**Making Arabic Compulsory**

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On February 1, this year, the Senate of Pakistan had passed a Bill by which every school of Islamabad had to be compelled to make their students study the Arabic language from Grade 1 to Grade 5. Thereafter he or she shall learn Arabic grammar from Grade 6 to Grade 12. Senator Javed Abbasi of the PML-N moved “the Compulsory Teaching of Arabic Language Bill, 2020” which was unanimously passed by the Senate except for one dissenting voice of Sen. Aamir Raza. It will become an Act of Parliament once it is also passed by the National Assembly. It is very likely that it would then be extended to the whole of Pakistan.

Before I discuss the merit of this legislation, I propose to dwell a little on the plight of our students. Our young Pakistani students are unique in the world in that they have to learn too many languages which often sap their energies by expanding their major potential in learning the new languages rather than in the acquisition of new knowledge and skills. In all their struggle in life, their native or mother tongues are never put to any use due to many social and historical causes. The main reason for the inadequacy of these dialects is their lack of capacity to cope with the current national or international knowledge and skills which are necessary to make them literate and skilled in the true modern sense. All great linguists consider that the best medium to impart knowledge is in one’s mother tongue, in which a child’s basic images of the outside world are formed and which he can comprehend with the least effort. But that unluckily is not the case with our social and geopolitical background. The inner urge to acquire knowledge perforce makes us depend on other languages which are alien to our culture. And this makes our situation very unique compared to many other nations. In the West, people do not face this difficulty. They are born into an English environment, where English is the only language of communication, and dissemination of knowledge and skills. Thus they are spared of the gigantic task of learning other languages for the acquisition of knowledge. Even the languages of French, German and most other European nations contain modern knowledge in their language and therefore do not face such problems. That is the fundamental reason why the Western world is far ahead of us in knowledge and skills.

Language has nothing to do with character-building.

In our case, a child born into Punjabi, Seraiki, Pothohari, Hindko, Pashto, Sindhi or Balochi parents whose dialects eminently serve their local needs but those are bereft of the current knowledge and techniques without which progress in the modern world is not possible. Having our roots in religion, the child has to first acquaint himself with Arabic phonetics to enable him to recite the Holy Qur’an. As he grows up, at school he has to learn Urdu up to 5th standard along with science and other social sciences, and then from 6th standard onwards up to the higher secondary stage, he is compelled to study English as a compulsory language. If the budding fellow wishes to know more about his history, culture and rich literary heritage, he will have to exert more to learn Persian as well. Thus the entire life of our students is spent learning other languages rather than gaining proficiency in new knowledge and techniques. This is peculiarly our dilemma.

Now, coming to the reasons which weighed heavily with the lawmakers was their argument that proficiency in Arabic will “broaden the employment and business opportunities for the citizens of Pakistan” in rich Arab countries. This argument is not valid for two reasons: First, that rudimentary knowledge of a very rich language like Arabic is not enough for employment opportunities in S. Arabia. Secondly, good Jobs and businesses go to persons with specific skills who can adequately deliver and not for their rudimentary knowledge of the language. Even in Saudi Arabia, the skilled Westerners with no knowledge of the Arabian language get excellent jobs by dint of their latest knowledge and skills. Due to a lack of adequate skills, Pakistanis in S. Arabia end up in low and menial jobs. Present enrolment in Pakistani Universities for teaching the Arabic language has also drastically reduced, because of their slim chances to get good jobs in the Saudi market. Making Arabic compulsory for the Pakistani students would only add to their further burden in learning new languages rather than concentrating on learning new techniques and skills to meet modern challenges in a competitive world. Their too much occupation with learning new languages will only reduce their chances to acquire better skills, and thus fail to get them good jobs. This undue stress by the law-makers on learning Arabic only betrays their intentions to create a virtuous class of religious people. Language has nothing to do with character-building.

The school-learned Arabic can hardly help our children to understand the vast changes affected over 1500 years in the Arabic spoken in Modern Arab countries. Nor it can be argued that the students un-schooled in the Arabic language would be unable to understand the message of the Qur’an. The Qur’an is the most published and translated book in the entire world. If one does not know Arabic, there are several languages in which the translated text of the Holy book is available to an inquisitive reader. Moreover, our entire culture is religion-driven, in every mosque at least seven times a week, sermons are delivered based mostly on Qur’anic teaching. Thus, even if one is not conversant with the Arabic language, one cannot remain oblivious to its fundamental teaching.

In Pakistan, there are only arrangements for teaching the classical Qur’anic Arabic, which is vastly different from the current colloquial language spoken in Saudi Arabia. The Qur’anic Arabic is primarily suitable for conveying spiritual themes. Their grandeur, beauty and dignity of Classical metaphors and symbolism in Qur’anic Arabic brims with highly concentrated thoughts in several layers of meaning. With every fresh reading, new meanings are dawned upon the reader. Most verses have both internal and external rhymes divinely designed to leave a lasting impact on the mind and soul of the man. Ordinary Arabic spoken in modern-day Saudi Arabia or other Arab countries has a pedestrian intelligence to convey as against the winged flight of the Qur’anic language, which enthrals the ears with its intuitive perception. Our use of the finest Arabic language must be limited to the classical Qur’anic text only because our chances of physical interaction with the Arabic speaking world are very minimal. Nor the ordinary colloquial Arabic will ever match the magical effect of the Qur’anic classical Arabic, to which we are familiar as Muslims.

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