

# Analysing the implementation of the Single National Curriculum in Pakistan: A Change for Good?

Dr. Khushboo

Assistant Professor, Political Science Department  
Mata Sundri College for Women, Delhi University

The history of education reforms in Pakistan has passed through tough trajectories since its inception. Since 1947, the education system has been in a state of flux marred by frequent political upheavals through the change of regimes. Successive governments implemented their respective policies and reforms which hardly made any substantial difference in the overall condition of education in Pakistan. The beginning of Zia-ul-Haq regime had its own eccentricity which brought a new turning point in the education of Pakistan. Islamization policy of Zia was a historic move indeed which coloured every sphere of life in Islam including education, culminating in distortion of history, curriculum, textbook contents leading to indoctrination of young minds. Successive governments continued with this policy, along with introducing other reforms in education. The so-called Islamisation drive during the General Zia regime in the late 70s and 80s led to the radicalisation of madrassas and gave rise to increased sectarianism and militancy. The terrific 9/11 attack which shook the whole international community left its impact on the education system of Pakistan since Pakistan is said to be one of the safe havens of breeders and perpetrators of terrorism. Under pressure from the international community and the US move on the war on terror, General Musharraf attempted to reverse the tide through his policy of "Enlightened Moderation" in which he attempted to bring several reforms in this field, one of which was bringing madrassas into the main stream education.<sup>i</sup> His Madrassa reforms of 2002 is significant in this context. However, the reform was resented by a large-scale opposition to his reforms by the orthodox religious bodies. The Lal masjid attack can be cited in this context. The impact of Islamization in Pakistan is such that, it is hard to do away with since it has taken ground in the whole socio-political edifice of Pakistan with the strong nexus of the government with orthodox religious bodies. In fact, the Zardari and the Sharif government continued with it.

The Pakistan Tehreek-i-Insaf (PTI) government led by Imran Khan, after assuming power in August 2018, started its tenure with an Education Policy Framework, highlighting reforms in four priority areas in education. These were: (1) Putting all the out-of-school children in schools, as required by Article 25 A-of the Constitution; (2) eliminating apartheid in education by introducing a uniform curriculum; (3) enhancing the quality of education; and (4) emphasising technical and vocational education.<sup>ii</sup> As part of this policy, his government proposed implementing a Single National Curriculum (SNC) that would establish a uniform system "in terms of curriculum, medium of instruction and a common platform of assessment so that all children have a fair and equal opportunity to receive high-quality education". Like the previous National Curriculum in 2006, the current SNC would only provide the minimum learning standards that every child should be able to achieve in a particular subject at a certain grade level. The first phase of the SNC was launched in March 2021 and covers primary school students. The second and third phases covering classes 6 to 12 will be rolled out by 2023.<sup>iii</sup>

According to Imran Khan, today Pakistan is back on track to realise the ideal of Riyasat-e-Madina by bringing the powerful under rule of law and establishing a welfare state through Ehsaas, Panagahs and health cards programs. In one of the tweets, the Prime Minister said, "15 centuries ago our Holy Prophet set up the first welfare state in Madina based on rule of law, meritocracy, compassion and tolerance and where quest for knowledge was made a sacred duty." He said when Muslims moved away from these guiding principles, their civilisation decayed and declined.<sup>iv</sup> The supporters of SNC appreciate this as a positive step stating that this would bring multifarious opportunities for the mismanaged educational system of Pakistan. Many students face difficulties in competing with those who have studied in institutions following the Cambridge system and many of the institutions also lack coherency. Their discriminatory curriculum is the root cause of the low intellect of many students who have studied from ordinary and low fee institutions. According to them, the SNC will surely improve the abysmal condition of education in Pakistan in a positive direction.<sup>v</sup> Recently in August 2021, just after the Taliban take-over of Afghanistan, the Prime-Minister of Pakistan criticised the parallel system of education in the country saying that existence of English medium schools in Pakistan has led to the adoption of someone else's culture in the country. He added, "When you adopt someone else's culture, you believe it to be superior, and you end up becoming a slave to it." According to him being a mental slave is a bigger problem than being a physical slave since subjugated minds will never be able to take big decisions<sup>vi</sup>

