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What about the govt schools?

By Sajid Ali



It is painful to observe how the government education system is managed in our country. Many government schools in Karachi which were quite effective only a decade ago have enormously declined in standard.

The school I attended until 1990 was a government school, quite reputable in those times. Many of the children coming from middleclass homes attended it and we stood fairly in comparison to known private-school children, which were also not so many in those days. Unfortunately, the same school now presents a very sorry picture.

I visited my school a few years back and was stunned to see the dismal its building and even the teachers and students were in. If this government school, located in the central part of Karachi, has decayed to this extent, imagine the state of government schools in the suburbs and rural areas throughout Pakistan.

As part of my research responsibilities, I have visited government schools in Karachi's suburbs, rural Sindh and the rural Northern Areas too. Many government high schools have huge buildings, which are most often used to a minimum. One school that I visited in Karachi's suburb occupied a huge piece of land, a big ground in the middle and rows of rooms all around it. On talking to the teachers I realised that this school which looked like a single building actually houses as many as four or five schools at a given time under some weird government arrangements — bad governance indeed.

It is worth pondering on the causes of the continued downfall of our government education system. It can be traced back to the inefficient governance, faulty recruitment system, lack of professional development opportunities, corruption and politicisation of the system, poor material and resources, etc.

The problems are numerous and some prominent educationists like Dr Shahid Siddiqui and Dr Tariq Rahman have highlighted them quite amicably in their books and articles. So instead of exploring the causes, I want to ponder upon the following questions: Can government schools and our public schooling system be improved? And more importantly, why should we attempt to restore government schools rather than popularising private provision?

Why not just do away with the government schools, after all the recent education census showed that around 33 per cent of our education provision is in the hands of private institutions. First and foremost, it is because the private system works on market principles and only moves to places where profits can be made — a “corporate model” of education according to Dr Shahid Siddiqui.

My critique of private schools is directed only towards the private-for-profit sector here and not towards the private-not-for-profit. NGOs can lend a helping hand to poor segments that cannot afford private education. However, it would be unwise to believe that they can compensate for a very large population below or near the poverty line, mostly in the rural areas.

To measure the enormity of the task, according to the official statistics available at the Ministry of Education’s website, there were 137,751 primary, 14,982 middle and 9,110 high schools in the public sector of Pakistan in 2005-2006, majority of them in rural areas. Governed by market rules, the private provision can not be an equitable system. An increase in private provision would worsen the already existing “educational apartheid” as demonstrated by Dr Tariq Rahman in his book *Denizens of Alien Worlds*.

It is the constitutional responsibility of our government to provide equitable education to all members of society and we should hold our government accountable for it. Rabea Malik in a recent research report prepared under a DFID project estimates that we need Rs426,092 million to fulfil Education for All targets. Given that it is an investment in the future of the country, is it too much to ask?

In his article in this newspaper on (Nov 30, 2008) Shehzad Roy vividly pointed out the fact that the state alone has the means to provide education to all its citizens, what it lacks is the political will. He rightly noticed that despite their commendable efforts, NGOs and not-for-profit-private provisions cannot compensate for state provision. It would be prudent if they try and harness their efforts alongside the government system, support it and also make the state accountable for its basic constitutional responsibilities. Private provisions should only be available as a matter of choice, not compulsion. The declining quality of government schools are leaving parents with no option but to turn to private provisions.

I believe that the government education system can be improved with some honest leadership. We need to revitalise our political commitment towards education that was abundant at the time of independence. The first education conference occurring within three months after independence despite myriad settlement challenges shows leadership commitment. The conference, addressed by the Quaid, showed the political will at the highest level. The first

education minister Fazlur Rahman was also very keen on developing our education system on strong footings. We need a renewed commitment from the top leadership as was shown by our founders. I have come across brilliant government teachers with high hopes, carrying out marvellous efforts but getting frustrated on the way. So all is not bad but they need encouragement and continuous support before it gets too late.

Our government can hold all-party conferences when it comes to foreign threats. We pass joint resolutions in the parliament against foreign aggression. Why can't we have a collective parliamentary decision to improve our education system and refrain from political interference within the education sector? Depoliticisation of the education system is also one of the important recommendations in the recently-issued White Paper by the Ministry of Education. The 1998 education policy had the same recommendations. I suspect our elite rulers are not bothered to improve the situation of mass education perhaps because bad government schools do not affect them directly.

The middle classes also do not seem passionate about this issue as they can still acquire better education through private schooling. Amidst this scenario, the poor segments of our society see no opportunity for improving their future which can come through quality education. Our poorly managed education system is one of the major causes of our society's radicalisation. The elite cannot stay inside their castles with such prevalent injustices. Equitable educational provision for all is good for the whole society at large.

Is there any cure? Apart from the government, what should be done by NGOs to make it happen? NGOs should not only limit their efforts for educational provision but also hold the state accountable for its commitment to provide reasonable education for all. There have been laudable efforts by NGOs in the shape of the Pakistan Coalition for Education and Campaign for Quality Education. The need is to activate it and to keep it going.

In addition, and most importantly, there is a role for each one of us in this connection. For example the alumni of government schools owe a payback to their alma mater. Upon my return from the UK, I intend to gather the alumni of the school that I came from and try for its improvement in whatever way that I can. So could many others who have good memories of their schools.

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