



Islamizing Education in Bangladesh

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Public education in Bangladesh is biased to a single religion. Hijab is no more limited to Muslims. Vicious circles actively engaged in devising methods to discriminate minorities.

National Curriculum and Textbook Board (NCTB) exercises the authority to decide on the contents of educational materials for the primary and high schools in Bangladesh. The major focus of the board is to prepare the young generation to carry the legacy of Bangladesh forward.

In the process of physical and academic development, molding of the young minds to make good citizens of the future is an important objective. Good humane qualities are emphasized in making decent, patriotic and caring individuals. Historical background of the land and its rich culture is part of this endeavor in the lower grades. This objective is achieved significantly by designing appropriate curriculum for Bangla (Bengali) course from the first grade through the tenth grade.

The contents are decided by a board of veteran educationists with Professor Dr. Gazi Mohammed Ahsanul Kabir and Professor Dilara Hafiz as Chairs of the Board. Writers are selected by NCTB and approved by the Primary and Mass Education Ministry of the Peoples' Republic of Bangladesh. Short stories, poems, family and societal values and lives of illustrated individuals and history of the land are included for the beginners. The contents gradually change focus towards more on literature into the higher grades.

Each Bangla textbook for 2006 and 2007 academic years, consists of good collections of articles and information prepared by writers to develop the mindset of youngsters to become good citizens. However, the selections on religion and religious figures are totally for the majority of the population. There is absolutely no mention of other religions except a single sentence in one article of third grade Bangla which reads like, "Bangladesh is for all; Hindus, Muslims, Buddhists, and Christians." This seems to be a wise statement; but in fact, it is just a mockery of NCTB to say the least.

The third grade textbook is edited by Mansoor Musa. It contains one article named, "Prayer" by Sufia Kamal. Some questions at the end of the selection are: i) who is Rahim Rahman? ii) what do we pray to Allah?, iii) what are the gifts of Allah?, and iv) what are our last prayers? Another selection is on religious personality, Caliph Hazrat Abu Bakr (R) from Middle East. There is no mention on other religions.

The fourth grade textbook is edited by Professor Kabir Uddin Ahmed Majumder. It has one article on religious personality, Caliph Hazrat Umar (R). There is no mention on other religions.

The fifth grade textbook is edited by Professor Kabir Uddin Ahmed Majumder. It contains one article on the messages of Prophet of Islam during his last Hajj. There is no mention on other religions.

The sixth grade textbook is edited by A. N. M. Kamaluddin. This one does not have any article preaching religion. Instead, it contains one very valuable article depicting the philanthropic activities of Nobel Laureate Mother Teresa.

The seventh grade textbook is edited by Shawkat Ali. Its second selection is, Moru Bhaskar (Sun of the Desert). The whole article is in praising the prophet of Islam.

The eighth grade textbook is edited by Dr. Mohammed Abul Quyyum. This one does not have any article preaching religion. It contains the life sketches of four political personalities of Bangladesh.

The ninth and tenth grade textbook is edited by Dr. Mohammed Abul Quyyum. The selections are, i) "Islamer Mormokotha" (The Fundamentals of Islam), ii) "Manush Mohammed(S)" Mohammed as a human being, iii) "Lal Shalo." The article, Lal Shalo is out of context, consisting of a couple of pages taken from Syed Waliullah's famous novel, Lal Shalo. This article does not represent the real message of the novel; rather it ends with a religious bigotry to the Hindus who are interpreted as idol worshippers, worshiping via images of gods.

The above paragraphs show how the Bangla curriculum is carefully crafted to impregnate the religion, Islam into the mindset of young minority population. In the schools, teachers are one more step ahead. Handouts start with holy messages, like, "Bismillahir Rahmanir Rahim", "Read in the name of your Lord", etc.

Making a particular religion compulsory is totally unfair in public education where students from other faiths are in the attendance. Young minds are very flexible in learning and accepting anything as truth from adorable teachers and prescribed textbooks. Laws of gravitation, motion, optics, electricity or electronics and the phenomena of chemical and physical properties of materials are universal but the religions are not. Religion is always controversial. One fights the others. Every follower believes his/her is the only true one and the others are false. Giving lessons on a particular religion to others comes from the vicious intention of sick mentality.

The laws of motion and gravitation, optics, electric and magnetic properties of materials, for examples, are learnt from Physics class. The universal truth of chemical reactions, such as, formation of water from oxygen and hydrogen, are learnt from Chemistry class. Students see the proofs in the laboratory. From the same group of gurus (teachers) they learn a single religion and some of its personalities. This has a direct impetus on the young minorities to accept this as the only true religion, as they learn the truths of the universe and materials in physics and chemistry courses, for examples.

The NCTB has forced the minorities to learn and believe this religion as the only religion as true to accept. In fact, this design is well thought out to make the youngsters confused and vulnerable

to develop their mindsets to hate their own religions and cultures. One initial and direct result of this selective education is to weaken their moral strength by providing them with the message of segregation to realize that they are the minority of the country. By being minority they are the weaker segment of the nation with less right and privilege.

