

Research Article

QJantic Journal of Social Sciences and Humanities (QJSSH)

The Construction of Nationalist Narratives in Textbooks and Process of Radicalization in School and College Students. A Study of Social Sciences Textbooks in Pakistan

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Abstract: This research is about how social science textbooks contribute to the process of radicalization among school and college-going students. The central argument of this argument is that education has become more like a political project in states like Pakistan, faced with the perceived existentialist threat. The result of all this is the inclusion of heavily militarized content in the textbooks in both the public and private sectors of education. These contents promote narrow nationalism based on us versus them narratives by dubbing India and other Western countries as enemy states that pose an existentialist threat to Pakistan. This research further challenges the wrongly held belief that Madrassa education has been the real source of radicalization by arguing that the real problem lies in the mainstream education system taught in schools and colleges. This research employed secondary sources of data collection, including research papers, books, and newspaper articles.

Key Words: Nationalist Narratives, Textbooks, Radicalization, School, College, Social Sciences, Pakistan

Empirical Puzzle

Syed Faheem Shah, a student in the first year of Islamia College at Matta in Shabqadar, district Charsaddah, shot and killed his principal on the college premises. The student, later in a video message, justified the killing by saying that the principal had committed blasphemy (Muhammad, 2018). On another occasion, Khateeb Hussain, a student in the Bahawalpur city of Southern Punjab, stabbed his professor to death after accusing him of committing blasphemy and promoting un-Islamic culture at a college (Anwar, 2019). For many, this may be a matter of routine, and so has failed to win any attention from policy makers and researchers, but what may be mind boggling is to ascertain as to what reasons drive young college students to embrace radicalization, despite the fact that they have been through mainstream education process for more than eleven years?

Introduction

Textbooks, especially those taught at secondary and higher secondary levels, aim primarily at constructing and representing the political and ideological worldview of any particular nation. It is for this reason that most stories written in textbooks about the founding fathers of a nation or other historical events of significance are appropriated, packaged and presented to promote certain ideological perspective framed in pre-defined nationalist narratives (Rosser, 2003). In other words, as education practices don't take place in vacuum, textbooks are strictly embedded with ideology (Gosh, Manuel, Chan, & Babaei, 2016). The result is that writers as well as advisory committees appointed by the state agencies to develop curriculum and textbooks are more concerned about nurturing particular socio-political ideals and narratives.

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• **To Cite:** Rab, H. A., Ehsan, N., & Ali, S. (2025). The Construction of Nationalist Narratives in Textbooks and Process of Radicalization in School and College Students. A Study of Social Sciences Textbooks in Pakistan. *QJantic Journal of Social Sciences and Humanities*, 6(1), 231–236. <https://doi.org/10.55737/qjssh.vi-i.25319>



'Narratives are the stories that members of social and political groups tell about themselves and their relations with selected "others," to create or reinforce a sense of collective identity and shared purpose' (Funk & Said, 2004). Though it may be challenged by some group members or rival leaders in the group, narratives, especially those that dominate public discourse, effectively give definitions to in-group identity by making reference to an out-group. Such narratives provide authoritative, commonsense understandings about the nature of perceived threats to the group and its values, and connect the fears, insecurities, and problems of the moment both with past tribulations and with a forward-looking political program (Funk & Said, 2004). As most questions about identity issues are constructed around questions like who we are as well as who we are not, according to Van Dijk, these answers are usually organized in the polarized terms such as "Us vs. Them". Textbooks based on such polarized discourses:

- Emphasize positive things about Us.
- Emphasize negative things about Them.
- De-emphasize negative things about Us.
- De-emphasize positive things about Them (Dijk, 2000).

'In many countries, education is called upon to construct and elaborate upon these many enemies, explain the threats they pose, and reiterate how the self 'us' has survived their designs. Knowledge about real or perceived enemies is carefully crafted, packaged and disseminated through the school systems of the state, mainly in the form of social studies' (Saigol, 2005, p. 04). Pakistan came into being in August, 1947 as a nation state through a process that involved bloody rupture from a bigger state, the parent entity that was India. The struggle for partition that extended over half a century was drenched in blood and filled with hatred. All this had a significant effects on the subsequent identity formation of the newly independent state.

