Which language?

BY Z U B E I D A M U S T A F A | 2/14/2020

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| THE medium of instruction in school is once again being hotly debated, not that the issue had ever been resolved. But now that the pro-mother language lobby has gained more leverage over the years, its voice is being heard. That is why passions generated by the language issue cannot be slapped down.  What provoked the controversy this time? It was a report prepared by a subcommittee of the National Curriculum Council on the medium of instruction that caused the ruckus. Later, a member of the NCC described the report as a piece of `misreporting`. The so-called wrong report had prescribed English as the medium for quite a few subjects from primary to Grade XII.  The regional languages had been omitted totally. It was the latter omission that had led to the deafening furore on social media and quite understandably so. Mercifully, a clarification was later issued by the government explaining that the question of the languages to be used as the medium had been left to the provincial governments to decide.  Be that as it may, one cannot be complacent about this matter because the provinces (with the exception of Sindh) have abdicated the rights they had acquired in respect of education under the 18th Amendment to the federal government. The propensity of the PTI to anglicise and centralise education is well known. I want to bring it to the notice of the subcommittee as well as the NCC that the teaching of provinciallanguagesisnotthe onlyissue atstake.  The vital question is the use of the mother language as the medium for teaching all subjects, including science at the primary level. To teach English as a subject is fine, but to use it as the medium of instruction is ridiculous.  The case of the mother language as the medium of education has been argued convincingly by experts all over the world. I will restate it here briefly. The mother language is acquired naturally by the child from the environment in the home and a bit later from the community. The child does not have to be taught the language which she picks up herself as her cognitive development takes place symbiotically.  This process begins right after birth and continues for six or seven years when the child is learning through a process of self-education.  Unfortunately, educationists do not understand this and believe that they are the ones entitled to `educate` the child. As soon as the child is admitted to school, which might be anywhere between two and five years of age, her past experience in selflearning is ditched and the lid is slappeddown on her language in which she is pretty fluent by then. In effect, the child is told that she must learn in a language that is quite foreign to her (for over 90 pc of our children, even Urdu is foreign) if she really wants to be educated.  What happens then? First of all, the child loses interest in school and education.  Second, she is alienated from those around her namely her teachers and other children not speaking/being allowed to speak the language she identifies herself with.  Third, she starts forgetting her own language. As a result, she loses her capacity to think, while she fails to acquire proficiency in the `new` and `strange` language she is being taught by `new` and `strange` people.  This process makes her `bay zuban`that is dumb and a rote learner. This should answer the question why our children fail to learn even in schools which provide reasonably `good` education.  Take the case of the three young boys I am mentoring these days. Ranging from age11 to 13 years, they are supposedly being educated in English.  I asked them which language they wanted me to speak in. `English,` they replied in unison, adding, `We want to improve our English.  When I brought out of my bag a smallstone that I had picked up in Berlin during my visit in 1990, when the rubble of the demolished Berlin Wall was still lying around, my students became curious. When I started explaining to them in English the history behind the stone, they protested loudly and demanded that I speak in Urdu.  They were enjoying the conversation because they could understand clearly.  And more than that, they could also articulate their thoughts with ease, which I always encourage them to do. To wind up the class, they performed impromptu a small skit to narrate the history of the Second World War! That is the magic of language. It is the bonding factor between people. It connects the teacher with her students. The teacher who says language does not matter as long as the teacher is good is wrong. It is the language of the students that the teacher must speak. A teacher who does not acknowledge this simple fact does not know that education must be participatory in order to be enjoyable. m www.zubeidamustafa.com |