

Rethinking Education

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Although the Muslim world is facing many crises today, probably none has more far-reaching consequences than the crisis of education. If in every area we find that our affairs are not being run properly, the problem ultimately lies with the system that produced the people responsible for running those affairs. For the same reason its solution offers the greatest promise for the future.

The problem has become intractable because not only our system of education has been corrupted; our very ideas about education have also been corrupted. That is why despite the presence of educational institutions of every type everywhere, the problem defies solution. We are producing literacy but not education. We are disseminating information but not knowledge. We are producing certificates, diplomas, and degrees of every conceivable type but we are not producing men of learning and understanding needed to run the affairs of the Ummah and help it carryout its task of being a guide for the humanity.

The Muslim world throughout is plagued with the presence of two parallel education systems. Schools, colleges and universities on the one hand and madrasas or Darul ulooms on the other. They are parallel in a textbook definition of parallel lines; two lines that never meet. Together they are tearing the fabric of the Muslim community by pulling it in opposite directions.

In order to understand where we stand and where we are headed with what we have, it is important to look at how we ended up where we are now.

The paramount system of education throughout the Muslim world is the system of western education introduced by the imperial powers: The British in the subcontinent, Palestine, Sudan, Egypt, Iraq, and elsewhere; the French in Algeria, Lebanon, Syria, Tunis and Morocco; the Italians in Libya; and so on. These imperial powers methodically worked to destroy the system of education they found in the conquered territories and confer all the power and prestige on the implanted system.

Their main purpose was to *control* the minds of their subject people. It is instructive to note that the first three universities established in India (Calcutta, Bombay, and Madras) did not do any teaching at all when established or for decades after that. They were established in 1857 and their task was to conduct examinations for the students in their vast areas of jurisdiction, thereby controlling education throughout India. In other words, their prestige was not due to their excellent teaching---as there was none--- but due to their monopoly over the granting of certificates and degrees which could be cashed through government employment.[1](#)

Imperial Schooling

The immediate purpose of the schools and colleges established by the imperial government was the production of junior functionaries for running its affairs. Their products were required to be cogs in the wheels of the exploitative and repressive imperial machinery. For this they had to be convinced of the superiority of their masters, their language, their manners, their knowledge, their system of government, their culture and their history while disdaining their own history

and civilization and questioning their religion. Prayers in a textbook used in Libya by the Italians sums up the plan: "O God! Help me to be a good Italian. O God! Help me to love Italy, my second fatherland." One could substitute France or Britain for Italy in the other colonies.

Toward this goal, they eliminated religious education from government schools in the name of religious neutrality, replacing it with secular humanism. With this moral training was also eliminated. Science education was introduced to train the students into celebrating the discoverers of the laws which governed the physical world from atoms to the huge galaxies, without ever thinking of the Creator of the universe and its laws. It was also used to convince them of the absolute authority of science as the arbiter of truth. The language of instruction was changed to cut the students off from their culture and civilization, decrease parental authority and parental participation in their learning, and develop in them an abiding inferiority complex.

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Free universal education was ended; it was a requirement of the grants-in-aid system to support a school that the school must charge fees. Providing education was no longer a calling but a business. Its purpose was no longer to produce a good human being but a good wage earner. A petition filed by Arab organizations in Palestine to the Mandate Commission in 1945 stated that the British government policy (the mandatory power) was *tajheel* (spreading ignorance) not *taleem* (education). The same could be said of all the colonial powers in all the colonies.

Madrasas

Today most people have no idea of what a madrasa looked like. While there are thousands of historic mosques and tombs throughout the subcontinent, we do not find old madrasa buildings. What happened to them? Well, they never existed! Madrasas existed in a masjid, in the living room of an affluent person in the neighborhood or in the home of the teacher, or under a tree. There were no fees and no fixed grades. Students joined a teacher to study a particular book with him. Classes were heavily interactive so the examination took place every day, there being no idea of an annual exam. The students that had read a book with a teacher could and did immediately start teaching it to others. Teachers either had support from a ruler or an affluent person or had waqf lands that sustained them. Not only that there were no fees, but frequently students were given a stipend or financial aid by the teachers.

