**AWARAN, O AWARAN**

**BY Z U B E I D A M U S T A FA | 1/3/2020**

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| IP a child of seven is separated from his family to be sent to a village 50 kilometres away to attend school, how would it affect him? Obviously, it would be traumatic. The pain and anguish of separation would be deep for him as well as his mother.Such a situation would also make me feel a surge of anger against those responsible for creating such oppressive conditions that leave parents with no choices but ugly ones: send the child away for the sake of his future or keep him home to remain illiterate for life. That is what Balochistan has been reduced to.The pain in Shabir Rakhshani`s voice is almost palpable when he recalls that parting moment in his life more than two decades ago. `You would understand the emotional and psychological scars this left on me. That should answer your question as to what prompted me to start this campaign to get closed schools reopened in Balochistan, he tells me in an interview.Much af ter he had completed his primary education, a school was opened in his village, Abdul Sattar Goth. Shabir moved to Karachi after his higher secondary in the neighbouring village. He obtained his Master`s degree from the Federal Urdu University while doing a part-time job.But on a recent visit home, he found the school was not functioning. The sight of the closed school revived old memories. He did not want any Baloch child to suffer the fate he did.According to Shabir, he launched his campaign the Balochistan Education System on Oct 23, 2019. And within two days, the school in Abdul Sattar Goth reopened.Encouraged by his success, he decided to do more and managed to mobilise volunteers to identify 192 closed schools in Awaran district out of a total of 380 that the Education Management Information System (EMIS) claims exist. They also identified 210 teachers who have been found to be absent from duty.The district authorities refute these figures and say only 36 schools are not functioning. They attribute this to the `worst law and order situation/migration of population/non-availability of building/ infrastructure/shortage of teaching staff(due to retirement, transfer, death, etc). Nearly 557 teaching posts lie vacant`.Shabir obtained figures from secret sympathisers among official sources and the EMIS website. Awaran has a population of 121,680 (18,094 households) with a school enrolment of 20,193. My guess is that roughly half the children are out of school.Figures vary, but even if you accept the ofhcial data, it is outrageous. Shabir calls his campaign and has been lobbying hard visiting MPAs, Education Departmentofficials and other senior officials. He has used social media, television and newspapers to create awareness and mobilise public opinion in support of education for all Baloch children.What emerges is a horrendous picture of the education sector in Balochistan. It is ironic that some of these shocking facts are contained in a letter by the district education of ficer (DEO) Awaran to the education secretary, accusing Shabir of `false propaganda` and demanding that he be tried by the FIA under the cybercrime law. This is a ridiculous charge.The f actis that the DEO has himself admitted that all is not well in Awaran. For even 36 schools to be closed in a district is not a matter to be brushed aside as being of no consequence. He confirms that 92 schools sanctioned by the three budgets adopted since 2017 have yet to see the light of day. It may be pointed out that Rs6 million has been allocated for reopening closed schools and this sum lies unutilised with the educationdepartment. The DEO has nothing to say about the 200-plus teachers who have been absenting themselves from school for years and yet have been drawing their salaries regularly.They probably fall in the category of `etc`.Apparently there are many silent whistleblowers who do not wish to be identified for fear of being penalised. Shabir has lost his job as a media officer in the People`s Primary Healthcare Initiative. He resigned when the DEO accused him of carrying out `false propaganda` against the government whose employee he was.I spoke to many people from Awaran on condition of anonymity. They confirmed that all schools were not functioning. I believe them, for the Baloch are intelligent and known to be keen to educate their children. Shabir tells me that next month the Awaran Taleemi-o-Adbi Melo will be held to celebr ate learning.The Baloch have suffered at the hands of their sardars and now the security forces and the insurgents are making life difficult for them. If education were to be the focus of the government`s policy, the situation in the province could change altogether.The education secretary thought it best to evade my call by answering, `Wrong number`. But the phone company sent me feedback confirming that the number I had dialled was indeed that of the education secretary. m www.zubeidamustafa.com  |  |