

**Perspectives on Education from Field-Work  
in Southern Punjab, Pakistan**

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# Perspectives on Education from Field-Work in Southern Punjab, Pakistan

Lubna Nazir Chaudhry

Why does one write, if not to put one's pieces together? From the moment we enter school or church, education chops us into pieces; it teaches us to divorce soul from body and mind from heart. The fishermen of the Columbian coast must be learned doctors of ethics and morality, for they invented the word *sentipensante*, feeling-thinking, to define language that speaks the truth.

(Galeano 1989/1991; 21)

"Those parents who send their children to school are acrid and bitter. How can one entrust one's children to those masters? How can one imprison one's children for most of their lives? You should know, with all your degrees, that it takes around 25 years of education, 25 years of torture, to get anywhere, to become self-sufficient. I mean, if you ever can, without growing your own food."

Ameer Ahmed paused to bring the *hukkah* to his mouth, and the rest of the people in the courtyard -- his mother, his wife, his two brothers and their wives, and an assortment of young people between 5 and 25, the next generation, now laughed outright. I had sensed them trying to contain their amusement when I had walked in half an hour ago, and introduced myself as a researcher collecting perspectives on education. Now I knew for sure that the sight of myself with a tape-recorder, note-pad and pen had held the promise of a highly entertaining afternoon.

"Not 25 years, *Chaacha Jee*," I protested, as I hurriedly continued to try to take down what was being said. *Chaacha* had refused to be tape-recorded. "You can get an MA in 16 years."

"Yes, yes. I know," *Chaacha Jee* said impatiently and raised both of his hands in exasperation. "I might be illiterate. I'm not stupid, daughter. How many MA-pass people get jobs? You had to study outside the country for years and years in order to go around writing about us. Us!"

The mirth in the household now knew no bounds, and a cacophony of chuckles, guffaws, and sniggers filled the air. I decided that the best policy was to exhibit that I too had a sense of humour, and managed a rather fake, very tentative smile. Meanwhile, *Chaacha Jee*, as irrepressible as his relatives in his own way, persisted in elaborating on his theme.

"25 years of having a guest in your own house. Cook for them. Wash their clothes. By the time they are done they are good for only asking a lot of questions. Look at this one. My brother's son, Saleem. Now 17. We have no school in this village, so we sent him to the town an hour away, if you go on to the road. Went to school for 6 years, and now thinks he can't feed the cattle," The young man sitting on the *charpai* right across me squirmed, and I looked at him with great empathy.

"Can I ask Saleem some questions?" I asked, and there was yet another outburst of glee. So the afternoon unfolded, as I stubbornly pursued my task, and managed to interview Saleem, his parents, the two younger male children in the household who were still in school, and the 9 year old girl who had never been to school, in the midst of all the hilarity. At least, I reminded myself, being laughed at was preferable to being reduced to tears. The day before, in another household in the same village, a woman

around my age, in her mid-thirties, had responded to my query about her not sending girls to school by stating, "We like staying at home. Just like you pick up your bag and go around like a dog sniffing here and there, we stay in our boundaries."

I start my presentation with this tale from the field, not to point to the unbridgeable chasm between myself, the enlightened scholar from a relatively elite Central Punjabi urban background, and *Chaacha* Ameer Ahmed and his family, the uneducated, relatively poor, Saraiki-speaking inhabitants of a village in Southern Punjab, Pakistan. Neither do I share this narrative to glorify my role as the valiant, conscientious researcher, committed to the production of knowledge, and struggling against all odds to realise that commitment. In fact, the story exposes how my forays into the field carried more than a hint of the absurd.

What is remarkable, for me, about this incident is *Chaacha's* subversion of my site of privilege, the fact that he chooses to locate himself oppositionally to the discourse of modernity within which the interactions between he and myself are squarely located. Unlike at least 25% of my research participants, who despite having little formal education and having chosen not to send their children to school, *Chaacha* and others like him did not pay lip service to the ideal of education as the panacea of all evils, as the way out of the darkness. They refused to give me the right answers.