A strong argument for religious materials may be to prepare youngsters with morality. However, contents from a single religion make the curriculum biased and injustice to the citizens of other religions in a country. Some of the bad effects, for example, are: i) the majority learns that the minorities are the followers of wrong religions, ii) the minority loses confidence in their own religions, iii) the minorities learn to have less right and privilege in the country, and iv) the minorities automatically become citizens of second class in the country of their birth.

NCTB does its job to produce and keep the minorities vulnerable, weak and handicapped. Many others are engaged with similar schemes. As a result minorities are being discriminated in various shrewd ways in Bangladesh. They are discriminated in admission to higher education and in government jobs. Some Hindus are still visible at some high positions; however, less and less Hindus are seen in the lower ranks of professional hierarchies as new recruitments from minorities are almost non-existent in government and semi-government organizations. Face to face interview is one popular method to discriminate where board members can give any scores irrespective of performance of the applicants.

As an example, the admission to undergraduate classes at Bangladesh Agricultural University used to be based on written test only. As a result, professors realized that the performance of the minority students was out of proportion. This prompted one late professor, known as a devout follower of Communist Party of Bangladesh, to devise a plan. He proposed to introduce a new segment (viva voce) in the interview process, in which the board members can assign any score to any admission seeker. His verbal argument was indecent, "otherwise we cannot stop the Hindu students from admission." He forgot to realize that the secretary, sitting in the back seat, was a Christian, a minority, one of only two in the whole university. That secretary, being a close friend of mine, told me the whole story one day. Had this secretary not my close friend I would never know about this heinous crime designed by the professors with the highest level of academic degrees in the world.

The viva segment was easily added to the interview system. As a result, I saw a clear decline in Hindu student admission to the university. I noticed Hindu students uncomfortable during viva voce part of interview for admission. This discomfort starts as they enter the board using fuzzy greetings neither belonging to Hindus nor to Muslims, a petty attempt to hide religious identity. Their scores used to range from 2 to 4 out of 10. Those who get admitted should perform exceptionally well in the written part. An unbiased research is suggested. But the party who included the viva voce in the first place, will not accept their agenda get public and that their objective gets ruined. So the effort will remain highly objected.

I came to know about a second such incidence from Channel I broadcast few years back. Mr. Sheikh Shahidul Islam, a political figure of Bangladesh expressed his anger to Gopalganj DC. The gleeful DC once claimed that he had introduced 20% points in viva voce as a way to single out the minority candidates for teaching positions in primary schools under his jurisdiction. This has been bearing fruits.

The NCTB should look back to see what it has in Bangla curriculum. Can anybody imagine of replacing the Islamic materials with other religious materials, for example, from Hindu religion. Just imagine materials from Gita, Ramayan, Mahabharat, Lord Krishna, Lord Ram, Vishnu, Vivekananda, Chaitanya, etc. Even though Pakistan was created on the basis of religion, it did not corrupt the Bangla curriculum.

Religion is not the only way to make good citizens. Japan is an example. It has banned religious education in 1947. But its population is in no way inferior in humanity, honesty and patriotism. Bangladesh was liberated with the spirit of democracy and secularism where people of all faiths will enjoy equal rights, freedom, dignity, and honor. But paradoxically, the NCTB has crafted the Bangla curriculum with its ‘first dose of lesson’ to train the future citizens to deny the rights of the minority eventually.

My first visit of Bangladesh in the summer of 2001 after 12 years a half was very fascinating. I forgot many names and places in Dhaka city. Traffic pressure due to increased population was offset by improved transport system. Taxi was readily available at telephone calls. I was amazed to see people in Dhaka city waiting in lines for buses.

It was not a joke at all that I could not find my own home in my village in Dhaka district unless I was guided to where my brothers and mother still live. It was a different sensation in my heart. My dearest village living in my heart disappeared. The landscape has drastically changed due to growth of new homesteads, trees, and walkways in and around the village. It was a rare and strange feeling being elsewhere dream; I recognized some but many more objects appeared fuzzy and strange as I turned my head from one direction to the other.

Over the years, tons of water has flown down to the ocean than I could imagine. Lot more changes waited for me to discover. My sister-in-law does not apologize to God for mistakes as before. She slaps her cheeks and utters “Touba.” My next door neighbor is Shri Chaitanya Sarker. I saw his thirteen year old daughter ready for high school with Hijab. I asked if it was compulsory for girls to wear. She said, “No, but our teachers want us all to wear it.”

Such is the environment in Bangladesh. An unseen hand is everywhere. While wearing Hijab is controversial even among the Muslims themselves, the minorities are under pressure to adopt it.

Population of the country has jumped from 70 million in 1971 to 150 million in 2007 but the Hindu population growth is not at the same pace. For decades, the indigenous people of Chittagong Hill Tracts are under military pressure. Soon they will be extinct species. “We need the land but not the people of the land,” one major of the area once told.

In eighties, the author was an Associate Professor at Bangladesh Agricultural University. He is disturbed by the rise of fundamentalism and by the gradual extinction of the minorities in Bangladesh including the indigenous people in Madhupur, Sylhet, and Chittagong Hill Tracts.