There is no doubt that national narratives that help a nation construct its identity are learned, and internalized through a process of socialization, and school is perhaps one of the important institutions of national identity formation. Pakistan is no exception where public education is used as an instrument to develop national consciousness in students by teaching common myths and historical memories (Saigol, 2005).

Over the years, Pakistani textbooks have been in the spotlight for its controversial contents. In the first instance, the guiding principles for those tasked in Pakistan to develop curriculum is that of 'Ideology of Pakistan' (Nayyar & Salim, 2014) which is an extension of 'Two Nations Theory' (Khan, 2018). The Theory, at its heart, argued that Muslims were not just the largest minority but a separate nation in pre-partition India. It further suggested that Hindus and Muslims were two different nations, belonging to two distinctive religions, social cultures and philosophies of life and so couldn't live together in a state (Durrani, 2007). In continuation of the Two Nations Theory, the Ideology promotes 'Islamist-nationalist ideology' (Gosh, Manuel, Chan, & Babaei, 2016) which seeks to develop a strong correlation between Pakistani nationalism and Islamic identity, leaving imprints of exclusivist and rejectionist tendencies on the minds of young students. This has resulted in the introduction of a 'closed system of education' in which the contents of textbooks are so designed as to emphasis rote learning, and students are discouraged to ask questions and challenge state sponsored ideas.

The unfortunate Mullah-Military nexus in the wake of Afghan Jihad in 1979 paved the way for excessive Islamization of school curriculum (Nayyar A. H., 2013). Under a plan, fundamentalism and fundamentalist mindset was brought in, and even empowered to exert influence on textbooks. The result is that curricula and textbooks, especially those written after 1979, openly glorify Jihad and martyrdom (Peace and Education Foundation, 2016) against the 'other' and urge students to be ready all the time for jihad against the infidel others as their fundamental religious responsibility. To further the cause of religious driven nationalist identity, a distorted version of history is presented where foreign Muslim invaders from across the region are portrayed as the real heroes who, according to school books, were on a divine mission to free the Indians from the shackles of Hinduism, something presented as essentially bad in the books. To indoctrinate the young school going kids and inject in them a sense of nationalism, a significant portion of textbooks on social sciences and history are dedicated to teachings on anti-Indianism. This has resulted in the inclusion of increased hate materials that help indoctrinate the students and develop in them strong feelings of animosity towards Hindu majority India.

Education, no doubt, is a double edged sword, depending on its objectives and contents. To help counter violent extremism, numerous countries have formulated educational programs for young students to prevent them from being radicalized. However, educational curricula which is based on biased contents, may imprison the mind of school kids, and so results in 'us' versus 'them' syndrome (Heintz, [2018](#)), and thus may provide a fertile ground for young minds to undergo an unavoidable radicalization process. In Pakistan, especially after 1979 the authorities in the government has systematically introduced contents in the textbooks at school level that promotes not only an exclusivist ideology but also propagates jihad as part of state's security policy in a strategic manner. There is a possibility that such radicalization of textbooks contents or education process may foster prejudice and intolerance not only at individual but also at national level, and may prove to be problematic with serious repercussions including the radicalization of vulnerable young school kids.

The Problem

No doubt, one of the greatest threats to the contemporary world's stability and security comes from the phenomenon of radicalization that can lead to violent extremism, and so terrorism ultimately which has the potential even to penetrate across sovereign borders (Chalfont, [2008](#)). Though the phenomenon of radicalization is universal in nature, the issue is more serious in Pakistan. Evidence based research suggests that over the years, Pakistan has become a hotbed for radicalization (Feyyaz, [2014](#)) which poses threat not only to regional stability but may also disturb international peace. Research on the issue of radicalization in Pakistan abounds, the existing literature regards the Madrassa education as the major source of radicalization in Pakistan (Ghumro, Qureshi, & Mahesar, [2017](#); Yusuf, [2008](#); Puri, [2010](#); Rabasa, Benard, Chalk, Lesser, & Thaler, [2004](#)) while neglecting the problematic role of mainstream state education system in fueling the issue of radicalization. The recent episodes, including the murder of Mashal Khan in April, 2017 a young university student whose corpse was dragged through hostel hallways, stripped naked and was then shot twice to death by one of his class fellows in the campus of a well ranked university (Siddiq, [2017](#)).

