**Empowering our culture**

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The 21st century has witnessed a paradigm shift in almost every sector. including education. Previously, education was all about gaining knowledge of a specific subject or enrolling in career-oriented courses. Now, education is not limited to textbooks.

Today, it is all about learning different skills such as critical thinking, problem-solving, communication, collaboration, creativity, social and cultural interaction, information literacy, media literacy, and leadership. These skills are usually learned outside classrooms through co-curricular activities. They are as important as learning the curriculum – or even more than that. These activities help develop the overall personality of people to prepare them for dealing with the challenges of life in any society.

For instance, participation in sports events develops sportsman spirit, teamwork, and mental and physical health. Organising these events in schools or colleges polishes an individual’s leadership skills and teaches how to live with diverse opinions. Participation in music, drama and dance classes instills creativity and imagination, which leads to empathy. Volunteering activities and community engagement make students sensitive and more humane. These skills are not exclusively required in corporate or other traditional jobs but they are indispensable to lead a purposeful life. In the 21st century, people who call themselves ‘educated’ have learned these skills.

Ever since the Taliban came into power in Afghanistan, a general and unwritten ban has been announced on all such activities. As explained above, these activities play a vital role in keeping people away from radicalisation. Sports clubs, dance and music programmes, attan nights, art exhibitions and other similar activities are banned by the Taliban. The effects of this ban culture are visible in Pakistan as well, especially in the country’s Pakhtun-majority areas. When an ideology is in power or in a dominant position at any place, people who identify with the same ideology – regardless of where they live – feel empowered too. The same thing is happening with the pro-Taliban ideology of some Pakhtuns.

Interestingly, these people are also radicalised for the vested interests of those in power through the ongoing curriculum development. These people are trying hard to place a ban on co-curricular activities and the subjects of art and humanities. They are in search of finding like-minded people, which cannot be done in a liberal and progressive environment. They urge people to identify with their extremist culture and leave their progressive culture which they call ‘vulgar’.

They use ‘religion’ as a tool to justify their action as we recently saw in the Sri Lankan worker lynching case. At a time when there is a strong need to tackle extremism in schools and colleges through various activities, extremist elements are spreading like a contagious disease.

The effects of this ideology are more severe on women and girls. In Afghanistan, there is a complete ban on girls’ education. In Pakistan, there is strong criticism against girls’ and women’s participation in co-curricular activities. Women in Pakhtun-majority areas are rarely seen outside, and they do not have opportunities to engage in community work. There are no women-only parks or sports grounds for them. Their participation in drama and debate and poetry competitions is considered taboo. They are prevented from interacting with boys, which makes it difficult for them to pursue higher education as most universities and degree colleges are co-ed and there is not a sufficient number of highly qualified women teachers who can be hired at women-only colleges.

The justification for this segregated society and gender parity is to prevent vulgarity, but research shows that rape cases – which is part of ‘vulgarity’ – are higher in highly gender-segregated areas. In these areas, there is no healthy interaction between men and women and women are portrayed as a ‘prized possession’.

Co-curricular activities are not only important in life but also have a direct influence on a person’s academic achievements as well. Research shows that students who participate in music programmes and school clubs tend to have slightly better grades than those who do not. They also are less likely to be absent or drop out. Another research conducted in Khyber Pakhtunkhwa’s (KP’s) southern districts has suggested that students involved in extra-curricular activities have consistently better academic achievements. Active participation in co-curricular activities is one of the factors that can help a student get admission at a foreign university on scholarship. These degree schools look for students who are well-groomed and have a strong skillset.

Some co-curricular activities have made their way to the mainstream curriculum. We also have the arts and humanities discipline which includes many subjects. As opposed to the traditional STEM education, the arts and humanities subject is more important as it deals with emotional intelligence. It gives us a different perspective of life which is beyond statistics and is full of empathy. These subjects do not use data but human emotions. They help us relate statistics to humanity and guide us to use science and technology for the betterment of humanity and not for its destruction.

These subjects are a tool to preserve an area’s culture. In the era of globalisation, indigenous cultures and languages are dying slow deaths. Single culture and a single language are rapidly forming a monopoly. It is time to do something to preserve our identity. This can be done by introducing clubs for different activities, organising events and mainstreaming arts and humanities in educational institutions – a major place of socialisation. Schools and colleges should include cultural dances, folklore plays, poetry and music in the curriculum to ensure that our culture and identity do not die. Every culture is beautiful and when it deteriorates, people start looking for other things to form their identity, which can be quite dangerous.

Co-curricular activities and the subjects of arts and humanities are necessary for developing a person’s personality so that he/she does not get engaged in extremist practices. A critical thinker, a creative innovator, an imaginative and empathetic leader and a person of diverse opinions cannot be easily radicalised. People who are connected to their culture will never try to construct a false extremist identity for themselves. Extremism and arts and humanities are inversely proportional to each other. When extremism spreads, co-curricular activities vanish.

The importance of co-curricular activities and arts and humanities, although realised by the whole world, is not appreciated in our region of extremism. It is time we stopped this extremism from rising to power if we want to see a progressive and equal society. This can be done from the place where it started in the 1980s.

Instead of focusing on the the Single National Curriculum (SNC), we should remove extremism from the roots by engaging our young people – both men and women – in co-curricular activities in educational institutions. Instead of banning these activities, we should make them compulsory and allot separate grades to them. We can deal with the prevalent extremist culture by empowering our own culture through normalising arts and humanities.