

# Implications of Single Curriculum

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The obsession to implement a single curriculum in Pakistan must be viewed with the broader lens of rights of stakeholders, particularly, the right to education and the responsibility of states to ensure promotion of values such as peaceful coexistence and tolerance. This paper will therefore, take a closer look at the attempts to introduce one national curriculum in Pakistan and the implications that may have on the rights of children, parents, minorities, provinces and other stakeholders. In doing so, it will look closely at the nexus between state, education and ideology and what that means for pedagogy. Ultimately, it will identify why it is more important for the states to focus on the pedagogical objectives of education to meet the rights of children as opposed to employing education as a political tool for ideological goals that serves those who control the means of production to perpetuate their dominance and control.

Keywords: National Curriculum, Fundamental Rights, Education, Ideology

## Introduction

Ever since it assumed power in the general elections 2018, Pakistan Tehreek e Insaf (PTI) had embarked on an ambitious plan to develop a uniform system and curriculum of education in the hope to provide equal education to all students whether they be enrolled in Madrassah's, public schools or private schools. Under the National Curriculum Council, the work on homogenizing the curriculum was undertaken over a stated period of two years which has now been approved for implementation from Pre-I to Grade V from August 2021.

However, several concerns and criticisms of educationalists, technical experts, publishers, parents and other stakeholders have come to fore who have highlighted the challenges and the implications for fundamental rights that the single national curriculum (SNC) poses. As a result, the implementation of SNC must be viewed with the broader lens of rights of stakeholders, particularly, the right to education, to choose, freedom of expression, rights of minorities, preservation of language and culture and the responsibility of states to ensure access to education and promotion of values rooted in international commitments to peaceful coexistence and tolerance, both at home and abroad. This paper will therefore, take a closer look at the attempts to introduce one national curriculum in Pakistan and the implications that

may have on the rights of children, parents, minorities, provinces and other stakeholders. In doing so, it will look closely at the nexus between state, education and ideology and what that means for pedagogy, the constitutional and legal implications post the 18<sup>th</sup> amendment and ultimately, it will identify why it is more important for the states to focus on the pedagogical objectives of education to meet the rights of children as opposed to employing education as a political tool for ideological goals that serves those who control the means of production to perpetuate their dominance and control. It will also endeavor to address some of the misplaced assertions on which the ethos of SNC has been built including answering questions as to whether uniformity can pave the way for equality and end ‘educational apartheid’ and whether or not different streams of education (private, public and seminaries) are responsible for creating the economic disparities and different mind-sets in the society which can be in turn be harmonized by virtue of a single curriculum.

### **The Purpose of Education**

There is no single answer to the question of what the purpose of education is. The response has tended to depend on whom one is asking. Educationists have long been grappling with these questions, but the answers have been ever-evolving, at times responsive or even reactive to circumstances that a society finds itself in and what the needs and requirements or the aims and objectives of channelizing education are for that society at a given point in time. It has ultimately remained a political goal, which is why it varies in line with the dominant political ideology of its time.

Functionalists believe that education equips people to perform different functional roles in society. Conflict theorists view education as a means of widening the gap in social inequality. Feminist theorists point to evidence that sexism in education continues to prevent women from

achieving a full measure of social equality, while symbolic interactionists study the dynamics of the classroom, the interactions between students and teachers, and how those affect everyday life.<sup>1</sup>

In the context of nation states, the response has further depended upon the point of time at which the nation is developing its education policy and the corresponding goals it aims to achieve in that period as a result. India and Pakistan for instance have grappled with this question too often from the point of view of their national goals which have alternated between indoctrination of religious values to promotion of innovation and skills for progress and human advancement.

The same has been the case in America where education's primary purpose has ranged from instructing youth in religious doctrine, to preparing them to live in a democracy, to assimilating immigrants into mainstream society, to preparing workers for the industrialized 20th century workplace and still yet, to preparing them for a rapidly changing world in the 21<sup>st</sup> century and for them to be able to compete in a global economy.<sup>2</sup>

Throughout history, education policies, have more often than not, remained hostage to political goals and have tended to serve the interest of the bourgeoisie, even though multilateral forums and international conventions have tended to highlight the importance of the pedagogical objectives of education for the fulfillment of the rights of children.<sup>3</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> Introduction to Sociology 2e. OpenStax CNX. Located at: <https://openstax.org/books/introduction-sociology-2e/pages/1-3-theoretical-perspectives> in Lumen Learning, Chapter on Theoretical Perspectives on Education, Available at: <https://courses.lumenlearning.com/sociology/chapter/theoretical-perspectives-on-education/>.

<sup>2</sup> Willona M. Sloan, 'What is the Purpose of Education?', ASCD Education Update, Vol 54, No 7, July 2012. Available at: <http://www.ascd.org/publications/newsletters/education-update/jul12/vol54/num07/What-Is-the-Purpose-of-Education%C2%A2.aspx>.

<sup>3</sup> See for instance, Principle 7 of the Declaration on the Rights of Child 1959 and Recommendations III (4), V, VI, VIII of UNESCO's Recommendation concerning Education for International Understanding, Co-operation and Peace and Education relating to Human Rights and Fundamental Freedoms. Available at: [http://portal.unesco.org/en/ev.php-URL\\_ID=13088&URL\\_DO=DO\\_TOPIC&URL\\_SECTION=201.html](http://portal.unesco.org/en/ev.php-URL_ID=13088&URL_DO=DO_TOPIC&URL_SECTION=201.html).

Ideology is the philosophical basis on which a system of beliefs and ideas is developed and promulgated. The term *ideology* originates from French *idéologie*, itself deriving from combining Greek: *idéā* and *-logiā* ('the study of'). These ideas or systems of belief may in turn be based on religious, social, economic or political outlook of those who have the power to promulgate their ideas, which overtime may come to characterize a particular culture.

On the other hand, pedagogy is the manner in which teaching is imparted to students and is a more technical and scientific field that focuses on the relationship between the methodology and the learning outcomes of the student. Under the lens of pedagogy, the focus is to evaluate and assess what the best learning techniques are for a given set of students. Like ideology, the manner of teaching also varies depending upon the underlying objectives of education at a given point in time in a given state.

Education therefore, is rarely neutral. Its underpinning in ideology has been explored by several notable scholars in the field.<sup>4</sup>

As Per F. Laursen believes,

“The basic form of power in education is the ideological power that can make learning seem reasonable to the students. The power sources behind the educational system and behind the role of education in the labour market are primarily political and economic. But the political and economic

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<sup>4</sup> See for instance, Rubina Saigol, 'Knowledge and Identity: Articulation of Gender in Educational Discourse in Pakistan', ASR 1995, Rubina Saigol, 'The Pakistan Project: A Feminist Perspective on Nation and Identity', Women Unlimited, 2013, Per F. Laursen, 'Ideological Power in Education', European Education Research Journal, Vol. 5 No 3 & 4, 2006. Michael Morris, 'Knowledge and Ideology: The epistemology of social and political critique', Cambridge University Press, 2016. DOI: <https://doi.org/10.1017/9781316819289>.

powers in education are ultimately dependent upon ideological power: only ideological power can make students learn.”<sup>5</sup>

In many instances, ideology trumps pedagogy because the overwhelming focus of states has remained on the substance of what forms the basis of the learning of children and the political ends which are expected to be met at the end of the learning process and the teaching methodologies have accordingly followed suit. From rote-learning and memorizing to critical and independent thinking, analytical and other skills, the learning process has followed the ideological imperatives of its time. Likewise, the purpose of education is likely to depend on the ideological power at play in a given state at a given time. What we need to ask is whether those ideologies in line with existing international commitments under human rights treaties, particularly those related to rights of children or not.

### **The Goals of Education under International Instruments**

The right to education is one of the most pivotal rights of children recognized in several international instruments.<sup>6</sup> It was enshrined in Article 26 of the Universal Declaration of Human Rights (UDHR) in the following terms:

"Everyone has the right to education. Education shall be free, at least in the elementary and fundamental stages. Elementary education shall be compulsory. Technical and professional education shall be made generally available and higher education shall be equally accessible to all on the basis of merit. Education shall be directed to the full development of the human personality and to the strengthening of respect for human rights and fundamental freedoms. It shall promote

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<sup>5</sup> Per F. Laursen, 'Ideological Power in Education', European Education Research Journal, Vol. 5 No 3 & 4, 2006, Pg 276.