Even at the expense of casting myself as ridiculous, I wanted to highlight the sophistication of *Chaacha's* challenge to my authority as the traveler with the searching self, who through her very existence in the lives of the research participants becomes an icon of a certain world-view. For even in wanting to discover and gather his and other's perceptions and experiences of education, I was actually trying to scrutinise, and perhaps validate, my own fundamental assumptions about learning, about progress, and ultimately about life. *Chaacha's* interruption of the hegemonic practices of my travel opened a window into another, different way of looking at the world. I had consumed several books and countless articles critiquing Western-style development and the educational system supporting it, but it took *Chaacha's* mockery to bring home to me the reality of the critiques. Actual people, not just academics in ivory towers, perceived of formal education as dehumanising, violent, and irrelevant to their lives.

Yet *Chaacha's* views on education, as they manifested themselves in the lambasting session with me, and as they impacted the educational trajectories and aspirations of his children and other younger relatives, can not be taken as an unequivocal rejection of development and modernity. As he proudly told me himself, only the year before he and his brothers had saved enough money for a powerful tube-well of their own. He lamented the fact that they could not own a tractor. And his biggest grudge against the military was that they had deprived him of the pleasure of watching television for the three months it took him to reinstall the electric connection in his house through legally correct procedures.

Moreover, later when I interviewed some members of the feudal family of the village, I noticed how in their defence of why they were not allowing a school to be set up in the village, they were echoing some of *Chaacha's* biting comments on education, although they lacked his powers of articulation, and their concern was with controlling the entire village population, not just their children. How much was *Chaacha's* resistance to education a conformity to the expectations of the local powers? There was only one major landlord family in this village, a Syed with political clout. The rest of the villagers were either small farmers, or *mazdoors*, people who worked for wages. The farmers owned smaller plots of lands, not exceeding 20 *bigahs*. The *mazdoors* usually worked on other people's lands or went to the nearby big city for work, which was about two hours away by bus. A few families had members away in Karachi and one family had a son in the Middle East. The small farmers and the *mazdoors* would also supplement their

income by taking on some of the landlord's holdings on *thaika*, on an annual contract. Also most of the village women, including *Chaacha's* family members, would work in the landlord's fields during the harvesting season.

The lives of the villagers were thus very much tied up economically with the feudal power, even though no direct authority was being exercised at that point in history. Most of the people I interviewed in this village said that they and their families always voted for electoral candidates whom the landlord supported. Unlike some of the other villages I visited, however, the people in this particular village, did not look to the local Syed landlord for religious guidance.

The objective of my paper is to focus on issues highlighted by preliminary field-work in rural Southern Punjab vis-a-vis the place and role of formal education in people's lives. To date, my field-work, which took place in the spring and summer of 1999, has been exploratory, a prelude to a more intensive ethnographic project. Like a good anthropologist, I am still polishing and refining my research questions for this long-term project, but my work in progress has raised provocative questions about the function and perception of formal education in a region that has been designated as economically depressed.

Southern Punjab, also known as Lower Punjab and the Siraiki region, consists of Multan, Bahawalpur, and Dera Ghazi Khan Divisions. It is a riverine belt, home to the *Panjnad*, the meeting point of the five rivers of Punjab. Geographically, culturally, and historically, the Siraiki belt appears to have more affiliations with the province of Sindh, rather than Punjab. Proponents of the Siraiki movement, a movement that started off as cultural revivalist, but has now incorporated a more overt socio-economic, political agenda, however, claim an identity distinctive from that of either Sindh or Punjab. This claim has led to the demand of a separate province for Siraiki-speaking populations in some circles, a demand that is also offered as a solution to end the socio-political and economic domination of Lower Punjab by Upper Punjab. The Siraiki movement is more popular in some parts of Southern Punjab than others, and it is a very male, even masculinist movement, that is, not very inclusive of women. It is not a populist movement, in that it represents primarily the voices and aspirations of a second tier feudal class that wants to reinscribe and reinstate what it conceives as its former glory through separation from Upper Punjab rulers. (The upper tier of the Southern Punjab feudal class has been incorporated into the ruling elite of Punjab). However, the claims of economic disparities and inequities in resource allocations between Northern, Central, and Southern Punjab on which the movement is now heavily premised, have been borne out by a recent study conducted by the World Bank on poverty assessment in Pakistan (World Bank 1995), a recent comparative poverty ranking (Gazdar 1999), and an unpublished study on education in five districts in Pakistan led by Haris Gazdar. (My own study began to take shape and form when I accompanied Haris Gazdar and his associates through two of these districts in Punjab.) The Siraiki belt can be indeed categorised as the poorest part of Punjab, using any type of development or welfare indicators. In fact, according to the World Bank report, even compared to rural Sindh, where the incidence of poverty is compiled as 31-35%, rural, South Punjab has a higher level of poverty recorded at 50%.

