

Educational Opportunities in Pakistan – Bringing the Poor At Par With the Others

Authors: Peter Koppen and Abdul Hafeez

mechanics doing work

“Educational Opportunities in Pakistan – Bringing the Poor At Par With the Others.” You are listening to a coproduction of Abdul Hafeez from Radio Pakistan and Peter Koppen from Deutsche Welle, Voice of Germany.

welding work

Welding work at the Anjuman Faizul Islam in Rawalpindi. Students of class 10 are fixing iron-legs to a bed. The principal of the Technical Education Centre attentively watches this boys perform.

Principal

“They are trained according to a proper syllabus which consists of theory and practical. We teach this to the boys on different kinds of machines, welding and plumbing job.”

Different noises resound from the other classes. 120 boys are getting vocational education to become mechanics, electricians or woodcarvers. Even a computer-lab is provided. The head of the institution, Qazi Syed Saghir-ul-Haq is proud of the achievements he can offer his students in the twin city of the capital Islamabad, having in mind that their fate might have been different.

Saghir-ul-Haq

“By the grace of God they are well established in the practical field. Had they not come to this institution, they would have become beggars or criminals or drug-addicted. But to the grace of Almighty God, they came to this institution. Their life was turned into a useful and solid life. So from this point of view, this institution is for the deprived humanity and the poor people. We are in a position to give them proper education and we also try to settle them in their practical life.”

Giving vocational training isn't the main aim Anjuman Faizul Islam is focusing on. More than 400 students are permanent residents of the school - all of them being orphans. 60 years ago, the institution was founded as a social welfare organisation, working for the poor community of the nation. Today the foundation has six branches spread over the province of Punjab. The mission stayed the same, but now the orphanages are self-reliant schools with own

bakery, laundry, carpentry, water-supply and medical station, employing hundreds of people.

Saghir-ul-Haq

“It is as good an institution as any other government institution in the public sector: We pursue the same courses, the same syllabus which is designed for the government schools. So from that point of view, there is nothing new about it. We simply bring them at par with the others studying in public institutions run by the government. The main thing about this institution is that it is run on the donations of the public, the philanthropists. Above that, this is an absolutely non-sectarian, non-political institution. We simply believe in bringing up the people according to the standard which is applied to the other people of the nation.....And those people who have been brought up here, educated here, now they rub their shoulders with the higher ranks of the nation.”

Islamic lecture in class

Social welfare and education institutions have a long tradition in Pakistan. They were created as a home for needy students, based on the idea of Wafq or voluntary charity. It allowed private founders to reserve part of their wealth for a charitable purpose such as the lodging and teaching of students in order to gain religious merits. Islamic seminaries or the madressahs belong to such private institutions. They have been serving the community for a very long time, says Professor Khaild Alavi, Director General of the Da'wah Academy at the International Islamic University in Islamabad.

Alavi

“The system of madressahs is a continuation of the system which was prevailing in pre-partition India. It is mainly catering for those students who are poor and not able to join the mainstream educational system, so they provide them with education, residence, syllabus books and after completion of this, there is a security of jobs, either being an Imam in the mosque or a teacher in the madressah system.”

Madressahs see themselves as preservers of Islamic identity and heritage, their cardinal principle is to impart religious knowledge. Kalim, a student from the United Kingdom, is in his last year of Islamic studies at the Dar-ul-Uloom Haqqania in Akora Kkattak. His professional career lies very clear before him.

Kalim

“The students that graduate from these madressahs, they are preaching the Muslims here, they are showing the other Muslims about Islam. So the students that get graduated from here, they go and preach Islam. When I finish I intend

to go back to England and tell the students what rights the England government gives you there.”

Kalim’s parents live in the U.K., their son travels home at least once a year. So aren’t religious schools only for the benefit of the poor ?

Fazl-ur-Rahim (voice over)

“In the last 25 years we were mostly catering for the poor and lower class, but now people are getting aware of Islamic education and now even very wealthy people send their children to these institutions.”

Hafiz Fazl-ur Rahim is Director Education of one of the most prestigious Islamic universities in Lahore, the Jamia Ashrafia. His father founded the institution, many followers including wealthy industrialists and philanthropists added a pile of donations to furnish whatever was needed in educational terms. Two newly installed computer labs with 75 PC’s provide a comfortable access to modern information technology for the 2000 scholars enrolled. One of them is Muhammad Zaheer Khan.

Khan (voice over)

“This university has a well known name in Islamic education, that is one of the reasons to get higher education here in Islamic studies. And another thing is the wholly education of computer. So that is the main intention to get a wholly and religious education.”

Basically, teaching in Pakistan’s madressahs consisted in imparting religious education. But other subjects were also allowed. Only recently, some religious seminaries have begun to teach English, mathematics, general science and even computer science. But mostly these subjects are confined to a short period in the scholar’s Islamic education.

Azan calling for prayers

Ali Shah (Voice over)

“Madressahs want every child of the nation to be educated, especially in the religious education. If a child is educated by the Quran and the sayings of the prophet, he is morally strong. So we stress upon these things and ask the other schools to educate the students according to the principles of the Quran.”

Dr. Syed Sher Ali Shah is vice-principal of Dar-ul-Uloom Haqqania in Akora Khattak. Most people are poor in this area of the Northwest Frontier Province. As madressahs generally don’t charge tuition fees, they attract very poor students who would not receive any education otherwise. Recent studies indicate that almost 70% of the madressah students come from rural areas and belong to

poor agrarian families. Reinhard Sauer from the German Agency of Technical Cooperation knows the reason.

