

Education
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Education for the poor

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The NWFP Government has announced that there will be no tuition fees in its schools. This was also announced earlier by the Punjab Government. For some people this is insignificant since the tuition fees is very nominal anyway. Personally I think it is a welcome step as the *Pakistan Integrated Household Survey (2001-2002)* tells us that the poorest people manage to send only 27 per cent children to school. The richest out of those surveyed by in the Household Survey send 56 per cent. The government schools charge between Rs 17.25 (Middle school) to Rs 22.75 (High School) per month as tuition and other recurring fees. There are other heads of fees also which the children's parents have to pay.

The major problems for poor children are that the children must be provided a uniform for the school. They must also be given notebooks and books. Moreover, they do not work either at home or anywhere else. Thus, schooling comes to be quite expensive for poor parents because they have to provide all these things and, in addition to that, lose the money which other poor people get by making their children work. Moreover, most children travel 2 km to their schools while some even travel as far as 5 km. In Balochistan and Sindh girls especially have to travel long distances. Sometimes children walk which means that their mothers have to get up earlier to prepare them for the school. It also means that the uniform gets dirty much more quickly than otherwise and the wear and tear is more. Also, the children get very hungry and mothers have to provide them with a meal. This meal cannot be too meager because that leads to loss of face. These are things which many of us will not even understand but such is life for the very poor. In short, the expenses add up and schooling becomes more and more difficult to sustain by the very poor people.

There were 169,089 primary schools; 19,180 middle schools and 13,108 secondary schools in 2002. In one of the high schools I visited there were 960 pupils and the expenditure was Rs 5,309,000 (for 2002-2003). This comes to Rs 5,530 per year or Rs

460 per month (ie about 8 US dollars). Most of this comes from the state already but the Punjab Government will have to increase its spending on education — something which all provinces should do too. Moreover, even if the tuition fees is waived the children will still have to pay something by way of other fees unless these too are waived.

In 1998 there were 36,750 private schools too. Most of them are establishments which call themselves English-medium schools. They charge a tuition fees between Rs 50 to 1400 or



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have a school (*Maktab*) section but many of them go on for higher studies. They teach the *Dars-i-Nizami* for eight years leading up to a degree of MA in Arabic and Islamic studies. After this students become *maulvis* (prayer leaders) in mosques; teachers in schools and madrassas and also go for other jobs.

I went to a number of madrassas and asked them about their budget. In some rare cases a printed budget was

Ideally speaking, and perhaps in the long run, I suggest the gradual elimination of one type of schooling system for the poor and another one for the rich. I think we need the same kind of schools, teaching the same courses and in the same medium of instruction (at least the same in each province) for all children

so per month. The really elitist private schools cost more than that and cater for the rich. Most of the non-elitist English-medium schools, however, are for the upper working classes; the lower middle classes and the middle classes. Some of these families can hardly spare the tuition fees but they force themselves to eat less in order to educate their children in these private schools. The private schools sell dreams — the dream to learn English; the dream to get good jobs; the dream to enter the upper classes; the dream to go abroad and do well! These dreams do not necessarily come true but what else have the poor to live on but dreams.

While none of the institutions mentioned so far really cater for the very poor, one institution does. This is the Islamic seminary or the *madrassa*. They charge entry fees of Rs 100 to Rs 400 per student but, generally, this is all. Most students do not charge any tuition fees at all. Most residentials even give free meals. These are simple

given to me. Others gave me figures which were approximate guesses. Taking an average of these I calculated that they spent 45,00,000 a year on 11000 students ie Rs 4,090 per student per year (Rs 340 per student per month). This is very surprising because these are hostel students who are given meals; notebooks and books. This budget, according to the administrators of madrassas, comes from charity. I do not have the means to check the veracity of this statement but it does seem to be true for most ordinary madrassas where the teachers take a monthly salary of Rs 4000 (average) and the meals are very Spartan indeed.

This being so, the madrassas are the only poor-friendly institutions in the country. They fulfil the role of the welfare state. The Punjab and Frontier governments' free schools will still remain costly for the very poorest people while the English-medium institutions are meant to fleece the poor in the name of education. The madrassas

do provide almost free schooling in the real sense of the concept as applicable to this country but then they provide only religious training. Moreover, they do tend to support an aggressive Kashmir policy and internal policies which would restrict the freedom of choice and even mobility of women. They are also against most forms of entertainment available in the modern world. This education, then, does not attract many parents even from the poorer classes. What, then, should be the model?

As it happens I saw a possible model during my last research visit to Peshawar. These are schools run in the NWFP for the children of working class parents. Their director, Colonel Iftikhar Hasan, told me that they charged tuition fees of Rs 30 per month but they provided English-medium schooling as well as uniform. I personally visited a school in Hayatabad (Peshawar) and the headmistress (Sumaera Waheed) showed me clean classrooms, well-dressed children and qualified teachers (mostly MAs instead of the matriculates and FA pass people of the Urdu-medium schools of the government). In short, this is a model which can be followed in our country with certain improvements such as the inclusion of milk at lunch and no fees at all.

This, however, is merely a stopgap arrangement which I find unsatisfactory if we really want a more egalitarian and fair society. Ideally speaking, and perhaps in the long run, I suggest the gradual elimination of one type of schooling system for the poor and another one for the rich. I think we need the same kind of schools, teaching the same courses and in the same medium of instruction (at least the same in each province) for all children. This would require enormous investment so maybe it is a dream some of us can keep dreaming.

For the short term, and with immediate effect, what we need is more investment on the poor and the substitution of a welfare-state schooling model to complement the madrassa model which is the only really poor-friendly model available in the country right now.

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