**Educating Pakistan**

Why is Japan richer than Pakistan? In fact, why is any country richer than another? There are multiple reasons, but education is probably the most important factor in determining the wealth of nations.

The question perhaps then to ask is not how to make Pakistan as rich as Japan but how to make Pakistan as educated as Japan. Here some people will correctly tell you that to reach the level of Japanese education we need a lot more resources. That is to say, we need to be wealthy to be well educated.

This of course suggests that we are in a Catch-22 situation. To be rich we need to be educated but then to be educated we need to be rich. And there is some truth to it. But, thankfully, it is not the whole truth. There are of course many poor countries that have become educated and then rich – so it is possible to break this vicious cycle. China and Malaysia come to mind as countries that have successfully done so in the very recent past.

The reason countries don’t remain trapped in poverty and illiteracy is because money fortunately is not the sole or even the prime determinant for education. Far more than wealth, it is culture that promotes literacy and an appetite for education. Aristotle said that parenting is the most important jobs humans do. And if you think about it you’ll realise he was absolutely right. If parents do their jobs and raise their children well, in one generation all of society’s problems will go away. Every citizen would be educated, decent, kind and well mannered. No one will try to get ahead of you in the line at the airport. Or the cinema. And there might even be a line at the bookstore.

But what is it that makes parents raise their children well? It is society and its culture. Ours is a very robust culture that plays a most important role in our lives. And our rich culture has so many positives things. But for some reason education is not very valued by our modern culture. (I actually know of one father who, having bought his son a Land Cruiser, didn’t have enough money to send him abroad for higher education).

Nine Israelis have won Nobels in academic fields. Israel’s population is four percent of Pakistan’s population. In equivalent terms, Pakistanis should have won 225 Nobel prizes. We have won one, by Professor Abdus Salam.

If Pakistan is to do well in the world we have to restore our cultural heritage that values education and academic excellence. Whether Islamic cultural heritage or Subcontinental heritage, our culture had always valued education. But we have clearly lost our way. As much as we should celebrate them, we cannot just celebrate the Wasim Akrams and the Jahangir Khans of Pakistan. We have to also celebrate the Abdus Salams, the Atif Mians, the Nergis Mavalvalas and the Akbar Zaidis of Pakistan. (The last three are, respectively, professors at Princeton, MIT, and Columbia and IBA).

Getting our society to value education is such a big issue that it really cannot just be entrusted to the government. It is the responsibility of all of us to do something to inculcate the spirit of education into our society.

Pakistan lacks both width and depth in education. The government can help in widening the breadth of education by spreading literacy and ensuring that no kid is left out of school. But we need to change some prejudices of our society to increase the depth of education. It’s not just a matter of throwing more money at the problem. We as a society remain, if not hostile, at least wary of new ideas or unorthodox thoughts. We need to change that. We have to take new ideas and debate them and give them a chance to make their mark.

Science and social sciences thrive and grow only through new ideas. So Islamic resistance to new ideas cannot be applied to other areas. Our culture has to be prepared to make that distinction, even when in certain cases the distinction can become murky. But if other Islamic societies can do it, I am sure so can Pakistani society.

As I write this, I am particularly happy to report that three proud sons of Karachi and Pakistan are doing their part. Asad Alam Niazi, Asif Riaz Tata and Fawad Anwer Teli are having their companies – along with two other companies – sponsor the Karachi Thinkfest in collaboration with IBA. Thinkfest is the brainchild of Professor Yaqoob Bangash who has already held the Lahore Thinkfest very successfully.

On Saturday, December 8, the Karachi Thinkfest will bring academics like Professors Akbar Zaidi, Joseph Massad, Anupama Rao, Ali Usman Qasmi and Adam Kotsko, practitioners like Ishrat Hussain, Nadeem Ul Haque, Kristian Harpviken, journalists such as Najam Sethi, Fahd Hussain, Asma Shirazi and Mazhar Abbas, activists such as Jibran Nasir and Ayesha Khan and authors such as Hanif Kureishi (the keynote speaker), together at the IBA city campus for a day devoted to thinking and thought.

These and many other intellectuals from Pakistan and other countries will talk about the Raj and the Railways, about (another) new beginning in Pakistan, about Islam and liberalism and see if they contradict or coincide, about Iqbal and Ambedkar, about Afghanistan, the Middle East and the Oslo Accords, about mandirs and gurdwaras and the minorities in Pakistan, about the ruins of Delhi and the urban problems facing Karachi, about the media in Pakistan, about Al-Qaeda, about Fahmida Riaz, and so much more.

This Thinkfest is going to be a rich mix of ideas and topics and intellects that will combine to educate, entertain and challenge the students and residents of Karachi who attend. And hopefully from among the student attendees we will inspire a few to become the next Ishrat Hussain or Mohammad Hanif.

Educating Pakistan is both a long game but also an urgent need. Making resources available for education will of course help. But the change we require is not in the budget numbers. What we need is a change in how we value education. When teachers and authors and poets and scientists are celebrated socially, when parents want their sons and daughters to become college professors and not rich, then we will all become rich.

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