

A fresh approach is needed

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'If we decide that for the next 50 years we will focus on primary education alone, and then talk about higher education, we will never have higher education. We have to strike a balance,' says Atta-ur-Rehman

Q: There is a general feeling that when we don't even have any real primary education, how can we expect to have quality university education. What do you think of it?

A: You have to have a multi-pronged approach. If we decide that for the next 50 years we will focus on primary education and then only will we talk about higher education, then we will never have higher education. You have to have a balanced approach, because you have to have development everywhere. You have limited amount of funds for development. Sri Lanka has got over 90 per cent literacy, but it is not a developed country. So, development doesn't work through literacy alone.

You have to have, actually, a number of factors dovetailing together where you have basic education, you have higher education, you have applied research and development, and, perhaps, most important of all is to have linkage with the market.

Through venture capital schemes, major investments, a strong marketing system, irresistible incentives to the private sector to come in, offering free land or long-term tax holidays and so on, your products and processes get translated into something which actually comes out into the market. All these have to come together before you have economic development taking place.

Q: There is this debate going on about the conflicting demands on our limited resources between lowering the illiteracy rate and the development of higher educa-



ATTA-UR-RAHMAN: The focus has to be re-adjusted

tion. How do we resolve this conflict?

A: Again, there has to be a balanced approach. You can't really say that one is more important than the other. There are norms of success and there are norms of failure. You only have to pick up a country like South Korea or Japan or any of these countries that have prospered, and see what kind of investment they have made in various sectors, including science and technology.

For instance, Unesco now recommends that a minimum of two per cent of GNP should go into science and technology in the developing world, whereas all OIC countries together spend only about 0.2 per cent on average of their GNP on science and technology and research and development. OIC's Arab countries spend seven per cent of their budget on defence, in contrast.

The critical role R&D now plays in development has not been realized by the Islamic world, and Pakistan is no different till lately. The entire GDP of the Islamic world is less than half that of Germany

and less than one quarter of Japan's. There are only 500 universities in the entire Islamic world, most of them being colleges at best, whereas there are over thousand universities in Japan, and over 120 in Tokyo alone.

Q: But they have an initial comparative advantage in R&D. What are we doing to catch up?

A: We can't spread money too thin. What we decided was that we should pick up a few selected fields in Applied Sciences — information technology, biotechnology, engineering and pharmacology — and a few in the Basic Sciences — physics, mathematics, chemistry and biology — and focus on them. Now, under the Higher Education Commission, social sciences are also being focused on.

Q: How different is the government approach to science and technology in the past and now?

A: Funding for science was never available in the past. Different committees used to be formed, different projects used to be formulated, but then they used to be put aside and never funded. Under Nawaz Sharif's government, I was chairing the national committee which prepared the ninth five-year plan.

We had a document about what needed to be done, but no funds were made available. So when I took over as minister of science and technology in March 2000, the total budget for our ministry was Rs120 million. I told the president that if he wanted something to be done, and if he was serious about funding science, then it should be reflected in the budget as well. He was very kind and supportive, and as a result the budget today is about Rs7.1 billion.

But, then, money is only one part. You have to actually come forward with focus programmes, develop

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DR Atta-ur-Rehman, who heads the government's Higher Education Commission, and is the coordinator of the OIC Committee on Science and Technology, says the late start made by President Pervez Musharraf's government to take Pakistan ahead in science and technology must be sustained by future governments.

In a panel interview, he calls for a bipartisan approach to the subject in which the government should take along opposition parties so the promotion of science and technology is not disrupted with the change of administrations.

Dr Rehman, who was science and technology minister in President Musharraf's cabinet and continues to have a minister's status, said the country also needed to carry out very focused programmes in different fields.

The following are excerpts from the interview:

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