

The Real Purpose of Education

By Khalid Baig

Education---like democracy, free markets, freedom of the press, and "universal human rights" -- is one of those subjects whose virtue is considered self-evident. So is the superiority of the industrially advanced countries in attaining them. Consequently, any package that arrives with one of these magic labels on it, automatically qualifies for the "green channel" at our entry ports. No questions asked. This uncritical acceptance has severely crippled our discussion of all these vital topics. For example, in education most of our discussion centers around literacy statistics and the need to have so many graduates, masters, PhD's, and so many professionals --- engineers, doctors, etc.--- in a given country based on the standards in the industrially advanced countries. The central issue of curriculum, and even more fundamental issue of the purpose of education normally do not attract our attention; they have already been decided by the "advanced" countries for us and our job is only to follow in their footsteps to achieve their level of progress.

Indeed, they have. In the "first" world, education has become an extension of the capitalist system. Its purpose is to provide qualified workforce for its machinery of production and eager consumers for its products. Stated in a more polished form, the purpose of education is to provide for the economic prosperity of a country. Similarly on a personal level today the purpose of education is to be able to earn a respectable living.

While earning halal living and providing for the economic well-being of a country are certainly important Islamic goals as well, the linking of education to financial goals is extremely unfortunate. It turns the centers of learning into mere vocational centers in their outlook and spirit. It degrades education and through it the society.

To bring home the pivotal but forgotten role of education we need to recall that there is a fundamental difference between human beings and animals. Instincts and physical needs alone can bring ants, bees, or herds of beasts together to live in a perfectly functioning animal society. Human beings do not function that way. They are not constrained by nature to follow only those ways that are necessary for the harmonious operation of their society. If they are to form a viable, thriving society, they must choose to do so. What drives that choice is the sharing of common goals, beliefs, values and outlook on life. Without a common framework binding its members, a human society cannot continue to exist; it will disintegrate and be absorbed by other societies. Further, the society must ensure that the common ground will continue to hold from generation to generation. This is the *real* purpose of education. The education system of a society produces the citizens and leaders needed for the smooth operation of that society, now and into the future. Its state of health or sickness translates directly into the health or sickness of the society that it is meant to serve.

Today we find many internal problems --- corruption, injustice, oppression, crippling poverty --- everywhere we turn in the Muslim world. If we think about it, we may realize that most of these problems are man-made. Which is another way of saying that they are largely traceable, directly or indirectly, to the education system that produced the people who perpetuate the problems. The rulers who sell out to foreign powers and subjugate their people; the bureaucrats who enforce laws based on injustice; the generals who wage war against their own people; the businessmen who exploit and cheat; the journalists who lie, sensationalize, and promote

indecencies, they are all educated people, in many cases "highly" educated people. Their education was meant to prepare them for the roles they are playing in real life. And it has, although in a very unexpected way!

The problem plagues all layers of society. Why are Muslim communities in the grip of so much materialism today? What should we expect when our entire education system is preaching the gospel of materialism? Why have we effectively relegated Islam to a small inconsequential quarter in our public life? Because that is precisely where our secular education system has put it. Why in our behavior toward each other we see so little display of Islamic manners and morals? Because our imported education system is devoid of all moral training. Why our societies are sick? Because our education system is sick.

This *is* the real *crisis* of education. Before we got into this mess by importing from the Colonial powers what was current and popular, education in our societies was always the means of nurturing the human being. Moral training, *tarbiya*, was always an inalienable part of it. The *ustaz*, (teacher), was not just a lecturer or mere professional, but a mentor and moral guide. We remembered the hadith then, "*No father has given a greater gift to his children than good moral training.*" [Tirmidhi]. Our education system was informed by this hadith. Our Darul-ulooms still maintain that tradition but the number of students who pass through their gates is minuscule compared to the secular schools.

In the U.S. and Europe, the schools were started by the church. Later as forces of capitalism overtook them, they molded them into their image. Moral training was a casualty of that takeover. But capitalism and their political economy did need people trained to work under these systems. So citizenship training was retained as an important, though diminishing, component of the curriculum--- a religion-free subset of the moral training it displaced. Whatever civility we see here is largely a result of that leftover component. The imported versions in the Muslim countries, though, had even that component filtered out. And the results are visible.

We can solve our problem once we realize our mistakes. The first purpose of our education system must be to produce qualified citizens and leaders for the Islamic society. *Tarbiya*, real Islamic moral training, must be an integral part of it. This must be the *soul* of our education, not a ceremonial husk. All plans for improving our education will be totally useless unless they are based on a full understanding of this key fact. This requires revamping our curricula, rewriting our textbooks, retraining our teachers, and realizing that we must do all this ourselves. We do have a rich history of doing it. Are we finally willing to turn to our own in-house treasures to redo education the way it should always have been?