

## **Educating the Pakistani Masses: The world needs to help<sup>1</sup>**

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### ***Introduction***

Let me start this brief presentation with the main conclusions that I have to offer with respect to the deteriorating state of education in Pakistan and how this could affect the rest of the world. I would like to underscore the following six conclusions. One, it is right for the world to worry about the larger impact of Pakistan's dysfunctional educational system especially when it has been demonstrated that poorly educated young men in a country as large as Pakistan pose a serious security threat to the rest of the world. Two, it is timely for the world's donor agencies to offer help to Pakistan to reform its system of education so that it can produce people who have the right kinds of skills to operate in the modern economy. Three, it is correct to focus on the reform of the madrassa system but it would be imprudent to give too much attention to this part of the educational system in the country. Four, the part of the system that really needs attention is the one managed by the public sector. This is the system that looks after the education of some 90 percent of the school going age. Reforming it is of critical importance. Five, the problem of public education will not be solved by throwing more money into the system. What is required is systemic reform. Six, and finally, the private sector has an important role to play in reforming the educational system. This is an area in which the large and well-endowed communities of Pakistanis resident in the United States could also participate.

I will develop these conclusions in five parts. In the first, I will provide a quick overview of Pakistan's demographic situation and how it has affected the system of education. In the second part, I will give a brief description of the structure of the educational system in the country from the time of independence in 1947 to the early 1970s when it began to deteriorate. The third part will provide a quick overview of the reasons that led to slow collapse of the educational system. In the fourth part I will indicate the lessons Pakistan can learn from attempted reforms in other parts of the world to improve its own system. In the fifth and final part I will suggest some approaches to the reform of the Pakistani system.

### ***Pakistan's demographic situation and how it has impacted on the system of education.***

Pakistanis, both policymakers based in Islamabad and the public at large, were slow to recognize that the country's large and increasingly young population was mostly illiterate and was singularly ill-equipped to participate in the economic life of the country.

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Pakistan's young did not even have the wherewithal to participate in the process of "outsourcing" that had brought economic modernization and social improvement to many parts of India. The economic and social revolution that India is witnessing today could have also occurred in Pakistan but for a number of unfortunate developments discussed below. For the moment we will reflect on the problem Pakistanis faces today – in 2005.

In 2005, Pakistan is the world's sixth largest country, after China, India, the United States, Indonesia, and Brazil. Its population is estimated at 155 million; of this, one half, or 77 million, is below the age of 18 years. Pakistan, in other words, has one of the youngest populations in the world. In 2005, the number of people below the age of 18 in the United States was less than those in Pakistan and yet the American population is almost twice as large as that of Pakistan. What is more, with each passing year the population is getting younger.

In spite of a significant decline in the level of fertility in recent years, Pakistan's population is still growing at a rate well above 2 percent a year. Even with some further reduction in birth rate, by 2030 Pakistan could – a quarter century from now – overtake Brazil and become the world's fifth most populous country, with a population of 255 million. Or, put in another way, Pakistan is set to add another 100 million people to its already large population over the next 25 years.

A significant number of this additional population will end up in the already crowded cities of the country, in particular Karachi, in Lahore, and in the urban centers on the periphery of Lahore. Karachi already has more than 10 million people; by 2030 it could have a population of 25 million. By the same time, Greater Lahore may have a population of 15 million. Will such large urban populations live in peace and become active contributors to Pakistan's economic growth and development? Or will they become increasingly restive and disturb peace not only within the country but also outside the country's borders? The answers to these two questions lay in the way the authorities and people of Pakistan approach the subject of education and what kind of assistance they can receive from the world outside.

There are four characteristics of Pakistan's demographic situation that have attracted attention in the western world, particularly in the United States. One, that in two to three decades Pakistan will have the largest concentration of Muslims in the world, more than in Indonesia and in India. Two, the population of Muslims will be very young. Out of a population of some 255 million projected for 2030, about 170 million will be below the age of 18. Three, unless an ambitious program is launched soon and implemented with the government's full attention and energy, a significant proportion of the young will be poorly educated and will have skills that will not be of much use as a factor of production in a modern economy. Four, an indifferently educated workforce made up of millions of young people, living in a few crowded mega cities, will become attractive recruits for groups and organizations that are alienated from the global economic, political and social system. In a Muslim country such as Pakistan, the groups that will be able to attract the young espouse various radical Islamic causes.

