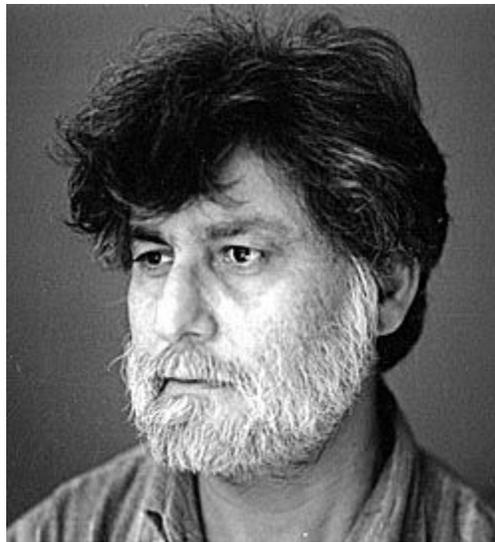




## An Interview with Zarfarab Ahmed

Edited by Daniel J. O'Connor



*Zafaryab Ahmed is a Pakistani journalist and human rights activist. Mr. Ahmed was arrested and charged with sedition in June 1995 after writing about the death of Iqbal Masih, a children's rights activist. According to Amnesty International, Ahmed's detention violates Article 19 of the Universal Declaration of Human Rights recognizing an international right to the freedom of opinion and expression. Mr. Ahmed won the first-ever Oak Fellowship at Colby and was supposed to have begun teaching in September. However, because of his charges in Pakistan, Mr. Ahmed was prevented from leaving. Maine Senators Olympia Snowe and Susan Collins and Congressman Tom Allen all applied pressure to try to expedite Ahmed's release. Senator Tom Harkin of Iowa also intervened on behalf of Mr. Ahmed. On December 2, 1998 the Pakistani Prime Minister relaxed the government's travel prohibition and gave Mr. Ahmed a permit to leave the country for 90 days. In January, shortly after he received his Oak Fellowship in person at Colby College, we sat down with Mr. Ahmed. Below is a compilation of our interview with Mr. Ahmed with passages from some of his more notable editorials written on child labor, human rights and other topics.*

**PAR:** Wouldn't it have been better if the system worked on its own rather than being forced to work?

**Ahmed:** I think systems don't respond to a certain extent on their own unless someone pricks. It's my conviction that if the people at Oak Institute and Colby College had not been able to mobilize the

support they managed in the media and local senators and pulled strings in the state department, it wouldn't have been possible. No one gives a damn you see. The individual is sacred but it's not the most important thing sometimes.

**PAR:** What role did Amnesty International play in your release?

**Ahmed:** Amnesty designated me as a prisoner of conscience immediately after my arrest because I was arrested for my views. Like Amnesty, no one in Pakistan believed that I am a criminal or I am an enemy of the government. And I am not an enemy agent. I believe in certain things and pursue for them, but like I said, one has to pay a price for that; nothing is free- there are no free lunches on the issue of human rights.

**PAR:** Has Pakistan made any progress in reforming child labor after your arrest?

**Ahmed:** Well, you see, it's all optimistic. My problem is with all these reforms. I know many people, not only in the state but I know these trying to do "goody-goody," people who think they are trying to reform the situation. It's not the state only but people who are trying to do something to ease out of the situation. I think they're not doing anything to reform the situation. My contention is that the situation cannot be eased out of unless the situation is understood properly. Refusal to accept a difficult situation that is so obvious on the assumption that it will hurt the reputation of an individual, organization or a country can only complicate matters. The lackadaisical official attitude to the menace of child labor is one such issue that has landed my country in big trouble. Such an attitude can only delay finding solutions-if it does not culminate in an apocalypse. As the issue of child labor has both domestic and international dimensions, it is being taken up at both levels, there are serious problems with the approach being taken. The West, irrespective of its role, is resorting to pressure tactics; in Pakistan, the effort has been to brush it under the carpet by looking for scapegoats. What needs to be understood in the context of child labor both by the Americans and the parties concerned here is that it is not just a moral or an ethical issue. It is structural to the economies of the developing countries vis-à-vis international economic relations. A debate needs to be initiated at both levels to understand the nature of the problem.