<sup>6</sup> Right to education has been recognized under Universal Declaration of Human Rights 1948, Declaration of Rights of Child 1959, UNESCO Convention against Discrimination in Education 1960, International Covenant on Economic, Social and Cultural Rights 1966, UNESCO Recommendations concerning Education for International Understanding, Co-operation and Peace and Education relating to Human Rights and Fundamental Freedoms 1974, Convention against Elimination of Discrimination against Women 1981, UN Convention on Rights of Child 1989, World Declaration on Education for all 1990, UN Convention on Persons with Disability 2006. The right to education has also been recognised in ILO Conventions and international humanitarian law, as well as in regional treaties.

understanding, tolerance and friendship among all nations, racial or religious groups, and shall further the activities of the United Nations for the maintenance of peace. Parents have a prior right to choose the kind of education that shall be given to their children."<sup>7</sup>

There are several aspects of this definition through which the goals of education as envisaged internationally may be ascertained. As per the UDHR, education must be directed for the full development of the human personality and strengthening of respect for fundamental rights but more importantly that it should promote tolerance, understanding and friendship across all nations, racial and religious spectrum. Similar theme is adopted in all subsequent documents which also call upon upholding similar goals.<sup>8</sup>

The most important aspect to note however, is that Article 26 further recognises the rights of parents to *choose* the kind of education that they would like for their children. This appreciates the fact that there may not be a single way to educate a child. ‘Choice’ is a very important democratic value to consider, in fact, it is the cornerstone of and inherent to the concept of democracy that people have the right to choose. Taking that away at any instance in a bid to promote ‘uniformity’ is not the kind of ‘equality of access’ that international instruments promote.

The UN Convention on the Rights of Child (UNCRC) 1989 is an important international instrument recognizing the fundamental rights of children because it is one of the most widely ratified UN human rights treaties.<sup>9</sup> This leading charter of rights of children recognizes

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<sup>7</sup> Article 26, Universal Declaration of Human Rights, 1948. Available at: <https://www.un.org/en/universal-declaration-human-rights/>.

<sup>8</sup> see (n 13).

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<sup>9</sup> As of Feb 9, 2021, 196 countries are parties to it save for United States which is a signatory but has not yet ratified the convention. Available at: <https://indicators.ohchr.org/>.

amongst others, the right to education,<sup>10</sup> freedom of thought conscience and religion,<sup>11</sup> the right to preservation of identity,<sup>12</sup> the right to access information and material from a diversity of national and international sources, especially those aimed at the promotion of the social, spiritual, moral well-being and physical and mental health of the children.<sup>13</sup> It also lays stress on the fact that in states where ethnic, religious or linguistic minorities or persons of indigenous origin exist, a child belonging to such a minority or who is indigenous shall not be denied the right, in community with other members of their group, to enjoy their own culture, to profess and practise their own religion, or to use their own language.<sup>14</sup>

Although, this convention, like any other consensus based multi-party document comes with several caveats for states as regards reservations they may have in the context of local, religious, cultural, national security or other sensibilities, nevertheless, it does offer a comprehensive charter of child rights with an approach that encourages the state parties to take a holistic view of the development of children and take appropriate steps to ensure that the children should be fully prepared to live in a society and are brought up in the spirit of understanding, peace, tolerance, equality of sexes, and friendship among all peoples, ethnic, national, religious groups and persons of indigenous origin.<sup>15</sup> Given that it does categorically recognize certain fundamental rights of children, those rights then must form the backdrop of every measure that has a potential impact on one or several of those rights.

Although, Pakistan is not yet a signatory to the 1960 Convention against Discrimination in Education by United Nations Education Scientific and Cultural Organization (UNESCO), this

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<sup>10</sup> Articles 28 and 29, UN Convention on Rights of Child 1989. Available at: <https://www.ohchr.org/EN/ProfessionalInterest/Pages/CRC.aspx>

<sup>11</sup> *Ibid.* Article 14.

<sup>12</sup> *Ibid.* Article 8.

<sup>13</sup> *Ibid.* Article 17.

<sup>14</sup> *Ibid.* Article 30.

<sup>15</sup> *Ibid.* Article 29(d).

convention is designed to eliminate discrimination in accessing education and to ensure equal access to quality education for all. It calls for 'equivalent' (not equal or identical) standards of education in all 'public' educational institutions of the 'same' level. It seeks to safeguard the minimum standards of education that each child should be able to access without distinction as to their race, sex, colour, language, religion, social origin, birth, political or other opinion etc. Those standards are however, not expected to be the ceiling. Furthermore, despite the egalitarian approach, the convention understands and acknowledges the liberty of the parents to choose their children's education and the right of minorities in a state to carry on their own educational activities. It also believes that the purpose of the education should be to achieve the full development of the human personality and to strengthen respect for human rights and fundamental freedoms.

More recently, the Sustainable Development Goals (SDG), and in particular, SDG Goal 4 (Quality Education) lays down 7 outcome targets and 3 means of implementation which includes the provision of 12 years of free, publicly-funded, inclusive, equitable, quality primary and secondary education, of which at least nine years are compulsory, without discrimination; equitable access to learning relevant technical and vocational skills for decent jobs and entrepreneurship; gender equality and inclusion in terms of access to schools; education for sustainable development and global citizenship to be implemented through safe, inclusive and effective learning environments, trained and qualified teachers and scholarships to enable people from disadvantaged backgrounds to access education.

All in all, the main focus of international goals of education remains on firstly, improving access to education, which includes focus on ensuring enrolments, particularly of marginalized classes and investing in infrastructure and support schemes like scholarships and secondly to ensure that education in substance is able to lead to a holistic development of the child with a

global worldview and ideals of peace and tolerance with respect for fundamental rights and freedoms along with a sense of their own unique history, identity and space. In an increasingly interdependent and interconnected world, this appears to be the correct approach as it gives the children an opportunity to identify who they are whilst embracing and accepting the diversity around them, equipping them with necessary tools to relate, connect and engage with the world as is what they would need in practice as well in order to succeed.

Can Single National Curriculum (SNC) ever be wide enough to deliver such outcomes or should they be less prescriptive to allow room for diversity? I will attempt to answer this by first looking at the new single national curriculum in Pakistan and its related legal framework in the next sections.

### **SNC and the Conflict with the 18<sup>th</sup> Amendment of the Constitution of Pakistan**

The process of developing the SNC was spearheaded by the National Curriculum Council (NCC) comprising 46 members including federal minister for education and professional training as chairman, the provincial and area education minister, chairman HEC, heads of Ittehad Tanzimat ul Madaras Pakistan, chairmen of provincial textbook boards, representatives from army, navy, air force and educational institutions and eminent scholars and educationists.<sup>16</sup>

However, since the 18<sup>th</sup> Amendment of the Constitution of Pakistan 1973 in 2010, education has been a provincial subject. In that, the provinces have the authority to determine their own curricula and matters related to education whereas the Federal Government merely has a

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<sup>16</sup> Minutes of the Meeting of Punjab textbook Board with Private School Owners on orientation of Single National Curriculum and adoption and Implementation of 30 Model Textbooks from Class Pre I-V, 7 January, 2021. Available at: <https://pctb.punjab.gov.pk/system/files/Minutes%20of%20the%20Meeting%20with%20Private%20Schools%20for%20orientation%20on%20SNC%20dated%2007-01-2021.pdf>

residual role mainly with respect to Pakistani students in foreign countries and foreign students in Pakistan. It is therefore, intriguing to note the role and responsibility that the Ministry of Federal Education and Professional Training (MOFEPT) has assumed in the crafting of the Single National Curriculum which is not its constitutional mandate. This point was explored further in writ petition No 49211 of 2020.<sup>17</sup>

In the petition, the petitioners had alleged amongst other things, that after formulating a National Curriculum Council with the coordination of the Interprovincial Education Ministers Conference (“IPEMC”), the Federal Government was now preparing a Single National Curriculum for Grades Pre-I to V, which was against the dictates of provincial autonomy being adopted by the Provinces resulting from the devolution of powers under the Constitution (Eighteenth Amendment) Act, 2010.

The counsel for the petitioners also explained that the Federal Government functions under Article 90 of the Constitution with executive powers provided under Articles 97 and 99 of the Constitution and its jurisdiction is completely defined in the Federal Rules of Business, 1973 whereas the Provincial Government exercise powers under Article 129 read with Article 137 of the Constitution with the Provincial Rules of Business, thus after the 18th Amendment, the issue of curriculum comes within the scope of the Provincial Government because the Punjab Board is mentioned in Column-3 of the First Schedule (Rules 2 and 3) of the Punjab Government Rules of Business, 2011.

The Additional Attorney General for Pakistan, Ch. Ishtiaq Ahmed Khan, in his contentions however, took the view that under Article 25-A of the Constitution (right to education), the

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<sup>17</sup> Al Bakio International and 8 Others V Federation of Pakistan and 8 Others, W.P No 49211 of 2020. Available at: <https://sys.lhc.gov.pk/appjudgments/2020LHC2439.pdf>.

state had a duty to provide education to children between ages 5 to 16 therefore, the Federal Government had not been absolved from taking initiatives to secure fundamental rights for the children and that the State in terms of Articles 37-A of the Constitution shall form such policies on the basis of which the State shall promote with special care the education and economic interest.

