Promoting inequality

By Humair Ishtiaq

EDUCATION is rightly considered to be among the elements that promote social and psychological equality by encouraging awareness on basic issues and by way of its ability to give everyone a level playing field. But, more than that, it is actually the manner of its delivery that decides whether or not a society will achieve the lofty targets associated with mass education.

In our context, it may well be serving just the purpose that it should not. If anything, it is there to ensure that the level playing field remains a dream for the majority, while the minority continues to make hay. For the minority the sun keeps shining and the system — education being nothing more than one of its many components — is there to guarantee its continuity.

As things stand today on the ground, and they have been standing that way since long, the country's education system is the cause of serious polarisation in society when it should have been building bridges. The result is obvious.

Every time someone refers to a problem in society, regardless of the nature of the problem, fingers start wagging in the direction of the country's low literacy rate as being the root cause, or the mother, of all problems. From armchair discussions to high-level official proceedings and statements emanating from the corridors of power, the accusing finger wags in no other direction as often as it does in that of the education sector. The irony is that the accusers are not far from the truth. A bigger irony is that no one does anything to bring about some kind of change for the better.

The low literacy level, however, is only one-third of the issue; the second fold is brought up by what is being taught to those who actually make it to some education centre, and, equally critical if not more, is the third tier that is represented by the huge difference in the quality of contents being taught at different strata and to different segments of society.

ated from each other. Dangling in the middle is the majority. Pulled by the two extremes in diametrically opposite directions, it sometime goes in one direction and sometimes in the other. While the tug of war continues, it remains a battle which can never produce a winner.

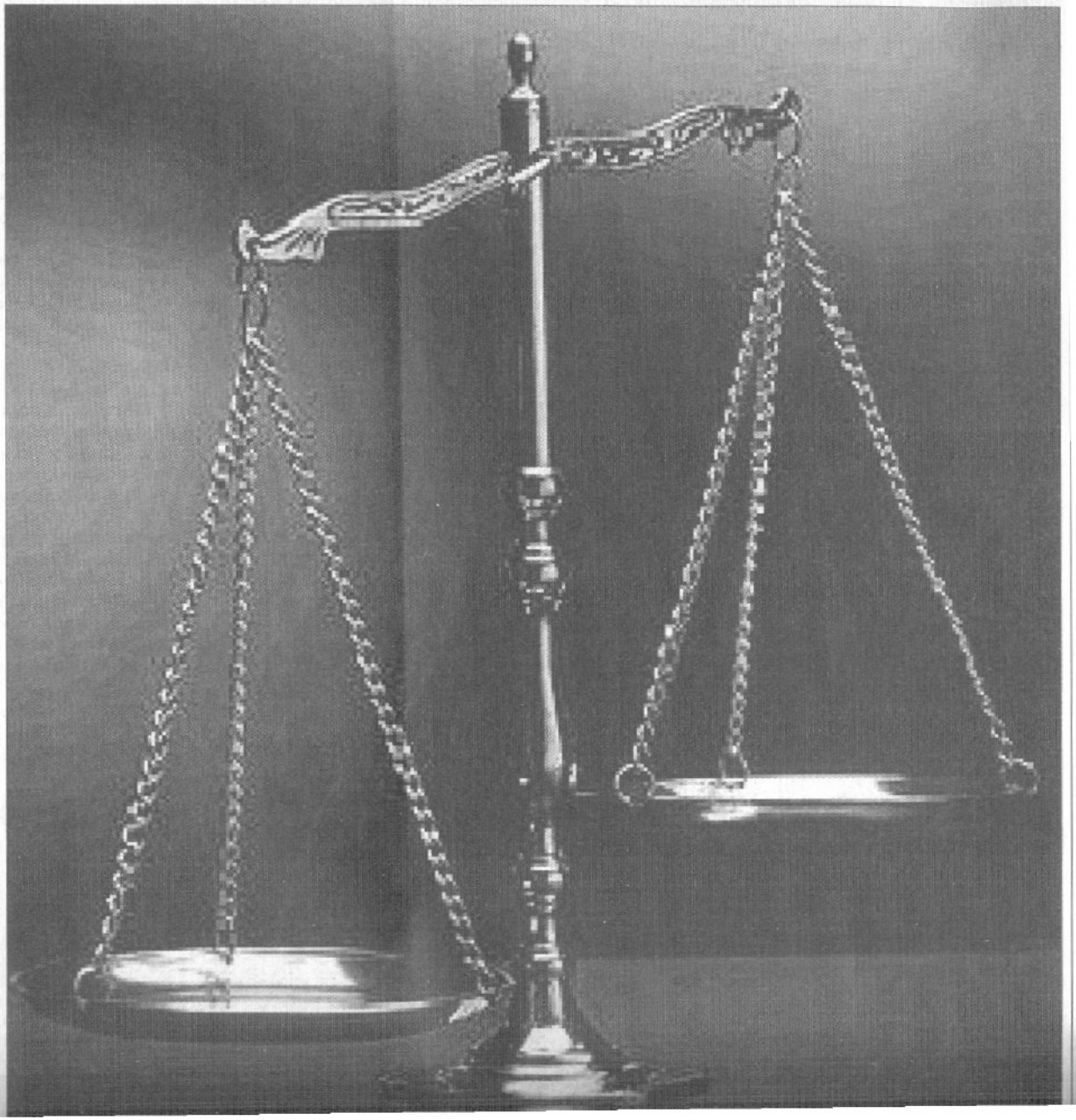
The story does not end there though. At each level, there is further polarisation. At the bottom rung, for instance, there are the state-run Urdu-medium schools as well as the seminaries. Each of them has its own peculiar dimensions.

