



Promoting Diversity through Children's Books in Pakistan

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Abstract: Militancy has grown to such menacing proportions that it has become a great problem for Pakistan. We now reap what we sowed thirty years ago, during the Afgani war, when primers for children carried images of pistols and Kalashnikovs and children were taught 'J' is for 'Jehad'. As a children's writer I am contributing by producing books for children and young people on Multi culturalism and tolerance.

Key words: militancy, books, mindsets, multi-culturalism.

Pakistan is going through tumultuous times. Growing militancy has worsened the security situation in many parts of the country. Increasing violence coupled with successive governments' inept educational policies threaten the very existence of 'education' in general and 'girls' education' in particular.

Between 1975 and 2000, the school-age population in Pakistan doubled, with poor families turning to religious schools (madrassahs) as the only affordable option for their sons' education. Boys in these schools receive neither proper academic nor technical training, which makes it difficult for them to access the job market¹. It has become very important to identifying the root cause of militancy in Pakistani society. According too an editorial in the leading newspaper of Pakistan, The News (29/06/10),

While opinions differ as to how militancy has grown to such menacing proportions, the growth of madrassahs has repeatedly been cited as a key contributing factor. The Brookings Institute in Washington has pointed out that less than ten per cent of Pakistani parents send their children to seminaries and that these institutions are unlikely to be instrumental in fuelling militancy. On the other hand, the report also points to the terrible state of mainstream schooling in the public sector and calls for reform. This is urgent for more reasons than one. The decline in quality of government-run schools has been a key factor both in the drop-out rate – which stands at over 50 per cent for the first five years of learning – and in the resort to madrassahs. The food and shelter on offer at these religious institutions provide a further incentive for poverty-stricken parents to enrol their children. The chain of cause and effect is clear. Poor government schooling denies young people the opportunity to learn. This in turn creates the frustration that so often pushes them towards militancy. The answer to militancy then lies, at least in part, in ensuring access to quality learning.

Quality learning is only one of several factors. Through madrassahs, and also through the narrow curriculum offered at government schools, we have created a mindset that lends itself to militancy.

¹ Elizabeth Leahy with Robert Engelman, Carolyn Gibb Vogel, Sarah Haddock And Tod Preston, Population Action International, The Shape of Things to Come – Why Age Structure Matters To A Safer, More Equitable World.



Supported by the Americans and Saudis throughout the 80s' war in Afghanistan, General Zia-ul-Haq and his eleven years of Islamization did the greatest damage to our link with our multi-cultural South Asian past. Not only did Saudi-funded madrassahs mushroom throughout the country, even the curriculum of state schools changed drastically. Children have been “educated into ways of thinking that make them susceptible to a violent and exclusionary worldview open to sectarianism and religious intolerance”². We now reap what we sowed thirty years ago when primers for children carried images of pistols and Kalashnikovs and children were taught ‘J’ is for ‘Jehad’.

This repellent idea of 'poisoning young minds' originated not in a madrassah but in the University of Nebraska, United States of America. As part of a covert attempt to incite resistance to the Soviet occupation, the US Government spent millions of dollars on supplying Afghan schoolchildren with textbooks³. These were filled with militant Islamic teachings accompanied by violent images. Our involvement in the Afghan war and the changes consequently made to the school syllabus had negative repercussions for Pakistan. Successive civilian governments, as well as the 'Enlightened Moderation' rule of General Musharraf, were unable to undo the destructive policies of the Zia regime.

Those children exposed to the violence of the recent conflict brought about by the ‘War against Terrorism’ are a good example of children whose childhood has been lost. The Taliban destroyed hundreds of schools, mostly girls’ schools where students were the victims of bombing by their own army as well as of the violence of terrorists. Drone attacks also have resulted in the loss of innocent civilian lives.

In this scenario, where children are exposed to unprecedented violence, what can a Pakistani children’s writer do? Writing about the importance of cultural diversity and Sufi Islam, once hallmarks of a rich and diverse South Asian culture, is my choice. My passion for writing for children converges with my activism, whose objective is to promote non-violence, multi-culturalism and environmental protection. It was in 2002, post 9/11, that I felt the need, first of all as the mother of two young boys and secondly

² Dr A.H. Nayyar & Ahmed Saleem, *The Subtle Subversion: The state of Curricula and Textbooks in Pakistan*, Islamabad, 2003.

³ Joe Stephens and David B. Ottaway, From U.S., the ABC's of Jihad, Violent Soviet-Era Textbooks Complicate Afghan Education Efforts, Washington, Saturday, March 23, 2002, p. A01.



as a children's writer, for children's books that encourage non-violence, tolerance and diversity. It had disturbed me greatly when, several years ago, I heard an eight-year-old boy say, 'Good, it (the destruction of the twin towers) happened to the Americans. Look what they are doing to poor Afghan children'. I was very concerned about this comment and felt that we all needed to act on the concern we had about the messages our children absorb from their surroundings. When I repeatedly heard these messages of hate, war and enmity from the lips of children, I decided to write books for Muslim children, knowing that this world was not an easy one for them to live in.