However, to cause much distress to the implementation of SNC, there has been much controversy and seen much debate across mainstream media, civil society and some social media platforms. The idea of imposing a uniform curriculum on all educational institutions was to ensure that public schools, private schools and seminaries/ *madrassahs* have the same/ similar learning outcomes. This required a standardisation of the pedagogical practices and identical syllabi as well as modes of assessment.<sup>vii</sup> The major criticisms surrounding this move of government centre around many issues. Perhaps the most important change that the SNC aims to implement involves the language of instruction. According to Dr Mariam Chughtai, who was consulted by the government during the drafting process, the SNC allows schools to choose their language of instruction. It can be English, Urdu or any of the local languages. This sounds very over-optimistic. However, the contradiction here is that textbooks needed to practice this choice may not be available in school's language of choice. Additionally, the textbooks written in local languages may not match the standards of those available in English and Urdu that have been developed, improved upon and taught in schools for decades. The requirement that every textbook used by a school be first approved by the respective provincial education board raises another problem. It will

be difficult, if not impossible, for the Ministry of Education and Professional Training to ensure that the provincial textbook boards produce and/or approve for teaching books of identical standards to cater to this policy of inclusivity.

Another change in the curriculum aims to address another concern about inclusivity. The students belonging to religious minorities are to be taught a new subject: religious education. Previously, non-Muslim students were taught ethics in place of Islamiyat. While Muslim students were being taught extensively about Islam and its teachings, it was lamented non-Muslim students were deprived of a similarly thorough education in their own religions.<sup>viii</sup> Recently, after the Taliban take-over of Afghanistan and after launching the first phase of Single National Curriculum, the prime minister also urged the education minister to expedite the process of teaching about the Life of Islam's Prophet to grades 8-10 saying it should be implemented within 5-6 months. "Your timeline for 2023-24 is too long," he said, stressing this must be "forced. "Khan claimed that regardless of whether or not you were Muslim, you had to acknowledge the achievements of Islam's Prophet. "The Quran teaches us to learn from the life of the Prophet (peace be upon him)," he said, adding this was "for our benefit."<sup>ix</sup>

According to Tariq Rahman, "I am most concerned with the 'othering' these children will be subjected to. Their class fellows will see them going out and will be told by insensitive teachers that they are 'unbelievers'. Thus, the minorities will be further alienated and ostracised in our schools. There is already a study by the SDPI called, *Connecting the Dots*, which makes it clear that Hindu children are forced by teachers to study Islamic studies. Some teachers even taunt them calling them 'idol worshippers' and 'kafir' and so on. Will this discrimination be extended now to Christians, Sikhs and Ahmadis?"<sup>x</sup> Farhatullah Babar, one of the former Senator of Pakistan says, "it aims at imposing a single national narrative dominated by security, religion and a high dose of piety. It is a recipe for promoting a narrative of nationalism that rejects plurality of ideas and diversities of cultures. Such imposition by the federation seem intended to create justification for suppressing alternative voices be that of the youth in ex- tribal areas, in Balochistan or are gender and faith based."<sup>xi</sup>

The historic 18<sup>th</sup> amendment which was passed during Asif Ali Zardari, culminated in the devolution of power amongst provinces. Another major implication of the 18th Amendment for education was that the curriculum, syllabus, planning, policy, centres of excellence and standards of education fell under the purview of the provinces. This was a big step forward for education. The 18th Amendment, passed unanimously by parliament, was the result of a rare consensus between all the major political parties. After becoming a part of the constitution, however, some strong voices of dissent were raised by different quarters, including the Ministry of Education. A campaign was also initiated to spread the idea that the provinces are not ready to take up the massive challenge of dealing with the provision of education. This claim is made on the assumption that the provinces do not have the capacity or the financial resources to cope with the huge challenge in front of them.<sup>xii</sup> A.H. Nayyar says, "the new curriculum documents carry a slogan of "One Nation One Curriculum", implying that, without a single curriculum, we cannot remain one nation. This is false. There are countless examples of countries having diverse curricula-even ones that vary from school to school -and yet a strong sense of common nationhood."<sup>xiii</sup> In fact, this step of government is violative of the 18<sup>th</sup> amendment which brought devolution of power and gave autonomy to provinces in matters of education and curriculum making. It is a move in which the centre is flexing its muscles over the provinces. As, Farhatullah Babar adds, "Education is a provincial subject and the provinces alone have the right to determine issues in education, including curriculum. The very words "single national" in the SNC seems intended to legitimise assault on provinces. Words and phrases matter."<sup>xiv</sup> A.H. Nayyar calls it a constitutional transgression. <sup>xv</sup>

