

Issues in Education in Pakistan

(By Dr. Ismail Saad)

Education is the basic need of all human societies. The process of education is essential, both for the preservation and further progress of societies. In 1947, when Pakistan appeared on the map of the world, the intention of the leadership was to make and build up a new society which would express the aspirations of Muslim community in India, focusing on the values and cultural traditions which they cherished and shared together. To give Muslim aspirations definite shape and structure a new educational system was needed. The initial difficulty to surmount was to work with the educational legacy of a system which was introduced by the British for specific but narrow purposes. Quaid-e-Azam was aware of the need to revamp and build up a new system of education and directed to hold a policy debate at the national level to arrive at a consensus about the salient features of a new system.

In December 1947 the First National Conference on Education was held which through a number of committees deliberated on the features of the aspired new system. The participants at the conference heard the following message of Quaid-e-Azam:

“... The importance of education and the type of education cannot be over emphasized ... there is no doubt that the future of our State will and must greatly depend upon the type of education we give to our children, and the way in which we bring them up as future citizens of Pakistan ... we should not forget that we have to compete with the world which is moving very fast in this direction.”

The challenge to which the new country was exposed had both a quantitative and qualitative dimension. The seriousness of the challenge, which was then experienced, still persists but with each passing day it is now looming larger and appears grim and more formidable. Under the direction of Quaid-e-Azam, the first national conference on education was held in December 1947. All those interested and working prominently in the field of education were invited and discussed the educational vision and implementation strategy of a system of education in line with the aspirations of Pakistan Movement. The commitment was held that in another 20 years, free and compulsory education up to primary level will be provided to every child, boy or girl, as a state responsibility. The challenge was tough and arduous but the fervor and optimism to build a new country overshadowed, grimness of the task ahead. Today, when more than 60 years have elapsed to the independence, we are still far behind and yet to fulfill the promise made at the first educational conference with the difference that the initial fervor and optimism has also left us and we are desperately looking for a beam of light at the end of the tunnel. Less than half of our population is still illiterate, specially, women and the people who live in rural areas. The irony on top is that we have not yet able to give a proper definition to literacy. The same story is true of elementary and primary level schooling where half of our children never enter the school boundary and half of those who manage to get admission fall on the wayside before the completion of the five years of primary school. The number of children going beyond primary school

steadily diminishes and hardly 2 percent manage to reach the stage of higher education and university education. The population of the country is increasing at a pace very near the 3 percent ratio and it seems that our educational endeavors will always stay behind the increasing population. Thus, for a long time to come Pakistan is destined to stay as a country of illiterate population. Literacy and primary schooling still remain insurmountable.

The challenge of quality, though not as apparent as the quantitative challenge, is even more serious in terms of future progress. The quality of education imparted is disappointing and does not measure-up to social and economic needs of a developing nation. We are nurturing a highly stratified system of education which caters to the needs of an elite and the less privileged remain utterly deprived. The result is that our young educated population does not have the feeling and the needed commitment for the country nor do they have the realization that the country needs their services and they must play a part in the reconstruction of Pakistan. Whatever small human capital our education system manages to produce is drained by the countries abroad as our own economy is unable to productively absorb their talent. Without a sound manpower planning and training strategy, we shall remain unable to employ our graduates in meaningful vocations and occupations.

The foremost challenge to quality is that even today we find ourselves directionless, we are without a philosophy or ideology to guide us. Pakistan associates itself to the world

of Islam, but our adherence is limited to an emotional fervor without a clear understanding of the Islamic ideas and how our values would be employed in our day to day life. We need clarity of vision whether we subscribe to Islamic values and way of life, as interpreted and understood by the founding fathers of the country or adhere to an entirely different interpretation which is confined to a narrow vision which has impelled us to keep looking with adulation at the past rather than to brace ourselves to face the future. So far, with each new government, the Islam changes its meanings and forces us subservience to the new center of power.

The educational system need also to teach the young generation to love their country and feel committed to its well being and progress. This has not been possible to-date and most of the young people stay devoid of a sense of belonging to their country.

The most critical aspect of our education, in terms of quality, is that it is not aligned with our economy and economic needs. The system of education is not governed by proper manpower planning. The number of jobs is highly limited and is not suitable for the economic needs of the country. The system of education does not produce manpower at different levels and there is a highly limited capacity to absorb graduates beyond the high school or graduation levels, with the result that even after the university education there is no expanded job market to absorb the trained talent. Whatever small human capital the system of education produces cannot be productively employed with the result that the graduates look for jobs outside the country.

