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February 6, 2021

**Reforming education?**

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Last week the federal government, as well as the governments of Punjab and Khyber Pakhtunkhwa, issued identical directives applicable to all public and private schools from the next academic year as regards teaching in grades one to five. Directives that will regulate teaching in the higher grades are expected soon enough.

These directives require all schools to teach from textbooks prescribed by the state as model textbooks. Other textbooks that realize the objectives of the Single National Curriculum (SNC) may be used only after approval by the designated government authorities. While the model textbooks are meant to lay down minimum learning outcomes that individual schools may exceed, the fact is that no other textbooks stand approved as of now.

A 2020 amendment to the Punjab Curriculum and Textbook Board Act 2015 requires all textbooks with content related to religion to be approved by the Muttahida Ulema Board. The law expressly places Islamiyat, History, Pakistan Studies, Urdu, Literature along with ‘any other subject material related to religion’ in the hands of the Muttahida Ulema Board. Presumably, the teaching of evolution as much as the stories of Ismat Chughtai could be interdicted by the ulema.

The government directives for grades one to five also require the textbooks and teaching of English, mathematics and the natural sciences to be in English. All other subjects are to be taught and examined in Urdu in all schools.

Both the government and private schools have called upon parents and citizens to engage with what is underway.

Explorations with those in leadership positions at the Federal Higher Education Commission, public and private sector universities and schools and those closely involved with the government’s SNC reveal considerable noble intent confounded. To its credit, the SNC provides for introduction to Christianity, Sikhism, Hinduism, the Baha'i and Kalasha faiths in each of the first five grades. Having said that, four objectives have collided. The outcome is a muddle. This must be stated clearly.

The four objectives are: first, improve concept formation and absorption, particularly at the primary level; second, enable access to knowledge in the natural sciences that is being produced globally; third, ameliorate the language apartheid that exists in Pakistani society with English language competence and accent standing as barriers for the vast majority; and fourth, instill ‘appropriate’ religious, cultural and patriotic attitudes through control over the teaching of the social sciences and humanities.

These objectives perch on a pedagogical landscape etched by realities that are denied at great peril to the cause of mass education. Consider.

Given the overwhelming evidence from around the world, it is incontestable that concept formation and absorption in the early years is best achieved in the mother tongue or in languages familiar to the child. While the mother tongue is generally determined by ethnicity, the tongue or tongues that are most familiar to a child are determined by class and locale. Children of any ethnicity growing up in an upper middle-class household in Lahore or Karachi are far more likely to be familiar with the English language than the children of the domestic help growing up in the same area or those with an upper middle-class income growing up in a less metropolitan setting.

A detailed study by The Citizens Foundation (TCF) that looks at learning outcomes in the Tharparkar district has recently been put out in the public domain, the hope being to generate a larger conversation about schooling in Pakistan. The study, ‘Finding Identity, Equity and Economic Strength by Teaching in Languages Children Understand’, confirms that mother tongue teaching complemented by teaching in one or more familiar languages yields learning outcomes, in terms of concept formation and literacy, far superior to those achieved when a language alien to the child is imposed as the medium of instruction in the early years. In Tharparkar, as in most parts of Pakistan, after 73 years of dominating the airwaves, Urdu is the language most familiar after the mother tongue.

While the schools in Tharparkar studied by TCF, and hundreds of thousands of similar schools, are clearly likely to benefit if the medium of instruction is the mother tongue supplemented by Urdu, this will not necessarily hold for the private schools that cater to the middle classes in urban settings. In these schools English, supplemented by Urdu, is a familiar enough language for the students to allow teaching using English language textbooks, even between grades one and five. For decades, these schools have been providing children from middle-class households an education that allows considerable proficiency in the English language and a path to London or Cambridge O and A ‘Levels and beyond to successful university education. Should this urban, middle-class education compact be disturbed?

It should not be for the simple reason that this is perhaps the only part of the education system that is working reasonably well. That it reflects the inegalitarian structure of our state and society is not reason enough to dismantle it. Inequality must be confronted directly. The role that English has come to play in the country, as facilitator of internal and international communication as well as obstruction for the millions whose academic progress and access to the professions and the services is barred by it, is a colonial legacy that neither the SNC nor its progenitors seek to dismantle.

What the directives that purport to implement the SNC seem likely to achieve is a degradation of private school education in the hope of achieving ‘a one size fits all’ indigenization. The indigenization objective is less harmfully attained by requiring a proper engagement with the literature of the land. Easy Urdu is the culprit to apprehend.

In the less-than-perfect world that we inhabit, private schools offer a stark deal that promises mobility: ‘somehow make the money to pay our fees and we will help your child onwards.’ The state system offers few channels for mobility. Quite apart from the role of English as a societal escalator, English is the medium that provides access to the burgeoning mass of knowledge in all fields. It is a fact of life that English language teaching in Pakistan is poor and will remain so for the millions of students in the state system. Teachers with the requisite ability and in the large numbers required cannot be produced in the foreseeable future.

While English language teaching in the state system is being worked upon, hopefully as a national priority without conflating the practical worth of any language with its spiritual value, knowledge must be made available within the linguistic eco-system that the child in Tharparkar or Gujjar Khan or Waziristan or Kech inhabits. Translation remains the key to the spread of knowledge, including cutting edge science, at all levels of instruction in countries as diverse as Japan, South Korea, Slovenia, Iran and Turkey. If that is what it takes, then let the spirit of the Bait ul Hikmah of the Abbasids, perhaps the greatest translation effort the world has known, be invoked.

A relationship between students and texts that do not forbid engagement nor seek to indoctrinate and teachers who can act as effective companions needs to be created in the state education system. The Higher Education Commission has taken some steps to encourage translations but a coordinated state effort with the requisite resources made available remains absent.

For those going around asserting that Urdu and our other languages are dead languages incapable of handling science or modernity, while Farsi and Korean are somehow adequately equipped, one can send good wishes along with a pdf of the now sadly late Shams ur Rehman Farooqi’s monumental essay in Sheldon Pollock’s ‘Literary Cultures in History’.

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