At the time of British arrival in the subcontinent, this system of education was producing men for all walks of life. A large country with millions of people needed all kinds of goods and services and people who could produce them. The country needed religious leaders, scholars, administrators, judges, craftsmen for all sorts of products from textiles to pottery to weapons, builders, workers, soldiers, generals, physicians, writers, copyists (in a thriving publishing business), teachers, and traders. And the pre-colonial madrasa did produce them all. Ustad Ahmad Lahori (d. 1060 AH/1650 AC), the chief architect of Taj Mahal and Jami Masjid Delhi was a graduate of a madrasa². So was Ali Mardan Khan (d. 1067/1657) who was the builder of Shalamar Gardens in Lahore. So was Khairullah Khan Dehlvi (d. 1161/1747) who built the Observatory in Delhi. So was Ustad Rumi Khan who built cannons for the Mughal King Babar (d. 937/1530). So were other architects and engineers who built hundreds of other civil engineering marvels throughout the vast land. Madrasa taught them reading, writing, arithmetic, geometry, *tib* (medicine), Farsi, Arabic, Qur'an, Hadith, Logic, and Fiqh in an

environment which valued *adab* (manners and morals) over book learning. Then they learned the crafts through apprenticeship and on the job training with a master.

This was the system sustained by the pre-modern Mughal society. It had the capability of absorbing the new disciplines and knowledge coming from Europe into its rich tradition without causing a permanent disruption if it had been allowed to. But those developments coincided with the coming of the colonial masters who had no intention of letting this conquered land tame their modernity, picking only the useful things from it and adapting them to the values and traditions of the society.

Destruction of the Madrasa System

Despite its weaknesses and problems but contrary to common perceptions, this old system of education did not die of natural causes; it was crushed by the power of imperial despotism---by its guns and political intrigue, not its superior scholarship and pedagogy. The task of destroying the existing system of education was carried out efficiently and ruthlessly by simultaneous attacks on two fronts. On the one hand they cutoff financial support for the existing madrasas. Through zamindari system and “land reforms” Muslim landholders who were sponsors of education were impoverished. Further --- and it is just one example of this effort--- a barbaric machinery was established to execute the notorious Resumption Act (1828-1846) to confiscate the tax-free land grants that had sustained madrasas for centuries. Even W. W. Hunter (d. 1900), who was later a member of the governor-general's council and presided over the commission on Indian Education admitted, “The Resumption proceedings were harsh in the extreme.” As he describes, an army of “informers, false witnesses, and clam, stern Resumption officers” spread throughout the length and breadth of India, demanding land documents and declaring them invalid at the slightest pretext. The lands were thus confiscated. At the height of this campaign in the middle nineteenth century, hundreds of madrasas closed every year in a single district.

On the other front the imperial despotism eliminated opportunities for employment of the graduates of the old system who had historically filled the jobs in the administrative and judicial branches of the Mughal governments. The only jobs left for them were those associated with mosques, now offering low prestige and lower salary. It is a testimony to its resilience that the system was down but not out despite these attacks. It survives in the form of today's madrasas.

Modernity

The drastic educational revolution was brought about at the same time as modernity was ushered in at the terms of the colonial power and for the purpose of serving its needs. Beginning in the 1840s Lord Dalhousie's huge public works project was started to “forge the conquered territory into a unified, secure, and productive colony.”³ The projects included irrigation, railways, telegraph, mining, and manufacturing. They were all aimed at easing and strengthening imperial control and making the land more productive for the imperial masters.

But there were additional benefits. The dazzling display of engineering feats convinced the people of the superiority of their masters. As Syed Ahmad Khan said at the meeting of Civil Engineering Society in London in 1869, “What creates the most awe of the British Empire in the minds of the people is the work of its engineers.” Not just engineering work but all aspects of modernity made the old education irrelevant and new education a necessity. Obviously,

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madrasas had not been designed to produce the people who could serve the modern institutions that had suddenly been imposed on the land.

To be sure it was a necessary evil in the eyes of many. Syed Ahmad Khan himself openly admitted the problem with the new education even as he slavishly embraced it: "As this education spreads, and spread it must and I am also helping it spread, to the same extent ill feelings, indifference, and even turning away from Islamic practices will become common."

The society had been changed. Its economic organization, social relations, power structure and all the institutions that had sustained it had been crippled. It could no longer be business as usual.

