**English, education and elitism**

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The prime minister has said in a recent speech promoting the Single National Curriculum that English has developed into a kind of status symbol in the country, with everyone desperate to learn it. The system of English medium schools means there is an instant sense of superiority when parents send their children to such a school in contrast to the so-called Urdu medium schools.

We have created a hierarchy of languages in which English stands at the top, Urdu is next, with Punjabi at no place at all, at least in its home province. Other provincial languages do somewhat better. Imran is correct in speaking of the elitism and the use of English for specific purposes by the British colonial rulers of the Subcontinent to create a divide between groups and nourish a class of persons they could use for their own work. But there are many nuances to the whole question, which need to be addressed in the context not of the British Empire but of the society we live in today.

The prime minister has suggested that the Single National Curriculum will amend the cultural vacuum we face. In the first place, we need to address the issue of what our culture is. It does not consist of anything to do with the learning of religion, a duty that should primarily lie with parents and be followed as they see fit and perhaps backed up by schools that could focus on teaching morality, ethics, manners, and the basic break from the mob violence we have seen again and again, most often directed against vulnerable persons, such as women. But beyond this, we must understand that our culture does not involve adopting Arabic words in place of Urdu words which have been used for generations, but instead comprises an extremely rich heritage of poetry, music, dance, and folk culture which needs to be imparted to children as a means to teach them about their identity and possibly reduce the influence of social media.

We also need to teach English, given that it allows Pakistanis a boost in acquiring jobs around the world, but we must make sure its teaching is more equitable and that it is taught properly at all levels, so that lower income groups have equal access to a language which is becoming a language of the world. It is certainly not correct that simply learning English will tear us away from our culture. After all, children in the Netherlands are taught four languages, stage by stage, beginning with their native language Dutch, and moving on to English, German and French. Many people from the Netherlands speak all four languages with a commendable level of fluency yet at the same time they retain their culture and their sense of belonging to a particular nation with its particular heritage.

We, on the other hand, need to rediscover our lost heritage which was stripped away from us, notably during the period of General Ziaul Haq, when classical music suddenly became identified with Hindu tradition for some peculiar reason, and a time that made dance into something that was not beautiful. The beautiful voices of classically trained singers have today been forced into fusion music, combining Western and Eastern forms of music, in order to allow the singers to survive.

We need to be very clear where we are going with our education system. It is, after all, the basis on which society is built and grows. The images in the books for Single National Curriculum, showing almost every girl and woman in hijab, do not really depict our society. Whereas women are free to adopt their mode of dress, there are many in the country, including rural women who work the fields and herd cattle, that do not don the hijab and are in fact virtually unable to do so because of the hard labour they must perform. They too need to be a part of our culture.

We also need a massive reform in teaching and the manner in which lessons are imparted in classrooms. For English to be taught as a language, rather than as literature or simply as a reading out of words and sentences that children in classrooms learn by rote but cannot understand, we need a massive programme to retrain teachers and to teach them how to teach. This is perhaps especially true of private schools, many of whose teachers are not trained at all. Government school teachers receive at least a basic grounding in education and learn how to teach to some degree even if they are not motivated, not paid enough, and not encouraged by the fact that their profession is seen as one of the lowest in the society. This contrasts with the Scandinavian countries where education is amongst the most successful in the world,

Beginning a programme under which teachers can be taught how to teach is essential. They must be able to teach the mother language of children, where children do not feel completely alienated in classrooms, and then move on from there to teaching other subjects in a manner that explains concepts. English does indeed need to be taught as a language, but this requires a fair amount of expertise and hard work in retraining people on how to achieve this. The fact that the English language skills of so many teachers, even those who teach at elite private schools, are so weak does not help. The terrible system of education we have followed for years has had its impact.

We do not need a Single National Curriculum. Instead, we need a complete overhaul of the system which exists so that it can be improved and made equal at all levels, aiming for the highest possible level rather than pulling others down. According to international experts, small children in our schools are already formally taught too much, too early. We ignore the basic fact that young children learn through experience and learn on their own even if they are not forced to memorise long passages of text.

Education needs to change. But this must be done sensibly with English also taught as a language, but an emphasis placed at the same time on rediscovering our identity as a nation which stands in South Asia on the map, and which borrows its history and tradition from the Subcontinent. Until we rediscover this identity, the question of language alone will make no difference. As has been done in Bangladesh, in India, and in other nations we need to teach our musical heritage, our poetic heritage, and other aspects of life to our children so that we can rediscover ourselves, neither as clones of the West, nor as slaves to a world in which it is suddenly assumed that saying things in Arabic somehow makes us superior or better followers of our religion..

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