**Is good education only for the rich?**

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“Old boys protest after Aitchison College governors in Lahore say they will no longer support sons of the rich and powerful” (for admission). This was the headline of The Guardian, the world-renowned British daily newspaper, in its July 9, 2014 edition when the privilege of ‘kinship’ for admission was scrapped and a total merit policy was adopted for admission by the board of governors of Aitchison College.

Likewise, a recent tussle between the BoG, dominated by alumni of Aitchison College, and a senior bureaucrat elevated was picked up by national and international media. This issue compelled its principal, Michael Thompson, to resign, not due to conflict on any academic aspect but due to parents’ strife to retain the prestigious tag of this college for their children.

A recent article published in these pages (‘Daanish dilemma: beyond the fold’ by Dr Ayesha Razzaque) on April 18 acknowledged the commendable academic performance of Daanish schools. The article highlighted the impressive achievement of students at Daanish schools, with 90 per cent of SSC students and 70 per cent of HSSC students securing top grades of A+ and A. However, the article also raised concerns regarding the high cost associated with this educational model, suggesting that these resources could be better utilized to address the issue of 26 million out-of-school children in Pakistan. While concerns regarding out-of-school children are undoubtedly valid and require immediate attention, dismissing the Daanish school model solely based on its cost overlooks its immense potential for promoting social mobility and educational equity in Pakistan.

Discrimination in education has been a persistent issue throughout history, with powerful groups or privileged classes often restricting access to quality education for the majority. Unfortunately, not all public-sector institutions in Pakistan are of the same quality in terms of school area, building specifications, teaching-learning facilities, curricula, qualification of teaching faculty, and budget for co-curricular activities of students. On the other hand, high-quality private schools, while offering superior education with smaller class sizes and modern facilities, remain inaccessible to the majority of the population due to their exorbitant fees. This creates a stratified educational system that perpetuates social inequality.

In addition to historically elite schools like Aitchison College Lahore, Lawrence College Murree, and Sadiq Public School Bahawalpur, there are 20 Daanish schools and 15 Divisional Public Schools in Punjab, and about 40 cadet colleges in the country managed by the federal or provincial governments, known for their state-of-the-art facilities and better quality of education compared with ordinary government schools. Although the costs of construction, furniture, fixtures, and operation of both a Daanish school and a cadet college are almost the same, it is less risky to criticize the concept of and expenditure on Daanish schools.

It is interesting to note that the concept and model of the cadet colleges are specific to the Indian subcontinent only, and this unique type of educational institutions are not found in the civil setup of any other country in the world. The British rulers established the first cadet college in the Subcontinent in 1922, mainly to produce a well-trained batch of young men who could easily be inducted into the army. After independence, India did not establish any cadet college for civilian students. However, Pakistan has proliferated this unique model of the colonial era. In 1952, there was only one cadet college in Hasan Abdal. The second cadet college was established in Petaro in 1957.

The priority of Zulfiqar Ali Bhutto was to establish a cadet college in Larkana, his home district, which he ordered in 1975. Benazir Bhutto, completed his mission and Cadet College in Larkana was operationalized in 1992.

From 2008 to 2013, when then-CM Shehbaz Sharif was actively establishing Daanish schools in southern Punjab, then-president Asif Ali Zardari and the Sindh government were mobilizing resources to establish more cadet colleges in Sindh. Shehbaz Sharif did not approve the establishment of any cadet college in Punjab during this period, whereas Asif Ali Zardari, himself a graduate of Petaro Cadet College (Jamshoro), started work on the establishment of seven cadet colleges during his first tenure as president of Pakistan. Currently, there are twelve cadet colleges in Sindh, with seven approved from 2008 to 2013. It is important to note that out of about 40 cadet colleges in the country, only three, or about 8.0 per cent, are for girls.

On the other hand, all Daanish schools are built in pairs, with campuses for both boys and girls. This means Daanish schools are more gender-balanced. The objective is not to undermine the significance of cadet colleges. Cadet colleges are needed not only for defense purposes but also to inculcate patriotism and mainstream those in bordering areas. A similar rationale should be applied to free quality education and residential facilities like Daanish schools, for impoverished people living in various parts of the country

The concerns surrounding Daanish schools primarily stem from three main perspectives. First, there is political opposition, often fueled by rivalry, towards initiatives launched by competing political figures. Such politically motivated criticism can be shortsighted and hinder progress on initiatives with the potential to benefit the public good. In the complex world of Pakistani politics, innovative projects like Daanish schools can become pawns in a larger game, overshadowing the true purpose of educational development.

Second, some urban intellectuals who advocate for universal access to education seem reluctant to endorse the idea of quality education for underprivileged students. Their own children likely attend expensive private schools, potentially leading to a sense of dissonance towards Daanish schools disrupting the established order. This perspective, while seemingly advocating for equality, might unintentionally perpetuate the status quo. A truly equitable education system should ensure quality education for all, not just the privileged few.

Finally, valid concerns exist regarding the cost-effectiveness of Daanish schools. However, a closer examination reveals the relatively modest share of this program in total education budget. In Punjab, for example, the total budget of Rs1.5 billion allocated to Daanish schools for 2022-23 constituted a mere 0.3 per cent of the province’s entire education budget. Additionally, the Punjab Education Foundation was allocated a significantly larger sum of Rs21.5 billion during 2022-23, to subsidize tuition fees for underprivileged students enrolled in low-fee private schools through education vouchers.

This shows that Daanish schools do not represent a disproportionate allocation of resources within the education budget. It is a targeted investment with the potential to yield significant returns in terms of offering opportunities for social mobility and academic excellence to disadvantaged children.

The Unesco Convention against Discrimination in Education of 1960, has been ratified by 128 countries to date – but not by Pakistan. The convention declares that “limiting any person or group of persons to education of an inferior standard” is also discrimination. Probably, this is the main reason that policymakers in Pakistan have so far not ratified this convention, fearing that this may legally oblige the country to ensure equality of educational opportunities to all children in the country, and this may lead to the abolition of privileges enjoyed by the elite.

The National Education Policy of 2009 explicitly highlighted the detrimental effects of a segregated education system in Pakistan. The policy pointed out the divisive implications of three parallel systems: under-resourced Urdu-medium government schools catering to the public, high-quality English-medium private schools accessible only to the wealthy, and madrassahs serving religious education primarily to underprivileged communities. This creates an environment where educational opportunities are determined by socioeconomic background rather than merit. A child born into poverty has a significantly lower chance of receiving a quality education compared to a child from a wealthy family. Daanish schools offer a counterpoint to this stratified system. By providing high-quality education and residential facilities to disadvantaged students, these schools empower them with the tools to break free from the cycle of poverty.

Over 70 per cent of students at Daanish schools have been securing A or A+ grades in annual examinations. Hence, the performance of Daanish schools is far better than regular government schools. For example, in the Rawalpindi Division, only 16 per cent of HSSC students of government schools earned A+ to A grades, and just 23 per cent of SSC candidates of government schools received grades A+ to A in the 2022 annual examination of the Board of Intermediate and Secondary Education. The World Bank Pakistan Learning Poverty Brief (June 2022) reveals that about 65 per cent of students in Grade 4 in Pakistan lack a minimum proficiency level in reading.

Under these circumstances, why not invest part of our resources in a model that not only produces better returns in terms of quality but also contributes towards social justice, and equality of educational opportunities, and helps marginalized groups climb the ladder of social mobility? Policymakers, political leaders, media, and civil society ought to advocate for equal educational opportunities for all children, whether they are from any class. The country needs lighthouses and role models that can attract and inspire poor parents to send their children to school with the hope for a better quality of life for their children.

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