



Our education system

In a message to the All-Pakistan Educational Conference at Karachi on November 27, 1947, Quaid-e-Azam Mohammad Ali Jinnah said: There is no doubt that the future of our State will and must greatly depend upon the type of education and the way in which we bring up our children as the future citizens of Pakistan. Education does not merely mean academic education, and even that appears to be of a very poor type. What we have to do is to mobilise our people and build up the character of our future generations.

This was indeed a message of prophetic relevance to our nations future. The Quaid correctly emphasised the critical role education plays in the over-all health and well-being of a modern nation-state. Unfortunately, with misplaced priorities, we never focused on developing education as a pillar of our nation-building and as an asset for a modern, progressive and prosperous Pakistan.

Historically, as a public sector responsibility, education in Pakistan has remained a most neglected sector both in terms of budgetary allocation and systemic development. It has been among the lowest of our national priorities with scant attention paid to the need for systemic reform and redressal. Besides low ratio of budgetary allocations, we suffered an attitudinal complacency inherent in governmental as well as societal inertia towards our educational system.

With general disdain for academic freedom and scholars, we could not give education the place that it deserved as a major building-block in the future of our nation. Corrupt bureaucratic hold over the countrys education system has only aggravated the situation. The experiment of nationalisation in the 1970s damaged not only the industrial and banking sectors of the country but also radically changed the complexion of our educational system both in quality and output.

Instead of allocating a major share of our own resources to this primary need, we left education to be funded mostly through external donations. Seventy-six percent of governments educational expenditure is met through foreign grants and assistance and Pakistan still ranks among the 15 worst countries as far as education is concerned. What is even worse is that access to good education in Pakistan is a privilege available only to the very few with affluent feudal and elitist ancestry.

Sub-standard education in Pakistan is at the root of its problems including endemic corruption and poverty, the two main scourges of our society which continue to feed off each other, locking the overwhelming majority of the people in a cycle of misery and hardship. We have remained backward in education only because of our misdirected priorities, perennial leadership miscarriages and governance failures. In the absence of the rule of law, there is no sense of justice and equity in our country.

We remain clueless in determining the quality and content of our education system. Prime Minister Yusuf Raza Gilani engaged Britains world-renowned educationist, Sir Michael Barber to co-chair a task force he established last year to advise him on what to do with our education system. Nobody bothered to tell our Prime Minister that we have umpteen red-ribboned reports of several such task forces lying in our archives.

Over the decades, under almost all successive governments, numerous studies have been undertaken at the national as well as international levels to identify the long-standing problems in our education system. We already have an elaborate menu of creative options available to delineate a pragmatic reform strategy, closely tailored to our countrys problems and needs, backed by requisite resources and political will.

Education must become the highest priority of the state not only in terms of GDP share but also for structural and curricular reforms in our education system to make it more productive, equitable and coherent. This is the first recommendation made by Sir Michael Barber after having advised our Prime Minister to declare the year 2011 as Pakistans Year of Education. The task force has reached the conclusion that Pakistan population will increase to 350 million by the middle of this century, and without good education, there is no future for this country.

The basic parameters for improving our education system include universal coverage at the schooling level and quality not quantity at the higher education level with adequate resources and efficient management. The foremost benchmark must be the constitutional provision that every child in our country is entitled to a good education A determined effort is needed to overcome the barriers to this goal that include lack of resources, governmental ineptitude and corruption, political patronage of inefficient and unqualified teachers who dont turn up to work, poor quality facilities and poor quality teaching.

For a successful education system in our country, we must do away with multiple systems and evolve uniform curricula. Education must be treated as high strategic priority with its GDP allocation raised from the current less than two percent to at least four percent to start with. According to Sir Michael Barber, many education systems have made this transition successfully; for example, Korea and Malaysia from the 1960s, Minas Gerais a large province in Brazil and a number of Indian states more recently. Some provinces of China, such as Shanghai, which topped a recent survey of 60 education systems, have also shown what is possible. Why not Pakistan?

In Punjab, one does see new passion as a ray of hope. Chief Minister Shahbaz Sharif, inaugurating the first of the Danish School System in Rahim Yar Khan, the city where I started my two-year teaching stint before joining the Pakistan Foreign Service, said he intended to provide quality education facilities to people who could not otherwise afford it. His intention is indeed laudable and his priority attention to the educational needs of backward Southern Punjab is also understandable.

But the very concept of Danish Schools is privilege-based, and has no relevance to the needed systemic reform in our country. We dont need any more elite schools to expand the islands of privilege that only symbolise the anachronistic culture of feudalism and elitism in our society. We need genuine structural, coherent reform in our education system.

And finally, education is a national responsibility and must remain a federal subject with a full-fledged ministry to continue to look after it as recommended by National Assemblys Standing Committee on Education. We cant afford any devolutionary adventure at the cost of systemic uniformity and cohesion as well as national unity and integration. The flawed Eighteenth Amendment must be corrected.