To sum-up the discussion the crux of the problem circles around our own commitment and preference to education. Despite lip service and claims education has never been our national priority. Commitment to a cause necessitates a measure of sacrifice. To cater to the country's aspirations to educate its children and to provide them quality education, we are without an option but to spend more on education. Thus far, our limit has been less than 2 percent of the GNP, which is a meager amount even compared to other South Asian countries in the neighborhood. Good education needs resources even at the expense of imperative national needs, like defense. Unless a national commitment is made to education and money is spent on this head, we cannot hope to come out of the morass in which the country finds itself today. Let us remind ourselves that the country's best defense is its system of education and unless education is placed at the top of the priority agenda we as a nation will continue to drag our feet and lag behind.

NEEDS OF PAKISTAN IN THE TWENTY FIRST CENTURY

A couple of years are left before we enter the twenty first century. Metaphorically, we are at the eve of a new century. Objectively speaking, the time left is almost as much or even less than has been used for regular economic plans of the country. The need is to grab this opportunity and make use of it as best and as productively as possible. It is clear that the country is confronted with a formidable challenge. It is formidable not only because of its magnitude but even more so because of the urgency to attend to the challenges of time. We are racing against time. The matters have already been delayed and a further delay can only be suicidal. The onset of the twenty first century may only add to the poignancy of an already worsened situation if we show any unpreparedness. A most striking feature of the new times to come is, perhaps, the expected increase in the velocity and speed of human scientific and technological endeavors. This process will cause a chain effect and is bound to accelerate the pace of progress in all walks of human life. The increase in the momentum will exert greater pressure and place heavier demands on the developing nations, specially, on those countries, which have had a disappointing record

of achievement in the second half of the twentieth century. Pakistan cannot count it self out in the list of these countries.

Entry into the twenty first century would need adequate preparation based on fore thought and planning. We should have learnt from past experience that problem which requires long sustained effort for their solution can neither afford excessive ambition nor can they subsist on periodical outbursts of energy. We shall have to be realistic, with firm feet on the ground, aiming only at targets which are achievable in the period assigned to them. In the field of education we have lost considerable time in setting targets which were unrealizable from day one and have wasted energy and resources in pursuing elusive goals. Most of our educational efforts have been based not on a realistic appraisal of our needs, resources and limitations but on political day-dreaming. We shall have to embark upon the educational work with a new sense of realism and will have to measure every as we go along. In planning and organizing resources for education our model need not be the developed countries that have outdistanced us with such a wider gap that there is little relevance left in their experience to suit our immediate situation. Instead, Pakistan should focus attention on the experience of those developing countries which started the independence as a new nation. Their example can provide us with a better comparative perspective to realize where we have faltered and what can now be done to redeem past mistakes.

In the field of education Pakistan is confronted both with a challenge of quantity and quality. We hold a disappointing record in the expansion of educational opportunity in the country and our performance in maintaining a reasonable standard of education is equally dismal. The two dimensions need to be looked at separately, since in planning and preparing for the new century we shall have to pursue a two pronged policy, delicately balancing each against the. Let us first survey the challenge of quantity.

Pakistan is a democratic country with a firm faith in Islamic values of social justice and equality. With these convictions the gap between belief and action appears even more glaring. Despite a number of expensive experiments, Pakistan is still to be counted among those four or five countries in the world which have the lowest literacy rate. Our literacy figures though variously quoted indicate that at least seventy percent of the population suffers from illiteracy, which virtually means that they are not capable of signing their names on a piece of paper. Thirty percent is the literacy percentage with which we started our journey as a new nation in 1947. This indicates that in the expansion of literacy the pace of progress has been stationery throughout and we have not moved a bit from the original position. No doubt the increase in population and the rate of population growth have significantly contributed to off setting the progress in literacy but, how so ever it may be, when the achievement is compared with other developing countries we can hardly hide out embarrassment.

The low rate of literacy is further aggravated by the imbalances in the spread of literacy throughout the country. The literacy rate is highly uneven among the provinces with Baluchistan as the region with lowest rate of literacy. Similarly, there is disequilibrium between the literacy rate of cities and villages. The bulk of the population lives in rural areas and these areas indicate an alarmingly poor level of literacy. The most conspicuous literacy imbalance may be seen between the two sexes. Female literacy is phenomenally low as compared to men, with merely 2% the lowest in Baluchistan. In the race between Population growth and increase in literacy, the latter must always lag behind. In the past twelve years the literacy rate according to official claims has been increasing over 3% every year. The net result is that the country has nearly 80 million people who do not know how to read and write.

Not unrelated to literacy is the issue of primary schooling for all children. As we new democracy Pakistan cannot deny the right of any child born and reaching the school-going age to have access to free and compulsory primer education. But the factual position is that only half the primary age population has an opportunity to attend schools. Here again there is a gender discrepancy and even less than one third of the girls attend primary schools. Compared to 8% increase in enrolment since 1981 for boys, the increase for female is only 5%. The sad part is that even the 50% intake of children in class I suffers a

serious set back in the form of drop-outs and by class V, the last grade of the primary school, one half of the children discontinue their schooling.

