**[The forgotten children](https://www.dawn.com/news/1746544/the-forgotten-children)**

[Shahab Usto](https://www.dawn.com/authors/4878/shahab-usto) Published April 8, 2023

The writer is a lawyer and an academic.

Listen to article

WHILE the elites are locked in an internecine power struggle, [millions of flood-affected](https://www.dawn.com/news/1734524), homeless and destitute citizens have been left to fend for themselves. Most of these wretched families have been practically forced to cater to their own needs — food, shelter, health and above all, the education of their psychologically traumatised children.

The situation is grave in Sindh where about 20,000 public schools have been destroyed or considerably damaged, depriving hundreds of thousands of poor children of an education, and that too, at the most formative stage of their lives.

Although the provincial government has since declared an ‘educational emergency’, barring some official meetings and pressers, nothing much has come forth in the form of concrete efforts on the part of the provincial or federal government to rehabilitate these ill-fated schools.

Indeed, the prospect of these forgotten children resuming their schooling anytime soon seems rather dim. Although the country is listed among the climatically most vulnerable states, there seems to be hardly any urgency or preparedness on the part of provincial and federal governments to meet the impending, let alone long-term, climatic challenges.

Another, possibly disastrous, spell of monsoons is about to begin, yet the Sindh government has neither rehabilitated the broken irrigation infrastructure, nor restored the old clogged up dhoras (historical spillways) to save the cities by draining out the floodwater. Also, the promise of reconstructing destroyed houses is still waiting to be fulfilled.

Even otherwise, public education — particular­ly among poorer sections — has hardly been a priori­­ty with governments. Unicef reckons that Pakistan has the world’s second-highest number of out-of-school children.

The numbers themselves are horrifying: 22.8 million children aged five to 16 or 44 per cent of the total population in this age group are out of school; 5m children drop out after the primary level; 11.4m adolescents aged 10 to 14 don’t receive any formal education. In Sindh, 52pc of the poorest children (58pc of them girls) are out of school.

The other ills include: low national spen­d­­­ing on public education, a dilapidated educatio­nal infrastructure, poor quality of teaching, curricula guided by faith and ideology rather than facts and science, and the opaque recruitment of teachers.

The prospect of flood-hit children in Sindh resuming their schooling soon seems dim.

Given that 60pc of our population is composed of the poor, two questions — related to the moral and constitutional foundations of the state — arise: could a state built on the promise of ensuring social justice, equality before the law, and protection of life, limb, property and the honour of its citizens, deny for decades the right of citizens to education and hence a decent and productive life? And what are the options for a dejected, destitute and betrayed citizen to enforce his or her constitutional rights in a constantly transgressing state?

In such a situation, the citizen has two options. First, he could join a political party that represents his class or at least protects his rights and liberties. But here this option has long been closed to him.

Post-war working class movements that were inspired by Marxist, Leninist and Maoist ideologies, or the later left-leaning progressive platforms, are all but extinct, barring some existing on the fringes. But that doesn’t mean that progressive or class-based politics is passé. On the contrary, leftist governments or at least left-oriented social agendas continue to shape much of the world, including Latin America, Europe and even Modi’s India.

Regrettably, here, state-sponsored feudal, conservative and populist leaderships have crowded out, rather crushed, the left and working class politics. All three fountainheads of progressive politics — peasant movements, labour unions and student bodies — have been virtually stamped out.

Instead, private property and capital have become deified in the name of political stability, economic growth and national security. Labour laws stand drastically rigged in favour of the employer; land reforms lie buried in the cloak of ‘Islamisation’; and the coercive apparatus, armed with a brutal antiterrorism code, remains ever ready to smother the voices of dissent.

The other option for a wronged citizen is to knock on the door of the court under Article 199, or sparingly, Article 184(3) of the Constitution.

In fact, judicial recourse has become the most popular remedy, thanks to an increasingly inefficient and dysfunctional state machinery. But this path is littered with many a pitfall: the courts are overburdened; litigation is lengthy and expensive; ‘policy’ issues are beyond their scope; the government employs the ‘face-value’ of renowned lawyers; and often it takes a second round of litigation to get a judicial order implemented.

In these circumstances, a man of small means, and usually living in a suburban or feudal-tribal milieu, will rarely venture out to enforce his fundamental rights by suing the public authorities.

As a result, perhaps the sole option left to a poor man (or woman) is either to resign himself to his (ill) fate, or ‘surrender’ his civil and political rights to a powerful local honcho or the so-called ‘electable’. But ironically, even this surrender won’t fetch him transactional benefits unless he really adds to the electoral success or societal power of his putative benefactor.

It’s a pity that the current ‘democratic’ dispensation in Sindh, if not in much of the country, is rooted in this pernicious ‘principal-client’ relationship.

The hapless poor must give up on their political freedom to get some ‘crumbs’ for their family. And this immoral and unconstitutional relationship couldn’t have survived without the facilitation of the state. Resultantly, there has developed a permanent nexus between the disempowerment of the common man and the despoliation of national wealth, power and resources.

The powerful ‘handlers’ of the state, ie, a coterie of the military, bureaucratic, judicial, business, landed and political elites, continue to thrive while the lot of the poor and powerless worsens.

Mercifully, the status quo is now under attack. The principal power centre, Punjab, is politically sweltering; Balochistan and KP are facing armed insurgencies; and Sindh is seething with discontent.

In these cataclysmic times, ignoring the education of millions of poor children is like preparing the country to become a wasteland in a world run by cutting-edge technology and super-human resources.

*The writer is a lawyer and an academic.*  
[shahabusto@hotmail.com](http://mailto:shahabusto@hotmail.com)

*Published in Dawn, April 8th, 2023*