The 2015 Safoora Goth carnage in Karachi involved well educated young militants who were found guilty of many other terrorist activities as well (Ghori, [2015](#)). One of the perpetrators, Saad Aziz who masterminded the terrorist plot was BBA from one of the country's top ranked university, Institute of Business Administration in Karachi. The other accomplice in the massacre, Mohammad Azfar Ishrat is reported to have passed out from the Sir Syed University of Engineering and Technology. Noreen Laghari, an MBBS student from Hyderabad who joined ISIS (Tanveer, [2017](#)) is enough to raise question on the quality of contents of textbooks taught in public sector education in Pakistan.

Though radicalization is a complex and multi-faceted issue having wider social, ideological and political roots, there is a general consensus among scholars and researchers that it is the unregulated madrassa education that has been at the base of radicalization and extremism in Pakistan. This has caused state institutions and policy experts to make faulty conclusions, resulting in opting for wrong policy options on one hand while on the other, has undermined governmental efforts aimed at addressing the issue of radicalization. In addition, intervention policies and counter radicalization measures have not only failed to produce the desired results, but have even proved counter-productive in certain situations.

There is no denial the fact that textbooks in many countries including China, India and even America are used to indoctrinate the young students about their national ideologies, yet these countries are not faced with the issue of radicalization. Does it mean or in other words, can it be said that the proposed link between curriculum and radicalization is weak? Or is there something unique in the Pakistani textbooks that can explain the country's current problem with the phenomenon of radicalization? There is a need for an in-depth empirical research on the complex nexus between the construction of national narratives through school textbooks and the process of radicalization in school children.

Analysis and Conclusion

What this research argues is that radicalization is a process where young men and women are brainwashed in a systematic manner through the application of soft tactics and methods. This process may extend over months and even years. This research further argues textbooks have been used time and again for certain



strategic political interests in Pakistan by both and civilian leadership in schools and colleges. In other words, textbooks have become more like political projects in the hands of successive governments in Pakistan and all this has resulted in the politicization of textbooks to a serious extent. In the process, textbooks have been used as projects for nation building through the construction of a sense of unity through books like history, Pakistan studies, geography and other social science subjects. Ironically, the government in Pakistan have historically used education by constructing a narrow nationalism by identifying and locating enemies through the discourse of us versus them and instilling and promoting the mindset of militarization in the young students. All this has contributed heavily to the process of radicalization among young school and college going students.

Pakistan's education system can be broadly divided into two categories: first one is the mainstream madrasah education system which focuses solely on religious teachings and contents. The other one is secular temporal education, given through schools, colleges and universities in public and private institutions. Earlier, a common opinion held across academia and scholars was that that the former were the hub for and breeding grounds for radicalization and extremism. This commonly held academic belief was questioned by Christine Fair as something based on limited knowledge and understanding. Fair's argument is based on the fact that hardly any Madrasah students has been found involved in global terrorism but acknowledges that they are involved in sectarian violence and conflicts.

In the course of the religionaization of textbooks, the distinction between Islamic studies and Pakistan studies has disappeared. Pakistan's birth and existence is depicted in religious terms by legitimizing it through Two Nations theory and ideology of Pakistan. Interestingly, the political ideology of Pakistan has become more like Islamic ideology that galvanize all kinds of social forces against the enemy states like the India, Afghanistan and other Western nations. For all this to successfully accomplish, textbooks contents heavily are filled with militarized lessons and heroes. All this leaves lasting imprints over the minds of younger generations who often end up undergoing radicalization process.

In Pakistan, education and textbooks have become more instruments of advancing and protecting nation's political interests and thus have fallen short of meeting its real objectives. These books have failed to instil critical and analytical thinking in students and have fallen short of producing scientists and academicians. The dangerous aspect of all this is that these books, especially those from social sciences have proven to be effective tools for the radicalization process among school and college going students. Their perception of 'others', the non-conformists is nothing less than that of an enemy and their belief that they can't live together in an environment of trust and confidence has led to serious repercussions. This is something that the state would find hard to counter and contain if remedial measures are not taken in time. For it to happen, reforms in education in general and curricula in particular is the need of the time. It should be done now before it is too late.

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