Though not at the same level of disparity, the peculiarities do exist at the elite level as well. It is not exactly in terms of the level and quality of education imparted. It is more about the brand one is associated with. Seeing it through the prism of vanity that is the hallmark of our elite, one can be sure of the psychological barrier that separates the good institutions from the localised version of the Ivy League.

Those lying between the two extremes have a huge variety to contend with. From English-medium secondary system and various shades of foreign programmes — Cambridge being the most popular of them all — it is a massive range to explore. But ask any set of parents and they will confirm without much of a thinking that it is not as much about picking and choosing than about picking and rejecting. These institutions are more of a fee-collection agency than a place of learning.

And when you think you have taken into account all possible divisions, think again; still left is the urban-rural divide, which, practically speaking, is the most fundamental of all divides in the context of the country's education system. And, then, there are also the cadet colleges and public schools.

For a glimpse of how all these varying concoctions affect the mindset of their victims, let's turn to a survey done by known educationist and social activist Tariq Rahman a few years ago (*Denizens Of Alien Worlds*: OUP, 2004).



ety.

Together, they are playing havoc with society's fabric, having led to a situation where the perceptions and notions of young adults coming out of the various educational streams — seminaries, state-run schools, and private institutions of various hues and shades — happen to be divergent in dangerous proportions. Alongside the prevailing financial inequality in society, the class-based education system is a quick recipe to ensure that the present levels of polarisation in society, already alarming as they are, will only grow in the days ahead.

Talking of inequality, the system at the lower level produces clerks and semi-skilled workers, while at the upper level it creates westernised people whose lifestyle depends on obvious and voracious consumption of western products. The result is that the two classes together are perpetuating capitalism in its worst form, the lower by providing cheap labour, the upper by creating inane and selfish consumers. This naturally portends disaster for the future, as neither of the two tiers is capable of ushering in an era of self-sufficiency, equality and social dignity for the masses.

