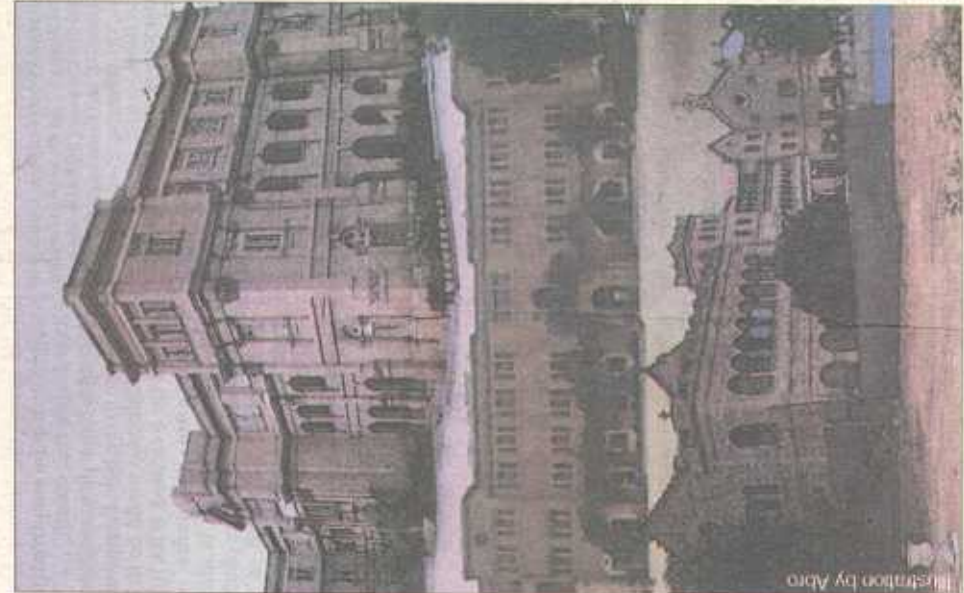


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Arabi schools: educating the young

By Sami Mustafa



Intellectually impoverished and economically backward nation, not half as developed as we are today.

Despite lack of support from the government and despite administrative interference and political uncertainties, and working on limited resources, these schools have been able to maintain a certain educational standard. There are many reasons for this. First and foremost is a strong tradition of dedication, professionalism and a deep commitment to modern educational methods. Initially, while many of these schools did have compulsory religious education as part of the curriculum, the overall thrust of education was, and has been, modern. Their inspiration came from changes in the developed world of the west, not just in terms of material development, but more importantly, in terms of the social, philosophical and intellectual development of western civilization. Their professionalism has come from the fact that the hiring and firing practices of their teaching staff, and their admission procedures,

more often than not, have been on merit and on well-established and transparent norms.

Second, unlike government schools with their heavy baggage of sermons and moralizing, the missionary schools link the objectives of education with the learning dynamics of the young, and with the needs of modern society. While there is a variation in quality among these schools as well — some being very good, others being less so and more mainstream, and others still being not so good — their commitment to quality has remained unwavering. Third, in most cases, the missionary schools have not been a victim of crass political expedients and practices. They have been spared situations which have unfortunately become the hallmark of public sector schools: incidents of 'ghost' schools or 'ghost' teachers do not happen in private schools. The missionary schools (perhaps slightly less so after the nationalization of schools in the 1970s) have been able to maintain an independent course in safeguarding the quality of education in their schools.

And finally, they have been able to make a very positive impact on the education sector in Pakistan because they have been able to provide modern education for very nominal fees. Their wide acceptability over the years is due to the fact that they have provided good education at affordable cost to parents.

Today, many missionary schools

have not kept up with changing times and need fundamental changes. Today, private elite schools provide a 21st century vision of good education and are serving as a catalyst for bringing about change.

Unfortunately, their prohibitive fees do not allow a very large number of parents to send their children to these schools. Therefore, it is imperative that the missionary schools get rid of the old guards and re-define their educational objectives. In this, the government, while improving its own schools, should provide administrative and financial assistance to missionary schools.

Strangely and disappointingly enough, despite all their contributions (which we will write about in the second part of this article), education department functionaries have seldom recognized the positive role played by the missionary and trust schools and have hardly extended them a helping hand. As if that was not bad enough, from time to time they have been notorious in throwing a spanner in their works, from arm twisting for admissions, to threats of punitive administrative action, on one pretext or another.

It is now time to take a fresh look at the massive contribution made by these schools, and establish a dialogue so that their success could be replicated in government schools so that those children whose parents cannot afford the high fees of private schools may also benefit. At a time when there is talk of privatizing government schools, which is both irresponsible and dangerous, the public sector schools would do well by establishing close association with missionary schools and learning from them. ■