**PAR:** What exactly is "the problem?"

**Ahmed:** The "problem" is the conflict that arises out of economic development of the Third World. Poverty and illiteracy have long been the focus of the development debate in countries like India and Pakistan. Consequently, education and literacy have emerged as the consensus remedy for all in these societies. But a chicken and egg-type argument always seems to arise in such discussions. One day you hear that people are poor because they are illiterate, and the next day you are told that people are illiterate because they are poor. Clearly, the issues of poverty and illiteracy are far more complex than these simplistic arguments allow. Gradually, income came to replace other criteria of social and material well being, becoming an index of social perfection. "You have to catch up with the developed West" was the predominant message- "development" in line with the Bretton-Woods economic regime, became the cognitive foundation for the newly independent states of the Third World. Despite the developmentalist dream, however, countries like India and Pakistan did not follow the same sequential progression as the West. Nor is it likely that by imitating the western model, rapid "development" will occur in the near future.

**PAR:** So the development conflict is a chief cause of child labor?

**Ahmed:** It is the entrepreneurial lust to maximize profits, both at home and abroad that creates and

sustains the market for children so that they are treated as if they are the property of their parents, to be bought and sold like any other commodity. Ultimately, as long as there exists a market for child labor, no manner of good intentions can help solve this problem. One of the main reasons for using child labor is to keep the prices low. It is the interplay of the market forces that perpetuates the conditions for the use of child labor. Both the retailer and the consumer in the West benefit from this violation of human rights. Unfortunately, child and bonded labor today have been built into various layers of national economic practices. It keeps many men and women unemployed. It is an illegal labor practice but the manufacturer employs it to be able to compete in the international market. Locally it is a subsidy to an urban lifestyle, paid by a child's childhood. Child labor can thus be termed a product of poverty as much as poverty is a product of child labor as it is underpaid. As mentioned, many scholars claim that child labor is rooted in poor education. A corps of intellectuals worked to provide ideological coherence to this new formula for progress, which was generously funded and gained rapid acceptance in policy making circles. Many others embarked on an exercise in futility, merely giving a new name to the same problem. The separation between the home and the workplace, and the resulting commodification of labor, is essentially a product of capitalist production. It is dangerous to ignore this transformation in disturbing issues like child labor.

**PAR:** What are your ideas to solve child labor?

**Ahmed:** Many intellectuals believe there is an essential link between compulsory education and child labor laws. In addition, they insist that child labor laws are not enforceable unless children are required to attend the school. Other pragmatic economists are not bothered about the impediments to the eradication of children go to work because of the economic necessity, that they are quite happy working and want to continue work because education does not pay. But the implications of these findings are insidious: taken to their logical conclusion, they would suggest that since children themselves prefer to work rather than go to school, we should stop worrying about the prevalence of child labor. Others suggest the solution is to allocate resources and implement measures to improve the quality of education, and to increase community participation-the kind of pat suggestions offered by most official studies. In my view, both arguments have failed to take into account structural imperatives, both global and national, for the prevalence of child labor and high rates of illiteracy in countries like India and Pakistan. I believe simply that we need to open a dialogue with everyone involved-the businesspeople, the workers, everybody, to see what are the causes of child labor and how we can solve this issue.

**PAR:** So do you think that current attempts to reform Pakistani education also demonstrate this conflict of development and national identity?

