**The pied piper syndrome**

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Nationalistic jingoism, emotional meltdowns, loud chest-thumping and rhetorical comments will surely attract attention, win applause and echo in chambers far and beyond. However, logical arguments, rationality, facts and reason can never be replaced as the best possible way to engage, deliberate and even dissent.

Unfortunately, the present times exhibit much more of the former than the latter even in the best of educated, exposed and well-travelled women and men. We are dealing with a herd mentality where a large part of the population, especially the youth, is swayed by a pied piper into believing almost anything and everything. A close study of our private education system will reveal the circumstances that have led us to the current situation.

People have often criticized Pakistan’s public sector and the madrassah system for poor content, low quality teaching and missing resources and facilities for their students to compete with the rest of the world. The English-medium private sector has often been glorified as a spectacular example of quality education. While this may be true to a large extent, there lie a host of other benchmarks to see whether this is truly the case or not.

Private school systems have filled in a huge vacuum left by the government of Pakistan. The private sector has delivered where the state has failed us. One wonders what the state of education would have been had the private sector not jumped in to provide the missing education. But, while we are all indebted to their nation-building contribution, it is important to now question some of the established practices in many of our private schools that have now curtailed any form of critical thinking, analytical mind and logical thinking.

We live in a society where there is grade fixation amongst parents, schools and even the students. The final grade is seen as the ultimate form of success or even failure. But, while grades are important as they become the basis of admissions in good universities within and outside Pakistan, they are not the end or the final word at all.

We are sitting in 2022 now and the world around us has not only evolved, but it has also broadened in terms of access to knowledge, and evolution and progress of knowledge – and that too at a very fast pace. This digital age has completely transformed the markets and has also revolutionized market demands. In fact, Google has even gone on to say that perhaps they don’t need these fancy undergraduate degrees anymore and they will now take students and customize them according to their requirements.

This is food for thought for how far the world has moved on from traditional learning and teaching ideas. We need to see this as a necessity if we are to compete globally as global citizens. Hence the need to think out of the box in Pakistan as well and introspect on some of the nagging and decadent methods of educating our youth. Also important are the ramifications of not evolving with time in the shape of the current intolerant, myopic and less read student of the day.

Our grade and content fixated parents, schools and students rely more on teachers’ notes to rote learn than books or research. They are dependent more on tuition/ after-school help than in-class teaching. They are expected to reproduce, not analyze, create or think out of the box in classrooms. Students in general are discouraged to ask questions or disagree in class as well as at homes as questioning or engaging in argument is seen as disrespect instead of a probing mind.

In light of such outdated classroom and home practices, we will surely produce a generation that will rely on and believe whatever comes their way without an iota of doubt or dissection. They will skim read or just echo what they have heard, seen or have been told by others without trying to go beyond the obvious or questioning them. They will retweet/ post, believe and even argue based on WhatsApp forwards, drawing room chats, TV show content and their favorite politicians’ words with zero scrutiny or thinking.

All this creates a generation of blocked minds who are walking and talking robots with no research, study of facts/data or any sort of in-depth reading. We thus have all the right ingredients for a massive cult following of populist and fascist demagogues. In short, any pied piper will stand up and walk out and will be followed blindly by many who will buy that narrative easily and quickly due to their own ignorance and gullible minds devoid of knowledge, logic and rationality.

There is therefore an urgent need to move away from the traditional mode of education, learning and assessment that encourages and perhaps institutionalizes surface level understanding, zero critical thinking and any form of research/ in-depth study. We need to make our students agents of change and allow them the space to explore, create and question. Research, presentations, thinking skills and open-ended questions should be compulsory components of the school curriculum. Sadly, today only the International Baccalaureate (IB) system is doing this as part of the academic framework from preschool till higher levels. Others seem too occupied and happy with the regular rote learning mechanism that we mocked the local public school system for.

Many in the Cambridge system have cracked the code and now know how to attain grades through tuitions, last minute past paper sessions and teacher’s notes only. That is why when graduates coming out of such systems reach good universities based on grades only, they struggle to cope with the demands of modern education.

They say that fascist Modi’s rise has just exposed the undercurrent of anti-Muslim sentiments that existed across India for decades. They say even Trump rose on a hate campaign that was already there, but hidden, in the US. Many now draw analogies and state that Imran Khan’s popularity graph, especially amongst the youth, is a reflection of the inherent intolerance, hate and bigotry that has always been there. While I agree with that assertion, I think what it also exhibits is our decaying and outdated education sector that breeds such a herd mentality that is more glorified today because of populist Imran Khan’s young following. This is a generation with no sense of history, no sense of probing and absolutely zero research skills. They buy fake news instantly and will never challenge D grade journalism or media coverage just because it suits their narrative.

We are faced with an intolerant generation that is self-righteous, hates dissent and wants everyone to think one way – which is their way. In short, we are reaping the fruits of the seeds we had sown ourselves in our classrooms and society at large. Today it is the misogynist, fascist Imran Khan, tomorrow it can be a right-wing extremist force which will use the same herd to its own advantage and ruin the already religiously intolerant and anti-women society.

Before it gets even worse, we should wake up from this slumber and stop this pied piper and work on our education system not to produce fodder for a future pied piper to mesmerize our young into delusions.

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