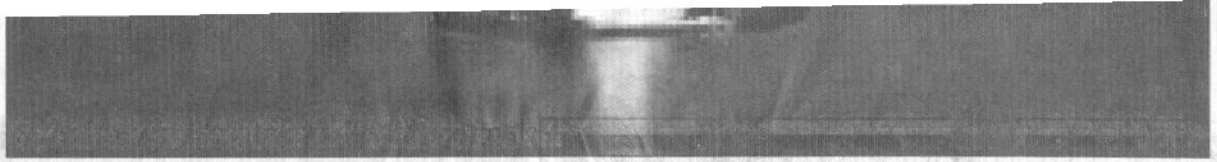
Though living in the same country, the two classes are completely alien-

(*Denizens Of Alien Worlds*: OUP, 2004).

Drawing the class lines for the purpose of his survey, the author divided the school-going lot into four broader and rather generalised categories; seminaries, Urdu-medium schools, cadet colleges and public schools, and the elitist English-medium schools. The survey was aimed at feeling the pulse of the country's youth in terms of their perceptions about such key issues as militancy and tolerance.

Asked about supporting state-level covert militancy in occupied Kashmir, 52.82 per cent pupils in the seminaries and 53.08 per cent in cadet colleges favoured the approach, but the figures dropped down to 33.04 per cent for Urdu-medium schools, and further down to 22.41 for the elitist institutions. Not surprisingly, the survey of teachers at the same institutions brought out almost similar opinion patterns.

While the statistics were understandable for the three other categories, the author qualified the figures for the state-run Urdu-medium schools by noting that since General Pervez Musharraf, the then president, himself had reversed the policy of carrying out covert activity in Kashmir and had been talking of averting a possible war, "students and teachers might have felt that it was safer and perhaps more desirable not to support war."



Though the survey had its limitations, it did offer a peep into how perceptions on key national issues are formed — or deformed — by an education system that has inbuilt flaws.

Among other things — pattern of government spending on the various types of institutions, the fee structure etc. — the survey also took up the issue of direct or indirect control enjoyed by the armed forces over schools, colleges and even institutions of higher learning, noting, not without a hint of irony, that while the armed forces have had a history of using seminaries and state-run schools to promote their concepts and ideologies, "the very same armed forces have established elite schools for the children of their officers."

A staggering 48.95 per cent of those found in the seminaries told the surveyors they were there purely because of economic reasons. This is a classic case of social and economic inequality being turned into ideological inequality by those who happen to be in a position to call the shots.

For sure, the military is not the only perpetrator in this context; the civilians are not any different at all. The bureaucrats have their own ways out and the politicians, being the pragmatics that they are, more often than not tend to carry passports of more than one country at all times.

With none of the ruling elite having any stakes in the education system, it is no wonder that the whole activity is centered on the idea of creating pigeonhole compartmentalisation of the country.

The net worth is not difficult to assess. The system is only giving birth to a polarised future where different segments may well move to different destinations based on the social and psychological inequality that marks the formative years of the youth. With every passing moment the future is becoming the present and the signs are there for all to see. In fact, one would expect the leaders to not just observe the trend, but also to do something about it, but in the kind of society that we are part of, it is like asking for the moon.

We have often heard our leaders giving voice to their intense intention of enabling the country to join the ranks of the developed world. What we have never heard from them is the plan they may have in mind to make it happen. Leave out the cynics who may argue that in order to have a plan in the mind, one needs to have the mind in the first place, but even the layman knows that there has neither been a plan nor an intention to turn things around. All we have seen our leaders — both of the political and military varieties — doing is to indulge in one-upmanship on this vital issue.

Had it not been so, the leadership would have certainly focused on such a key area as education. It is no secret that around 90 per cent of the growth of the higher performing Asian economies — South Korea, Taiwan, Malaysia and Thailand, for instance — could be accounted for by the exceptionally high levels of primary school enrollment and equality during the 1960s. We, in Pakistan, failed to match things on the ground, but have surely beaten everyone else in terms of hollow verbosity. ■