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UNESCO’s Global Education Monitoring Report, launched recently, points to a basic flaw in the education systems of South Asia. It is the inequity that the fast-growing private sector in education has spawned. The GEM report does not say it in so many words but the fact is that inequity is stratifying society itself.

I can speak for Pakistan, where, on numerous occasions, some of us have pointed out that education is no longer the equaliser it was meant to be. It is dividing the country into two. The GEM report confirms this but only in passing.

The key question is: how has the private sector come to occupy such a big space in education? It is so predominantly entrenched now that it has become an existential threat to national integrity. The expanding presence of ‘non-state actors’ (the private sector) is the result of the government’s neglect of its own responsibility in educating Pakistan’s children, which has created a vacuum prompting private entrepreneurs to step in. Other factors have also been at work, such as the highly competitive job market and parental pressures. The expansion of non-state actors has enabled the latter to influence policymaking in education.

With more funds in hand, the private sector conventionally performs better than state-owned institutions that suffer from financial constraints and bureaucratic strictures. The state has been a part of this process. Thus, it has opened the door to the private sector while not pushing its own institutions to put their acts together. Today, nearly a third of school enrolment in Pakistan is said to be in private institutions. Some claim the share is larger.

Education is no longer the equaliser it was meant to be.

The forte of the non-state actors is their diversity and adaptability. That is how they cater to a variety of needs of a variety of clients from all classes — but for a fee. Those who can pay more get quality education and those who cannot afford a high-fee school must content themselves with low-quality education for a low fee. Such a school is still considered to be better than a state institution that doesn’t function at all.

The schools catering to the privileged class that have the money naturally set the trend, as they are perceived to be the role models for success. The most exploited element is language. False propaganda has created the myth that English alone can bring economic prosperity, social status and wealth. Hence the chase for English-medium schools, as ignorant educators know nothing about language learning and blatantly break all the rules of how and when to teach a foreign language in Pakistan.

The low-fee schools devise a half-baked hybrid solution. It involves mixing up English and a native language in teaching the child how to read, understand, speak and write English, All the child experiences is rote learning. In spite of all her efforts, the child fails to gain command over English, loses her command over her own language and fails to gain knowledge of the subject being taught. Such schools describe themselves as ‘English-medium’ and are flourishing in the private sector.

Children studying in high-fee schools are also suffering. Their English language skills may be as good as their teachers’ or better, but they lack the capacity to think critically as their in-born curiosity has been destroyed because of wrong language-teaching practices.

Poor English competency is not the only handicap confronting these children of a lesser god. As has been pointed out, such children do not have access to well-trained teachers, educational technologies and the facilities of fair assessment. Only the rich can have their offspring take the O-Level exams, as the latter cost money. Hence these children are the losers when they look for a job later. And so, the cycle of poverty is perpetuated ad infinitum. It is a tragedy that even education fails to provide social justice to the marginalised.

What is the solution? The GEM report makes a number of recommendations that assume that the private sector is there to stay. In an era when neoliberalism rules the world economy, the private sector cannot be wished away. But it can be regulated and monitored, as the GEM report recommends. Subsidies could help lower costs and soften the impact of the private sector. The question is, who will bell the cat? The government cannot regulate its own institutions. How can it manage the burgeoning private sector, as GEM suggests?

Unesco has another suggestion that sounds idealistic but is well worth trying out: “Governments need to forge a social compact centred on equity, quality and inclusion so that the entire education system — state and non-state — can collectively prepare learners to address current challenges such as climate change, declines in democratic governance and prevailing inequality.”

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