Furthermore, he contended that under Article 144 of the Constitution, the Provinces could give mandate to the Federal Government through resolutions to promulgate laws for uniform applicability throughout the country on the *request of the Provinces*.

The Additional Attorney General also submitted that the Federation had supervisory powers to consult all federating units for the sake of unity and uniformity and argued that SNC was a national cause to unite the Nation and a Nation could not stand without unity. He regarded education as the central pillar in commanding the nation building which he claimed was lacking since creation of Pakistan. He also asserted that uniformity in syllabus would eradicate sense of deprivation amongst federating units and it will uplift federalism, as it encourages cooperation and inter-departmental coordination.

To further cement the role of the Federal Government, Assistant Attorney General, Sadia Malik added that under Schedule-II, Serial 8 of the Federal Rules, the Education Division had control over the development and coordination of National Policies/Plans/Programs in education, development of curricula and textbook, national book foundation, etc.

In the same spirit, Dr. Faisal Zahoor, Special Secretary (Planning) School Education Department, Government of the Punjab, Lahore, who was present in the Court highlighted that

even though after 18th Constitutional Amendment, education is a devolved subject and development of curriculum is the responsibility of the Provinces, however, IPEMC, Ministry of Federal Education and Professional Training, and NCC with representation from all federating units *had been taking provinces into confidence* on educational matters for the purpose of national cohesion and ensuring uniformity in education. Under what authority, that he did not mention. He also conceded that, the development of curricula and its notification within the province of Punjab was the mandate of Punjab Curriculum and Textbook Board (PCTB) and though SNC had not been developed by the PCTB, it was ‘reviewed’ and ‘concurred’ by it.

Justice Jawad Hassan agreed with the contention of the Additional Attorney General that Article 25-A of the Constitution did indeed not limit the obligation of any government in Pakistan to provide free and compulsory education to all children from age of 5 to 16. The learned judge accepted that in view of the definition of the State, the Federal Government had not been absolved from taking initiatives to secure the fundamental rights for the children or to promote their education and well-being.

He summarized the position with respect to the role of Federal Government in para 24 of the judgement as follows:

‘24. As far as the powers of the Federal Government are concerned, the “inter-provincial matters and co-ordination” is within the legislative and policy competence of the Federal Government under Entry 13, Part II, Fourth Schedule, Federal Legislative List. If we look at the definition of the term ‘co-ordination’, it is defined by Advanced Law Lexicon 4th Edition, Volume 1 p. 1070 with respect to the Indian Constitution as: “*The expression ‘co-ordination’ occurring in Sch. VII, List I Entry 66 of the Constitution means harmonization with a view to forge a uniform pattern for a concerted*

*action according to a certain design, scheme or plan of development. It will include power to do all things, which are necessary to prevent what would make 'co-ordination' either impossible or difficult."*

In view of the above, *co-operative and consultative federalism* can be a way forward with regard to issues such as education - which *falls within the exclusive domain* of provincial legislative competence after the 18th Amendment. *If all the Provinces desire or agree* to bring a sort of uniformity in curriculum for specified kindergarten till primary standard, such an idea can only be made to work through a well-articulated and comprehensive inter-provincial co-ordination and objective consultation which can be performed by the Federal Government while functioning within its domain as per abovementioned Entry 13 of the Federal Legislative List.<sup>18</sup>

It is pertinent to note here that the Honourable judge views the role of the Federal Government as one of 'coordination' but goes on to define coordination in terms of harmonization to forge a uniform pattern for concerted action. This interpretation of coordination has the potential to make serious in-roads into the effect of 18<sup>th</sup> amendment and sets a dangerous precedent that could roll back all gains made for provincial autonomy up till now. In that, it makes legal headway for recentralisation of a previously devolved subject and opens the entire scheme to the general criticism that PTI is looking to undo the 18<sup>th</sup> amendment altogether and relocate the power to the centre. The political implications of such a move could be devastating for a country that was already 27 years late in devolving the promised rights back to the provinces which they initially set aside in order to strengthen the centre of the new state that had come into being.<sup>19</sup>

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<sup>18</sup> *Ibid*, Para 24.

<sup>19</sup> The powers had to be devolved within 10 years of the 1973 Constitution but the 18<sup>th</sup> amendment came in 2010. See Abid Mustikhan, 'Ambiguities of the 18<sup>th</sup> Amendment', Tribune, Jan 12, 2015. Available at: <https://tribune.com.pk/story/820769/ambiguities-of-the-18th-amendment>.

For now, until it is turned over, it seems that the judiciary has endorsed the right of the Federal Government to helm the affairs as regards harmonization of education but more critically, and what is of real concern here is that it may also have legitimised the idea of ‘cooperative and consultative federalism’ (an idea that is not envisaged so much in the Constitution itself) as a viable and hybrid way forward based on normative values such as ‘desire’ or ‘agreement’ instead. This begs the question as to why would these values be more important than constitutional parameters to uphold and does this mean that Provincial and Federal Governments can override the Constitution by simply desiring or being in agreement? It would also be interesting to explore whether fundamental freedoms argument could be used to subvert the Constitution itself such as to erode the impact of 18<sup>th</sup> amendment or should the same have been interpreted in a manner so as not cause any inconsistency or conflict between them? In other words, do fundamental rights of people prevail over constitutional rights of provinces, which in turn, are also the rights of the people of those provinces?

That said, however, the question of erosion of provincial autonomy did not begin with SNC and neither will it end with it, but this development has the serious potential to open many floodgates in terms of setting the wrong precedent as regards the erosion of provincial autonomy in the future on at least a de facto if not a de jure basis.

This is a very alarming course for the future of 18<sup>th</sup> amendment and so A H Nayyar defiantly urges the provinces to reclaim their policy domain. He suggests that,

‘The federal government has extended itself beyond its constitutional domain. Education in its entirety is a provincial subject and it is the provinces that will be eventually held responsible for the

intellectual development of their young generations. They must not feel bound to an exercise carried out in violation of the constitution, even though they had consented to sit in consultations on SNC.<sup>20</sup>

### **SNC: Vision, Objectives and Content**

Having discussed the constitutional position at length and seeing how the Federal Government has made its case for assuming the role and responsibility to develop the SNC, let us turn our attention to what the SNC actually is, what its vision and objectives are, how it proposes to achieve them and assess how successful those proposals likely to be in light of the right to education as proclaimed by PTI and as enshrined under international law.

The official website on the Single National Curriculum by the Ministry of Federal Education and Professional Training (MOFEPT) lists the vision, objectives, key considerations, phases of implementation, development process, consultation with stakeholders and the salient features of the curriculum.<sup>21</sup> It also makes accessible the subject wise curriculum, learning outcomes and guidelines prepared for the users of the new curriculum which gives an insight into the kind of content that is expected to be covered.

Although, 30 model textbooks have been approved<sup>22</sup> as the only books ought to be used by everyone in the following academic year, they have not yet been published and so at the time of writing this paper, I have no means to assess the extent to which the content will match the objectives and the guidelines, however, the guidelines themselves are quite illustrative of the topics that the course intends to include. To that extent, they can be compared with the stated objectives to see how closely they co-relate.

<sup>20</sup> A. H Nayyar, 'Dissecting the Single National Curriculum', Dawn, 9 August 2020. Available at: <https://www.dawn.com/news/1572130>.

<sup>21</sup> Ministry of Federal Education and Professional Training: <http://www.mofept.gov.pk/Detail/YzJiNGVjODgtNjIwOC00YzRiLThmNmUtNjJjYWlWYmJkMWY2>

<sup>22</sup> *Ibid*, (n 16).

The SNC is based on the vision and objective to develop one system of education for all, 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 and to ensure:

- Social Cohesion and National Integration,
- Alleviation of disparities in education content across the multiple streams,
- Equal opportunities for upward social mobility,
- Equity in education,
- Holistic development of children in the light of emerging international trends and local aspirations,
- Smooth inter-provincial mobility of teachers and students.

The key considerations that underlie the curriculum are:

teachings from the Quran and Sunnah; vision of Quaid-e-Azam Muhammad Ali Jinnah and Allama Iqbal; the Constitution of Pakistan, national policies; international commitments, including Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs); latest trends in education; societal values; inclusive education; human rights and child protection; hygiene and sanitation; environment and climate change; global citizenship; life skills based and civic education; respect for religious and cultural diversity; move away from rote learning; activities and project based learning; 21st century skills; use of information and communication technology; and the ever evolving challenges and trends of the new era.