According to Hoodbhoy, Pakistan's Single National Curriculum rests on three flawed assumptions:

1) It is a false assumption that differences in educational institutions in Pakistan is due to adoption of different curriculum. When teaching any secular subject such as geography, social studies or science, all streams have to cover the same topics. The weakness lies in the fact that instead of laying emphasis on reasoning and critical thinking, rote learning is considered as an easy way.

2) It is also misleading fact that a single national curriculum is going to bridge the gap between rich and poor schools. Hoodbhoy states that rich and poor schools will remain worlds apart unless equalised through school infrastructure, well-trained teachers, high quality textbooks and internet access.

3) Modern education rests squarely upon critical thinking, and success/failure is determined in relation to problem solving and worldly knowledge. Madrassah education goals are important but different. They seek a more religiously observant student and a better life after death. Understandably, critical thinking is unwelcome. Soon after 9/11, madrassahs were spotlighted as terrorist breeding grounds. Musharraf's government, beholden as it was to America, ordered them to teach secular subjects. Most rejected this outright but others were successfully pressurised. However, madrassahs teach secular and religious subjects identically; reasoning is sparse and authoritarianism dominates.<sup>xvi</sup> The instructional model of the *madrasa* system is based upon memorisation because the system is based on preservation and respect for the past and not on questioning. Modern science, on the other hand, is based on questioning the past not revering it; on critical thinking not on uncritical acceptance of authority. The two paradigms are based on different ways of responding to the world and if we want critical thinking to increase, then we would have to develop analytical skills and questioning. <sup>xvii</sup>

According to Pervez Hoodbhoy, this policy of Imran Khan's government is a way step forward to that of Zia's Islamization. He says, "as yet only SNC plans for Class I-V are public. But the huge volume of religious material they contain beats all curriculums in Pakistan's history. A column-by-column comparison with two major madrassah systems, Tanzeemul Madaris and Rabtaul Madaris, reveals a shocking fact. Ordinary schools will henceforth impose more rote learning than even these madrassahs. Normal school teachers being under-equipped religiously, SNC calls for summoning an army of madrassah-educated holy men-hafiz's and qaris as paid teachers inside schools. How this will affect the general ambiance and the safety of students is an open question."<sup>xviii</sup> According to Babar, "The backdoor entry of seminary teachers into mainstream educational institutions may be the dream of some people but it will be a nightmare for the country. It is something that even Zia did not do. It is poison"<sup>xix</sup>

Tariq Rahman, in this context states that there will be huge influx of *madrasa* graduates in schools to teach Islamic studies. As it is, our society is critical of those who are different from the majority or the fashionable normative framework. Teachers of religion, no matter what sect they belong to, will probably be critical of girls who dress differently from what they prescribe. As they will operate in the name of the sacred, they will be difficult to refute or ignore. Girls and women teachers will either be forced to change their lifestyle or bear the guilt of appearing as sinners. Indeed, with so many religious teachers in all institutions the very atmosphere of these institutions will change. We will have less tolerance for Western dresses, liberal ideas, religious minorities and even certain sects and sub-sects. So, how can we employ *madrasa* graduates? Well, they are specialists in theology and there are places for them in the mosque and seminary system.<sup>xx</sup>