Deoband

It is in the context of this modernity imposed by imperial despotism at its terms that we should understand the heroic work of the founders of Deoband. Deoband was the first institutional madrasa in the subcontinent: The mother madrasa whose example was followed by all the other madrasas, of all persuasions, in the years and decades to come. It was started under the shade of a pomegranate tree, as Deoband historians love to tell us. But that would hardly be a distinguishing feature as thousands of other madrasas had operated under the shades of trees for centuries in the subcontinent as already noted. Actually, that humble beginning was a link with the past that masked a revolutionary change for the future. It would soon introduce a purpose-built building housing the class rooms, a system of classes and grades, annual examinations, an organization structure for the faculty and an administrative structure to manage the new madrasa. All of these were innovations and there was internal resistance as they were introduced. Yet, instead of longing for the good old days, its visionary founders designed a modern institution that could survive in the changed post Mughal society that had been forced upon the land. This is an achievement that unfortunately has been ignored by friends and foes alike.

Deoband was not all that was needed, but it was all that could be under the crippling constraints imposed by the imperial despotism. If madrasas had provided all education before, they should have continued to do so now, absorbing the new disciplines and knowledge coming from Europe in their own scheme. But that would require much more than a competent staff well versed in both old and new subjects (itself a daunting task); it would also require an army able to defeat the colonial regime. For, we should have no doubt that the colonial masters would never have allowed such a scheme that would disrupt their plans. Their plans were to disrupt the society and turn it into a willing accomplice to its own subjugation. Any challenge to that would be an existential threat. Let us not forget that even such a loyal and subservient person as Syed Ahmad Khan was not allowed to establish his university. The Aligarh Muslim University did not come into being for nearly a quarter century after Syed Ahmad's death. He had to quash his plans to build his life's dream of an independent university and had to be content with establishing the M.A.O College that would be under total academic control of Calcutta University. If this was the freedom given to a loyal servant, one can imagine the freedom allowed to those who were suspected as troublemaker right from the beginning.

Deoband, and other madrasas that emulated its example in institutional structure, avoided conflict with the colonial educational establishment by staying clear of the new subjects taught by them. They made it their goal to preserve the old education ---- now considered to be purely "religious" education. This education had produced civil servants, judges, and well-rounded scholars in all fields in a previous era. But their worldly component catered to a world that no longer existed. In the changed world it would only produce imams for the mosque.

They could not tame modernity; they had to find a safe haven in a corner of it. At a time when even this corner was threatened, it was a great achievement. Lest we underestimate the significance of this work, let us not forget that it was in 1856 that Father Edmond's letter was sent to all the employees of the East India Company exhorting them that the time had come for all of India to become Christian. This was after decades of sustained and increasingly aggressive work by missionaries from all over the Christian world who had been supported by the East India Company. There is no saying what would have happened to Islam and Muslims in the subcontinent if these madrasas had not been there.

Unfortunately, what was adopted under compulsion by the founders was retained voluntarily by their followers when times changed. They stuck to the drastically reduced scope, even after the imperial rule ended, because they imagined this to be their universe. As a result, they had staged a voluntary withdrawal from the larger public sphere. Madrasas became a smaller and weaker pole in a polarized world of education. The task of producing leaders for all walks of life was taken over by the opposite pole of schools and colleges created in the image of the Western model introduced by imperialism.

Hybrid Education: The Best of the Two Worlds?

The tensions created by the two opposing systems are an old story. We can see them playing out in every Muslim country. How to bridge the gulf between the two is a question that has occupied our minds for more than a century. The dilemma is we cannot do without either one of them and at the same time we cannot continue to have two disparate systems.

The solution that has lately become popular among concerned educators and parents is the hybrid system, combining religious and secular education in one institution. These schools provide Qur'anic education, hifz training, Islamic studies, and Arabic in addition to math, science, social studies and English language and literature taught in the normal secular schools. The new English medium Islamic schools in Pakistan which prepare the students for O and A levels are the trendiest examples of this approach. Maybe we finally have a solution that would produce Muslim doctors, engineers, scientists, managers, and leaders for all walks of life--- people who would combine first rate worldly education with a solid Islamic education.

Or would they?

Unfortunately, while these schools are better than what we had before as contemporary schools, they are hardly a solution to our educational crisis. If the two worlds are not harmonious and pull in opposite directions, as they do, then combining them under one roof is not going to make them so. Hybrid education's teaching of science, social studies, medicine, engineering, law, journalism, management, business or any other subject would not automatically be stripped of their un-Islamic humanistic worldview just because of a heavier load of Islamic subjects in the curriculum.