There are two questions that need to be answered in order to explain the situation in Pakistan. One, why did the education system in Pakistan deteriorate to the point where it now threatens economic, political and social stability not only within the country but also poses a real danger for the world at large? Two, what can be done to redress this situation?

### ***The Structure of the System after the creation of the state of Pakistan***

In the late 1940s and up to the early 1970s, Pakistan had a reasonably efficient system of education, not much different from other countries of the South Asian subcontinent. It was dominated by the public sector; educational departments in the provinces administered schools and colleges while a small number of public sector universities provided post graduate instruction. The private sector was active at the two extreme ends of the educational spectrum. On the one end were missionary schools and colleges specializing in western-style liberal education. At the opposite end were religious schools, called *dini madrassas* that imparted religious instruction. Some of the better institutions belonging to this genre were either imports from India or were patterned after the old *madrassas* in what was now the Indian state of Uttar Pradesh. The best known of these was the Darul Uloom at Deoband that had developed its own curriculum and taught a highly orthodox or fundamentalist interpretation of Islam. Following the partition of India and the birth of Pakistan, a number of *ulema* (Islamic scholars) from Deoband migrated to Pakistan and established seminaries in the new country. Two of these, a madrassa at Akora Khattak near Islamabad called *Darul Uloom Haqqania* and the other in Banori township of Karachi played prominent role in bringing an austere form of Islam to Pakistan. We will return to the subject of these madrassas a little later.

The private schools catered mostly to the elite while the religious schools produced imams (preachers) for the mosques or teachers for the madrassa system of education. These two systems are producing two different social classes with very different world views and views about the way Pakistan should be managed. The two groups are now clashing in the political and social arena. One recent example of this is the controversy over the deletion of a box in the newly designed and machine readable passport that initially did not have a column indicating the religious affiliation of the passport holder. This step was taken by the government headed by General Musharraf as one small move towards what he has called “enlightened moderation”. He was, however, beaten back by the religious parties and the “religion column” was reinserted in the passport.

In between these two social classes is a large inert group, the product of the public educational system. The large public school system includes all aspects of the system of education. It starts with kindergarten and primary schools at the bottom, includes secondary and higher schools, and has at its apex semi-autonomous but publicly funded universities. For several decades the standard of instruction provided by this system was adequate; the system’s graduates were able to provide workforce for the large public sector and also for the rapidly growing private sector of the economy. Those graduates of the system who went abroad for further education either at their own expenditure or relying on the funds provided by various donor supported scholarship schemes did not

experience much difficulty in getting adjusted to the foreign systems. Some of Pakistan's better known scholars and professionals such as the Noble Prize winning Physicist Professor Abdul Salaam and the well known economist Mahbubul Haq were the products of this system.

However, the system has deteriorated over time to the extent that it has become common to describe Pakistan as the country that has done the least for the social development of its large population. It is also common to fear that without major investment in education, Pakistan may well become a large exporter of manpower to the stateless Islamic organizations – al-Qaeda being the most prominent among them – that will continue their crusade against the West, western values, and anything else they see from their narrow prism as anti-Islamic.

How did Pakistan travel the distance from a moderate Muslim country with a reasonably efficient educational system to a country in which the public system of education is virtually broken down and in which a large number of educational institutions are providing instruction that teaches hate for those who hold different points of view and encourages *jihad* against them? Pakistan's gradual transformation from one state to the other occurred slowly under many different impulses. As such the country offers a good case study of how a society can get derailed.

### *Systems progressive collapse over time*

The Pakistani educational system collapsed slowly, at times its progressive deterioration was not even noticed by the people who later were to be most affected by it. The collapse occurred for basically four reasons. The first jolt was given in the early 1970s by government headed by Prime Minister Zulfikar Ali Bhutto. Bhutto decided to nationalize private schools, in particular those run by various Christian missionary orders. His motive was simple. He was of the view that private schools encouraged elitism in the society whereas he wanted equality and equal opportunity for all.

