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UK Muslims for separate school

Muslim schoolgirls, their hair covered modestly by scarves, start their day by chanting the name of Allah. Next, they study the Quran and learn to read and write in Urdu and Arabic.

All their lessons—which include history, arithmetic, geography and biology—are punctuated by prayers facing Mecca. Everything in the curriculum instils Islamic values into the children.

Muslim private and supplementary schools, which operate in the evenings and at weekends, are burgeoning in Britain. And the campaign to make Muslim schools part of the state system is gaining momentum, especially since the new education bill of Kenneth Baker, the education secretary, promises greater parental choice.

The controversy in Dewsbury, West Yorkshire, has also given fresh impetus to the idea of state-funded Islamic schools. There are some 4,000 Muslims in the Dewsbury suburb of Savile Town, and the fight by the parents of 25 white children to send them to a mainly white school, rejecting the local school where 90% of the pupils are Asian, has un-

expectedly drawn support from sections of the Muslim community.

The Muslim Parents' Association in Bradford believes the Dewsbury crisis can further its ambitions. The association hopes that if English parents win their campaign it would prove harder to deny Muslims state-financed schools of their own.

The cause of Muslim schools is being championed by Riaz Shahid, the association's general secretary. "For me the question is an issue of faith," he says. "Muslims must maintain their individuality. State schools do not provide a Muslim ethos. Without an Islamic education, our children will be like lost sheep."

But would separate Muslim schools really be good for Muslims in the long term? The Muslim community is divided. Some leaders believe their children will be hopelessly disadvantaged if they are deprived of a broad-based British education and the opportunity to mix with their English peers.

Sibghat Kadri, a Pakistani barrister and former president of the Standing Conference of Pakistani Organisations, belie-

ves that Muslims would be mad to press for their own schools. His son, Sadakat, 23, recently came down from Trinity College, Cambridge, with a first class degree in law, and is now studying to be a barrister. Sadakat went to Sir Walter St John's School in Battersea, south London, while it was switching from grammar to comprehensive.

"If I had pushed him into an Islamic school at the age of five, he would never have made it to Cambridge," says Kadri.

The fundamentalist lobby in Britain, according to Kadri, has been inspired by the resurgence of aggressive Islam in the Middle East and by an influx of Saudi and Libyan oil money into mosques and Islamic trusts. He accuses the mosques of playing an unhelpful role. "They have become the centres of political infighting. I think we left all this behind in Pakistan. Manipulation in the name of Islam has caused such misery."

The roots of orthodox Muslim attitudes to British education reach back into history. In the 19th century, India's ruling class was Muslim. But when the British introduced

the English language and English education to colonial India in the 1830s, the Muslims rejected liberal Western ideas, and lost their dominant role in society. The Hindu middle classes, however, eagerly accepted Western education.

The consequences of the Muslim decision to boycott British education are apparent now in Britain. The 600,000 strong Indian community—which consists mainly of Hindus and Sikhs—has, so far, achieved more than the 300,000 Pakistanis or 150,000 Bangladeshis, who are predominantly Muslim.

There are exceptions, but many Muslim children today are often handicapped by their parents' lack of education. They do less well in public examinations than Hindu or Sikh children and find it more difficult to get into university.

Suspicion of Western values, it seems, makes it harder for Muslim parents to extract the best from British education. Meanwhile, far from arguing for schools of their own, Hindus are increasingly choosing to send their children to public schools.

Courtesy: Sunday Times