I developed a cartoon character for children, Amai, the magical bird. Amai is made of light and a million tiny stars. She is a friend of children. Her special friends are Ali and Seema. This tiny bird can turn magically into a shooting star and zoom around the world taking Seema and Ali on exciting adventures. In this way, the September 11 attacks in the US inspired me to write, illustrate and produce a book for children. Titled "Amai's Wish", it encourages compassion and empathy with the suffering of others.

In my second book "Children of Light", Amai introduces Pakistani children to an Indian child. The book's aim is to promote peace and tolerance between India and Pakistan, and create awareness of the horror of nuclear weapons. As an anti-nuclear activist, it is of great concern to me that children are being encouraged to take pride in these horrific weapons. It is indeed sad that India and Pakistan, with huge populations living in abject poverty, have spent billions in a senseless arms race. At a personal level, it pains me that in two main squares of my city, Islamabad, replicas of nuclear missiles were installed as memorials to the nuclear testing of 1998. Children, as it is, absorb messages of violence on television, whether in the form of their favourite cartoon channels or aggressive sports such as wrestling. Why should the ultimate symbol of aggression be presented to children as a symbol of pride? It was in this light that I wrote, illustrated and produced 'Children of Light', which was published by ACTIONAID and distributed free of cost in Pakistani schools. I am happy to share the fact that sanity prevailed and the two monuments have been removed from the city.

In 2006, in collaboration with the Asian Network of Trust, Hiroshima, I designed, wrote and illustrated the book 'Sadako's Prayer' about a young victim of the Hiroshima nuclear holocaust. In this book, Amai features with Sadako, an 11 year old Japanese girl who survived the bombing of Hiroshima in 1945. Since her story is true,



Sadako makes a fine symbol of hope for children traumatized by conflict or environmental disasters. After the devastating earthquake of 2005, the book was distributed free of cost among children living in the earthquake-affected areas of Azad Jammu & Kashmir. Widely distributed in Pakistani schools, it has been translated into Dari and distributed in schools in Afghanistan. The ‘Sadako Project’ team won the Hiroshima Citizen’s Award for promotion of Peace Education in 2007 .

During the recent conflict in north west Pakistan, which displaced thousands of people, not only was I busy in relief efforts, I also encouraged children to draw and paint as a way of exorcising their fear of the Taliban and army shelling. Wherever I went, I organized story telling sessions and distributed ‘Sadako’s Prayer’.

In addition to children’s books, I have produced books for adults and young students. “Glimpses into the Soul of Islamabad”, published by Sungi Development Foundation, is a coffee table book that promotes the multi cultural heritage of Islamabad and respect for Nature. The book identifies, catalogues and preserves the historical, architectural, cultural and natural heritage that belongs to the city. In documenting Islamabad’s inheritance of ancient trees and advocating their protection, the book emphasizes the importance of conserving natural as well as cultural heritage. It promotes peace by encouraging young people to respect their city’s diverse religious heritage, which includes the material culture of Hinduism, Sikhism, Buddhism and Christianity.

The most negative outcome of the process of Islamisation that began in the 1980s is the nation’s collective loss of its sense of ‘Identity’. This is especially true in the case of children deprived of an understanding of and therefore respect for their millenia-rich pre-Islamic heritage. The quest for identity assumes importance today because Pakistanis have suffered decades of mishandled attempts to manipulate their identity in the name of ideology. Identity, which takes thousands of years of civilizational progress to evolve, is being reduced to ‘social engineering’, using the tools of ideology and patriotism. My book *Chitarkari and Banyans – the Pursuit of Identity* reflects the quandary that I and my children face. As a child, I experienced a safer, greener Pakistan while as a young student abroad, I took enormous pride in my millennia-rich heritage.



But for my children the world is a different place. Road blocks and security checks within cities are the norm and boundaries between countries have become impregnable. For Pakistani students studying abroad, their ethnicity has become a disadvantage and a stereotype of the extremist Muslim has been created. As Benjamin Disraeli said, “Change is inevitable. Change is constant”. Sometimes change is for the better but in Pakistan two main factors have accelerated change for the worse: religious extremism and consumer nihilism. The result has been a loss of identity through loss of heritage.

My organization *Funkor* is committed to providing equal opportunity for special children. When *Funkor* was invited to participate in the first National Book Day, organized by the National Book Foundation of Pakistan, in May 2010, we brought blind children, from Almaktoom Centre for Visually Impaired Children along to participate. Two blind children read from my book “Sadako’s Prayer” in front of an audience of almost 200 children and adults. The sighted children were awestruck by the fact that these children could read flawlessly. Since schools in Pakistan do not encourage inclusive education for special children, they are usually confined to special schools. For the visually impaired children, it was the first time that they shared the stage with sighted children.

These humble steps are my contribution to working with children and promoting ideas of diversity and tolerance through books and art. I represent the tiny minority of Pakistani children’s writers in Pakistan who promote peace and diversity. Children need ‘enriching of the mindsets’ in the same way ‘militant mindset’ was promoted at every level, by powerful forces. It started with violent images in books, it has to end with images of multi-culturalism and diversity. But till that becomes a reality, we, the tiny majority of children’s writers must keep on producing children’s books to contribute in bringing about a better future for our children.

