

Reforming Education

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Source: Dawn

Issue: 18th July 2004

Law and order, population control (population welfare as it is known in official parlance) unemployment, human rights, human development, overall literacy, female literacy, eradication of poverty, the Hudood laws, karo-kari, the blasphemy laws, water - let every pundit has his say.

First, population control: for several years after the last census was taken in the second half of the 1990s, governments and leaders had it that Pakistan was 140 million.

The figure slowly moved up to 145 million, then to 148 million, and of late our President General Pervez Musharraf told us that we have grown into a nation holding and harbouring over 150 million.

Various NGOs, knowledgeable in such matters, have it that the population, taking into accounts the annual growth rate which differs from organization to organization, is a good 160 million. Near enough, the US Library of Congress data on the population of Pakistan puts the figure at 159,196,336 estimated as of July 2004 with an annual growth rate of 1.98 per cent (for the year 2003 the UNDP put the figure rate at 2.4 per cent).

Which responsible man in a responsible position in this country is worried and is working towards reducing this untenable and explosive rate? Not one that is perceivable. It obviously matters not a whit to those who matter.

The World Human Development Index released by the UNDP last week lists 177 nations, according to their rankings. The index is based on a nation's well-being calculated in terms of per capita income, educational levels, health care and life expectancy. Of the South Asian countries, the Maldives tops the list at 84, followed by Sri Lanka at 96, India at 127, Bhutan at 134, Bangladesh at 138, and Nepal at 140.

They are all listed under the heading 'Medium Human Development'. Topping the 'Low Human Development' sector incomes Pakistan is ranked 142. Below us, nations of the Dark Continent predominate.

As for education, restricting this low priority factor (as far as we are concerned) of human development to the province of Sindh, the statistics presented by the education department on July 14 to the newly inducted provincial education minister, Hameeda Khuhro, make sad reading.

Example: The department admits that the majority of people, 55 per cent living in the province of Sindh, are illiterate. In the rural areas, 89 per cent of the women are illiterate, the mothers of the nation's children, those responsible for the upbringing and well-being of infants up to the age of six years old.

How does the education department define literacy? A person who can read, and who can write a simple paragraph in any language is said to be 'literate'. So, if the signalman writes to his station master: 'respected master of station, am just hear that with your strongness you are now made father of girl no.7, so hope and prey your good lady wife milks like cow,' he is a literate man.

Another skill required to qualify as literate is the ability to count up to 50. So, if Moosa is asked to add 51 to 48, and he responds that he can count only up to 50, Moosa is literate.

Example: Out of some 44,000 schools in Sindh 5,624 'were found closed [for] non-availability of teachers'.

Example: The department maintains that it has and manages to run 40,121 primary schools (some of which must be closed for want of teachers), out of which 15,096 are shelter less (under trees), 6,205 are housed in one room, 13,737 have two rooms, 1,191 have three rooms, 1,249 have four rooms, and only 1,317 lucky ones can boast of five rooms - the minimum required to constitute a proper primary school. So, in actual fact the province has and runs 1,317 primary schools.

More statistics: Out of the primary schools that have one to five rooms - i.e. 25,025 of them - 11,229 have no electricity, 19,766 have no sanitation (water or lavatories), and 11,032 have no compound walls. Question: How many of the 1,317 five-room schools lack how many of the above facilities?

Example: In 1972, an arrogant president-cum-chief martial law administrator of Pakistan nationalized the nation's schools, to the detriment of the country and its people. When he took over 500 schools and 96 colleges in Sindh he knew he was destroying knowledge and learning.

Chief Minister Arbab Rahim has very rightly appointed Hameeda Khuhro as his education minister, undoubtedly much to the anguish and chagrin of Imtiaz Sheikh now flying politically high, and of Irfanullah Marwat who has been deprived of this plum post in which much funding is involved.

Question: How long will Hameeda be allowed to retain this portfolio? How long will Arbab last? General Musharraf, with his new Prime Minister Shaukat Aziz and consequently a revised 'set-up', may find the need to make another change in Sindh.

What she must do while she is with us is to convince the cabinet to denationalize the 343 schools and 157 colleges that still remain nationalized and held by the education department. She should return them to their rightful owners. If she can swing this, she will have done more than her bit for the education of her fellow citizens of Sindh.