**When in a hole**

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When you find yourself in a hole, keep digging. That, dear readers, may well be the ultimate epitaph for Pakistan. Everyone’s focused on the hole. Some make it wider, others tunnel deeper. And the truly gifted deliver smoothness so devilish that climbing out is as unlikely as mounting a greased pole in a loincloth.

But then there is the Captain. He’s an all-rounder – digging, widening, smoothing, he excels at them all. He sees a country full of craters and he starts swinging his shovel for sixers.

Take the current bête noire of the bourgeois, the Single National Curriculum or SNC. No one denies we have a problem with a stratified system. But the answer can’t be to clump the islands of private excellence with the marshes of public dysfunction, and drown both with the deadweight of a clumsily incomplete curriculum.

Our existential problem is not the books our kids read. It’s the kids who aren’t even in class. If Unicef is to be believed, we have the second highest number of out-of-school children in the world – some 23 million. These are the multitudes destined to live entire lives on the fringes of modern society – unskilled, unemployable, and unprepared.

What does the SNC have to say about this? Nothing. Indeed, most experts suggest that the hasty rollout of an untested curriculum and an unprepared teaching cohort will succeed only in raising drop-out rates in the public system. But yet we keep digging.

If only Robin Hood and his merry minions could realise that breaking the feudal’s china to decree clay bowls for all is meaningless for the millions who sit at no table and cradle no bowls.

And now we hear that the part of the education sector most desperately in need of reform – the twisted, turgid and functionally illiterate madrassah system – is exempt from the SNC for the foreseeable future. We live in a country where one has difficulty predicting what the morrow will bring so the possibility of the SNC ever infiltrating this domain is roughly the same as a profound thought emanating from the Captain’s regent in Punjab.

It’s enough to make one yearn through rose-tinted lenses for the days of Shahbaz Sharif. For all his considerable limitations, the man was all in on education – not the ‘vilify the rich to earn points with the poor’ class warfare of the Captain, but in the more boring (and apparently less vote grabbing) one-kid-at-a-time manner. His education reform roadmap targeted the things most amiss with our system: missing teachers, ghost schools, broken down infrastructure, student absenteeism. It wasn’t perfect, but at least it saw the forest for the trees and made some admirable dents. And guess who led that commendable effort? None other than KP’s Taimur Jhagra, in his earlier life as a private sector suit.

Perhaps the government could reach out to their own in-house expert for a second opinion. Maybe he could explain to them how he tested, piloted and validated all his education changes before springing them on Shahbaz’s subjects.

The dirty little secret, of course, is that fixing a shambolic education system takes time. But, with an election on the horizon, this is time the Captain doesn’t have. A proper fix is also expensive; classes don’t mend themselves and teachers don’t show up for free.

So what is an administration to do with little time and even less money? Turns out curriculum reform is both cheap – bureaucratic committees around a roundtable! – and instant (if you care little about quality) – print new books! Who cares then that it all amounts to the proverbial lipstick on a pig.

No wonder the government’s furious and fickle SNC roll-out feel less like pedagogy and more like politics. Have to hand it to them, it certainly will make for great click-bait at the hustings – the same (battered) education for rich and poor alike! Everyone in the same hole, all digging downwards.

Amidst all this mayhem, one wonders about the silence of the Supremes. So quick to take notice of every minor annoyance but now so deafeningly quiet on a matter tragically tailor made for their attention and redressal.

And there, ultimately, is the rub. A critic of the suo motu reduced to pleading for its exercise. For amongst all my gripes with the Captain, there is also his ability to make me yearn for the very things that I most dislike.

After all, where is a Saqib Nisar when you actually need him?

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