One of the first question which is associated with the implementation of SNC is that whether it is actually going to bridge the gap between private and public institutions since there are so many differences between these institutions and a single curriculum is not going to sort it out as emphasized by Hoodbhoy. Farhatullah Babar, rightly says, "No matter what curriculum is adopted, the inequality between 22 million out of school children and those enrolled will not disappear. No matter what the curriculum, the inequality in quality of education will not end as long there are inequalities in teaching methods and evaluation criteria between various academic institutions. Reducing inequality is a function of enrolling all the out of school children and improving the physical infrastructure of academic institutions. Inequality in education will not end as long as there are schools under trees, with no boundary walls, no drinking water and no toilets. Reducing inequality requires improving the human capital by way of teachers' training, providing internet access and improving teaching and evaluation methods. It also requires that physically and mentally challenged children – constituting a significant portion of a young population – are also integrated."<sup>xxi</sup>

To conclude, given the series of education reforms imposed in Pakistan, Single National Curriculum is a great leap forward towards Islamization of education in Pakistan. As discussed by different scholars, the mere implementation of a unified curriculum is indeed not going to bridge the gap between private and public schools and madrassas. The slogan of government to end educational apartheid is indeed praiseworthy but the approach to achieve this objective is contradictory in itself. Rather than bridging the gaps it would be creating further rifts in society. To end the inequalities and polarization within the education system of Pakistan, the government should come out with a more rational strategy rather than cementing it with a single national curriculum. In fact, there should be more broad visioned approach to bridge gaps like improving infrastructure, improving the quality of teaching in schools, providing skill and training to teachers, improving the assessment and examination system of schools, emphasising on critical thinking rather than rote learning, reducing gender gap, etc. As A.H. Nayyar states, "But what has been approved and notified is a uniform curriculum, not a system of uniform education. The latter would also imply equal educational facilities for all - rich and poor, rural and urban, boys and girls."<sup>xxii</sup> Apart from this, as emphasised by different scholars, the introduction of Islamiyat and the backdoor entry of madrassa teachers would also be leading to high scale indoctrination of the students and this would be giving way to a dangerous situation culminating in increased sectarianism and hatred towards the minorities which would be threat to the cultural and religious diversity of Pakistan. Instead of unifying, this move of the government is highly infused with divisive tendencies which is going to prove destructive instead of constructive in the long run. As far as Pakistan is concerned, the influx of the seminary teachers in the mainstream education would also be leading to increased intolerance towards girls and women due to their orthodox and conservative outlook. Also, it would certainly be a challenge for education in Pakistan to be at par with the global level with the restriction on the languages used in textbooks. Pakistan already is one of the most backward country in South Asia with low level of HDI and this reform is going to take the education of Pakistan a step backward and achieving the SDG goal set by UN would also be a sheer dream for Pakistan. The recent Taliban take-over of Afghanistan is also a boost up for Pakistan and it will facilitate this draconian move of the government. It is stated in one of the Indian newspapers that The Taliban have been helped by Pakistan. "Imran Khan when his party was in power in KPK actually gave 300 million rupees to a university that Pakistan's Khyber-Pakhtunkhwa government allocated in its budget to a madrassa known as the "University of Jihad" and having top Afghan Taliban leaders among its alumni, including its former chief Mullah Omar. The world also knows that the Talibis or the religious scholars- were trained in Madrassas in Pakistan and brainwashed in Jihad."<sup>xxiii</sup> In the garb of Single National Curriculum, it will be training future militants and terrorists by infusing fundamentalism and sectarianism in young minds. Recently, the provincial government has barred the Punjab Curriculum and Textbook Board (PCTB) from publishing books for grade 6 to 8 under the Single National Curriculum (SNC).<sup>xxiv</sup> However, from a broader perspective, the SNC in Pakistan is still a stark reality which has been implemented all throughout, which will be taking Pakistan to a nadir of backwardness rather than progress. Pakistan failed to achieve the goal of Universal Primary Education goal of the Millennium Development Goal 2000 set by the United Nations. Keeping in few of the contemporary developments in educational reforms, it seems that the Sustainable Development Goal to be achieved by 2030 will also be a far fetched dream for Pakistan.