The Siraiki region was extremely attractive to me as researcher, because my bias has always been to study anything that has been dubbed the margins. Given the existence of the Siraiki movement, the possibility of finding resistance to the center made the margins all the more interesting. Of course, I was very much aware of the irony that for some one who professed to be struggling to eradicate injustice, I was a bit too excited to find an internal colony in Pakistan.

Still, steeped in Freire, Che, and all those Western critical theorists and feminists in education, like Giroux and bell hooks, who advocate a pedagogy of resistance and opposition for the oppressed, and see the margins as a fruitful site for such pedagogies, I decided to go looking for such resistance through an investigation of education. Education was, indeed, a state apparatus whereby the repressive and ideological colluded to perpetuate the status quo by producing different kinds of desirable citizens. But maybe, in this region somewhere, people still perceived of education as something that could help tilt power relations in their favour, that if not through formal schooling, but via other learning/teaching mechanisms, education was being used as a conduit to social advancement and to sociopolitical subversion. After my initial round of interviews, which were basically an add-on to Gazdar's survey, I went into the field wanting to document the impact of multi-layered power relations, including local patriarchies and feudalisms, state apparatuses, and globalisation processes, on people's lives, and wanting to understand the role of education in undermining or reinforcing these power relations. I also wanted insights into the relationship of poverty with formal education as well as informal education or socialisation, and to find out how particular kinds of learning were linked to class, gender, ethnic, and caste backgrounds.

At this point in time, I am not ready to present a definitive analysis of the role and status of education, formal and otherwise, in the Siraiki region. Here I delineate some of the salient findings that my research has so far indicated. What follows is quite reductionist in the sense that I am over-simplifying some very complex trends in the data to come up with five key points.

Firstly, formal education serves as a pretty weak state apparatus in rural Southern Punjab. Even if there are schools, there are few teachers, and lack of books is another deterrent to the spread of the right message. Education as a mechanism of social control is required only in regions which are prosperous or where systematic ideological dissemination through schooling is the only way the state can ensure its authority. Schools do not need to be set up in parts of the country, where people are already well aware of their place in life. Of course, under pressure from donor agencies, the state does make half-hearted attempts to improve literacy figures, and there are also efforts by NGOs and the private sector to create literate workers for the global economy. Southern Punjab, however, continues to be on the periphery of this economy as it manifests itself in the Pakistani context, and so this imperative to produce workers is also not that strong.

Secondly, the most prevalent alternative to government schooling was religious training. In villages where there were no schools, children were sent to the local hafiz in the mosque or to women who taught the Koran. Even in villages, where the schooling of females was a taboo, girl children learned how to recite the Koran. There was an occasional male cousin in a village, who would take some time out every week to tutor female cousins either on the sly or openly, but I found very little alternative pedagogical sites involving literacy.

Thirdly, despite attempts by the state, private, and non-government welfare sectors to promote the idea, education was not perceived as an antidote to poverty in all cases. This was especially true in villages where few or no people who held jobs because they had a matriculation certificate or higher diploma. Even among relatively affluent residents of the village, owners of small businesses, such as shops or vans, there was a tendency to only send their children, mostly their sons, to school for only a few years. "Enough to learn to count money," as one village shopkeeper put it. Experts in education who work with numbers are pointing out that there has been attrition in school attendance in Pakistan through the years. Enrollment figures have been decreasing, and the drop-out rate is higher. The perception of education's inability to provide a better life could be contributing to this attrition. This perception of education was

more readily shared by people who were above thirty five, but even among the younger lot where there was more acceptance of education as a norm that needs to be adopted, a critique of formal education predominated.