From this, it appears that SNC is an attempt to achieve three major goals:

- (i) one 'system' of education,
- (ii) emphasis on national identity that looks upon religion as the unifying factor, and

- (iii) desire to modernise learning with progressive elements, global citizenship and 21<sup>st</sup> century skills.

Each of these will be analysed below:

**(i) *One System of Education***

The PTI government is desirous to replace the different streams of education prevalent in the country i.e. the Deeni Madaris (religious seminaries), public schools and private schools under one system led by the Federal Government with coordination among provinces as per the ‘consultative federalism’ model.

In our beloved country, different systems of education cater to the educational needs of children in the different classes of society. These include public sector schools, low cost private schools and the well-endowed state of the art private schools. Alongside, across the length and breadth of the country there are madrassahs which cater to the educational needs of approximately three million children. These different educational institutes follow completely different curricula, and resultantly we have graduates with completely different *thinking* and *approach* to life and livelihoods. These are precisely the differences that become stumbling blocks for nations aspiring to become great. A single national curriculum is therefore, an important step in the journey to building a strong nation.<sup>23</sup>

Their reasons for doing so may be wrapped in misplaced ideals of equality which will be assessed below but before that, it is important to understand the impact of this move from the perspective of state control of private entities and the resulting consequences on the private sector.

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<sup>23</sup> Para 3, Preface, Social Studies Curriculum Available at: <http://www.mofept.gov.pk/SiteImage/Misc/files/SNC%20Social%20Studies%204-5.pdf>. Similar paras appear in other subjects as well which are all available at: <http://www.mofept.gov.pk/Detail/NWJmMmM2YTQtM2YzYi00NjJkLTgzNDEtYzIxMTI4MTI1Y2Qw>.

Private sector is a feature of all capitalist nations. Private healthcare, private housing, private schooling, are all embedded into the capitalist framework. As against this backdrop, the social contract, international law as well as the constitutions of most countries accept and recognise the state duty to provide free and compulsory education up to a stated grade, usually up till the 12<sup>th</sup> grade but it may vary depending upon each state. Under the capitalist strain, the duty entails that the state ensures that there is a public alternative to access quality education by developing good quality public schools at par with a stated benchmark, not by eliminating the private sector, but by working alongside it.

This duty of the state will not be discharged by deflecting the blame on private schools or by their excessive, unfair and unnecessary regulation. In order to fulfil this duty, the state has to ensure that a certain standard of quality education is provided in state schools and the necessary funding to ensure the minimum standards of infrastructure, equipment and teacher's trainings is delivered so that the gap between state and private schools is reduced. The private schools are neither responsible for the widening of the 'quality' gap between their institutions and the state schools nor it is their duty to provide free and compulsory education to all. In doing so, the state is penalizing the private institutions for their own failure to deliver quality education and schooling at par with globally recognised standards. A duty that they were supposed to have fulfilled, not by eliminating competition, but by offering comparable or equivalent standards.

However, if the very existence of a private sector is the bone of contention, then the reform the state is looking for is not going to come by attacking the private schools alone and insinuating them as the 'big enemy' standing in the way of access to quality education of all children. If the problem is the existence of a private sector then essentially the problem is capitalism itself

and to address it, a complete overhaul of the economic system is required from its capitalist foundations to that of a socialist or communist system. One wonders if this is what the ultimate intention really is but if it is not, then cherry picking one or two sectors for state control won't eliminate the inequalities that they expect to neutralize.

This is because PTI places the blame for class inequality on the different schooling systems and the different curriculums prevalent in the country without truly understanding the class dynamics.

It insists that,

The decades old educational apartheid amongst the different streams of education in the country has not only kept the different educational institutions, educational quality, teachers and students divided, but has also perpetuated inequity in opportunities of social and economic progress amongst the population. These systems or streams of education in the country are creating disparities and different mind-sets.<sup>24</sup>

The assumption appears to be that if differing educational systems and curriculums are the source of unequal access to opportunities then perhaps standardization is the answer. In fact, that could not be any further from truth. This is not only an oversimplification of the challenge of ensuring quality education for all, but also flawed, both in theory and in practice at many levels. At best, it is akin to a treatment of the symptoms, as opposed to the actual disease i.e. economic inequality. One of the key considerations of the new SNC is to move from rote learning to project based learning and project based learning requires a learning eco-system and investment beyond the classroom as well as teacher training but the schools even with a

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<sup>24</sup> Para 2, Preface, Early Childhood Care and Education. Available at: <http://www.mofept.gov.pk/SiteImage/Misc/files/SNC%20ECCE.pdf>.

single curriculum are not identically placed in terms of resources. How then would the class difference be eliminated merely by imposing a homogenized curriculum, is not clear.

The question really is whether education the cause or the product of class inequality? Until this fundamental difference is understood, it is likely that all responses to eradicate the class inequality in Pakistan would remain symptomatic and consequently ineffective for a long-term and sustainable cure to the growing divide between the rich and the poor.

### *Class Inequality and SNC*

A class-based society originates when the means of production and wealth are unequally held and consequently determine, locate and place the distribution of power in the society. Those who control the means of production, also control the production and distribution of knowledge to perpetuate and reproduce ideas that ensure that the narrow and vested interests of the ruling groups, classes or castes are widely accepted as the interests of everyone.<sup>25</sup> The fewer such actors are in a society, the more unequal it is. The lesser the diversity of thoughts and ideas, the more it is an indicator of the concentration of power in a few hands.

As Karl Marx said,

“The ideas of the ruling class are in every epoch the ruling ideas, i.e. the class which is the ruling material force of society, is at the same time its ruling intellectual force. The class which has the means of material production at its disposal, has control at the same time over the means of mental production, so that thereby, generally speaking, the ideas of those who lack the means of mental production are subject to it.”<sup>26</sup>

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<sup>25</sup> Marx and Engels, *The German Ideology, Theses on Feuerbach, Introduction to the Critique of Political Economy*, Amherst, N.Y. Prometheus Books, 1998. Available at: <https://www.marxists.org/archive/marx/works/1845/german-ideology/ch01b.htm>.

<sup>26</sup> *Ibid.*

In other words, ideology follows the classes, not the other way around, as has been dangerously assumed under the single national curriculum. That means, that the inequalities in the society are not created because of the differing methods of schooling or curriculum, rather that the differing schooling and curriculums are created by the ruling elite as a means to perpetuate the inequalities or its dominant ideology. They are not the *reason* why the inequalities exist in the first place, rather they are the *consequence* of an unequal society based on an exploitative and unequal system of distribution of resources and power. To assume otherwise, would be to turn a blind eye to the glaring economic disparities and the systemic factors that place the means of production in the hands of the ruling few at the expense of the masses.

If there was any genuine desire on part of the government to create equal opportunities, they would be devoting precious time and resources to reconfiguring the economic power relations amongst people and improving their chances of accessing means of production by redistributing the means of production more equitably; instead, they are enforcing a single curriculum that would result in monopolising the ideas, thinking and approach of the students. As a result, this might lead to hegemony over ideas which from the perspectives of students is not very encouraging given that students should be able to refer to a variety of resources to formulate their opinions and develop their views. As far as the SNC goes, the ability of the students to do that is likely to be severely restricted.

#### *Limited Resources under SNC*

The Punjab Textbook Board Act 2015 as amended in 2020 gives wide and discretionary powers to the board to approve the printing, publishing and selling of any textbooks or supplementary

materials in the institutions<sup>27</sup> and where any subject has contents or material related to Islam, such as history, Islamiyat, Pakistan studies, Urdu, literature etc. then as per Section 2(a) of this Act, the approval of Muttahida Ulema Board in addition to the approval of the Punjab Board will have to be sought.<sup>28</sup> Although, it is stated that private publishers are allowed to develop their textbooks on SNC, after obtaining prior No Objection Certificate from the concerned authorities in the respective provinces and areas,<sup>29</sup> the instructions that private schools have allegedly received from the PCTB mandates that the 30 model textbooks developed by the government are to be used from the upcoming academic session. No other textbooks or workbooks are currently permitted.<sup>30</sup> Private publishers may work on developing textbooks in conformity with the SNC, but these may not be used until they have been approved by the PCTB, the Muttahida Ulema Council and the External Review Committees. All of this will result in increasing the prices of the books.

With dearth of comparative textbooks and control over the content that is published there is likely to be a serious control over the narrative and ideology by those in charge to give approvals. The children will be exposed to a limited set of knowledge with no comparative options which could indicate the death of dissent and consequently of social change. If everyone is studying the same thing, from the same books how will they be exposed to other opinions or points of view? As a result, this ambitious social experiment may lead to the creation of a hegemonic state where there is one party rule, one leader, one system, one curriculum, one set of books and one narrative, to the exclusion of any other thoughts, ideologies, freedom of expression, choice and dissent which are the hallmarks of any

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<sup>27</sup> Sections 9 (3) of Punjab Curriculum and Textbook Board Act 2015. Available at: [https://punjablaws.punjab.gov.pk/en/show\\_article/UGVQZ1ZkBzA-](https://punjablaws.punjab.gov.pk/en/show_article/UGVQZ1ZkBzA-)

<sup>28</sup> *Ibid*, Section 10.

