**Andragogy for All: the Uneducated Educated**

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“I say that it is the greatest good for a man to discuss virtue every day and those other things about which you hear me conversing and testing myself and others, for the unexamined life is not worth living”. What was an examined life for Socrates? His philosophy did not restrict knowledge to the understanding of our surroundings. To him, living an examined life meant understanding oneself. Ah…… where are we going with all this philosophy and discussion on the purpose of education? What has this got to do with us Pakistanis?

Pakistan, Alhamdulillah is one country where education is much talked about and most misunderstood phenomenon. With its edifice entrenched in the examination system, a legacy of the British Raj since 1857, the hallmark of Pakistan’s education system lies in assessments based on the grades and GPA, where the end state of education is to attain a good job.

Since our independence in 1947, all education policies (less one i.e., the 1980s era) “met their Kabul” due to gamut of factors where a lot has been discussed and criticized ranging from lack of funds to lack of will. This humble undertaking is to highlight another aspect which is the root cause not only for our deteriorating education standards but also a nosedive in our societal values.

Let’s come to the point without further guesswork. The closed book examination regime was first introduced in the subcontinent in 1857 on the lines of the University of London examination for matriculation to encourage the native Indians to learn English and adopt their values. This exam soon attained a benchmark for induction of natives into the government services and for higher education, with a promise of getting high-end jobs. The British themselves since then have moved leaps and bounds and that matriculation exam is a thing of the history, not even known to the present generation.

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We in Pakistan, true to our DNA, that whatever is taught to us or given to us, will be followed blindly and will not be questioned or evaluated for it’s suitability or applicability to our environment. The slave mindset resists change from the comfort zone of assembly line programming and routine……the comfort zone of the initial mental indoctrination/wiring done in our brains by our masters before 1947. Not realizing, that the British designed this matriculation examination for the industrial age dictates to produce a workforce where prime importance was accorded to obedience and to follow the assembly line procedures where thinking by the managers and workers was not desired. On independence, our education system was based on the British examination system, like all other legislature. Ironically, even after seven decades and despite global changes in the education paradigm, we still cling to this old outdated closed-book examination regime, rather we have strengthened it to an idiotic extent where it is now deeply entrenched in our system of life.

Examinations in Pakistan are a matter of life and death, since exams are the gateway to good schools and colleges and ultimately for good jobs. Poor grades and failing in exams is a humiliation and a lifetime stigma for the entire family where a student at a very young and vibrant age is discarded and isolated socially. Clearing the exams with good grades is the ultimate goal for the students, the parents and the teachers alike, irrespective of learning. In fact, our entire societal construct is all geared towards grades and GPA culture. Your grades make you a good or a bad person in the society. Our education system can best be defined as a system that believes that “Knowledge is a function of memory and not the understanding”. Rote learning, parroting and memorization is the trademark of this closed book examination regime “a function of memory”. Those who can mug up well and “copy- paste” the content knowledge from the book or imitate the teacher are good students, irrespective of their understanding of the idea or concept.

Architects of the SNC deserve a national applause as SNC is a step in the right direction….. if that is the right direction…. a manufacturing factory for “ratoo tottas” devoid of critical, reflective and creative thinking. The designers of this SNC must have been impressed with the success of the education policy of the 80’s era where we as a nation are reaping the dividends of intolerance, extremism and exclusivity of that great harvest. It seems that the “Konzertmeister” and other orchestrators of the SNC where under pressure and time compressed situation to come up with a novel idea to boast about their efficiency and intellect for “Naya Pakistan”. They all need to visit eye specialist for their lack of farsightedness.

There are serious conceptual questions when it comes to even planning for a SNC. I intend highlighting the core question that implicates all other important questions and intricacies related to it. Which curriculum to follow? broadly speaking education system in Pakistan has four tiers that follow different curriculum with varying pedagogical paradigms. The high-end elite private schools, the mid-range private schools, the government schools and the madrassah. Which level is to be selected for SNC, as each category of school systems follow a different curriculum? If the benchmark is the high-end elite private schools, the question arises on the pedagogical and technological construct of other category school systems, if the government school standards are in mind, that amounts to denying opportunities for those who can afford quality education and that would also mean dragging the overall standards of an already outdated non-performing education system in the country, leaving aside the constants of pedagogical regime, the technological access and knowhow, the school cultures and the availability of internet etc.

