
Going by Plato’s following epithet, “Of all the things I place education first,” the most fundamental cornerstone for building of an ideal state is education. Pakistan’s educational system unfortunately suffers a threat of annihilation not only at the hands of the so-called terrorist threats, but also of administrative lacunas and weaknesses, a major part of which goes by the name of corruption. Of the different problems that Pakistan’s educational system faces, a sense of insecurity, dearth of facilities owing to low funding and embezzlements, and failure to inculcate critical reasoning in students, stand high. There are few writings that provide an insightful account of issues confronted by institutions of higher learning in Pakistan, through a personalised experience of an educationist and administrator. David Gosling’s work presents a discerning attempt at analysing deep-rooted problems in Pakistan’s educational system through his roles and responsibilities as principal of a prestigious institution of higher learning for the boys of Khyber Pakhtunkhwa (KP), the Edwardes College, Peshawar. His book *Frontier of Fear: Confronting the Taliban on Pakistan’s Border* is full of interesting, personal anecdotes about his experiences in discharging responsibilities as the principal administrator of Edwardes College and interaction with the borderland region through its students and teaching faculty as well as common people. The book portrays eloquently the excitement, challenges, and uncertainty, which Gosling experienced in educating the youth of a volatile region.

Despite enjoying a rich background of heading reputable institutions of higher learning in South Asia, none of Gosling’s tasks has been more challenging, provocative, and disturbing than leading the Edwardes College in the restive KP’s capital city, Peshawar. While the book is essentially an account of how Gosling organised and supervised the academic as well as administrative matters of the institution, it is also an essential read into how
insecurity and uncertainty of political situation at the national as well as provincial level affected adversely the educational climate in the country. The adverse impact of worsening security is reflected in the various accounts of curricular and extra-curricular activities, which were disrupted or cancelled due to recurrent bomb blasts and suicide attacks on security and civilian positions. Untimely and pre-mature closures, cancellation of most of the co-curricular activities, and heightened security arrangements in the wake of threats were some outcomes faced by educational institutions in KP generally. For Edwardes College, which is one of the oldest institutions of higher learning in KP, such an impact was visibly felt as soon as the principal assumed office in the closing months of 2006 when the Prince of Wales and his wife’s proposed visit to the college was cancelled after the first drone attack on a madrasah in FATA’s Bajaur Agency. Gosling’s multifarious responsibilities, including his accounts of the admissions process in the college reflect upon his abilities as the chief administrator of ensuring merit in admissions and promotions in the face of at times continuous pressures from litigating parents. Here his prowess as an excellent administrator comes to the fore as he juggles with the process of admissions and elsewhere, administering discipline-based issues for making students comply with Edwardian ethos of behaviour.

Edwardes College is not only distinguished for imparting more than 100 years of excellent education to the male youth of KP, but also as one of the first institutions, which opened its doors to co-education as a policy to encourage female education. This is contrasted with the often difficult situation of girls’ education in Pakistan. The step is commendable not least for the reason that the decision by Gosling to open the college for female students was made at a time when the Taliban were fast gaining ground in Pakistan’s tribal areas bordering KP and Peshawar and had launched multifarious attacks on girls’ educational institutions not only in FATA, but also in Malakand and adjoining districts of Peshawar. The book also provides an interesting account of how the college reaches out in providing services to the disadvantaged proportion of the population including the prison inmates. It is interesting to read Gosling’s personal visits to Central Jail Peshawar and his attempts at engaging students for community service among the young prisoners.

The book meticulously recounts the various terrorist incidents that Peshawar fell a victim to in Gosling’s time period in the city. The growing numbers of such incidents portray not just the frequency of terrorist attacks, but also the atmosphere of fear and insecurity that had gripped the province in that period. From this fear of insecurity, Gosling could not escape as he had to face threats of murder for his attempts at introducing co-education in Edwardes College. His tenacity is displayed in refusal to budge to militants’
demands for revoking efforts at greater female enrollments. This commitment and resilience came in the face of continued incidents of militancy and bombings of girls’ schools in Peshawar’s periphery and in the tribal belt of Pakistan.

The book also demonstrates author’s understanding of the religio-political and cultural dynamics of conflict in the region as well as his analysis of the rising religious militancy in the country. He maintains that drones are creating a counter-productive atmosphere, which fuels the rise of militancy further. The book also provides a useful and intriguing but short account of how Pakistan drifted into chaos and conflict. He traces the emergence of the Afghan and Pakistani Taliban to the Soviet invasion of Afghanistan in 1979 and the subsequent struggle of the mujahidin, which turned into a civil war in post-Soviet withdrawal period, subsequently paving way for the rise of the Taliban in Afghanistan. The tribal areas of Pakistan were used as a conduit for the supply of arms and men to the warring mujahidin in Afghanistan. These areas later became a recluse to the Afghan Taliban as they withdrew from Afghanistan in the wake of post-9/11 attacks by the US. This led to militarisation and radicalisation of the tribal belt, where the mushroom growth of madrasahs produced tālībs to fight the Afghan jihād. He argues that thousands of Muslim youth impressed by the chance to wage jihād in the Soviet Afghan war, joined in from around the world. He maintains that the fall of the Soviet Union and its withdrawal from Afghanistan gave the mujahidin the romantic idea; the inflated impression that if their struggle could bring down one superpower, it could also bring the second superpower to its knees. While the Afghan Taliban are active against the US and Western occupation of Afghanistan in post-9/11 period, the Pakistani Taliban envisage the rule of Islamic sharī’ah inside Pakistan. He also discusses the role of Pakistan’s security agency, the ISI that masterminded the Afghan jihād with the help of the US and regional powers, such as Saudi Arabia.

The book also attempts to document the multifaceted character of Islam in Pakistan. It accounts the rise of various religious traditions in the subcontinent, which in turn intersperse to give Pakistan its unique religious character. The history of educational renaissance in the subcontinent is further delved into, including the contribution made by the religious minority communities to the cause of education in Pakistan. Christian minority in Pakistan occupies a central place in terms of running some of the finest educational institutes in Pakistan, including the Edwardes College, Peshawar, which has, besides serving the cause of education, produced some of the top administrators in military and civilian fields in the country. The book ends with an analysis of investigations into some accounts of malpractice in the
college. Problems identified in this book are not unique to just one institution. They reflect the broader malaise that afflicts the educational sector of Pakistan.

This book reflects the resilience, resistance, and the vibrancy of educational life in Pakistan’s borderland region. It further tells us how a firm belief in the power of education and its transformative nature illuminates the hearts of youth coming from lesser advantaged regions of Pakistan, helping them to develop tenacity in the face of continuous hardships. It brings forth the hope that education in the face of adversities will help carry the nation ahead. *Frontier of Fear* is very pertinent to our times when the Taliban and other extremist groups are continuously targeting institutions of learning in the country. These institutions can be utilised for spreading awareness among the youth, fighting radicalised ideas, and making them more knowledgeable and mindful of their responsibilities as citizens of Pakistan.

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