<sup>29</sup> Minutes of the PCTB Meeting, (n 16).

<sup>30</sup> LGS letter dated 29 January 2021, available at: <https://twitter.com/SanvalNasim/status/1355474223465115649?s=20>. See also, Ayesha Razaque, 'Eliminating Private School Competition', The News, 31 January 2021. Available at: <https://www.thenews.com.pk/print/782664->

democratic and civilised state. The stifling of choice and innovation is perhaps, one of the most significant implications of SNC. How will the children with such a closed vision ever be able to navigate their way in an increasingly interdependent and global world where ‘education without borders’ and ‘learning without boundaries’ is the call of the day?

It is important to highlight that although, the minutes of the meeting organised by PCTB with private school owners for orientation on SNC and the adoption of 30 model textbooks from Pre 1-V held on 7<sup>th</sup> January 2021 claim that the Lahore High Court in ICA No 55556 of 2020 *decided* that,

“No private or public school shall prescribe or suggest any kind of book or reading material without getting its approval from the Government or its authorized officers / department / organization and in case of its violation all kind of legal action shall be taken.”<sup>31</sup>

These words were actually part of the statement made by Dr. Sohail Shahzad, the Secretary of the School Education Department which the LHC records and reproduces. Thus, whether that can be attributed as a *decision* of the court remains debateable.

**(ii) National Identity that looks upon Religion as the Unifying Factor**

Pakistan is a product of the partition of 1947. Its people however, belong to various communities whose history goes back to many thousands of years and may even be traced back to ancient civilizations such as Mohenjo-Daro and Harappa. Each part with its own unique identity, norms, culture, language, food, music, role models and struggles stitched together to create one new state. The idea of Pakistan therefore, was susceptible to various

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<sup>31</sup> Altamush Saeed v Govt of Punjab etc. ICA No 55556 of 2020. Available at: <https://sys.lhc.gov.pk/appjudgments/2020LHC3336.pdf> .

interpretations and as Saigol expounded in her book,<sup>32</sup> it represents different things to different classes, ethnicities, regions, genders, religions and sects. It was not a coherent, monolithic, homogenous idea but, and she quotes Hamza Alavi who very succinctly states that,

The moment that Pakistan was established, Muslim nationalism in India had fulfilled itself and outlived its purpose. Now there was a fresh equation of privilege and deprivation to be reckoned with in the new state. Virtually overnight there were ethnic redefinitions. Punjabis who were the most numerous could boast of a greater percentage of people with higher education and were most firmly entrenched in both the army (being 85% of the armed forces) and the bureaucracy. They were the new bearers of privilege, the ‘true’ Muslim for whom Pakistan was created. The weaker ‘salariats’ of Bengal, Sindh, Sarhad and Baluchistan did not share this and accordingly they redefined their identities as Bengalis, Sindhis, Pathans, and Baloch.<sup>33</sup>

In addition to the ethnic tension, Saigol highlights that Pakistan was also caught between religious nationalism based on the two-nation theory and the secular ethos of ‘equal citizenship’ that M. A Jinnah intended to base the new state on.<sup>34</sup> His death just a year into independence made space for defining the new state but other influential people like Maulana Maududi who led the movement for creation of theocratic state in Pakistan. Saigol explains that the movement for Pakistan was now reinterpreted as ‘as a movement not for the establishment of a national state but for an Islamic state’.<sup>35</sup>

She writes,

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<sup>32</sup> Rubina Saigol, ‘The Pakistan Project, A Feminist Perspective on Nation and identity’, (Delhi: Women Unlimited 2013) Pg 1.

<sup>33</sup> Hamza Alavi, ‘Politics of Ethnicity in Pakistan’, in S Akbar Zaidi (ed.) *Regional Imbalances and the National Question in Pakistan* (Lahore: Vanguard 1992) Pg 270, in Rubina Saigol, ‘The Pakistan Project, A Feminist Perspective on Nation and identity’, (Delhi: Women Unlimited 2013) Pg 11.

<sup>34</sup> *Ibid*, (n 33), Pg 10.

<sup>35</sup> *Ibid*, (n 33), Pg 12.

Needless to say, equality of citizenship is unattainable so long as a single religion is established as the state religion. The moment that this happens the citizenship of those belonging to other religions is rendered secondary.<sup>36</sup>

So, on the one hand there were the ‘others’ on grounds of faith such as the Hindus, the Sikhs, the Christians etc. with whom Muslims had little in common, and on the other, the Sindhis, the Balochis and the Pakhtoons with whom at least one aspect, the religion, was more or less common, so it is not surprising to see why it is often used as the string to tie it all together.

The new nation grappling with competing objectives of building intellectual and scientific base capable of ushering in progress and prosperity on one hand and endeavouring to unify a diverse populace into a singular whole on the other, set to achieve these ends by alternating educational policy goals across the two spectrums. The purpose of education within Pakistan has therefore, depended upon the various stages of its history, national concerns and outcomes upon the construction of the ideology and the narrative around geo-political goals of the ruling elite.

However, the aftermath of the 1971 war jolted the nation and proved as a catalyst to vehemently reconfigure a unified identity rooted in ‘negative nationalism’ and redefined the common enemy from ‘backwardness’ and ‘ignorance’ to tangible ‘others’ lurking behind territory, plotting and planning behind any and every door.<sup>37</sup> The ideological boundaries thus, came to be interpreted much more narrowly to the exclusion of ‘others’ who did not conform or belong to the majority. This was seen most devastatingly later in the Zia era (1977-1988) which relentlessly pursued a singular, majoritarian agenda.

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<sup>36</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>37</sup> Rubina Saigol, ‘Between the Sacred and the Secular: Curriculum Debates in India and Pakistan’, in Imtiaz Alam (ed), *Religious Revival in South Asia*, SAPANA, 2007.

As Saigol recalls,

‘a spate of discriminatory laws, derived from a narrow and communal version of history were drawn up to erase the ungodly secular influences of the social policies of Ayub and Zulfikar Bhutto periods. Realizing the power of education to manipulate the mind, Zia quickly seized upon it to re-make the nation in a sectarian image. As expected, it was the subject of history that was subjected to maximum deletion and addition in the process of forging a Sunni Muslim Pakistan.’<sup>38</sup>

In addition to that, the discipline of science was subjugated and debased to such an extent that at an official conference during Zia, period the academic and scholarly papers that were read comprised of topics such as ‘the harnessing of Djinns to create an alternative energy source’, ‘chemical compositions of Djinns’, ‘measuring the temperature of Hell’, ‘calculating the formula for Sawab’, ‘measuring the angle of God’, ‘speed of Heaven’ and so on, as highlighted in Pervez Hoodbhouy’s book, *Muslims and Science: Religious Orthodoxy and the struggle for Rationality*.<sup>39</sup>

In the recent most articulation of the attempt to curate the sense of an identity that is ‘Pakistani’, the single national curriculum reiterates the focus on religion and select national heroes that fall in line with the state narrative of its time such as M.A Jinnah the founder of the nation and Allama Muhammad Iqbal, the national poet. Whose interpretation of religion will it be and how much scope there would be to include the struggles and stories of ethnic figures of importance to specific provinces such as for instance Bacha Khan in Khyber Pakhtunkhwa is however, not clear. What is clear is that *‘what is not said goes as much into the making of*

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<sup>38</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>39</sup> Pervez Hoodbhoy, *Muslims and Science: Religious Orthodoxy and the Struggle for Rationality*. Vanguard, Lahore, 1991, in Dr. Rubina Saigol, ‘Between the Sacred and the Secular: Curriculum Debates in India and Pakistan’, in Imtiaz Alam (ed), *Religious Revival in South Asia*, SAPANA, 2007.

*knowledge as what is said... The repressed consists of precisely that which does not fit into the hegemonic construction of the pure, singular, unified nation.*<sup>40</sup>

### *The Language Conundrum*

The government directives for grades one to five also require the textbooks and teaching of English, mathematics and general knowledge to be in English. All other subjects are to be taught and examined in Urdu in all schools. In this way, the new curriculum reorients the medium of instruction to move towards a hybrid model between Urdu and English on the grounds that children learn best in their mother tongue. The mother tongue here being equated to Urdu which may be the national language but it is not necessary that it is also the mother-tongue of a child.