Even the participants who professed a belief in the enlightenment aspect of education were not very convinced of its practical use in their lives. Yes, perhaps disasters such as those that ensued if you got into the wrong van could be prevented, and it would be nice to write and read letters yourself, but what else can you do with education? People who did send their children to school for a few years said that it civilised them, but when they needed the income, they had to take the children out. However, it was not just because there was no money to buy books or that the income generated by children was required that children were not in school. It was primarily the investment in education in terms of money, time, and energy that was not seen as justified. Quite a few participants expressed the opinion that even if for some people formal education had led to upward mobility, the barriers for themselves and their families were insurmountable. Some participants had come to this conclusion after particularly harsh experiences. Nooran Mai, for instance, a 50-something rural resident, had sent her son off as a ten-year old to a *zamindar's* house in the city with the agreement that her son would be provided education, so that he can make something of his life. However, the boy was turned into a virtual slave, and after 10 years had not learned to read or write. Thus, there was not only resistance to education, the kind of resistance that was voiced by *Chaacha Jee*, but also an apathy and disinterest as to its relevance to one's existence. There was some indication that if the quality of education was better, more children would be sent to school. Some of the younger people who had dropped out after their primary years did say that if what they had taught had been interesting, they would have stayed in school. However, for the most part, the older generation and the younger generation shared their dissatisfaction with the educational system and what it could deliver.

Fourthly, even when a lack of faith was expressed in education's power to transform one's life, there was very little disagreement as to what a positive transformation of one's life would look like. All of the people I interviewed who were above twelve, without exception, said that their life could be better if they had more money.

When asked how their life could be better if they had more money, there was more variation in the responses, and this variation seemed to be linked to gender, class, caste, and religious background. More men than women envisaged buying bigger plots of land, building bigger houses, and buying automobiles. More women than men wanted to retain their current lifestyle, and use the money as security for the future, as investments for their children's education, and as a means of buttressing the level of comfort to a certain extent. People, men and women, who were already relatively affluent and had adopted an urban lifestyle wanted to raise their standard of living and move to a big city. Most of the *mazdoor* families wanted to continue living in their villages but wanted bigger houses, their own land, and more consumer goods. Small farmer households also wanted bigger houses and consumer goods, but they also wanted more land. More families who were labeled as lower caste, and more Christian families wanted to leave their village and settle elsewhere.

Overall, there was this belief that money would enhance the quality of life, and bring progress, which was eminently desirable. What was striking how very few people talked about development interventions that would radically change the fabric of their lives. Development was definitely conceived of as something that should strengthen existing values and ways of being, and aspects of development that might seem threatening were dismissed or critiqued. Most people agreed that villagers were *jahil*, and needed to be civilised. However, this path to civilisation needed to be quick and painless.

Even in the preliminary dialogic interviews where participants were just given a few minutes to answer questions, however, there were strands of thought where this need to be civilised was called into question. When I tried pulling at these strands, however, they would either disappear or get re-enmeshed in that ball of wool that Escobar (1995) and others have called the discourse of development. It was in the more in-depth oral histories, where people tried to string their life experiences into a narrative for the benefit of my research, as well as through the participant observation, that I witnessed more clearly the bits and pieces of a different reality, an alternative discourse, a sub-text, to be very poststructuralist, that was subverting the dominant text of modernity. Both the participant observation and the oral histories contextualised people's perception of themselves as needing to be improved within the larger nexus of unequal power relations in their immediate environment, the development discourse being propagated by the media, the government, and NGOs as a means of transcending that inequality, and the failure of this discourse to provide either concrete, feasible strategies or the strength of convictions required to actually change material conditions.