If we teach them the same science using the same books as the other schools, the problems will also be the same. For in science, we are teaching our students to look at the universe from the viewpoint of a person who does not know God. "And how many Signs in the heavens and the earth do they pass by? Yet they turn their faces away from them." [Yusuf, 12:105]. A proper study of science would make one appreciate both the Power, Majesty, and Grandeur of Allah's creations and the humbleness and limitations of human knowledge and abilities. Today our science education gives exactly the opposite message. Will this problem go away because the school is also teaching Qur'an memorization and Arabic language?

How can the students reconcile the laws of conservation of mass and energy, which imply an eternal universe, with the knowledge that Allah created the universe from nothing and it will end one day? How can they reconcile the Qur'anic story of Creation with Darwinian story of Evolution? How can they reconcile the command (and a believer's natural disposition) to reflect on the creations of Allah with the command of science never to mention the name of Allah when engaged in scientific discourse? How can they reconcile the belief in the unseen, which is the first requirement for getting guidance from the Qur'an, with the injunction of science that certain knowledge can only come from sense perception and everything else is suspect and possibly a superstition? How can they reconcile the Islamic worldview with a capitalistic, materialistic worldview that permeates all "secular" curriculums?

The simple answer is they cannot. If they start thinking about the issues, they will face endless confusion and frustration. More likely, they will just internalize the secular perspective and relegate Islam to the ritual corner. They will probably be better at the rituals than students going to other schools, but that is a far cry from being good Muslim scientists, engineers, managers, and other professionals that they were supposed to become. They would have effectively learned that Islam is a beautiful religion and dear to our hearts but is irrelevant to understanding this world or to solving its problems. In the hybrid model when you study the serious and prestigious subjects that deal with this world, you still leave Islam at the door step.

The problem is not limited to science and technology. It covers the entire spectrum of subjects in our secular system. The best of our MBAs today learn that the goal of a business is to maximize profits and the goal of marketing is to create demand by manipulating people's perceptions. Those who excel there naturally try to be best at these skills. The best of our journalism graduates do not have a different model for journalism than the one presented by the West. They do not have their own definition of the news, their purpose for gathering it or their own moral standards that must regulate its dissemination. In economics we have been teaching that human beings are utility-maximizing animals. In our teaching of history, we see random events without a moral calculus driving them. We do not see Allah's laws that govern the rise and fall of nations. In psychology or sociology, medicine or engineering, civics or geography, it is the same story. In fact, our schools and colleges have been the main agency for secularization of Islamic societies.

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This problem is not fixed by the hybrid model. In hybrid schools the best we can hope is that the students will become practicing Muslims in a narrow sense of the word, but if they have not been trained and educated to detect and challenge the secular dogmas that have been integrated into their curriculums then in their working lives, they will be taking the same road as those who did not go to the hybrid schools.

We can see some additional serious problems in some of the hybrid schools that have emerged in Pakistan. They may even be run by a madrasa and co-located with it at the same campus but everything about them tells you that they belong to a different world. It is hard to beat the feeling that the old madrasa represents third class education while its hybrid cousin represents first class. They charge fees, and quite steep fees, for that matter. They use English not as a foreign language but as a medium of instruction, reaffirming its superiority over Urdu and

Arabic. They even use textbooks from Oxford, oblivious of the clever distortions and corruptions in their texts. Lord Macaulay would feel vindicated by these schools!

Solution: Integrated Curriculum

The real solution requires decolonization of our minds. It is not an easy task to dismantle the frame of mind that has been created, nurtured and reinforced for over two centuries. But there is no other option.

Let us imagine that we were there when European nations started to advance in *some* areas of knowledge but, unlike what really happened, we were independent and free. What would we do? Simply we would do what we had done throughout history; take the useful components of their new knowledge and incorporate it into our system--- aligning it with our worldview, vision, and values. We had always accepted worldly knowledge from other nations --- Hindus, Persians, Greeks, Romans, Jews, Christians --- but it was assimilated into our system. It was an organic growth within our own society not a forced, foreign, disruptive implant.

What will be produced using the same honorable and sensible approach will be an integrated curriculum. Every subject will then be infused with the vision of Islam. Our entire education will then be stamped with the signature of Islam.