As Salman Akram Raja explains,

Given the overwhelming evidence from around the world, it is incontestable that concept formation and absorption in the early years is best achieved in the mother tongue or in languages familiar to the child. While the mother tongue is generally determined by ethnicity, the tongue or tongues that are most familiar to a child are determined by class and locale. Children of any ethnicity growing up in an upper middle-class household in Lahore or Karachi are far more likely to be familiar with the English language than the children of the domestic help growing up in the same area or those with an upper middle-class income growing up in a less metropolitan setting.<sup>41</sup>

In addition to that, the constitution expressly provides the right of citizens who may have a distinct language, script and culture to preserve and promote the same under Art 28. By

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<sup>40</sup> Saigol, (n 38).

<sup>41</sup> Salman Akram Raja, 'Reforming Education?', The News, Feb 6, 2021. Available at: <https://www.thenews.com.pk/amp/785636-reforming-education?> .

imposing ‘Urdu’ language as a medium of instruction the curriculum again fails to appreciate the rich diversity of language and culture in Pakistan and ends up creating the dichotomy between the self and the other at yet another level.

As A.H Nayyar also highlights,

‘in this re-centralised curriculum, the child is taken from awareness of self, to family, to the neighbourhood and then straight to the nation. A child under this leapfrog curriculum will never get to learn about their district or province which will be a serious loss to the child’s worldview. The leapfrog seems to be a deliberate policy of those whose narrow view of nationalism insists on denying identities of constituent nationalities. Advocates of uniformity may like to keep in mind a well-known saying: uniformity has the colour of deserts while the beauty of gardens is in their diversity.’<sup>42</sup>

### ***(iii) Modernising Learning, Global Citizenship and 21<sup>st</sup> Century Skills***

The SNC proclaims to move away from rote learning towards project based learning, it attempts to include components on diversity, tolerance and human rights. Some of the ancient civilizations like the Mesopotamian, Egyptian and Indus are included.<sup>43</sup> There is stated focus on training children to be digital citizens for responsible online interaction and use of technology and the subject of ‘ethics’ which was based on moral values for minorities has been replaced with a new subject called ‘religious studies’ for minorities which will cover the fundamentals of 5 major minority religions prevalent in Pakistan.<sup>44</sup> These are all encouraging in-roads into an otherwise nationally oriented and patriotic curriculum. However, a few concerns still remain which are broadly related to the omission of minority religions not

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<sup>42</sup> Nayyar, (n 21).

<sup>43</sup> Social Studies Syllabus, (n 24).

<sup>44</sup> Religious Education syllabus. Available at:

<http://www.mofept.gov.pk/SiteImage/Misc/files/Religious%20Education%201%20to%205.pdf>.

covered in the curriculum and the implementation and delivery of this new curriculum in line with these new techniques.

Article 22 of the Constitution of Pakistan 1973 states that no person attending any educational institution shall be required to receive religious instruction, other than his own. Under SNC, even though there is a separate subject for the minorities and their religious instruction, some other subjects such as English have chapters in which religious personalities of Islam have been included.<sup>45</sup> The studying of those chapters becomes contentious in context of Article 22 as A H Nayyar highlights,

‘The SNC violates fundamental rights of non-Muslim Pakistani citizens by prescribing lessons in urdu and English courses that are already part of the Islamiat curriculum... A lesson on Seerat-un-Nabi is also prescribed in English textbooks of all grades. This is in spite of the fact that the course on Islamiat has a substantial part on the Seerat. It also has another substantial part on sacred personalities of early Islam... when challenged to justify this violation of constitutional right, officials at MOFEPT refuse to correct the wrong. Instead they prescribe outlandish ways of avoiding the violation: they want teachers to ask non-Muslims students to leave the class during such lessons (and do what, they do not say). They also prescribe exempting non-Muslim students from answering examination questions relating to such lessons, a risk that few students would want to take since examiners could easily be prejudiced against non-Muslims.’<sup>46</sup>

A change in the curriculum alone will not lead to 21<sup>st</sup> century skills if the examination and assessment techniques are not accordingly altered and the faculty teaching the curriculum is not trained to deliver it in the manner that it is intended. To begin with, the education budget

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<sup>45</sup> Theme 8, English syllabus, Pg 60. Available at: <http://www.mofept.gov.pk/SiteImage/Misc/files/SNC%20English%201-5.pdf> .

<sup>46</sup> Nayyar, (n 21).

under PTI government has seen several cuts and without the funding and resources equivalent standards of education cannot be ensured.<sup>47</sup>

Furthermore, although, the guidelines for the assessment are laid down in the syllabus, the actual examination questions and the contents of the textbooks when printed and released will determine the extent to which they are inclusive and the extent to which the critical and analytical components have been introduced and the descriptive or narrative questions reduced.

For now, a look at the learning outcomes in individual subjects call for the child to be able to either ‘explain’, ‘define’ or ‘describe’ a given concept such tolerance or diversity for example, which does not call upon the child to engage critically with the issue. Very few sections call for a more critical view that would require the students to ‘differentiate’, ‘demonstrate’, ‘critically examine’, ‘analyse’, ‘compare’ or ‘assess’ a subject matter.

SNC has also been criticised for subjecting children to oppositional systems, i.e. enquiry based approach for secular subjects and rote learning and memorisation for Islamiyat. According to Women’s Action Forum Policy Brief,

‘The SNC syllabus is too heavy for pre-schoolers and classes 1-5 (ages 4-10) which will not only expose children to a process that will destroy their interest in learning, it will also kill their creativity and intellectual curiosity. The pressure this arrangement will put on them would come within the purview of serious psychological and emotional abuse, including vulnerability to physical and sexual violence.’<sup>48</sup>

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<sup>47</sup> Chaudhary and Alam, ‘Institutional Reforms and Holistic Policy Recommendations for Child Protection in Educational Settings’, Lahore Education and Research Network, 2020, Pg 20. Available at: <http://learnpak.com.pk/wp-content/uploads/2020/12/Final-Institutional-Reforms-and-Holistic-Policy-Recommendations-for-Child-Protection-in-Educational-Settings.pdf>.

<sup>48</sup> Hussain and Saigol, ‘Policy: Education for One and All?’, Dawn, Sept 6, 2020. Available at: <https://www.dawn.com/news/print/1577990>.

As regards teacher training, with the amount of time that is left before the new curriculum kicks in from the upcoming academic year, it is unlikely that the requisite teacher training will be complete and so it is highly likely that the implementation of the SNC and its 21<sup>st</sup> century goals may be impaired.

Another cause of serious concern is that the curriculum is silent on soft skills and co-curricular components such as sports, music, dramatics, and arts. This is likely because in consensus based initiatives often the lowest common denominator becomes the ceiling.

Alternatively, it could mean that by remaining silent on this aspect, the Federal Government and the NCC has left the scope for schools and provinces to develop their own policies as regards provisions of these add-ons options based on their own beliefs, financial standing and resources.

In either case, this appears to be a serious omission from the perspective of the child's holistic development and another feature where class difference may yet be reflected, in that richer, private schools may be able to offer more to their students as compared to state and even low cost private schools so again, it must be asked whether curriculum alone is sufficient to eliminate class difference or is that a misnomer?

The combined effect of one system of education and the emphasis on national identity, points to the danger of equating equality with homogenization so instead of being a great equalizer in terms of advancing people collectively at a chance in life, this endeavour is likely to equalize people by lowering them all the same instead. Equality upwards and onwards may

be progress, but equality that brings everyone collectively down and that silences others, not so much.

To understand this, lessons can be drawn from India's attempt to homogenise education in the year 2000 by attempting to introduce a National Curriculum Framework based on unmistakably similar claims of reconstitution of identity originating from the majoritarian religion that Pakistan also appears to be appealing to in its own context. The similarities therefore, are uncanny but India's prior experience can serve as a cautious reminder for Pakistan that may still have some time to correct its course.

### **Homogenising Education: India's Experience**

In India, under the Bhartya Janata party (BJP), the goals were focused on 'saffroning' of education by the Sangh Parivar i.e. BJP and its ideological wing, the Rashtriya Swamsevak Sangh (RSS) and the Vishwa Hindu Parishad (VHP) in a quest to reconstitute India as a nation of indigenous Hindus suffering a series of alien invasions from multitude of enemies including most prominently by the Muslims who were the marauders, the warriors and the illegitimate foreign conquerors.<sup>49</sup> As a result, in the year 2000, the National Council for Educational Research and Training (NCERT) produced a highly controversial 'National Curriculum Framework' (NCF) which radically redefined the educational agenda of the state.

Saigol, in her seminal paper, *'Between the Sacred and the Secular: Curriculum Debates in India and Pakistan'*, discusses at length the ideology, trajectory and impact of the curriculum in India and Pakistan particularly in context of its reconfiguration and realignment with the ruling party's political agenda in both states.<sup>50</sup>

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<sup>49</sup> Saigol, (n 38).

