

Scratching bene

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Dawn

PROGRESS in education in Pakistan has so far been illustrated by figures that dictate student enrollment or the dropout rate, functional schools, teaching staff and the percentage of the national budget dedicated to education.

The figures that are provided often show a stark picture of failing standards in the country. Male-female and urban-rural ratios are horribly skewed, facilities are almost non-existent and quality is an issue that is barely even recognized let alone considered. For instance, statistics show that student-teacher ratios have dropped from 37.8 per cent in 1975 to 31.7 per cent by 1999. However, the female enrollment ratio has increased from 28.5 per cent in 1980 to 47.7 per cent in 1999. Similarly, in Balochistan, the average for the number of year of schooling spent by a child are the lowest, although the student-teacher ratio (for primary schooling) is the highest out of all four provinces. Such figures most often provide the background that is required for the development of what is known as 'social policy formulation' by government, donors and civil society practitioners.

The use of numerical facts as a basis for policy formulation and reform presents two major problems in Pakistan. Firstly, the conditions under which data is collected and examined occurs under extremely constrained circumstances, thus bringing accuracy under question. Secondly, such figures often tend to ignore small, but significant, social, economic and political realities on the ground that may lead to a change in the context under which such figures are reported. Therefore, while most of this information presents a fairly comprehensive picture of the current quantitative status of education in the country, it does not always present the qualitative nature behind this status.

This is often (simplistically) blamed on the state and a lack of resources and motivation. However, behind these figures lies a complex layering of socio-political elements that affect education (and for that matter almost every other basic facility) on a daily basis in both rural and urban areas throughout the country. Some of these elements are fairly obvious such as the impact of feudal influences or a lack of financial or human resources. However, a number of them are

extremely subtle but potent enough to be able to cause irreparable damage to the system. It is these elements that need to be examined and understood before anyone can come up with a 'solution' to the steady rate of academic decline in Pakistan.

These elements are usually found within the social and economic fabric of the case at hand. While it is easy to blame the state for all failures, a number of these issues are actually beyond the control of the state itself, or at least of the education department. Pakistan's ethnic and social make-up influences its social services to an enormous extent. Issues such as tribal and communal conflicts, territorial and geographical boundaries, basic economic livelihoods, gender disparities, religious differences and class and ethnic struggles, all lay great strain on educational inputs and outputs. In many areas, the school is the focal point within a community and as a result, gets embroiled in the many conflicts and struggles that exist there. The most common example quoted for this is of the school building being "captured" by the local wadera as his *autaaq* or meeting place.)

Within the state itself, there are a number of issues that go just beyond the lack of resources. There is a dire need of skilled personnel in not just areas of education, but also of those who are able to understand and deal with these complex social fabrics. Local staff themselves are often embroiled in power and ethnic struggles. Because the district education officer belongs to a particular caste or tribe, he/she will not cooperate with any staff member or worse, with any school that may belong to an opposing, rival or lower status caste. Similarly, staff members including school supervisors and teachers are coerced into supporting specific political personalities, thus reducing their influence on the educational process to serving as political henchmen. School supervisors, women in particular, will not visit the schools of their beat regularly, or at all, because

they may have been physically or verbally threatened by the local influential landlord or businessman.

Social and cultural obstacles also rear their head when government education staff refuse to communicate with certain schools; because they deem the inhabitants of that village or locality to be socially inferior to them. This is most apparent between those who belong to urban-based towns and cities and smaller and out-of-the-way rural villages and hamlets. As mentioned earlier, politically motivated elements within districts also influence decision making such as hiring policies and power struggles between staff internally regarding transfers and pro-

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are also influenced by caste, wealth and background.

With the state in Pakistan being so donor dependant this adds yet another layer to the problems at hand since agencies are compelled to institute and implement methodologies and policies that are alien to local cultures and concepts. The pressure on the government, in particular, to deliver to the donors is enormous, thus weakening an already weak system. The emphasis is on numbers, disbursements and deadlines, thus totally ignoring the fact that beneath the figures, lies a complex web of centuries old traditions and practices that have refused to progress with the times. This limited vision on social issues in the context of developing countries has a lot to do with fact that their is a large distance between the donors and their beneficiaries. This also reflects an unwillingness to channel learning (or lessons learnt) back into prac-