**Daanish: then and now**

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Built in 5 BCE, Takshashila University, also known as Taxila University, was considered the citadel of knowledge. It would remain so for seven centuries. Taxila itself, with well-planned cities, was the capital of the Gandharan civilization.

Prominent Chinese and Greek philosophers would talk about Takshashila’s prominence. Mahabharata and Ramayana spoke of its profound impact as did Arthashastra, a treatise on statecraft authored by Chanakya Kautilya, an alumnus of this university.

With its library housing a treasure trove of ancient manuscripts and texts, such was the allure of this great institution that it drew students from across the world. Its success and development hinged on the fact that, over centuries, Takshashila University enjoyed the patronage of kings and rulers.

Nearly 2029 years on, just 50 kilometres away from this ‘daanish’ (knowledge) centre of a bygone era, Prime Minister Shehbaz Sharif has laid the foundation of a Daanish school in Islamabad’s Kuri Village. Orwell famously describes political language as something that gives an appearance of solidity to pure wind. Such is the dire strait of our education that, despite this luxury, the PM has been forced to warn about an imminent national education emergency.

During the ceremony, he said that the fact that 26 million children in the country are out of school, the second highest number in the world, is criminal negligence. Punjab leads this charge with 11.73 million OSC. The ILO figures show that 13.7 per cent of these children are trapped in child labour. Our apathy can be judged from the fact that the Pakistan Employment of Children Act criminalizes child labour and prohibits work detrimental to a child’s health and development.

The moved PM also waxed eloquent about the non-fulfilment of Quaid-e-Azam Muhammad Ali Jinnah’s vision that calls for high-quality education for our children. However, the PM’s agony remains unjustified as his party has governed Pakistan and Punjab collectively for decades. It is also misplaced because it has been 14 years since the Daanish School System was introduced by him as the CM of Punjab.

These concerns were aired also after an equal number of years since the vaunted 18th Amendment was ushered in with the wholehearted help of his party. This was the purported talisman that, apart from many other deliverables, had mandated education as a fundamental right. It also guaranteed free and compulsory education for all children between the ages of five and 16.

Not an isolated travesty, education has suffered as have all societal imperatives. To name a few, we direly need health, financial, security, water, environment and energy emergencies. The latest WHO report has Pakistan leading the world with 8.8 million Hepatitis C infections.

As for the economy, in recent years, our per-capita debt has increased by 36 per cent, and we may have to beg and borrow to repay $80 billion in the next three years. The environmental challenge, reduced to our rhetoric at the annual COP huddles, continues its ever-increasing destruction.

Coming back to education, the Pakistan Educational Conference, the first of our nine education policies, was convened by Quaid e Azam himself just three months after Independence. Attended by scholars, educationists and vice chancellors, the conference provided and set guidelines for future educational development. The major recommendations were free and compulsory education in Pakistan teamed with Islamic values and special emphasis on science and research. We squandered this vision as we have wronged each of Quaid’s dreams.

There is growing clamour for increasing the dismal 2.0 per cent of the GDP that is allocated to education. Throwing money at the cracked facade that supervises education and our destinies shall only prove to be a windfall for a few. After all, it was again 14 years ago that a review found 37 parliamentarians with fake educational degrees. It led to a former provincial CM’s unabashed defence stating that ‘a degree is a degree, whether fake or real’.

The blatant squandering of budgetary allocation and grants for education are reported facts. A bright idea to impart ‘daanish’ was a scheme that saw the distribution of 250,000 solar lamps among Punjab students. It cost a whopping Rs4.4 billion.

Another saw the inception of the Free Laptop Scheme in 2012 under the stewardship of Shehbaz Sharif as the CM of Punjab. Four hundred thousand free laptops worth Rs40 billion were doled out. Imagine this election-year extravagance in a country with 26 million out-of-school children and where half the population is illiterate.

The announced 2024 phase of this scheme will again see the distribution of 100,000 laptops with an allocated budget of Rs10 billion. A far more rewarding option would have been to invest in computer libraries at colleges and universities, enabling students to run Machine Learning (ML) applications and other programmes like computer-aided design (CAD). These applications have otherwise to be bought and even then, are difficult to run on ordinary laptops or desktops.

Political will is imperative for change. It is also needed to ward off pervasive corruption that trickles down to the grassroots level. All facets of our collective lives have been affected by this ignominy.

‘Daanish’ then and now, Takshashila, though millennia ago, was an educated, cultured and vibrant society that was the hub of the world. Pakistan today, fraught with impoverishment, illiteracy, ghost schools/teachers and out-of-school children, is a stark indicator of the rapacity that it has borne.

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