**A Fatal Blow to Education in Sindh (Part VIII)**

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The wave of popular politics in the late 1960s and the mid-1970s, followed by religiosity under a dictator seeking legitimacy for his unconstitutional rule swept away the human values, social norms and cultural and sectarian tolerance from our evolving polity. The impact of this change hit hard the service delivery institutions including education. The democratic concept of “Less Government, More Governance” was changed the other way round. The motto that took roots in politics was more government, more acquisitive power and ruthless capture of state resources.

Gone were the social tenets and cultural ethos that once prevailed in this land where the help came without strings; commitment to merit, fair play and professional honesty were an inviolable norm of life; public funds generally were a sacred trust, and where it was an unforgivable sin to think of auctioning lucrative jobs, promotions and postings to higher political and financial bidders. This loathsome change spawned the basest human instincts including corruption and corrupt practices in the society and poisoned the entire swamp including education.

We passed into a period of the dearth of political leadership. What we had were politicians who knew the art of hoodwinking the electorate and acquiring power to serve their nests. The nation-building, good governance, rule of law, justice and equity, merit and fair play, service delivery institutions had no significance for them. They were the creation of the loathsome process of political and social change and had the effrontery to bring every national institution under their control like a medieval monarch.

Their greed for power and wealth was insatiable even after touching the summit of the political hierarchy on multiple occasions. The repeated electoral success pushed them into a delusional frame of mind where they identified themselves with the state and looked upon themselves as the infallible shepherds of this nation. The helpless land of Sindh suffered more from this delusionary thinking of leaders. Buttressed by the arrogant feudal mindset, this thinking turned the provincial institutions into dysfunctional, chaotic, stagnant, decadent, corrupt, incompetent and reform-resistant enterprises with an ever-growing willingness to kowtow to political bosses.

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With all these political and cultural trends gaining strength, Education suffered more because of this self-serving exercise of political power by our myopic leaders than the dearth of funds. This is manifest from the primary and secondary school and college teachings to university studies and Higher Education Commission. Could any civilized nation hand over thousands of posts of primary and high secondary school teachers to an electoral contestant for distribution at his sweet will? This, though unbelievable, happened in Sindh. I cannot vouch for other provinces.

The bad example set forth by a ruthless interim Chief Minister, an establishment favourite, was followed by a Prime Minister of gentle disposition like Muhammad Khan Junejo to rein in the National Assembly members, elected on a non-party basis, without thinking of its ugly consequences for his helpless land and people. The consecutive PPP political administrations since 2008 have followed this devastating example in all departments. However, the police, revenue, health and education have been the main departments to comply with the ‘recommendations’ emerging from the dark corridors of the known Houses.

The 18th Amendment provided a good framework for the devolution of powers from the federation to the federal units and from the provincial governments to the local bodies and provincial institutions. This devolution would have strengthened the provincial institutions and local governments to serve the people of Sindh. The constitutional amendment gave exclusive powers to the provincial administration to revamp education and enhance its service delivery capacity. The improvement was to be initiated from the top to bottom in an earnest fashion.

The Higher Education Commission (HEC) is the linchpin in monitoring, mentoring and capacity building of higher educational institutions. Sindh was the pioneer province to establish the provincial HEC in conformity with the spirit of the 18th Amendment under the chairmanship of Dr Asim who hails from the medical profession and owns one of the biggest private hospitals in Karachi. The hospital was transformed into a medical university a few years ago. In one way or the other, he has been affiliated with MQM in its heyday. As a shrewd businessman, he also cultivated the PPP supremo in the late 1990s. For most of his jail years, the PPP Co-Chairman remained hospitalized in the Ziauddin Hospital of Dr Asim. When the PPP came into power as a result of the general elections of February 2008, Dr Asim was appointed as Minister for Petroleum. Later, he was appointed Chairman of the Provincial Higher Education Commission in 2014.

The National Accountability arrested him from his office in a corruption scandal of Rs 425 billion. He remained in the custody of the bureau for many months until the Sindh High Court granted him bail on medical grounds. He is defending himself in the reference filed by the Bureau. However, the Government of Sindh restored him to his position as chairman of the PHEC and stuck another feather in his hat by appointing him as the chairman of the “Search Committee” for the appointment of the Vice-Chancellors of the seven public universities of Sindh. There are media reports that his wife is being appointed as Executive Director of PHEC.

The PPP supremo could have favoured Dr Asim in some other way keeping him away from the higher educational institutions. What the province needs to revamp the higher education is to reconstitute the PHEC under an educationist of high academic qualifications including a PhD from an acclaimed foreign university, good teaching experience, a high intellectual calibre in terms of research and publications, irreproachable credibility etc. with members selected from amongst the educationists and former Vice-Chancellors of an impeccable record. Such PHEC will have the poise, ability and, above all, the moral authority to deal with the community of academicians.

The higher educational institutions are the ultimate builders of the future of the young generation and need to be respected and supported instead of being undermined so ruthlessly.

(To Be Continued)

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