

The (not-so) minor issues

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A cursory mention of minorities in textbooks does not amount to inclusiveness

In June 2018, when the Supreme Court of Pakistan was approached with application CMA 4872, the Single National Curriculum (SNC) was still a possibility, as it was part of the election manifesto of Pakistan Tehreek-i-Insaf. The applicants – the Human Rights Commission of Pakistan, the Centre for Social Justice, and the Cecil and Iris Chaudhry Foundation – had sought judicial remedy against the grievances that pre-existed the SNC. The issue gained traction in the on-going discourse on the state of education in the country, partly because the application had been moved in the follow-up proceedings under the famous Jilani Judgment of 2014, regarding minorities' rights.

The application sought relief on three grievances in relation to curriculum. Firstly, on the hate speech against minority religions that was part of the textbooks. The application also substantiated the plea by providing evidence in the textbooks printed or authorised by the textbook boards of the Punjab, Sindh, Khyber Pakhtunkhwa, Balochistan and the Federal Board of Education. The second grievance was about the discriminatory arrangement of teaching ethics to only non-Muslim students. In fact, the subject was introduced to provide minority students an alternative to the mandatory teaching of Islamic studies for Muslim students. However, besides the arrangement being discriminatory, it proved to be impractical. Because students belonging to minority religions started opting for Islamic studies in order to save themselves from being singled out. Therefore, very few students studied ethics that created operational issues such as scarcity of books, examinations, etc. Thirdly, the application in the Supreme Court sought an injunction against the violation of Article 22 (1) which commands that teaching of religion should be limited to the students adhering to that religion.

The SNC that rolled out in March 2021 tried to address the first and second concerns in the application; it terribly failed to deliver on the third grievance. Particularly, the textbooks printed by the Punjab Curriculum and Textbook Board (PCTB) and the Federal Board of Education made repeated, and sometimes irrelevant, mention of the majority religion. The material in question is attributable to “religious instructions” and related to Islamic studies even according to the definition given by the Ministry of Federal Education and Professional Training (MoFEPT).

In February 2021, the applicants reported to the court about the SNC's lack of regard to the command of Article 22(1). The court commissioned a report on the compliance by the MoFEPT but found the report to be insufficient, and hence, rejected it in March. Chief Justice Gulzar Ahmad instructed the applicants' counsel, Advocate Hina Jilani, to file a fresh application based on the assessment of the new textbooks. It was filed in September.

The Supreme Court bench is yet to pass a ruling on this matter. Nevertheless, the Constitution of Pakistan unambiguously requires the ministry to refrain from allowing textbooks to teach religion in non-religious subjects (mathematics, languages, natural and social sciences). So, what stops the ministry from interpreting the intention of the Constitution? Assuming that they may have been held by an adverse public opinion would be a simplification of factors that control education in Pakistan.

An analysis of the factors and actors behind the recent incidents of policy manipulation should be examined. In June 2020, the Punjab Assembly amended the Punjab Curriculum and Textbook Board Act 2015 to include the role of clerics (Muttahida Ulema Board) for reviewing the textbooks to see if they are religiously appropriate. This amendment was initiated by the PML-Q legislator Khadeeja Umar. Two weeks later, Governor Muhammad Sarwar issued a notification making the study of Quran at university level compulsory. This instrumentalisation of religion by two coalition partners was too obvious to ignore. On the other hand, both moves conveniently ignored that non-Muslim students and teachers were part of the education system in the province, their inclusion or provision of an alternative in the policy deserved a thought.

The PCTB was also found applying the principle of provincial autonomy under the 18th Amendment at convenience. It hastily printed the SNC textbooks suggested by the Ministry of Education without a second thought, but on the other hand, it resisted implementation of One-Man-Commission's recommendation about taking out religious material from non-religious subjects, using the excuse of provincial autonomy. Though, the latter was backed by the Constitution as well as the Supreme Court of Pakistan. In the first instance, their haste marginalised religious minorities; in the second instance, the minorities could be salvaged from an imposition of majority religion.

Giving the drafters of the SNC their due for their noticeable strides, the hate speech was largely removed and replaced by a positive bias for the majority religion. Hence, experts such as Dr Ayesha Razzaque pointed out that a cursory mention of minorities did not amount to inclusiveness or respect for diversity. The textbooks ought to reflect an equal treatment of citizens irrespective of their religious affiliation.

Furthermore, the SNC provides for the option of five religions. The minority students may opt to study and take exams for Hinduism, Christianity, Sikhi, Baha'i and Kalasha religions. This inclusion of minority religions in the overall scheme of studies might help improve school environment and build confidence among the minority students who are otherwise ignored by the education system in several ways.

However, it will largely depend on how these subjects are taught and if the education is imagined as an emancipating and empowering process for the nation. The crux lies in the overall approach and outcome that the SNC is likely to produce.

It is no surprise that Dr Mariam Chughtai, the new curriculum director, has embarked on a revision of the National Curriculum Policy Framework. She is going to need perseverance and fortitude besides a broad-based technical support. She can help the government and the nation meet multiple challenges that the education sector is facing by merely implementing the Constitution. Pakistan's democratic and overall development will depend on the reforms that can be introduced to the education system in the on-going policy review. One wishes that her contribution will help change history rather than repeating it any further.