**Of schools, ghosts and dreams of education**

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June 23, 2021

Six-year-old Saad’s heart was racing as he paced towards his destination. He kept on turning round to capture one last glimpse of his mother, Jameela. She waved him goodbye with a faint smile. Saad’s father, Asad, held to his wrist tightly as they both walked hurriedly. “We don’t want to be late; today is your first day,” said Asad. Saad picked up his pace; he wanted to make the best impression as he shifted his bag from one shoulder to the other.

As Saad and Asad disappeared into the distance, Jameela’s mind wandered. Saad’s first day at the “choti jamat” (junior class), “this is a big day in his life, I should be happy for him,” she kept telling herself.

Jameela walks inside her small house and busies herself with chores. But her heart is with Saad, “I wonder what is he doing now; I hope he will be able to learn something new and exciting everyday.”

However, as the day progressed, she could not shake off the feeling of a bad omen; she raises her hands in prayer, “God, please keep my child safe and surround him good kids, not the bullies that are a nuisance to the village.”

As evening approaches, Jameela’s gaze is fixed on the door. Asad and Saad should be home any minute now, she thinks to herself. She hears a loud bang as Saad kicks the door open. Visibly shaken and angry, he runs to his mother’s embrace. Jameela’s heart sinks, “What is that bruise on your face? What happened?” Asad cuts her off before she can throw a fit at him, “Master had to teach him a lesson, he messed up on the first day, he couldn’t do a simple job,” his voice deepens.

You see, ‘chooti jamat’ was supposed to be a functioning elementary school. In reality, it was a toy factory run by those who wield influence and power in the village. Locals started sending their kids to that hell hole, and today the factory employs 80 children

‘But he is just a kid, other children his age go to school, they make friends and learn something new, you have sent him to a toy factory at the abandoned school building. All I want for him is to go to school and study. Our son should have a different fate than us”, Jameela responded with a trembling voice

You see, “chooti kamat” was supposed to be a functioning elementary school. In reality, however, it was a toy factory run by those who wield influence and power in the village. Its name was a cruel joke. The villagers started sending their kids to that hell hole, and today the factory employs 80 children. It is a school only on paper, like so many others in Pakistan: those ghost schools that destroy untold dreams. Today, this ghost school snatched away yet one more dream.

Back in 2006, there were reportedly some 30,000 ghost schools in Pakistan. Yet tackling this issue remains challenging given that the situation is vastly underreported; meaning that current data is often lacking. In 2013, the Transparency International Global Corruption Report (GCR) found that Sindh was home to some 2,181 ghost schools — down from 6,480 in 2009 — while 4,450 were identified as not functioning properly. The GCR also found that in 6,000 out of 12,500 schools in Balochistan failed to provide basic facilities. While, in mid-2012, funding for a federal education programme came under the microscope following allegations that money was being directed to some 8,000 ghost schools.

In addition, a 2018 report compiled by the then chairman PAC (Public Accounts Committee), DG Federal Audit found that more than 2,000 ghost schools were ‘operating’ under the Ministry of Education’s BECS (Basic Education Community Schools programme). Elsewhere, the Khyber Pakhtunkhwa government came under fire during the 2017-18 academic year over reports of embezzlement of Rs1.9 million under the Iqra Farogh-e-Taleem Voucher Scheme (IFTVS). And to top it all off, there are still an estimated 22.8 million out-of-school children, according to UNICEF. Indeed, Pakistan ranks second in the world on this front. It is a gut-wrenching figure that reflects a broken education system.

With absolutely no accountability, lack of accurate data, and lack of reporting on the matter, I am truly beginning to doubt claims of a 58-percent literacy rate in Pakistan.

How can anyone justify these numbers? How can we truly know the exact number of children forced into labour, how many become victims of violence, abuse, and thrown into extreme poverty, drugs, and crime due to lack of education?

I am not sure how many “Saads” will have to suffer before we give the children of this nation a fighting chance to save their future!

All I hear are tall claims and empty promises of increasing the education budget and educational reforms with little outcome. Civil society, media, and NGOs must collectively take action to draw the government’s attention to this pressing matter so that no dream is ever lost to a ghost school.

(*This is a work of fiction. Any resemblance to actual persons, living or dead, or actual events is purely coincidental*)

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