## References:

1. Hashmi, Z.T. (2020), "Is Single National Curriculum a good idea", [Online: Web], URL: <https://tribune.com.pk/story/2258912/is-single-national-curriculum-a-good-idea>
2. Nayyar, A.H.(2020), "Dissecting the Single National Curriculum", [Online: Web], URL: <https://www.dawn.com/news/1572130>
3. Patel, M., "Explained: What is the Single National Curriculum proposed in schools in Pakistan and what are its criticisms?", [Online: Web], URL: <https://indianexpress.com/article/explained/single-national-curriculum-proposed-for-schools-in-pakistan-7373650/>
4. "Pakistan is back on the track to realise ideal of Riyasat-e-Medina", [Online: Web]. URL: <https://www.radio.gov.pk/23-03-2021/pakistan-is-back-on-track-to-realise-ideal-of-riyasat-e-madina-pm>
5. Ahmed, M., "SNC is Great", [Online: Web], URL: <https://www.dawn.com/news/1643422>
6. "P.M. Imran talks about overpowering "shackles of slavery" at Single National Curriculum Launch", *Dawn*, 16th August 2021, [Online: Web], URL: <https://www.dawn.com/news/1640988>
7. Tahir, S., "Single National Curriculum", [Online: Web], URL: <https://www.thenews.com.pk/tns/detail/880525-single-national-curriculum>
8. Ibid
9. "Imran Khan formally launches First Phase of Single National Curriculum", [Online: Web], URL: <https://www.newsweekpkakistan.com/imran-khan-formally-launches-first-phase-of-single-national-curriculum/>
10. Rahman, T. (2020), "A single National Curriculum is no Solution", [Online: Web], URL: <https://www.thenews.com.pk/tns/detail/697677-a-single-curriculum-is-no-solution>
11. Babar, F. (2020), "Why a Single National Curriculum is dangerous", URL: <https://www.thefridaytimes.com/why-a-single-national-curriculum-is-dangerous/>
12. "18<sup>th</sup> Amendment and Education", *Dawn*, 11<sup>th</sup> October 2010, [Online: Web], URL: <https://www.dawn.com/news/570524/18th-amendment-and-education->
13. Ibid
14. Babar, F. (2020), "Why a Single National Curriculum is dangerous", URL: <https://www.thefridaytimes.com/why-a-single-national-curriculum-is-dangerous/>
15. "Imran Khan formally launches First Phase of Single National Curriculum", [Online: Web], URL: <https://www.newsweekpkakistan.com/imran-khan-formally-launches-first-phase-of-single-national-curriculum/>
16. Hoodbhoy, P. (2020), "What Imran Khan is doing to Pakistani school textbooks even Zia-ul-Haq didn't" [Online: Web], URL: <https://theprint.in/opinion/what-imran-khan-is-doing-to-pakistani-school-textbooks-even-zia-ul-haq-didnt/464016/>
17. Rahman, T. (2020), "A single National Curriculum is no Solution", [Online: Web], URL: <https://www.thenews.com.pk/tns/detail/697677-a-single-curriculum-is-no-solution>
18. <https://theprint.in/opinion/what-imran-khan-is-doing-to-pakistani-school-textbooks-even-zia-ul-haq-didnt/464016/>
19. Babar, F. (2020), "Why a Single National Curriculum is dangerous", URL: <https://www.thefridaytimes.com/why-a-single-national-curriculum-is-dangerous/>
20. Rahman, T. (2020), "A single National Curriculum is no Solution", [Online: Web], URL: <https://www.thenews.com.pk/tns/detail/697677-a-single-curriculum-is-no-solution>
21. Babar, F. (2020), "Why a Single National Curriculum is dangerous", URL: <https://www.thefridaytimes.com/why-a-single-national-curriculum-is-dangerous/>
22. Nayyar, A.H. (2020), "Dissecting the Single National Curriculum", [Online: Web], URL: <https://www.dawn.com/news/1572130>
23. <https://timesofindia.indiatimes.com/blogs/no-free-lunch/imran-khan-the-taliban-have-broken-the-shackles-of-slavery/>
24. "Punjab likely to roll back Single National Curriculum for Middle classes", (3<sup>rd</sup> May 2022), [Online: Web], URL: <https://www.dawn.com/news/1687977>