

Tariq Rehman (2004) *Denizens of Alien Worlds:* A study of Education, Inequality and Polarization in Pakistan.

Karachi: Oxford.

*Reviewed by Shirin Zubair**

The proclaimed objectives of Rehman's new book are: a) historical overview of the development of educational institutions in British India, b) description of how schools and universities are situated in contemporary Pakistan, c) understanding of how Pakistani society is polarized along socio-economic lines and how, at least, at the school level, this results in polarization in worldview as well. However, the book has certainly some weaknesses some of which the author has reasonably acknowledged in that he repeats data from some of his previous books; because of replication of earlier data and themes, the book does not have enough meat in it, and Rehman sounds repetitive. Besides, he also acknowledges the limitations of the survey study : it does not represent rural and small-town Pakistan; it does not represent the Sindhis, Balochis and the Pakhtuns; the survey mainly covers urban Punjabi population, mainly teachers , students and administrators from three different but parallel systems of education in Pakistan.

He documents some more data (albeit very thin) from three different types of school education systems that coexist within Pakistani society, namely the Urdu-medium schools, the English-medium schools and Madrassahs (Islamic seminaries) a task he has been engaged in since a long time. However, unlike his earlier works, this time round there appears to be a lot of repetition in his work. Chapter 2 which is titled education policies seems to be a replication of earlier studies and the chapter titled higher education, is a modified version of an earlier chapter in *Language Education and Culture* (1999). One chapter each is devoted to the description and analysis of the three types of schools and systems of education under investigation with tabulated results and findings of the questionnaires administered to the students, teachers and administrators in these institutions. My general feeling was that some of these findings have already figured in *Language Ideology and Power* (2002).

The newness of the book, however, lies in its ethnographic orientation to the data and its analysis: highlighting the differences in educational institutions of the rich and the poor, Rehman finds linkages between these three types of schooling and the consequent polarization and bifurcation of the worldviews of their products. The ethnographic details, the *thick description* added on to the statistical data give a feel of the immediacy of the research sites and the environment:

It was the spring of 1960 when I entered this imposing building with shining terrazzo floors and cheerful classrooms with yellow glass windows. The next five years were among the best in my life. Father Scanlon was the headmaster and he did not style himself as 'principal' as almost every head of an English-medium school does nowadays. (p. 73)

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The author's own account as an insider, in a vignette, of the elitist English-medium schools of which he is a product, along with little vignettes of students/teachers from the other parallel systems in each chapter, such as *The Author's Story*, *The Peripatetic Teacher*, *The College Lecturer's Tale*, provide interesting and rich insights into the lives and educational practices of the subjects, which, in turn, compensate for the lack of representativeness of the data, and situate people's literacies within the broader sociocultural and ideological frameworks. Here is the indigenous ethnographer of the New Literacy Studies (NLS) without acknowledging or even referring to the work of pioneers such as Street (1984), although his work seems to endorse Street's ideological model of literacy and education which he developed after his seminal ethnographic study in Irani villages of *Maktab* (religious school) literacy. This, then, is the strong point of the book—although weak in survey data—the ethnographic details fill one up. After describing the three systems of education, Rehman goes on to link the parallel systems of education to the socio-economic divide—the alarming, ever-widening gulf in Pakistan between the rich and the poor is not only a product of the three systems of education, but also perpetuates and reinforces the bifurcation in the worldviews. The students of these three types of schools have divergent views on war and militancy, tolerance (of religious minorities) and gender equality. This, Rehman argues, is potentially threatening in a post 9/11 world.

Rehman barely touches upon gender inequality or 'sexual politics' in this book, which is rampant in Pakistani society, even at the level of *madrassah* education. The book captures the polarization in terms of class but not in terms of gender inequalities: although inexpensive, as compared with *madrassahs* for boys the *madrassahs* for girls are either invisible or almost nonexistent. It is, further suggested (p. 62) that women teachers of English medium schools are supportive of a peaceful foreign policy but are not as tolerant of religious minorities as their students. This does suggest that polarization exists between genders too. My work (Zubair 2001) on women's religious and secular literacies captures some of these tensions and conflicts but has been ignored in this study. The invisibility of females within the religious seminaries is a serious issue in the Pakistani context, since in the post 9/11 world, the *madrassahs* have been considered by the Western powers as the breeding ground for the Taliban with masculinist and militant biases.

Apart from typos such as *resul* instead of results and anglicized with a capital 'A' (p. 69), Rehman sounds pompous and judgemental at times, for instance, when he pronounces that 'the faculty is recruited by the PSC and usually possess a simple master's degree' (p. 99).

References:

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