Bhutto was also responsible for delivering the system the second shock and this time around the motive was political expediency. His rise to political power was viewed with great apprehension by the religious forces in the country. They considered the socialism Bhutto espoused as "godless" and were determined to prevent him and the Pakistan People's Party founded by him from gaining ground. The two sides – Bhutto and the Islamists – chose to use the college and university campuses to fight the battle for the control of the political mind in the country. Both sought to mobilize the student body by establishing student organizations representatives of their different points of view.

For a number of years campuses of the publicly run institutions became the battle ground for gaining political influence at the expense of providing education. It was in this battle, waged in educational institutions, that Pakistan witnessed the birth of another organization – the Muhajir Qaumi Mahaz – that was to use violence in order to spread its word and make its presence felt.

The third development to turn the system of education dysfunctional occurred in the 1980s when a coalition led by the United States and included Pakistan and Saudi Arabia decided to use the seminaries as training grounds for the *mujahideen* who were being instructed to battle the Soviet Union's troops occupying Afghanistan. There was an unspoken understanding about their respective roles among these three partners. The United States was to provide equipment and training for the foot soldiers of the jihad. Pakistan was to set up madrassas in the Afghan refugee camps and along the country's long border with Afghanistan. Its military with better knowledge of the Afghan terrain was to be actively involved in training the mujahideen. The government of Islamabad also reserved the right to choose among the various groups that were prepared to do battle in Afghanistan. The Saudis were happy to aid the effort with money as long as they were allowed to teach Wahabism, their brand of Islam, in the seminaries that were to be used for training the jihadis. This proved to be a potent mix of motives: the United States was able to recruit highly motivated fighters to go after the occupying forces of the Soviet Union in Afghanistan, Pakistan was able to further its influence in Afghanistan and Saudi Arabia was able to introduce its extremely conservative interpretation of Islam into a large Muslim country that had hitherto subscribed to a relatively liberal, accommodating assimilative form of religion.

The fourth unhappy development to affect the sector of education was the political confusion that prevailed in the country for more than a decade, from the death of President Zia ul-Haq in August 1988 to the return of the military under General Pervez Musharraf in October 1999. In this period four elected governments and three interim administrations government the country. Preoccupied with prolonging their stay, the elected governments paid little attention to economic development in general and social development in particular. Under the watch of these administrations, public sector education deteriorated significantly.

The failure of Pakistan to educate its young was the result of the failure of the state to provide basic services to the people. As already noted, the collapse of the public sector began in the mid seventies when the socialist-leaning administration of Prime Minister Zulfikar Ali Bhutto nationalized some parts of the educational system while denying an expanded public sector the resources it needed. In the thirty-year period since then, various governments, both military and civilian, continued to neglect public education while allowing it to be politicized. Politicization took the form of increased political activity on the part of student organizations representing various political parties. It was the Islamic parties that gained the most in the battle to influence the campuses.

The progressive failure of the public sector to provide reasonable education to the masses brought in two very different types of educational entrepreneurs into the sector. On one end of the spectrum were groups of entrepreneurs who filled the space for western-style liberal education. Since there was enough demand for this type of education on the part of the relatively well-to-do segments of the society, a number of for-profit institutions were established. They have flourished over time, providing high quality education to the upper-end of the society.

At the other end of the social spectrum were the poor who needed institutions that could provide basic education to their children without placing an unbearable economic burden on the families. This is when the *madrassas* stepped in with the financial wherewithal to take in male students, provide them with board and lodging, and give them instruction in religion. Most of these institutions did not have qualified teachers who could give instruction in mathematics, sciences, and languages other than Urdu to their students.

The result of all this is that the Pakistani society today is split three ways when viewed from the perspective of education. At the top are the students who have received reasonably good education from western-style institutions that operate mostly for profit. They count for perhaps 5 percent of the student body in the five to 18 year age group of some 70 million people. At the bottom are the religious schools that provide education to an equal number of students. In between is 90 percent of the student population dependent on a public system that is inefficient and corrupt. It is, in other words, dysfunctional. Before addressing the important subject of the remedies that are available to improve the educational system, we should take a look at the situation as it is today.

