**Education — for sale?**

[Huzaima Bukhari](https://dailytimes.com.pk/writer/huzaima-bukhari/)

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*“Education is like the pooja ghar (place of worship) for us. We are never going to become a for-profit player in education. It will be akin to selling the pooja ghar”-Anand Mahindra.*

A people-friendly government of any sane country will make best efforts to first improve the quality of its denizens-human resource. A perfect organization can be reduced to rubble if those managing and maintaining it are not properly trained. Conversely, a dilapidated structure can be converted into a masterpiece by those who have the requisite skill and abilities. More important perhaps, is maturity of consciousness that sets the wheels of thought, rolling. When the mental faculties of the humans are developed with the aim of making them see the world in a broader perspective, other things automatically fall in place. This is only possible through widespread education together with teaching manners and culture.

Our Pakistan Constitution has declared education as one of the fundamental rights that every citizen is entitled to. This means that the government must and without exception take appropriate measures to ensure that in general, every member of the population has access to learning and in particular, the younger generation. Where many violations of the constitutional provisions have been taking place this aspect too remains off the grid. When such a scenario is not visible on the government’s front, the remedy left is for the private sector to step in and fill up this vacuum. Obviously, the basic difference between the public and private sectors is that the former has to function as a matter of duty while the latter, albeit well-intentioned, is prone to making profits, and rightly so. No harm in making money either but when greed knows no bounds then there should be cause for concern.

The concept of modern day schooling may have been derived from the West but it actually goes back down the centuries when first the Greeks and Romans and then with the advent of Islam, mosques became places of both worship and dissemination of knowledge. When these became overcrowded madrassas began to be built adjacent to mosques followed by halqas (study circles) and maktabs (elementary schools) in addition to palace schools. The Encyclopedia Britannica gives an in-depth account of development of the educational system in the first few centuries after Islam. For example, in the early decades of the tenth century 3,000 mosques with schools attached were reported in Baghdad and in the fourteenth century 12,000 were reported in Alexandria.

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Such was the importance of education during the early period of Islam and interestingly, there is no mention of compensations being taken from the students who came from distant lands to attend these institutions in large numbers. Even in those days, mostly lectures were delivered while pupils painstakingly made notes on whatever form of paper or writing material was available to them. There may have been a dress code but historians have not mentioned any specific type of uniform or stationery to be used by the students. Imparting knowledge and learning from the scholars were the main purposes but at the same time there were activities related to education. Thus cities like Damascus, Baghdad and Cordoba were fraught with bookshops, copyists and book dealers for whom these became new found business ventures which not only brought them profits but also helped in spreading education as they travelled to distant lands in search of rare manuscripts and books.

So, one thing is clear that wherever there is an activity which involves the public in large, there is definitely going to be economic activity having some connection with it which brings along prosperity for many. Growth should always be encouraged but concurrently undue exploitation should also be discouraged. These days innumerable educational institutions have sprouted up all over the country some of which have become brand names. While some cater to average income families, many charge exorbitant fees, perhaps justified, considering the ‘exceptional’ standards they maintain especially when compared to government run public schools. These high-end institutions boast of devoted qualified teachers as against lethargic and uninterested ones found in government schools therefore their owners hardly have any remorse with respect to overcharging parents eager to provide their children with good education. Acknowledging services rendered by these institutions is one thing but reeling to their constant demands is another. These days there is a lot of insistence on particular note books, stationery items and of course uniforms that can only be purchased from specific booksellers who have been notified by these schools. Parents are being pushed to buy from only the assigned shops otherwise, children are penalized and their work is not accepted. Prior to this onslaught of branded schools, book lists were handed out at the beginning of the term and students would get them from wherever it was feasible and economical for them. It did not matter if the books were bought from an expensive shop or some wholesale market as long as these were covered with brown paper. The main purpose of schools was giving good education and not making money.

Unfortunately, schools today are overburdening parents by forcing them to pay through their nose for such things as notebooks, pencils, pens and paints available at certain shops. The video of a grieving parent went viral when he complained about a pack containing books and stationery for a lump sum heavy amount along with a receipt without stating item-wise price that was handed over to him by the stationer who made it clear that the school had imported these items from China and they were asked to sell them for a commission. In other words, besides charging high tuition fees, these schools were profiting from business deals, further fleecing parents.

Families that are financially well placed may not feel this crunch as much as a middle class father of three children struggling to make ends meet. This kind of exploitation is certainly not tolerable. In the first place, education which should be free for all is getting expensive with each passing day and adding insult to injury, this arrogant attitude of brand schools is rather inimical especially when government regulators are turning a blind eye towards these monstrosities. History will register names of these institutions as wealthy centres but will not record great names like Omar Khayyam, Al-Beruni, Fakhr Al-Din Al-Razi, Ibn Sina (Avicenna), Al Tabari, Ibn Rushd (Averroes) because despite all this fuss, they have yet to produce such mighty scholars.

The only redeeming features are those educational institutes that are so-called ‘charitable’ and run on non-profit basis but many consider sending their children to these schools as a social stigma as this could expose their financial standing which they want to conceal from others. Consequently these unfortunate parents have to pay a heavy price for false appearances and buying good education for their kids.

*The writer, lawyer and author, is an Adjunct Faculty at Lahore University of Management Sciences (LUMS)*