<sup>50</sup> *Ibid.*

She locates RSS as an alternative site of production of historical knowledge and explains how the Sangh Parivar, when in power, relied on this knowledge to redraw the ideological map of the nation and state. One of the methods employed included changing the textbooks and teaching their version of Hindu supremacy via teaching ‘Indian’ values to the students. As a consequence, India’s diverse history, its multiple truths and pasts and its secular ethos was suppressed to promulgate a homogenized version of state sanctioned ideology leaving little or no space for alternative discourse. By diminishing, silencing and erasing ‘other’ histories, the singular, dominant tales were rigidified and consolidated through textbooks to ensure a monolithic and colourless past leading towards a construction of an artificial, false and a monolithic identity as the one ‘truth’ and one ‘correct’ base of knowledge.<sup>51</sup>

In her paper, she explains how the RSS ideology was mainstreamed and disseminated in the leading institutions for the production and dissemination of historical and social knowledge in India.

‘The vacant posts in these institutions were filled with dubious names of people with known Hindutva sympathies rather than outstanding accomplishments in historical or social research... This allowed the Hindu nationalists to get a firm grip on the institutional sites of the production of historical knowledge and by extension over the process and content of the knowledge construction.’<sup>52</sup>

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<sup>51</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>52</sup> *Ibid.*

Perhaps, homogenizing different streams of knowledge is not always the most prudent way forward as it can have the impact of diluting the less dominant voices necessary for critical reflection and development of ideas.

Homogeneity of education often comes at the expense of ignoring the diversity and the multiplicity of a state's culture, politics, class, religious, regional and gender interests and are designed to ensure the long-term continuity and relative permanence of the dominant political ideology. Saigol shares the example of the time when the Goa School Education Advisory Board made the controversial decision to hand over 51 government primary schools in rural Goa to the RSS Vidhya Bharati Educational Trust. About 30% of Goa's population is Christian and parents felt that this move would provide the RSS a backdoor entry into primary education. They felt that the Chief Minister and his appointees to the Board were 'trying to inculcate fascist ideology under the guise of protecting Marathi.'<sup>53</sup>

This shows that education has often been reduced as a tool through which the political elite maintains its power and hegemony over the populace. The value system of the majority become the source of value for everyone, leading eventually to potential conflicts, particularly in countries with a diverse historic, cultural and ethnic base. The erasure of their self and their unique identity becomes a form of psychic violence and an atrocity committed against them. A single national curriculum has communal implications that can lead to further alienation, erasure and suppression of marginalized classes and by extension, to conflicts, violence and unrest.

### **Pakistan's Own Historical Rendezvous with Ideological In-Roads into the Curriculum**

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<sup>53</sup> *Ibid.*

Like India, Pakistan cannot be devoid of its ancient and historic past and certainly cannot be seen in isolation as a superficial dream that miraculously came into being with much sacrifices and bloodshed at the stroke of a pen that August 14<sup>th</sup> of 1947. However, because ancient history of the subcontinent makes reference to India or Hindustan as it then was prior to partition, it becomes a taboo subject for the artificial construction of an identity that is to be inherently Pakistani at the expense of denying and disowning our shared history and collective past. This results in a massive repression of parts of the past that belong to the South Asian region and is a process that diminishes identity as much as the Hindutva denial of multiplicity of the Indian Past does.<sup>54</sup>

Saigol makes an excellent point as to why it is important for Pakistan to reclaim its ancient medieval past. She writes,

‘In order to prove authenticity, Pakistan cannot be shown to have such shallow or recent historical roots. Identity can be consolidated more easily if it can lay claim to antiquity... Pakistan needs to be historically ‘pushed back’ to an earlier period to make it more exotic an authentic and also to make its claim to soil more justified.’<sup>55</sup>

The political past as taught through history books has been manufactured truth, conveniently deleting or omitting aspects that don’t sit comfortably with the national narrative.<sup>56</sup> When students are not given an opportunity to research and consult different texts, opinions and viewpoints on a subject matter, they have a danger of learning and growing up with a rigid and incomplete outlook rendering them incapable of applying their mental faculties to analyse and

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<sup>54</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>55</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>56</sup> To read a detailed analysis on the silencing of histories in Pakistan see, Rubina Saigol, ‘Between the Sacred and the Secular: Curriculum Debates in India and Pakistan’, in Imtiaz Alam (ed), *Religious Revival in South Asia*, SAPANA, 2007. It gives a detailed account with examples of the kind of instances of the past that have been suppressed to preserve the state narrative, both in India and in Pakistan.

critically assess the different pieces of information coming their way in a constructive manner. The hegemony of textbooks and ideas reproduces the regurgitation and rote-learning of what has been constructed and made available to them and does not offer any room or space for critical reflection because there will be no competing information to compare and contrast with.

In this context, education has been seen and treated more as a political tool to achieve political and ideological ends as opposed to a process for the training and preparation of children to meet the challenges of their time and to equip them with skills necessary for them to compete in an increasingly shrinking and inter-dependent world, which is our default reality.

It appears that the policy makers may have been too selfishly motivated to secure their political objectives by means of control over curriculum to an extent that it may be classified as a disservice to children and as a denial of their fundamental rights to acquire an education that will empower them to meet their pedagogic and global citizenship goals.

The single national curriculum is centred on the notion of ‘one nation, one curriculum’, which to begin with is in itself an exclusionary and silencing slogan that denies the diversity of identities prevalent in Pakistan. In addition to that, it speaks of ‘ending educational apartheid amongst different streams of education in the country’ which is a flawed assertion given that it implicates the ‘symptom’ as the ‘cause’ and not vice versa, which is rather lazy and perhaps dishonest.

The authors of SNC have time and again been advocating for uniform education that will uplift the quality of education for all but it remains unclear how the notion of identical and same curriculum has the capacity to make it ‘inclusive’.

Inclusive education is about ensuring access to quality education for all students by effectively meeting their diverse needs in a way that is responsive, accepting, respectful and supportive whereas, uniform education means that all children regardless of their differing needs study the same single curriculum, with the same methods and same mediums.

Uniform systems are rigid and do not take into account the different learning abilities or the different social, historical, ethnic, gender and other context of different groups of people. It imposes a singular dominant version to the exclusion of others. Ordaining the imposition of such a singular vision is not the kind of equality that leads to progress. In fact, it has the potential to leave behind many more than before in terms of pedagogic aims and has the potential to lead to an increased risk of communal or sectarian violence.

Thus, ‘sameness’ does not automatically mean nor indicate ‘high quality’. The ‘quality’ of education does not come from a dictated singular view through a uniform method, rather it comes from developing the ability to think and question amongst the students, who should be able to address real world problems of their time.

If the objective really is ‘inclusive’ education, then the focus should be on ensuring equal space for diversity and diverse needs, histories, languages, cultures, gender, ethnic and other markings in the fabric of the society. That however, seems to be missing from the idea of a single national curriculum.

### **SNC, Transparency and Stakeholder Engagement**

The process of developing the SNC was spearheaded by the National Curriculum Council (NCC) comprising 46 members including federal minister for education and professional training as chairman, the provincial and area education minister, chairman HEC, heads of Ittehad Tanzimat ul Madaras Pakistan, chairmen of provincial textbook boards, representatives from army, navy, air force and educational institutions and eminent scholars and educationists.<sup>57</sup> The SNC website also enlists 373 persons under ‘curriculum experts’ from different provinces and areas as focal persons. These persons include anyone from lecturers, subject specialists, principals, head of departments, assistants, junior teachers, coordinators, directors, trainers and persons with other similar descriptions.<sup>58</sup> There are very few established names of scholars and professionals whose field and expertise is curriculum, amongst them while majority are people from the bureaucracy itself.

For a policy matter as grave as the manner in which knowledge will be produced, distributed and deployed in the society and more importantly which and whose knowledge it would be; the process of consultations, the selection of stakeholders and the general lack on part of the ministries to engage with a wider populace set to be impacted by these developments including amongst others, private publishers, parents, civil society, concerned citizens and the students, has been far from satisfactory, wholesome or conclusive. There is for example, no clarity on the extent to which the recommendations of different stakeholders, who have been stated to have been a part of the process, have been included in the SNC. Moreover, not once has this curriculum been debated in the assemblies nor an effort made to conduct impact assessment on those on whom this is to be applied. Even the private schools expressed concern in their correspondence to the parents that the government’s decisions regarding the curriculum and

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<sup>57</sup> Minutes of Punjab Textbook Board Meeting, (n 16).

