

Do we value education? *Edun*

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Education for all" and "Girls Education" are 'in' phrases today. These are the catchy words used in most discussions by intellectuals in Islamabad. How do such slogans effect 70 percent of the population of Pakistan that is agricultural by profession? What value do we place on education?

My family has a beef-producing farm in the Potohar region near Rawalpindi and about ten years ago, while managing the farm, my first experience of school education was with the farm help, Karim, and his two children. Neither child was attending the two nearby government schools. A co-educational primary school exists for one village with roughly 500 households. The secondary school, segregated for girls and boys, caters to five villages. Primary schools have nominal fee per child and free books are provided during school. The contribution of parents is mostly voluntary: uniforms, slates (*takhtees*) and copy-books.

At the farm, I encouraged Karim to enrol his children, a girl and boy, in the primary school. The incentive was that we would pay for uniforms, school bags, tuition, copies and *takhtees*. Sure enough, both children started attending school. However, the mother, frequently on behalf of Karim, would question me: "Today our child is being educated. Tomorrow would you ensure a job for him, and what kind of future do I see for my daughter with her education?" Hardly a year passed when Karim withdrew his children from school. He said: "If I can earn a living without an education, my son should also learn the trade with me. As for my

daughter, if I educate her, she will have a mind of her own. Finding a suitable marriage partner will be a problem and even if she does marry, she would face problems with her in-laws for her intelligence." Lets be honest that the real reasons Karim withdrew his children from school were motivations other than the value for education.

Environment

I would now like to talk about another educational experience in the urban Islamabad area with the children of the household help, Bashir and Kalsoom, who belong to rural Faisalabad in Punjab province. Back home they were *tenants (muzaras)* of the Chaudhry to whom they were heavily indebted. Also, their area suffered from severe soil, water and air pollution from the tanning factories. Thus, two out of every three children are born blind. Bashir and Kalsoom too had a blind daughter who died at the age of seven. They have two living sons and one is almost blind. We had the child medically examined but the results showed that he was born with incomplete retinas. No transplant exists that could cure his blindness.

Both of Karim's children were placed in local schools and their expenses for uniforms, tuition, copies and stationary were borne by my family. The blind child attended special school. These governmental schools are excellent as they only charge nominal fees, provide books for free and teach children to read in Braille, etc. Bashir and Kalsoom were very pleased with their children's education. Kalsoom would bathe and dress her children every day for school. Her particular concern was that her sons not wear smelly socks! She prepared their tiffins and walked them to school.

She would especially dress up to attend every parent-teacher meeting and came back to enthusiastically tell us all about the proceedings. Kalsoom eagerly sat with the children and her simple presence helped them complete their homework.

Both parents distribute sweets when their children earned distinction in class. In the process, Kalsoom learnt the alphabet and proudly signed her name for letters delivered by the postman. A year down the road, without any reason, Bashir withdrew the children from school and left our house. Since they really valued education, the only possible cause could be that his relatives became jealous. The well dressed children, the happy and smiling mother attending meetings and the father proudly distributing sweets proved to be the last straw that broke the camel's back of the relatives' apparent "forbearance" for the freedom granted to this family. Now that we recall, Kalsoom did talk to us about this occasionally and we, in our ignorance, did not pay much heed to this issue family jealously.

Children's future

The third and most interesting case is again about two farm help families who belong to NWFP. Both families' fathers (brothers) are employed at the beef farm. Gul has four children: three girls and a son and Shehzad has one daughter and three sons. Gul's children are all studying at excellent private English medium institutions and their school expenses are borne by two very generous ladies, our neighbours.

Although the children's education continues, both parents have expressed their concern. "We are afraid, especially for our daughters' future, as all suitable matches in our clan are educated in the rural sec-

ondary government school with no knowledge of English whereas all our children are fluent in that language." Instead of being joyous at their children's abilities, there is constant tension between both parents. Shehzad, the other brother, has chosen to not educate his children. He says, "yes, they lack access to the elite world by not being educated and many windows of opportunity are closed upon them. Nevertheless, I am comfortable because my family does not stand out as being superior amongst our clan of peasants."

These educational issues (among others) raised on the Quamber Farm makes one ponder about grand educational programmes. Free books and free primary schools are not enough incentive for the children or their parents to opt for education. Boys need to start earning at an early age in order to contribute to the family income. Girls need to find suitable marriage partners and far from being valued, a good education can prove to be a handicap when people cannot fit into their community. A child's education cannot be treated in isolation: there has simultaneously to be a motivation by NGOs, the government and other activists to educate the family, the clan, protect the environment and provide adequate employment.

I had almost lost hope for universal education when we visited Murree in June 2003 and encountered three boys selling tea and boiled eggs. The tea was so good that we inquired its morning sale timings so that we could breakfast on Kashmiri tea. All the boys were scandalised: "We serve tea only in the evening — in the morning we attend school!"

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