**Can the media help our students?**

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We have often blamed politicians for ignoring the plight of the dismal nature of our education sector while focusing on other issues. We have critiqued policymakers, decision-makers and the establishment for not making education a priority.

But why don’t we ever beg the same question to the media who seem to be completely silent on the visible decay and crumble of our education sector while they run after lesser important yet juicy issues for the purpose of ratings and entertainment? Do all stakeholders, pillars of the state and the real handlers of this country even realize the impact of our poor education sector and what all have we missed out on because of our pathetic lack of focus on this primary issue and the best route to make Pakistan better?

We all know, have a fair idea or at least have heard the state of affairs as far as education is concerned. If nothing else, we have experienced it as students or as parents/ relatives of students in this country. A lot has also been written, spoken about and debated on this topic by civil society, NGOs and concerned educationists.

Yet, the media seems to give scant attention to, or simply ignores, the plight of students and education on a regular basis. We did see some attention on education when the Single National Curriculum was on the table, but soon this ‘boring’ topic was shelved for everyday masala and the regular leg pulling and ugly politics.

Just switch to prime time TV on any given day of the week and see what all is played on a daily basis while education burns. We do have those rare insights into other issues too but politics seems to dominate our screen time. No mainstream anchor has taken up the cause of various issues within the education sector in a sustained manner to help form opinions, policies and debate across the country.

This article is also an open letter to some of our most celebrated TV journalists and anchors to please pay attention to this most important and yet most ignored sector of Pakistan and help the country and its future – the children – get a charter of education, an education emergency, and a plan to deal with the severity of issues within education and more. Nobody is asking them to give up their daily focus on politics and give all the time to education, but can we please talk about education on a regular basis so that even the nation realizes the importance of education as a route to be educated individuals and not just literates? Can news channels introduce regular weekly shows, discussions and debates on the structural, philosophical and every-day gaps in our education sector?

Millions stand outside the education sector, while millions within its ambit are not getting quality – or any – education. Millions lack so much that would be a given in any responsible state.

The recent floods destroyed whatever little the poor had in this country. While the media took their voices to their screens, nobody asked the burning question of who and how governments and political parties plan to reconstruct schools, what plans they have to rehabilitate schools, what budgets, and how they will get those budgets.

The cost of this apathy towards education has now turned dangerous. Look at the birth rate in this country and then see the growing gap between children born and schools available for them. This article is keeping aside the glaring issues of quality education, poor and no teaching, female literacy statistics etc. and for now is simply demanding attention. It is too late and the results of these grave oversights and deliberately designed poor priority has, is and will cost us even more severely. This does not just have terrible social issues, but also paves the way for economic mayhem and political madness.

Just a basic look around Pakistan’s neighbourhood and across the world will tell you how far behind we are and how far ahead others are. Just study the role of heavy and quality investments in education in the more developed countries and see where they are today and then match it with the peanuts we allocate towards education in our country and then the poor structure of education we have and its impact on Pakistan as a whole. Simply match the innovations, developments and research in countries with better and quality education versus ours. Talk to students abroad and then speak to Pakistani students to see the gigantic gap in terms of thinking, skills, knowledge and attitude towards education.

Millions of Pakistani students – from primary to university level education – deserve to be heard and made stakeholders in deciding an education policy or even curriculum. They deserve to be counseled about their options, careers, skills and much more on a weekly if not daily basis. Those students living in smaller towns, villages or marginalized areas of cities, whose parents can’t afford good schools, expensive student counselors or international/ national exposure can demand to get all that through a responsible, aware and involved media. They need the attention of the country’s media houses so their issues can be addressed on the micro and macro levels. Popular anchors across TV channels can create, influence and control attitudes towards education and then pressurize governments, politicians and political parties to listen, act and implement what is missing in education.

Pakistan is light years behind where we should have been in the education sector; 2023 is an election year and this is the right time to help political parties debate, deliberate and design and later implement an education policy. This is the time to allow our students to ask hard questions from the decision-makers of this country. If the media can spend umpteen hours on a completely time wasting discussion on who will be the next army chief day in and day out. If our anchors can talk at length about less important issues of the country and if our politicians, influencers and establishment can make or break ideas in this country over time, then why can’t they make education their priority as well?

The students of Pakistan are now begging for the kind of attention they deserve and which has not been given to them by the media. This is simply the right thing to do by the fourth pillar of the state for a better, progressive and developed Pakistan.

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