

Lahore-Edu

When the 'wild' proved m

By Majid Sheikh

When the British conquered Lahore in 1849, Lord Dalhousie, the Governor General, declared that he would educate the "wild illiterate Punjabis" in a new system of Anglo-Vernacular education. When they started the East India Company Board was shocked by what already existed.

The board was amazed to find that the literacy rate in Lahore and its suburbs was over 80 per cent, and this was qualified by the description that this 80 per cent comprised of people who could write a letter. Today, in 2010, less than nine per cent can do this, while 38 per cent can sign their name, and, thus, are officially 'literate'. If you happen to read Arnold Woolner's book 'History of Indigenous Education in the Punjab' you will come across some amazing facts we today just do not know. To understand the situation it would

interest scholars to go through the 'A.C. Woolner Collection' in the Punjab University Library. My review is a scant one, but studying other similar pieces provides a picture of the educational system as it existed in Lahore in 1849 when the British took over.

The publication 'The Marquis of Dalhousie's Administration of British India' provides an amazing quote (page 345): "The board discovered to its surprise that the incidence of literacy in Punjab was higher than any other place in India. In Lahore city alone there were 16 elementary schools for girls alone, and to our amazement we discovered that co-educational schools were aplenty". Mind you we are talking of the year 1849. This fact is also mentioned by the great Sir Aurel Stein, a former principal of the Oriental College, Lahore, in his research on the 'great game' where he described the teaching excellence of the Vedas

and Dharma Sutras in the Hindu educational institutions of Lahore. The Sikh schools, the Muslim 'madrasahs' and the Hindu schools catered to the latest developments in mathematics and astronomy, all of which assisted the Sikh rulers maintain an edge over the British in the rest of India.

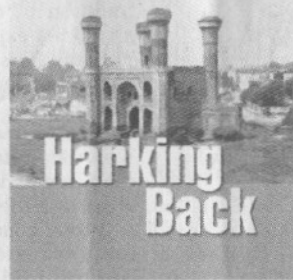
We also know from the book 'Punjabi Grammar' compiled by Dr. Carry of Fort Williams College, Calcutta, in 1812, that it based its grammar from the famed 'Punjabi Qaida', which was made compulsory for all Punjabi women to read during the reign of Maharajah Ranjit Singh. Every village 'lambardar' made sure that every female in every village had a copy of the 'qaida', which made sure that literacy was in-built into the Punjabi State at the family level. After taking over, the EIC Board allowed the 'madrasahs' at even the village level to continue to operate. However, to enforce the English language as the base

for all State functions, which seemed the sensible thing for the English to do in order to rule effectively, central schools for higher education were set up. The model for this came, initially, in the shape of the Rang Mahal School by Ewing, and then by the Central Model School at Lower Mall.

But the most detailed study of the educational system in place in Lahore before the British took over came in the shape of the research undertaken by Dr. Leitner, the first principal and founder of Government College, Lahore and the Punjab University. The eminent linguist described in some detail how the 'Punjabi Qaida' was removed from the scene, at even the village level, after the events of 1857, when it was felt that

unless Punjabi was removed as the language of first choice, the 'wild Punjabis' would soon overcome the British. Both Leitner and John Lawrence disagreed with this strategy, while Henry Lawrence, Dalhousie and Montgomery wanted a military solution to "end Punjabi educational dominance once English was introduced".

In the demilitarisation of the Punjab, "over 120,000 cartloads of arms and swords were confiscated", and in the process, says Edwardes and Merville in their publication of 1867 (page 433-34) it was thought important "to make sure militant Punjabis - Sikhs, Muslim and Hindus - and their language, were crushed by removing not only all arms and swords, but more impor-



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tantly their books, which were all burnt". Sir Aurel Stein described how a wealth of books on mathematics and astronomy were lost in this 'action'. For those still interested, samples of those books can be found in the Punjab Public Library.

But which sort of schools and 'madrassahs' and 'shawalas' existed in Lahore before the British came in 1849 to 'civilise' the people of this ancient city? The Muslim 'madrassahs' were located at every 'guzzar' and the madrassahs opened by the family of fakir Azizuddin were considered among the most modern in the entire sub-continent. They not only taught Punjabi, Arabic, Persian and Urdu languages, they also, at the elementary level, excelled at mathematics. Thus the basics of the logical transfer of knowledge had already been laid at the basic level. It now seems that the British, against the popular belief, actually destroyed this struc-

ture, to forever dent the 'formal learning institutions' available to the Punjabi people.

Higher mathematics and astronomy, as well as chemistry and physics, not to mention history and geography, were taught in these 'madrassahs'. The Punjab Public Library has a few beautiful leather-bound books of that time period in the reference section. Just for the record, these were bound in the square opposite the mosque of Wazir Khan, now consumed by illegal structures. For those interested in the classics, you will know that the British Museum Library has ample examples of 'Lahore Classics', all hand-written and those edges are painted in floral designs.

The research carried out by Lord Osbourne (1804-1888) in his description of the 'Court and Camp of Ranjeet Singh' describes how well-educated his camp-followers were. The same can be seen in the article on the

subject by Sir Henry Griffin. The Dogra brothers who ruled the Punjab in important positions were leaders in setting up Hindu schools, just as among the Sikhs the Majhathia, Malwai and Dhanna Singh families led in the setting up of schools for Sikhs, which also admitted Muslim and Hindu students. A few of them were co-educational, which was revolutionary for their concept at that time. It seems the French influence was also a reason for this.

In the year 2010 when the teaching of history is no longer allowed, where the exact sciences are deliberately avoided in the official syllabus, and where the system of examinations have created two distinct social and economic classes - Urdu and English medium - a study of our past in terms of its educational achievements needs to be undertaken by every child, so that we can pick up where we left off almost 160 years ago.