### ***Reforming an educational system***

There are several ways of assessing the status of an educational system in the developing world. Among the more frequently used indicators are adult literacy rates for both men and women in various parts of the country; enrolment rates for both girls and boys at different levels of education and in different areas of the country; the drop out rates at different levels of education; the number of years boys and girls spend in schools; the amount of resources committed to education as a proportion of the gross domestic product, particularly by the public sector; the amount of money spent on items other than paying for teachers' salaries; and, finally, some measure of the quality of education provided. To these indicators, one should also add the quality of data and information available about education. Unfortunately, Pakistan's record is relatively poor on all these counts, including the quality and reliability of the data which makes it difficult to provide a reasonably accurate description of the state of affairs in the sector.

The latest information available for Pakistan suggests an adult literacy rate of only 43.5 percent for the entire population above the age of 15 years. The rates for Sri Lanka and India are considerably higher than for Pakistan; 92.1 percent and 61.3 percent respectively. Of the South Asian countries, only Bangladesh has a slightly lower rate, 41.1 percent. Since the level of literacy has a profound impact on the quality of human development, Pakistan ranks 142 in terms of the UNDP's Human Development Index. Sri Lanka ranks at 96, India at 127, and Bangladesh at 138.

There are noticeable differences in gender literacy and in the level of literacy in different parts of the country. Some 58 percent of the male population qualifies as literate while female literacy rate is estimated at only 32 per cent. In other words, two-thirds of the country's women can't read or write. There is not a significant amount of difference in the rates of literacy among different provinces. Sindh, on account of Karachi, has the highest rate at 60 percent while Balochistan at 53 percent has the lowest rate. However, it

is among women living in different parts of the country that literacy rates vary a great deal: in Balochistan the rate is as low as 15 percent while it is 36 percent for Punjab's women. It is clear that the women of Balochistan must be targeted in any drive to educate the masses in the country.

There are wide discrepancies in the various estimates of enrolment provided by various sources of information. My own estimates are for the year 2003 when the number of children in the primary school age was 22 million of which 11.5 million were boys and 10.5 million girls. According to the Ministry of Education in Islamabad 9.6 million boys were in school, giving an enrollment rate of 83.4 percent. The number of girls attending primary school was estimated at 6.6 million, giving an enrollment rate of nearly 63 percent. There was in other words a gender gap of almost 20 percentage points. Once again the policy implication of this information is the need to focus on the provision of education for girls. Another conclusion suggested by these numbers is that we should expect a fairly significant increase in the rate of literacy as the cohorts presently in school reach adulthood.

There is considerable disparity in the rates of enrollment among the richest 20 percent of the population compared to the poorest 20 percent. The gap is two and half times as large in the urban areas and even larger in the rural areas. Applying these number to overall literacy rates, it appears that while universal primary education has been achieved for the richest one-fifth of the population for both boys and girls, the enrollment rate for the poorest 20 one-fifth is only a shade above 45 percent. Public policy aimed at increasing the level of education must, therefore, focus on the poor in both urban and rural areas. There is demand among the poor for education; if it is not satisfied by the public sector, it will be met by the *dini madrassas*.

As is to be expected, the well-to-do families tend to enroll their children in high performing privately managed schools while the poor are forced into the public sector system. According to a recent survey while only 27 percent of the children from the richest 20 percent of the households were enrolled in government schools; these schools catered to as much as 75 per cent of the children from the poorest 20 percent of the families. This means that the rich have been able to bypass the part of the educational sector managed by the government while the poor have no recourse but to send their children to public schools. This process of selection according to income levels is reducing the quality of the student body in government schools.

There is a high level drop out rate in the public system with the rate increasing as we go higher up in the system. Barely 10 percent of the school going age children complete 12 years of schooling; around 25 percent leave after eight years of schooling and another 15 percent by grade-10. Such a high level of drop out has serious budgetary implications. At least 50 percent of the educational budget is spent on the children who drop out early. This is a tremendous waste for a sector that is already short of resources.

A high drop out rate has one other adverse consequence. Even if the level of literacy increases in the country, the level of skill acquisition will not improve. For many years a

number of development institutions emphasized the provision of primary instruction without focusing attention on higher level education. It is only recently that there is recognition that human development means more than primary education. Some researchers maintain that universal education should mean more than five years of schooling; it take a much longer stay in schools to be able to become functional in a modern economy.

