

## Our Traditional Educational Systems

By Asad Zaman

In *Orientalism*, one of the most significant and influential books of the twentieth century, Edward Said describes how the European project of colonizing the rest of the world distorted all academic knowledge produced about the East (the Orient). The necessity of justifying and providing a moral basis for the loot and plunder of Asia, Africa and the Americas led to the invention of a large number of Western theories which made it impossible to achieve an objective understanding of the East. Imperialism and exploitation were cloaked under the noble objective of the White Man's burden to spread the benefits of his civilization to the rest of the world. The extremely cruel treatment of blacks (leading to an estimated 10 million slaves taken out and about a 100 million killed in the process, over the period of European colonization of Africa), was justified by the invention of racism: according to a US court ruling Negroes were "beings of an inferior order ... they had no rights which the white man was bound to respect."

The superiority complex of the West described in *Orientalism* has a natural counterpart in the inferiority complex in the East. The colonial educational system was designed by Macaulay, who expressed his extreme contempt for our heritage in his famous Minute on Indian education: "(no one) could deny that a single shelf of a good European library was worth the whole native literature of India and Arabia." Those who absorb this message embedded in Western education, write fiction and essays demeaning and insulting to their own families, culture, country and religion. European superiority becomes an article of faith to those trained to be "Indian in color, but English in taste" and criticisms such as the present one invoke an irritated defense combined with the platitude that if Europeans are bad, we and our ancestors are even worse. To overcome this inferiority complex, we need to learn that the common bonds of humanity that we all share are much stronger than petty differences created by race, nation, ideology and language.

This essay was motivated by a recent article in a leading newspaper contending that "public education began in our subcontinent with the advent of British rule. Before that, no such system existed." This perpetuates the European myth that we were all ignorant savages and barbarians before the White Man came to educate

and civilize us. The facts are so breathtakingly at variance with this picture that they will come as a shock to the average reader. The educational system of India was one of the wonders of the world and people from many lands came to India in search of knowledge and wisdom. A contemporary account from pre-British India states that while excellent scholars are present everywhere in India, Delhi can be especially proud of the vast assortment of world class experts in every field of knowledge as well as trade and craft. Among both Muslims and Hindus it was a religious duty to support scholars and to free them from worldly worries so they could concentrate on the acquisition of knowledge. Scholars could and did travel the country in search of knowledge without financial constraints, since they could count on hospitality wherever they went. Private and public libraries galore, books, copyists, authors, public debates, intellectual competitions of many types, testify to a widespread culture of learning, where even courtesans boasted of literary accomplishments.

This culture survived into the early periods of colonial rule: William Dalrymple writes that “He [the Muslim man] who holds an office worth twenty rupees a month commonly gives his sons an education equal to that of a prime minister. ... After seven years of study, the young Muhammadan ... [is nearly the equal of] ... a young man raw from Oxford.” Research on madrasas in early colonial British India shows that: “The syllabus employed at the Nizamia madrasas, which served as a model for madrasas elsewhere, represented a blend of *naqli ‘ulum* (revealed sciences), including the *Quran*, the *hadith*, *fiqh* (Islamic jurisprudence) and *tafsir* (Quranic commentary), on the one hand, and the *aqli ‘ulum* (rational sciences), including Arabic language, grammar, logic, rhetoric, philosophy, astronomy, medicine, physics and mathematics, on the other.”

Our educational systems were destroyed by deliberate British policy, which seized numerous endowments (*Awqaf*) set up for educational purposes, and denied jobs to all but those trained in the newly setup British educational systems. The destruction was so thorough that not only the educational institutions but the cultural traditions and even the memory of these institutions were lost:

I lament the loss of the treasures of the traveler.

*I mourn the loss of the sense of loss.* Iqbal (free translation)

The British educational system was explicitly designed to create intermediaries between the ruling class and the public; in effect, a method of producing bureaucrats and clerks, not scholars. The greatest loss from the introduction of this system has been the transformation of the concept of education as a sacred duty which leads to spiritual transformation and enlightenment, to education as means of acquiring a job.

This problem can only be fixed by reverting to our traditions. In her book *The Making of the Modern University: Intellectual Transformation and the Marginalization of Morality*, Harvard Professor Julie Reuben has described how universities in the USA abandoned their mission to build character and develop morals, opting for a purely technical education. It was not illiterate savages, but graduates of the finest educational systems of the West who designed the gas chambers used to burn millions of innocent men, women and children in Germany. David Halberstam in his book, *The Brightest and the Best*, has documented how graduates of Yale and Harvard ran the Vietnam War on the pattern of an efficient business, with callous disregard for human suffering: more than one million civilians died as “collateral damage” in the mass bombings and napalming, and atrocities and massacres were common. Ph.D. physicists who developed the nuclear bomb denied any responsibility for Hiroshima and Nagasaki. Leading biologists work for salaries to develop non-fertile varieties of genetically engineered high yield grains so that multinationals can profit from the hunger of humanity. The value of technical expertise is lost if the expert will stuff his pockets at the expense of the public at every opportunity. There is substantial evidence to show that the greed of highly educated financial wizards is responsible for the current global financial crisis. There is a vital need to re-learn and revive our heritage in education, which emphasized character, integrity, honesty and morality in addition to the development of competence in specialized subjects.