Al-Khwarizmi's Algebra

To get a glimpse of what we are talking about here, let us pick up the book of Algebra, written by Mohammed bin Musa Al-Khwarizmi, who introduced algebra to the modern world. He lived at the time of Al-Mamun (d. 218 AH/833 AC) and was the head of Baitul Hikma. Let us garner some wisdom from this well-respected head of the House of Wisdom.

It begins: "Praised be Allah for His bounty towards those who deserve it by their virtuous acts, in performing which, as prescribed by Him to His adoring creatures, we express our thanks, and render ourselves worthy of the continuance (of His mercy), and preserve ourselves from change; acknowledging his Lordship, bending before His Power, and revering His Greatness!"

Right away this beginning destroys any notion that what we are embarking upon is a secular enterprise. In the pre-colonial era all books, whether on chemistry, medicine, astronomy, optics, mathematics, or any other subject were always started this way. The idea of a secular domain (i.e., one divorced from religion) did not exist. This also alerts us that in the pursuit of this subject as elsewhere we are accountable to Allah and should not be doing or saying anything that would not meet His approval. Second, the words of praise are the authors. He is not copying a standard formula as a ritual but voicing his deeply held emotions.

This again is a hallmark of books written in the glorious Islamic tradition. They always declared up front the *purpose of studying the subject that they dealt with. It was not education for the sake of education but for a purpose.*

This is followed by the invocation of blessings on the Prophet, again in the author's own words: "He sent Mohammed (on whom and on whose descendants, may the blessing, and peace of God repose!) with the mission of a prophet, - long after any messenger from above had appeared, when justice had fallen into neglect, and when the true way of life was sought for in vain."

After this he describes the purpose of writing this book, which is, “...a short work on Calculating by (the rules of) Completion (jabr) and Reduction (muqabala), confining it to what is easiest and most useful in arithmetic, such as men constantly require in cases of inheritance, legacies, partition, lawsuits, and trade, and in all their dealings with one another, or where the measuring of lands, the digging of canals, geometrical computation, and other objects of various sorts and kinds are concerned.”

There is a clear declaration of purpose, which is to benefit other people, with specifics of how that is to be accomplished. This again is a hallmark of books written in the glorious Islamic tradition. They always declared up front the *purpose of studying the subject* that they dealt with. It was not education for the sake of education but for a purpose. In contrast modern textbooks fail to make a clear declaration of the purpose of study of the subject. And how many students we find in the universities today who do not have a clear idea of why they are studying what they are studying, except to get a degree or fulfill the requirement for a pre-requisite!

There is an even higher purpose here that he mentions next. He says that in writing this book he is “... relying on the goodness of my intention therein, and hoping that the learned will reward it, by obtaining (for me) through their prayers the excellence of the Divine mercy” He wrote this trailblazing algebra book so people who benefit from it would pray for him and help him get Allah’s mercy.

The solution lies in the integrated curriculum. Every subject will then be infused with the vision of Islam. Our entire education will then be stamped with the signature of Islam.

It is this loftiness of purpose, clarity of vision and wholeness of intellect that we need to reinvent Islamic education. This requires completely revamping our education and our thinking about our education. It requires rewriting our textbooks and teaching plans from the lowest to the highest levels so they are infused with Islamic *weltanschauung*, the Islamic worldview.

Certainly that requires huge resources. But the bigger problem is that we have not yet realized that the hybrid model is not our destination. We have to set our sights on the integrated model. Then a practical solution will be that we begin with teacher training. Dedicated teachers can be trained into the new mode of thinking and using their central position in the education process they can also have a central role in the education revolution. Using the classroom experiences then can pave the way for rewriting of textbooks as the next step.

Let the decolonization of our minds begin.

1 With the imperial government establishing monopoly over every possible trade (textiles, grains, tea, salt, sugar, indigo, transportation, communications --- you name it), it was the largest employer. It also had a huge administrative bureaucracy. Further its judiciary wiped out the system of qadi courts and concentrated the power of hiring the judges and administrative staff in the hands of the imperial government.

2 The madrasa of Mulla Abdus Salam of Lahore.

3 Gyan Prakash, “Another Reason: Science and the Imagination of Modern India”, New Jersey: Princeton University Press, 1999.