The situation requires greater awareness and inducement among parents for the education of their children, more environmental attractions in schools and a stable structural arrangement of non-formal education to bring back the drop-outs to the fold of education, specially, to a vocationally meaningful program of education. In post primary stages of formal education the number of students continue to dwindle, though the dropout rate tends to slow down in successive stages, those who manage to reach the post-secondary level, number only 5% of the population in the relevant age group. The yearly increase in student enrolments is, to say the least, very modest but it is remarkable that even this increase has resulted in serious overcrowding of educational institutions and a very great strain on educational facilities available in these places. Let us turn our attention to quality considerations in education.

The dimension of quality is even more important, for a low standard of education virtually means that we are not getting proper return on our investment in education. In the first place, the country is hard pressed in resource generation for education and if our educational effort fails to reach the desired objectives the investment of money, time and energy shall only be calculated as a total waste. It is difficult to measure standard of education because the objectives a nation tries to reach through education are not always tangible. For instance, the wish to see education as an integrating force, helpful in the promotion of national integrity, is not a thing that can be precisely measured. Same is the case with the aspiration that education should nurture and reinforce patriotic sentiments among people, or give our young men an emotional attachment to moral values and create a sense of discipline in them. Again, to see education as a means to bring cultivation to the life of the young and give them poise and balance in their personality desires which neither does nor permits to statistical calculation. We can only arrive at a rough estimate if the success or failures of the process of education in catering to these needs. It is apparent that our system of education has failed to measure up the national expectations on these intangible but important quality indicators of a system of education.

An important area with relevance to standard of education, which is more amenable to quality measurement and can inform us of the utility of education in calculable term is the relationship of education with the job market. The strongest motivation for a person to receive education is the capability education can develop in our individual to sustain himself economically. To be able to get respectable job is, perhaps, the greatest fascination which lures, initially, the parents and eventually the student to education. This should explain why the non-availability of a job at the end is the most frustrating experience with which our graduates suffer and is responsible for the bitterness experienced in youth about the system of education and the country.

Education in Pakistan is a matter of habit and chance and reflects very little planning and forethought. Never a serious attempt has been made at manpower planning or human resource development. As a result there is no correlation between the job available in the market and the numbers of graduates aspiring for the job. There is also a blind rush in the direction of higher education for there is no diversification of talent in different vocational fields at low educational levels. Even in professional and technical fields the preparation and training leaves much to be desired and the employers can hardly do without training the incumbents on the job. In order to meet the challenge of quantity and quality in the field of education in the next century, long term and concerted effort will be required. Educational development, especially in terms of quality is a slow process and would need along sustained work to bring about desirable results.

This means that a conjoint effort will have to be made which will need participation of each and every person. Public and private initiative both will have to work and act in harmony and unison, not at the cost of each other or at cross purposes with each other. The private sector will have to exert itself more vigorously in the field of education, especially in areas which are sensitive to quality education. Private

institutions are in better position to make safeguards for preservation of quality in education and to experiment with ways and means to maintain and raise educational standards. Through the public sector cannot remain oblivious to the consideration of quality in education, specially, at the higher and professional level of education, it will have to concentrate its efforts on the quantitative expansion of education in the country.

The government cannot possibly turn its face away from the basic commitment of the expansion of educational opportunity to all the people in Pakistan. No doubt, the mission cannot be accomplished in a hurry. The past record of the graph of educational progress indicates that our performance has never come up to a level to keep pace with the rate of annual increase in population, with the result that if one step is taken forward in terms of educational expansion, the increase in population pushed the effort two step backward. In addition to taking effective steps to check the rapid population growth this should mean that the educational action needs to be more vigorous and better organized. The little time left be used on building up a durable educational infra-structure, in terms of school buildings, facilities, teaching equipment, trained teachers, and a meaningful curriculum at the primary school level, which can sustain the needed expansion and development in the years to come. A massive exercise such as this would eventually bring into focus the urgent need of procurement and mobilization of financial resources for the purpose. It is clear that until now the amount spent on education has been highly inadequate, whether we look at what other developing countries have been spending annually on education or compare it with the 4% of the GNP, determined by UNESCO for education in the developing countries.

Low spending on education reveals our ambivalence about education. Despite verbal claims we have kept education very low on the national list of priorities. Compared to the national expenditure on defense, the spending on education is the ratio of 25:1. The National Commission in 1959 recommended an allocation of 7% of central revenues for education. In order to meet this requirement, current education budget would have to be increased six fold. This seems a tall order and stipulates a radical rearrangement of national priorities in favor of education. Let us remember that is education is debt from present to future generations. The turn of the century is, perhaps, a critical moment to be decisive about the repayment of this debt, whereas little time is left to prepare ourselves for the important event, or, perhaps, the time is left to prepare ourselves for the important event, or, perhaps, the time has already passed to make or prove the entry effective, meaningful and substantial into the twenty first century.