Sauer

“The religious schools are initially to be compared with what the churches in Europe did in the last century. Children from very poor families or whose parents died are taken care by the mosques. Many of them live there, get food, and then they learn to read and write, learn the Quran. There is a lot of emphasis on teaching moral and ethics and values. Much less emphasis on the normal regular school curriculum like science and maths.”

The German Agency has carried out a tracer study in four districts in NWFP in an house-to house research, asking : Why did children leave the school prematurely and what did they do afterwards ? One of the surprising results: There is a migration from government-run schools into religious schools. Surprising because in terms of normal learning contents, religious schools are not better than government schools.

Sauer

“But the religious schools guarantee a socially intact environment, the teachers are there, there is discipline and moral. One has to see that large parts of the poorer population have not experienced that school means something to them. They themselves cannot read and write and learned that you don’t necessarily get a job just because you went to school. So the life experience is that the formal school visit doesn’t mean something. So you put more emphasis on ethics, on moral being a religious man rather than on the formal education.”

music

Roughly, Pakistan has a three type school system. Apart from the private elite schools only affordable for the upper class, there are English medium schools for the middle class, then Urdu medium schools, the majority if them being governmental schools, and the religious schools. Economic and social reasons are the major factors why children join the schools at the bottom of the educational ladder, the madressahs. Dr. Muhammad Saeed Shahid from the Institute of Education and Research at the Punjab University in Lahore, says that there is need to change this system in order to give every child the same opportunities.

Shahid

“If the problem of poverty is solved, then parents will be happy to send their children to the schools. So we need to upgrade their life-standards, we need to give them more resources for dwelling their lives and to make them happy....You know, if the state is not giving more resources for education – and that is a

necessary evel – if we want to make education a melting pot to build a nation and to bring them to one class, we need equal type of institutions, equal type of curriculum, equal type of teachers and that needs resources. The government of Pakistan doesn't have much resources for education. I hope with the passage of time and the peace producing efforts of the government, Inch Allah may God help us, the efforts of the government in this way, cutting the resources on the defence side and giving more resources for education, may produce some results.”

The government has not yet managed to create a more attractive environment for state-run schools, although several efforts have been made by introducing free textbooks for all primary level students or granting stipends for girls. But still school-uniforms and exercise-books have to be provided by the children – too costly for the very poor. Madressahs seem to provide sustenance to the economically weak and thus performing welfare in a country which does not have any social security net. Size and number of the religious seminaries have risen increasingly since the days of General Zia Ul-Haque. In the year 2002 the figure was at 13.000 with 1,7 million enrolled students. While madressahs were increasing in number, they were also politicised. But talking about Western perception of religious seminaries being recruiting grounds for holy warriors, Professor Khalid Alavi of the International Islamic University believes too much attention is focused on this issue.

Alavi

“For political reason it has been blown out of proportion. There may be one or two madressahs from where some students went to Afghanistan, but for the rest of the madressahs concerned they are mainly concentrating on the syllabus and courses for the religious education... A lot of it is based on misunderstanding of the whole system of madressahs. Because of the name of the Taliban, because the Taliban were the students of some madressahs, therefore it is understood that every student of a madressah is a Taliban. That is not so. The majority is committed, honest and religious people who believe in the religious life and are away from the political life. There may be one or two madressahs that are politically orientated, but that has nothing to do with the general madressah education.”

A recent study indicates that only 2% of the scholars enrolled in a madressah actually described their motives as political.

classroom

Still, in the learning material and textbooks provided for every school in Pakistan the principle of defining Pakistan as an Islamic state to be governed by religious law and practices is underlined. Officially published textbooks of class

1-12 contain material that are in direct contravention of the values and goals of a progressive, moderate and democratic Pakistan and are reflecting a narrow thinking of Muslims, says Pervez Hoodbhoy, Professor at the Department of Physics at the Quaid-i-Azam University in Islamabad.

Hoodbhoy

“These days what they teach in school is not education, is not meant to enlighten your mind, but propagandize them, to create a certain frame of mind. And this frame is to believe that Pakistan is an embattled, besieged state surrounded by enemies all around. And the emphasis is totally on religious identity. So the first thing children are taught in Pakistani schools is the difference between Hindus and Muslims. They must learn about India’s aggression against Pakistan – and I can quote to you directly from the official curriculum from the government of Pakistan which says very explicitly that these are the things that children need to learn. And these children are class 5 which means they are aged between 11 and 12.”

He calls for a radical change in the curriculum for government schools as well as for madressahs, putting emphasis on an updating for textbooks issued to the scholars.

music

Change can come only when the level of poverty is reduced so that poor people can afford other systems of schooling. Above all, it will come when there is peace between India and Pakistan, believes Dr. Muhammad Saheed Shahid.

Shahid

“We don’t like enmity with any country, but unfortunately Pakistan has to face enmity from India and for that reason we have to establish a big army. And I believe that was the main reason why Pakistan needed nuclear power. If we don’t have such type of enemy, we don’t have to spend so much money on army or defence purposes. You are right that that money can serve to educate people and to enhance literacy rate, no doubt. But until and unless the Kashmir problem is solved and the other differences with India are not solved, we cannot shift our resources properly to the education side.”

And he gives a figure of the potential waiting for the education sector. Only little more than 2% of Pakistan’s total budget is spent on education, but approximately 40% goes in favour of defence expenditures.

Pakistan has a total school-going population of around 23 million. Religious schools cater for a respectable number of them. Professor Najma Najam, vice-chancellor of the Fatimah Jinnah Woman University has a clear vision of madressahs’ future in Pakistan.

Najam

“Madressahs are the best form of educational institution you can have. Because they take care of the child’s need as clothing and food and residence as well as education. However, this education need to be expanded. I think the child needs to be ready for the 21st century, needs subjects as maths, computer science and English. This is a good system, but it needs to be elaborated to meet the modern needs.”