The research participants, then, did not offer a seamless narrative of their visions of development and progress. They wanted social transformation, and they drew most of their images and symbols for that social transformation from mainstream development discourse. However, their weaving together of these images and symbols was interspersed with an insertion of images and symbols, at times contradicting symbols of progress, from their current lifestyles as well as an assertion of rebellion against being interpellated as inferior and backward. It is impossible to reduce what people said to whether they were for development or against development. Development was the only alternative being offered to existing deprivations, it was also impossible to avoid being exposed to it, and even when development seemed to be highlighting more deprivations than providing solutions, one could not let go of the hope it provided. Yet, there was a constant questioning of this hope, and a strong desire to hold on to known modes of being.

"This *aishparasti*, (love of luxury), of this new age, really bothers me," said Nooran Mai, the 50 year old woman I talked about earlier, as she proudly showed me the different sized *chakkis*, (hand-mills) she possessed. She ground her own flour, her own salt, and her own red chillies. Nooran Mai also grew her own food. Her house, as she boasted, was the cleanest in the village, and stood squarely in the plot of agricultural land she co-owned with her husband, who had been sick for the last ten years. Nooran Mai took care of the mango trees herself, and got help from paid laborers and her brothers to grow vegetables that she sold in the market and cooked herself. She had six children, four daughters, and two sons. A son and a daughter were married. From my vantage point, she worked very hard, but seemed fairly comfortable in her "sustainable existence."

Nooran Mai, however, did not want to bequeath her lifestyle to her children, especially her sons. Even her daughter she had married off to a sister's son who went to Karachi every year for work. One son had already been sent off to a *zamindar*, the other one she desperately wanted me to hire as a peon. When questioned as to why she did not want them to be farmers, she said that she wanted a less difficult life for them. Also, the next generation was too contaminated by urban and outside influences to do what she did. They wanted things her lifestyle could not provide. She had tried to raise her children the right way, but there were forces she could not control, and she had to accept that those forces shaped her children more than she did. She had tried to educate both of her sons, one in the village school, and one through the *zamindar*, but education seemed to be too long a path to the attainment of goals. But she had continued to teach them and her daughters things that will sustain them as they struggle to live in ways that are so different to hers.

Nooran Mai brings me to my final point, with which I would like to end. Here I come full circle to where I started, to a problematicisation of my role as someone who is bringing you, my readers, and others, who I hope will read and listen what I have to say in other forums, my research participant's perception of education and its relevance to their lives. I went into the field trying to glean "poor people's" perceptions of education, their aspirations for their future, and the relationship of education to those aspirations. Quite entrenched in my own relationship with modernity, for despite my intellectual pontification and occasional existential angst, I live a comfortable consumer-good oriented lifestyle, and I continue to pursue quite a linear track for the realisation of my academic ambitions, I walk into Nooran Mai's life, *Chaacha* Ammer Ahmed's courtyard, and other people's lives, to gauge their relationship to the project of modernity. I am disappointed when I find conformity to dominant discourses, and I revel in the discovery of resistance. I analyse and deconstruct their aspirations, and yet I can not suggest any way out of the dilemma posed by my field-work. Material and social inequalities exist, and there are oppressive power relations, but mainstream development is also creating artificial needs, making people feel they are poor and inadequate. Yet, this argument has been co-opted by those in power to also deny what are seen as basic amenities, including schooling, in other parts of the world, to people.

I suppose the solution lies in the devising of an educational system that would indeed enable people to participate more effectively in the project of modernity, so they are not continued to be oppressed within the present system. But this education needs to be tailored to particular people's needs, and an ethos needs to be created whereby education does become an integral feature of everyone's lives. But then, this education for upwards mobility needs to be accompanied by an education that paves the way for critical consciousness and the formulation of concrete mechanisms whereby development discourse and practices are transformed to create futures and realities for people that are not disempowering. Thus in our inputs into policy, not as builders of the nation-state or as augmentors of human development indicators, but as those committed to the eradication of injustices, we should take into account what Paul Gilroy (1990/1991), a Black British writer has categorised as "the politics of fulfilment," working towards the realisation of social and political promises within the present structures, and "the politics of transfiguration," which would involve contributing to the creation of a multicentric culture, allowing for qualitatively new desires and social relations.

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