[**Awaran moves on**](https://www.dawn.com/news/1656089/awaran-moves-on)

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OCT 16 was a red-letter day for Balochistan. In Lanjar, a village in Awaran, a schoolteacher brought together some girls and boys after school hours to teach them the Balochi language. One could well ask what was so special about this that it must be celebrated? The fact is, the tragedy of the Baloch is that they have been robbed of their language. For years we were fed the fiction that Balochi is only a spoken language with no literary tradition. The emergence of scholars and poets such as Zahoor Shah Hashmi and Saba Dashtiari belied this myth. Now we know better.

Yet the government which has no understanding of the role of language in the sociocultural and educational development of a people brazenly chose to disregard Balochi — as well as Brahui and Pashto, the two other languages spoken in Balochistan. As a result, the Baloch children who continue to speak in their own language are denied the opportunity to acquire literacy skills in it. They study in Urdu which is the medium of instruction in schools though students generally do not understand Urdu. As can be expected, this paradox has made education a tough challenge for them. School enrolment in the province is low while dropout rates are high.

In this bleak scenario, the language class in Lanjar has come as a breath of fresh air for the disadvantaged children of Balochistan. Behind this initiative is a young man of 36 who had to leave home at the tender age of five for a neighbouring village to attend school as his own village had none. This traumatic experience has left a deep imprint on his psyche. He became an education activist so that no child is forced to leave home to study. Shabir Rakhshani — that is the name of this activist — travelled to Karachi for higher education. He returned to Balochistan to campaign for making dysfunctional schools operational.

Shabir’s passion for education drove him to set up libraries and organise book festivals. But the books for young children that came pouring in from Karachi and Lahore were in Urdu and only the senior students could read them. Primary level students are denied the pleasure of reading books embedded in their own folklores and culture. Balochi language books for them are not available as there are no young readers. The irony is that children can’t read Balochi.

The government has brazenly chosen to ignore the Balochi language.

That is how Shabir had the brainwave of starting Balochi language classes. He had learnt of Prof Dashtiari starting such classes in various towns of Balochistan and Lyari in Karachi. But the project had been short-lived and had died with Prof Dashtiari’s murder in 2011. Shabir’s experiment has been an instant success. This pioneer brooked no delay. He wasted no time on planning a curriculum and writing textbooks. All that he needed were his gut feeling, knowledge of his people and their culture and his love for children. He simply picked up a whiteboard, a marker, his own competency in Balochi (a bit rusty, he admits) and his passion for education. He is certain that Balochi books for supplementary reading material will follow. Currently the Urdu readers I send him are camouflaged by covering the text with blank paper and translating it into Balochi with names duly modified. Shabir hopes that the Balochi Academy will step in to fill the vacuum.

This is Shabir’s response to this linguistic dichotomy in Balochistan: children who speak and understand the Balochi language cannot read and write it. They can read and write Urdu that they cannot understand till they reach senior school.

Shabir is excited about his pedagogical experiment because the children are thrilled. Seventeen attended the inaugural class. A fortnight later, attendance had more than doubled and is now 42. His colleagues in other schools are planning to follow suit.

Shabir feels he himself is learning from the children and he devises innovative methodologies to keep the students engaged while actively contributing to making the class lively. This is possible because the language of the classroom is Balochi.

Shabir describes the magical impact his experiment is having on the children. Earlier, he observed, by mid-morning it would become impossible to keep the children interested in their work. They would be yawning with boredom writ large on their faces. Since he launched his language class, the children remain alert as they look forward to the participatory exercise that awaits them at the end of the school day. They are involved in their lessons and also draw pictures of what they read.

I ask Shabir what he thinks of the Single National Curriculum. “It does not ‘match’ the realities on the ground, so it is irrelevant as all previous curricula have been,” he remarks. Then he asks, “Why doesn’t the government ask us — the teachers — to draw up the curriculum as we know the child best?”

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