<sup>58</sup> SNC List of Experts. Available at: <http://www.mofept.gov.pk/Detail/ZTgzM2ZhMmYtYjA0Ny00ZTI5LWIwYTgtZDU2OTg4NjFiZmE4>

textbooks would impact the teaching they provide and the books they use to prepare the children to compete in internationally recognized examinations.<sup>59</sup>

How transparent, inclusive and unanimous the process has been, is therefore, questionable as it appears to be reminiscent of the process adopted by NCERT in 2000 in India for their NCF. According to several academics and activists, the process of consultation for NCF in India was shrouded there too in secrecy and mystery. Mere circulation of text was declared to be consultation by NCERT. Through a pretence of consultation, the saffron agenda of the then political dispensation, could be declared to have been widely approved by academics and educationists. As a result of lack of consultation, several states refused to bow down before the central government's ideological onslaught.<sup>60</sup>

Saigol explains the basis of criticism and resistance by these states which included the fear that this move would lower standards of quality education, but more importantly, that it will give education a narrow, exclusivist, sectarian and obscurantist orientation.

‘the governments of nine states (Delhi, West Bengal, Bihar, Rajasthan, Madhya Pradesh, Nagaland, Karnataka, Pondicherry and Chattisgarh) signed a statement rejecting the National Curriculum Framework, arguing that it was a blueprint for lowering the quality of school education and giving it a narrow, exclusivist, sectarian and obscurantist orientation.’<sup>61</sup>

In Pakistan unfortunately, the odds of a similar resistance from provinces is unlikely given their wilful concurrence to allow the Federal Government to take over their sphere, particularly

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<sup>59</sup> LGS, letter dated 29<sup>th</sup> January 2021, available at: <https://twitter.com/SanvalNasim/status/1355474223465115649?s=20>. See also, Ayesha Razzaque, ‘Eliminating Private School Competition’, The News, 31 January 2021. Available at: <https://www.thenews.com.pk/print/782664->.

<sup>60</sup> Saigol, (n 38).

<sup>61</sup> *Ibid.*

where the ruling party has majority. In this event, it falls on the opposition to wake up to the dangers of erosion of provincial autonomy under the guise of uniformity which in itself is an authoritarian and hence undesirable ideal to achieve. Whether or not they would understand the dangers of excessive state control over curriculum and its impact on the students, on their learning progress, on minorities and on provincial autonomy itself and so whether or not they would rise to the occasion, remains to be seen; and even if so, to what extent can they make an effort to prevent this, or at least reform this, is a question.

Unfortunately, the answer seems very bleak in light of the Senate recently passing a bill moved by Javed Abbasi of PML-N to make Arabic language compulsory in ‘educational institutions’ in Islamabad.<sup>62</sup> The bill defines educational institutions in Section 2(b) as follows,

‘educational institution means any school, college, institute, otherwise by whatever name called for, established and setup in public or private sector for imparting education to students irrespective of its status whether registered or not registered with the Federal Government or any other body.’<sup>63</sup>

Although, for now the bill is applicable only within the jurisdiction of Islamabad Capital territory, a. the fact that it is moved by a member of the opposition at a time when the Federal Government is engaged in imposing its own SNC with similar underpinnings, illustrates the run for the popularity race amongst political parties to win the title of who is the bigger ideological loyalist and b. the fact that it has been shoddily drafted in violation of not only the fundamental rights, particularly of minorities but also as an excessive display of state control over private entities and democratic choices of the people, is deeply concerning of the

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<sup>62</sup> The Compulsory Teaching of Arabic Language Bill 2020. Available at: [http://www.senate.gov.pk/uploads/documents/1597726901\\_768.pdf](http://www.senate.gov.pk/uploads/documents/1597726901_768.pdf)

<sup>63</sup> *Ibid*, Section 2 (b) Pg. 1.

implications such actions, fuelled by emotions but devoid of any real empirical evidence have on citizens, students and their relationship with learning as well as with the state.

For instance, the bill makes no concessions for non-Muslims from the compulsory learning of the Arabic language, rather it makes clear in Section 1(2) that it shall apply to the students in all educational institutions of Islamabad Capital Territory. It does not define students at any point.

In addition to that, the statement of objects for moving this bill underscores the reasons why it was promulgated. These include amongst others, sweeping statements like,

‘a large number of population from around the world seek to do business and employment in the rich Arab countries, thus knowledge of Arabic...will also broaden the employment and business opportunities for the citizens of Pakistan as well’.<sup>64</sup>

This assertion seems to be problematic on three levels.

Firstly, there seems to be no empirical study, survey or basis on which an attempt to determine the percentage of Pakistanis interested in pursuing employment or business opportunities in Arab countries which establishes that their chances of doing such business or accessing such opportunities are being affected because of not being able to speak Arabic, is referenced or documented to substantiate the need to implement this. It therefore, appears to be based more on speculation as opposed to actual data.

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<sup>64</sup> *Ibid*, Statement of Objects and Reasons, Pg. 2.

Secondly, it seems farcical to suggest that the age group for which this has been made compulsory i.e. between levels I – V and with grammar from level VI – XII would be engaged in any immediate business or professional correspondence with Arab countries. If the intent was to benefit the business community and the working class, special but optional courses in preferred business languages would have been a more robust solution. It also begs the questions as to why there is a language bias when it comes to promotion of language of the Arabs. Surely business and employment opportunities come from many other countries as well as so on this logic should not all other popular languages such as French, English and Chinese also be equally promoted and supported by Senate sanctioned bills? Or do we just want our children to only engage with the Arabs and do business with them in days to come?

Finally, most Arab countries are more international in their flavour, hosting at times more expats than natives, conducting business in universally spoken languages, including English which is widely spoken and resorted to; not because of a colonial hangover, but because they look at English as a mere tool to communicate with a diverse audience who happen to have a working knowledge of it. In such multicultural set ups, not knowing how to speak Arabic does not appear to be quite the deal breaker for employers as much as the Senate bill makes it out to be.

This bill therefore, does not expressly exclude non-Muslims from learning Arabic which is problematic for their fundamental rights. Moreover, this bill includes private educational institutions which is excessive interference and dictation and it presumes without empirical evidence that work opportunities in Arab countries are dependent upon knowing the Arabic language. The decision of studying additional languages should remain an option for the students. Overburdening them does not appear to be the best way forward particularly when we

don't have data to show how many of them actually aspire of settling in Arab countries and where knowing Arabic is a prerequisite for accessing economic opportunities.

### **Conclusion**

To conclude, I would reiterate that education is a provincial subject and Pakistan is a federation with various ethnic, religious and other pluralities. We are not a homogenous nation. Attempting to bring private entities under state control, is akin to excessive government interference and control which will drive down competition and lead to inefficiency and a drop in the standards and quality because of a lack of incentives to excel that come with a competitive market.

In addition to that, SNC has repercussions on the fundamental rights, freedom of choice, rights of children and on thousands of years of multicultural history of this land which goes way beyond the 73 odd years since Pakistan has been into existence. The claim that one nation, one curriculum would equalise and get rid of education apartheid without first fixing the economic inequalities is false and misleading, in fact it will lead to more divisions and clashes between different groups of people whose past and identities are not reflected in the uniform majoritarian curriculum. Uniformity must not be confused with Inclusivity.

It must further be questioned whether such uniformity is a desirable end in itself or not. Uniformity implies dictation of one thought, one mind, one approach and is akin to authoritarianism whereas inclusion demands equal space and respect for diverse views, diverse approaches and diverse thoughts.

In countries with rich, multiple and diverse histories, cultures and communities, imposing a singular majoritarian vision is not the most pragmatic or inclusive way to take the nation forward. Hearts and minds will have to be opened to embrace all the parts that make the whole and consequently, the freedom to develop the curriculum with their own sensibilities, language, history and objectives will have to be accepted in letter and in spirit for the federation to be successful. Excessive control at the expense of suppression of diverse but constitutionally equal voices has the danger to lead to resentments that may fuel uprisings and conflict. Lastly, SNC marks erosion of provincial autonomy and appears to be an attempt to nationalize education on a de facto basis.

Some recommendations that urgently need attention include, but are not limited to, the need for creating a more nuanced understanding and discourse on the curriculum and ensuring that it is rescued from the bunkers of self-serving political and ideological agendas to make way for pedagogical aims instead. This objectivity and freedom of curriculum from undue political influence is crucial to do justice with our children and their future as regards learning and its outcomes. As long as education remains a slave to ideological hegemony and supremacy, its ability to inculcate critical thinking and innovative tendencies among the students, would remain handicapped.

It is up to Pakistan to decide whether it has to stay true to its indoctrinated, exclusivist and narrow vision that will be a disservice to its students and their right to education or, will it finally ditch its ideological binoculars to make way for an education that is geared towards developing the scholastic abilities and skills of the students that are necessary for the challenges of the 21<sup>st</sup> century.

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