In light of this, what are the options available to policymakers and to the donor community that is eager to help the country reform its educational system? The donor interest in the country's educational system reflects the understandable fear that, unless the educational system is fundamentally reformed, it would create a large body of young alienated people who would be prepared to lend a helping hand to the forces of radical Islamic not just in Pakistan but in all corners of the world.

### ***Educating the Pakistani masses: A new approach***

The conventional approach for addressing the problem posed by the underdevelopment of the educational sector involves is based on five assumptions. One problem – by far the most important one according to most experts – many societies face is that the opportunity cost of sending children to school is greater than the benefit education is likely to bring. Parents bear costs even when education is free. Perceived cost of education is likely to be more of an inhibiting factor for the attendance of girls in schools than for boys. In poor households girls help their mothers handle a variety of chores including the care of their siblings. One way of approaching this problem is to provide monetary incentives to parents to send their children to school. School feeding programs fall into this category of assistance; they lower the cost of education for parents.

Two, the state may not be spending enough on education. The remedy is to increase the proportion of public resources going into education. The donor community has been prepared to help with funds if there was the fear that the domestic resources were too constrained to allow for an increase in public sector expenditure on education. This was one reason why development institutions such as the World Bank significantly increased their lending for education.

Three, typically a state spends more on secondary, tertiary and university education than on primary education. The cure is to divert more funds into primary schooling.

Four, the quality of instruction is poor. The obvious solution is to invest in teacher training, reforming the curriculum and improving the quality of text books. Sometimes the quality may suffer because schools may lack proper physical facilities. They may be poorly constructed or the buildings may be poorly maintained. The students may not even chairs and desks on which they can sit and work. This problem can be handled, once again, by committing more resources for public sector education.

Five, the educational bureaucracy is too remote from the parents who wish to see an improvement in the quality of education given to their children. This gap between the



provider and the receiver can be bridged by organizing parents to oversee the working of the educational system. Teachers can be made responsible to the parent's association in addition to being responsible to the educational departments in some distant place.

Six, in highly traditional societies, parents will be prepared to send their girls to school only if they don't have to travel long distances, if they are taught by female teachers, and if the schools have appropriate toilet facilities. In some situations parents would educate girls if there are single-sex schools. The solution for this problem is to build more schools for girls and to employ more female teachers.

All this was learned from a great deal of experience by the donor agencies from their work around the world. Most of these lessons were incorporated in a high profile program of assistance for educational improvement launched by the World Bank in Pakistan in the late 1980s. Called the Social Action Program, the plan developed by the bank was supported by a number of donor agencies and billions of dollars were spent on it for over a decade. The result was disheartening. The program was inconsequential in achieving even the most fundamental objectives: increasing the rate of enrollment in primary schools for both boys and girls and bring education even to the more remote areas of the country. The bank made several attempts to correct the course during the implementation phase but the program did not succeed. There was one simple reason for the program's failure. It did not take full cognizance of the fact that the educational bureaucracy was so corrupt, inefficient and dysfunctional that it could not possibly deliver a program of this size. Ultimately the donors decided to abandon the program.

Given this experience and given the magnitude of the problem the country faces what options are available to the policymakers in the country and the donor community interested in providing help to Pakistan?

A variety of donors have already committed large amounts of finance for helping Pakistan educate its large population. According to a recent count by the Ministry of Education in Islamabad, foreign commitment for education is currently estimated at \$1.44 billion spread over a period of seven years, from 2002 to 2009. Of this \$450 million is being provided as grants with the United States at \$100 million the largest donor. The remaining one billion dollars is being given in the form of soft loans by the World Bank (\$650 million) and the Asian Development Bank (\$339 million). These commitments amount to some \$370 million a year.

The government has also announced its intention to significantly increase the amount of public funds for education. In 2000-2001, funding for education amounted to only 1.96 per cent of the gross domestic product. This increased to 2.7 percent by 2003-2004 when the government spent about \$2 billion on education, of which about one-quarter was provided by donors. It is the government's intention to increase the amount of public resources committed to education to about 4 percent of GDP which would bring the expenditure in par with that of most other developing countries.

