

Funding "Lower" Education

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It is a very pleasant change to see so many articles on education appearing on the editorial pages of newspapers as the announcement of the new education policy approaches. Since the government seems to have opted to restrict this discussion to a select committee of the Cabinet, it is heartening to see the Press providing an alternative channel for discussion on this most crucial subject.

Having said that, the thrust of the discussion--while not at all surprising--is nonetheless disturbing. The focus is predominantly on so-called "higher" education; as if the rest of education is "lower" and therefore unworthy of our interest. The terminology becomes all the more disquieting when one considers the Urdu equivalent "aala taleem"; the obvious counterpart would be "ghattia taleem" (which is not a factually inappropriate assessment).

This general fascination with University level education is not a new phenomenon and stems from two sources. The first relates to educational apartheid. In real terms, all policy--but especially education policy--in Pakistan is made by and for a very small elite class. Since those who make policy, or talk about it, are really only thinking about their own children who are already getting primary education (in elite schools) that is arguably as good as anywhere in the world it is not surprising that the focus quickly shifts to higher education. The discussion on primary education is reduced to a statistical juggling act--make sure that an impressive number of new schools are proposed, even though they would never be built or, if built, properly equipped. At the same time, elevate the rhetoric to a hollow crusade about 'literacy'--while appropriately redefining the term so that your chosen goals are statistically met.

Another reason for our enduring fixation with higher education relates to our penchant for quick-fixes and silver bullets; not to forget that wonderful term "leapfrogging". We are attracted to any solution that promises to be a quick and easy path to success. Despite a history of bad experiences, we are wont to forget that such paths tend to be neither quick, nor easy, nor leading to success. In the 60's there was a belief that if only we had enough engineers they would fix everything. In this respect, as in others, the 70's were a confused decade although there was a desire for producing enough physicians and surgeons to cure an obviously ailing nation. By the 80's it seemed that what we really needed were business professionals who could manage our way out of the mess. Now in the 90's the consensus suggests that our destiny will be determined by how many disciples for messers Bill Gates and Adam Smith we can produce; what we really need is a new elite that loves playing games--either with computers or with national economies and preferably with both.

The point is not that higher education is not important, but merely to propose--this is where my training in civil engineering comes in handy--that it is inadvisable to build the top of a pyramid without first laying out its base. Anyone who is remotely familiar with the notion of gravity should realize that building any edifice from the top down is not a good idea.

With a number of reasonably good private universities having sprung up this is a good time to reverse this trend. What we need in higher education is a shift from quantity to quality. Quality, however, needs money and our record of spending real money on education is abysmal. One way out is to allow government universities to raise their own funds without the interference of the Ministry of Education or its agencies. Both the private sector in Pakistan and donor agencies abroad are likely to be much more supportive of directly funding real research than throwing their resources into the melting pot of bureaucratic corruption. Such a step would not only dramatically improve the level of education at these universities but could possibly provide a rationale for actually reducing government support to universities and redirecting that amount to basic education.

While this may slightly raise the total amount available for primary education it is not likely to make a significant difference. In fact, there seem to be only two real ways of raising the necessary amounts. Either we could choose to default on debt repayments on the grounds that the future of our children is more important than subsidizing international bureaucracies at the IMF and World Bank. Or we could cut our national defense budget on the grounds that today the security of nations depend less on tanks and jets and much more on a competitively educated workforce. Realistically speaking, neither of these options is feasible.

Unless, of course, the military itself volunteers to take up the cause of education. This is not as far-fetched as it sounds. It is quite common for the armed forces to provide emergency services--build infrastructure in remote areas, provide relief after floods, oversee census arithmetic. Is there any bigger crisis in the country today than the crisis of education? The military already has the largest reservoir of educated personnel in its ranks; it already runs some of the best schools in the country. Allowing a selected set of, say, havaldars and subedars a two-year paid 'service leave' to go back to their villages and teach in a primary school could, in many cases, double the number of teachers in these schools. Other steps could be providing elementary schools for communities that host military bases, or volunteer teachers for existing government schools in those areas. With such an approach we do not need to cut the military budget per se but can divert the benefits of some of that money to the most vital developmental (and security) cause of all.

Such steps alone will not solve the immense problems of basic education in Pakistan. They will, however, make a more significant dent than any amount of statistical jugglery.