**Ahmed:** Well, instead of trying to identify the educational needs of an underdeveloped country in this concrete historical and social context, Pakistan has blindly tried to follow the historical experience of the advanced countries. The result is that instead of being able to achieve the target set 50 years ago, we have piled up a huge backlog. We complain about limited resource allocation for education. We compare it with other, what we call wasteful expenditure. We compare and contrast the budget for education with that of the army's. We profess that investment in education is an investment in the future. Universal primary education has been our dream ever since the inception of the new state. We have never asked what use this cherished dream of universal primary education would be. If one comes to think seriously of expenditures, however limited, on exercises like universal primary education these also appear to be a waste of resources. According to one UN inter-agency report on basic education in Pakistan, today no more than one-third, perhaps only one quarter of the children complete full cycle of their primary education. The existing education system is inefficient and wasteful since it enrolls about 70 percent of eligible students and fails to retain even half of these students to the end of the primary stage. Two-thirds of the graduating students fail to achieve minimum required level of learning. Out of 15.5 million enrolled students between the age of 5-10 years approximately 8 million will drop out

before completing primary education. Another 8 million of primary school age children remain out of school. This is the dismal state of our educational system. Ironically, both the international agencies and our local educationists end up comparing literacy figures of different so-called poor and developing countries, and also use them as indicators of their respective economic development. This has reduced education to a numbers race, as in the field of economic development, where the stragglers-the developing countries-have to catch up with the lead runners, running at an ever-increasing pace though. Any education or literacy campaign that does not aim at training a child to be a prospective citizen, not only of a modern state but of the world, is going to be ruinous. It has to aim at preparing a child to share the obligations of citizenship from the earliest age at which he begins to show some power of discrimination. This means bringing out the moral, rational and physical capabilities of a child. To achieve this, subjects on the syllabus like history, geography, mathematics, hygiene physical and social sciences, and general literature should not be treated as mere classroom subjects and taught in a manner that alienates a student. If an educational system does not on every little thing think creatively, think relationship with the surroundings they are living-to be able to question-it's no education. It's enslavement. Education is a means of empowerment, not enslavement. It is high time that we try to relate all these subjects to a child's immediate experience. We will have to draw a line between fiction and reality in our text books. This is all because we have refused to think for ourselves and have failed to define our national educational needs and have relied on borrowed wisdom.

**PAR:** If you think the United Nations is so intrusive in international education, do you think the United Nations should have a role to play with international human rights? **Ahmed:** I think the UN has a very important role to play. The way things are now they can lose their advocacy because these institutions can not afford to be part of it. The UN has been through its heyday and seen the days of subservience because of its structure and organization in a highly polarized world. However, despite its limitations it has managed to play an important role in the settlement of most of the international disputes. In this moment of world crisis, outfits like the UN can play a much more important role for protecting the economic and political right of the so-called developing countries--particularly where interdependence is being harped as the theme by the advanced countries in a world marred by unequal economic development. **PAR:** How can the UN ensure that even countries like China abide by the same codes of conduct? **Ahmed:** I think the international community is strong enough to persuade any country in order to conform to these laws in the policies which we been pursued after the framing of the Universal Declaration of Human Rights. If you look at the document, it's a brilliant document. There's a World Bank. And IMF. Just take into account the principles which this document has sponsored. There wouldn't be any problems. The world would be a peaceful place. There wouldn't be any child labor. The goal should be to pursue the observance of human rights as prescribed in the 1948 UN Declaration on Human Rights and the subsequent UN Human Rights conventions. No concession should be made in achieving this aim. We still do not know if all the hopes instilled by the UN Charter will ever be fulfilled. But one thing we do know: we have to try, for the sake of humanity. Without concerned citizen action to uphold [human rights] close to home, we shall look in vain for progress in the large world. And interestingly, not much is required except for rejuvenating the messianic mission of the world body at the time of its creation. But this selective use of human rights does not serve the case. It damages it. If I am violating and you are powerful, okay. You can twist my arm. Okay. But if you are violating the rights and you are powerful, then we have a problem. Unless these rights have meaning there, they have little meaning anywhere else.

### Political Affairs Reader