However, the experience with the World Bank funded and supervised Social Action Program tells us that a mere increase in the availability of resources will not address the problem. What is required is a multi-pronged approach in which resource increase plays only a small part. For Pakistan to succeed this time around, it will have to be imaginative and comprehensive in the strategy it adopts. There are at least six elements of this approach.

First, the government must develop a core curriculum that must be taught in all schools up to the twelfth grade. Along with the prescription of such a core syllabus, the government should also create a body to oversee the text books used for instruction. There should be no restriction on the submission of books that can be used as authorized text and there should be a fair amount of choice available to schools. They should be able to pick from an approved list. The selected books must carry the “good-housekeeping seal of approval” of the authority created for this purpose. The members of the authority should be selected by an autonomous Education Commission which can be nominated by the government and approved by the national assembly.

Second, no institution should be allowed to take in students unless it registers with the Education Commission. The Commission should issue certificates of registration to the institutions which should indicate what kind of curriculum is being taught in addition to the core syllabus. Overtime the Commission should develop the expertise to grade schools according to their quality. A scale of the type used by credit rating agencies could be used by the Commission as a way of informing the parents about the type and quality of education on offer.

Third, either the Education Commission or a similar body should issue certificates to qualified teachers. No school, no matter what kind of curriculum it teaches, should be allowed to hire teachers unless they have been appropriately certified by the authority. The certificate should indicate which subject(s) the teacher has the competence to teach.

Fourth, in order to further encourage the participation of the private sector while lessening the burden of the public sector, the state should encourage the establishment of Private Education Foundations that will be run on non-profit basis and will raise funds that will qualify for tax exemption. These foundations should also be encouraged to register abroad so that they can receive contributions from the members of the Pakistani diasporas in the United States, Britain and the Middle East. The government should offer for sale to the Foundations the institutions it manages at all levels. This will be a form of privatization with the intent to encourage not only educational entrepreneurs to enter the field but to involve the people who are interested in improving the quality of education in the country.

Fifth, the government must reform the management of the educational system. One way of doing this is to decentralize the system's running to the local level. The recent devolution of authority permitted by the reform of the local government structure has created an opportunity for the involvement of local communities in educational management. The development of the local government system as envisaged by the

administration of President Pervez Musharraf is being challenged by some vested interests including the members of the National and Provincial legislatures who fear erosion of power as more authority flows to the local level. The old bureaucracy that had exercised enormous power under the old structure is also reluctant to loosen its grip. This resistance will need to be overcome.

Sixth, parent-teacher-administrator associations should be created that manage funds and allocate them to the areas in which serious deficiencies exist. These associations should also have the authority to assess the performance of the teachers and administrators based on the quality of education given. Parental involvement in education, even when the parents themselves were not literate or poorly educated yielded very positive results in several countries of Central America.

Seventh, the government should attempt to level the playing field by making it possible for children of less well-to-do households to gain admission into the privately managed schools. The government could initiate a program of grants and loans that should be administered by the commercial banks. Such an approach was tried successfully in Mexico. Letting the bank's manage these programs will save them from being corrupted.

Eighth, to address the serious problem of youth unemployment in a population growing rapidly and in a society that is becoming increasingly susceptible to accepting destructive ideologies, it is important to focus a great deal of attention on skill development. This will require investment in vocational schools or adding technical skills to the school curriculum.

Ninth, in undertaking a school construction program to improve physical facilities, special attention should be given to the needs of girls. Only then will the parents have the assurance that the schools to which they are sending their daughters can handle their special needs.

Tenth, and finally, a serious review of current expenditure on public sector education should be undertaken. It is well known that the state pays to a large number of "ghost teachers" who don't teach but turn up to collect their monthly pay checks. It is also well known that the annual recurrent cost in well managed private schools that are able to provide high quality education is one-half the recurrent cost of public schools. Rationalization of these expenditures will increase the productivity of resource use.

### ***Conclusion***

Pakistan's educational system requires an almost total overhaul. It will not be reformed simply by the deployment of additional resources. This was tried once before by the donor community under the auspices of the World Bank's Social Action Program. That as we noted above did not succeed. What is required now is a well thought out and comprehensive approach that deals with all facets of the system.