

# Muddled thinking <sup>A</sup> about education

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FIRST the government of Punjab, and now the government of the North-West Frontier Province, has declared that education would be free up to matric stage. Who in his right mind would oppose this idea? But idea is one thing; implementing it properly and effectively is quite another. As it happens, we are not quite famous for always getting things done the way they ought to be done.

In the field of education our record can hardly be poorer, shoddier and more uneven. Look at the very first stage of education. Thousands of primary schools across the country are in a shambles. Add to this the shame that thousands are only on paper. The tax-payer's money is paid out to 'ghost' teachers of these 'ghost' schools. Why not set this right, for a starter?

Of the schools that do exist and may be treated as functional, hundreds are in appallingly bad shape. To begin with, the buildings are inadequate and in a bad state of repair and maintenance. Many school buildings do not even have a nominal boundary wall. Hundreds of schools do not have proper furniture and the minimal educational aids.

How do we treat teachers in primary schools? In the rural areas and remote villages, primary schoolteachers are virtually domestic servants of the area landlord, wadera, malik, chaudhri or just the area station house police officer. In these pockets, where time stands still, primary school premises are often used as the landlord's outhouse or as just cattle pen.

One must remain deeply sceptical about the quality of the primary schoolteachers. How are they recruited? What exactly are their qualifications? How they are trained? Teaching at the primary level is a specialized service for which teachers must be properly trained at specialized training institutions. This is hardly the standard practice in the country.

It does not take a lot of doing to announce that education would be free for all up to the matric level. But translating such admittedly noble intentions into practice, and making it a meaningful fact of life, would take a great deal of systematic thinking, planning and doing. Have the governments of Punjab and the NWFP done their homework?

The answer cannot be in the affirmative. Not yet because there is no evidence of any planning. There is no mention or suggestion that these provincial governments have worked out the cost of such an ambitious project. It is unlikely that these govern-

ments have available to them the statistics on the basis of which sensible planning is to be undertaken.

How many children are there of the primary education stage? How many of them are males and females? How many school buildings would be needed? Of what design and accommodation capacity? What kind of furniture and teaching aids would be needed per primary school and for all the schools in each province? These are not sophisticated details, only the basics.

One should have thought that the governments concerned would order a census of primary school stage children. This should perhaps be the task best performed by the village revenue or police departments because these departments are function-

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ing at the very primary level of population. The census should begin at the village or taluka level. There is no evidence that this has been initiated.

Once there is a fairly clear idea of the number of children to be enrolled in the primary schools, work should begin on planning for books and other educational aids that each school child must be provided with these. These would of course include books, notebooks, pens and pencils and erasers, etc.

The schools would need furniture — seats and desks, teachers' tables and chairs, cupboards, fans, etc. Not to be forgotten, are playgrounds and playing facilities. Every primary school should have at least one teacher in charge of games, sports and other outdoor activities. Playing talents of the children must be noted and nursed from the primary stage.

These are the very rudimentary needs and by no means fancy ideas. One should also be thinking of hobbies and extramural activities like painting, clay-modelling, woodcraft, papercraft. For girls there has to be provision for initial steps in sewing, knitting, doll-making and related creative work. And why not music, singing and folk dancing?

When one thinks seriously of

primary education, it would be realized that what is being attempted is an enormous undertaking. It will take a huge lot more than the provincial education ministers or chief ministers just standing in front of a few news people and making an announcement. That is all that has been done so far. The ease and alacrity with which these grandiose announcements are made only proclaims that the governments do not have the foggiest idea of what they are promising.

Many decades ago, the British imperial rulers announced that primary education would be free as well as compulsory. With all their resources and administrative skills, the British rulers could not achieve even one per cent of what was needed. So huge an enterprise it was that more than half a century later, we are only talking glibly about it.

When this be the case with the primary education, to be promising free education up to the matric stage is only betraying ignorance of the nature and magnitude of the task involved in terms of funding, planning, organization, physical provisions and so forth. For heaven's sake begin at the beginning and begin with common sense and a sense also of modesty in relation to the immensity of the task to be undertaken.

The government of the NWFP has also declared Urdu as the official language. There can be no quarrel with that kind of aspiration. It would perhaps be futile asking the MMA leadership to bring a modern and futuristic mindset to bear on a subject so sophisticated as education. These gentlemen seldom look ahead. Their sights are set, in fact fastened, on the past.

All education, if it has to be of any use in life to come, must be attuned to the language of the future. Make no mistake about the language of the technology on which life to come has to be built. They are all talking ceaselessly and loudly about information technology and computerization of all work. But few have so far been heard of talking of the language of information technology.

The language of tomorrow is English. It is no longer the language of the English people. It is the universal language of today and most definitely of tomorrow. We should be educating our children with the purpose of equipping them to deal with the reality of tomorrow. Nothing symbolizes the future of the human race more significantly than information technology that is inseparable from English language.

The vital importance of English language cannot be overemphasized. Is our government at the federal level sensitive to this basic and unchangeable fact of life today and much more so of tomorrow? The answer is: No, not yet. And that's such a pity.