SNC is a Draconian misadventure marred with regression, depravation and with a revulsion towards English as a language where all endeavours by Sir Syed Ahmad Khan have been ignored as part of our mutilated history. SNC or no SNC, the basic question remains unaddressed, and that is, what is the purpose of education? An agitating as well as most challenging question of our times. This question effects all segments of the society, from scholars to policymakers, from statesmen to administrators. In the wake of ambiguity and lack of a consensus on this very core question, the policymakers, the school owners and the businessmen all take undue advantage to suit their interests.

The purpose of education has undergone a paradigm change with a view to empowering youth as global citizen, capable of understanding global demand and supply dynamics. The purpose of education is development of skills to equip students with the “correct knowledge” that will enable them to become contributing members of the society. Ron Ritchhart, best defines the purpose of education in our world, i.e., to see “a student as an engaged and active thinker able to communicate, innovate, collaborate, and problem-solve”. Does SNC fulfill any of these end state ingredients of education? The answer is “Absolutely Not”. Unfortunately, the SNC, instead of boosting the already fractured education system in Pakistan, is a step towards more retrogression. The policymakers must understand that globalization does not necessarily mean westernization, if we are considering the “look East policy” strategically, then we should also study the dynamics of the rising power from the lands of the “Yellow River” with respect to the importance they attached to English as a language and science subjects over the past 30 years or so.

The menace of intolerance, extreme views, exclusivity and radicalized behaviour in our society lies in our education construct. Not in the education policy, not in the curriculum, not in the textbooks, not even in the pedagogy. The root cause of all these problems lies in the examination and assessment regime of our education system. Closed book examination regime relies on rote learning and memorization technique, where memory is tested and assessed instead of understanding. The existing examination regime has served us great so far where, apart from producing a run of the mill non-questioning minds, certain businesses have also flourished. Some publishers became big publishing houses with innovation of printing the past ten years’ papers, examination guides to pass the exams, by striking on the psychology of the students and the parents etc. The culture of evening home tutoring which flourished to an extend that the evening tuition centers transformed into tuition academies and colleges, and soon we will see them opening the universities, InshahAllah.

It is important for us to understand the importance of examination construct in a country….. “Examination regime is the prime mover from where the curriculum is orchestrated, the textbooks are designed, the entire pedagogical construct takes its shape and most importantly, the societal mindset is channelized “. The backwash of the closed book examination regime is the non-questioning, non-analytical mindset promoting rote learning and memorization at the cost of independent and critical thinking minds with the sole purpose of fetching good marks and higher grades. Byproducts of the closed book examination are higher stress/anxiety amongst the students apart from promoting the culture of use of unfair means/cheating in the exams. It defeats the entire purpose and essence of the philosophy of education.

The panacea lies in the open book examination regime. Open book examination assesses the true potential of the students based on their level of understanding of the concepts that can be related to real-time practical and on ground situations. Here, while the books can be consulted, still copy-pasting from the book never serves the purpose. The open book exams require an open questioning technique where examination papers can even be given beforehand or the exams can even be attempted at home. There is no room for rote learning and reproducing the content knowledge from the books, as unless the concepts are understood, pupil will not be able to solve real-world issues. This regime would entail critical, reflective and creative thinking skills where the current paradigm would shift to “knowledge is a function of understanding”.

Pakistan can hardly afford yet another trial please. It is high time for our leaders at

all levels, especially the political leaders, to take this absolutely important subject seriously and not relegate it for want of quick impact projects for optics as part of the electoral campaign. The mafia of the old guards in education sector must now be taken by the horns. It is now of paramount importance that we seriously strive to live honourably in the comity of nations and take concrete steps to eradicate the menace of radicalization, intolerance, growing trends of extremism and social and ethnic polarization. Towards this end, a paradigm shift in the examination construct in our education system in the shape of an open book examination regime is the necessity which may be accorded high priority to foster lifelong cognitive thinking skills among the youth.

“Education is what remains after one has forgotten what one has learned in school”.- Albert Einstein

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