**[Dumbed down deliberately](https://www.dawn.com/news/1768503/dumbed-down-deliberately)**

[Pervez Hoodbhoy](https://www.dawn.com/authors/2286/pervez-hoodbhoy) Published August 5, 2023

What PM Shehbaz Sharif blurted out recently isn’t quite a national secret. Though none in high office can admit it publicly, in a moment of despair he admitted that wherever he visits, disdain is written on the faces of hosts.

Respecting those who keep asking for loans and rollovers is hard. This, said he, is no way to live and so, “today we have to decide whether to live uprightly or by begging”.

Begging is a foul word. But a second whammy followed: “India has progressed ahead but we have been left behind due to our own faults.”

This understated the truth: Pakistan is seen everywhere as problematic even as [major world powers cosy up](https://www.dawn.com/news/1761629) to India; foreign companies are fleeing skill-empty Pakistan but high-tech semiconductor manufacturers [woo](https://www.dawn.com/news/1712063) India; and Pakistan’s space programme has faded away even as [Chandrayaan](https://www.dawn.com/news/1764702) and Mangalyaan elevated India to the world’s top four space-faring nations.

Those without blinders had seen this coming. No 21st-century country can function on tribal values, an 11th-century Arab-origin education system, and a 19th-century colonial administrative apparatus.

Proof: Pakistan is desperate to [outsource its airports](https://www.dawn.com/news/1764652), cannot run its railways, state industrial enterprises are major liabilities, and it exports mostly primitive items like textiles and leather.

Political instability and corruption are important factors but not decisive. How we educate our young is at the core of our backwardness.

Snuffing out reasoning capacity and rewarding mediocrity means that even college graduates are unable to read, comprehend, calculate, or innovate. Many become Careem captains and pizza delivery boys.

As for Pakistani PhDs: nobody wants them. Last year, overseas work permits were issued mostly to drivers and construction workers. The brain drain of earlier decades has become brawn-drain.

By robbing its young of their power to reason, Pakistan is choosing backwardness over prosperity.

To fix it all, the Sharif brothers — expected back in the saddle soon — want [more useless universities](https://www.dawn.com/news/1767199), [more highways and roads](https://www.dawn.com/news/1762119), buy more Chinese power plants, and, of course, distribute more free laptops. The PM pledged another 100,000 would be given away this year. What the last 100,000 accomplished, no one knows.

So let me propose a different fix. Outraged readers may want to practise hurling an inkpot. Others can have a good chuckle. All will agree — I included — that it cannot fly. Still, here it goes:

Let’s close down the federal and provincial ministries of education, give the officers and staff a golden handshake, and send them to wherever they can make an honest living.

Accustomed to the good life of pushing papers from one desk to another, that won’t be easy. All compassionate citizens will be called upon to pray for them.

Next: invite tenders from Finland, Singapore, Japan, China, Vietnam and five other countries. The successful bidder for a 10-year contract must reconstruct Pakistan’s primary, middle, and high school system.

The TORs will include implementing a space-age curriculum, examination system, training teachers and arranging for textbooks, teaching materials, school infrastructure, and school management systems.

Contract renewal will hinge upon enhanced performance of students evaluated through standardised tests which measure reading, comprehension, and math skills.

Students may opt for Urdu, English or five to seven regional languages. Performance will be assessed using best international practices. Equally important will be enhancing subject knowledge of teachers, pedagogical practices, and all that is expected of a teacher.

Reaping the dividends will need a generation or two. After that, the sky will turn blue. Pakistan, the sick man of Asia, will be cured and can then race towards becoming the subcontinent’s most vibrant country. India will be left trailing behind in a friendly-unfriendly competition between normal countries.

But here’s the rub. Pakistan is not a normal country with normal aspirations. Belief in blind memorisation is unshakeable. All subjects including science and math are taught and evaluated as though they were holy texts. Securing high marks is paramount.

But if successful memorisation is all that’s needed for good marks, why master concepts? Public demand for change is weak and so most schools are below mediocre.

Recently, I met some remarkably enlightened principals of schools for lower middle-class children. Risking disapproval from ministry officials and parents, they strive to make education useful. Even those from semi-rural areas are dismayed by what the [Single National Curriculum](https://www.dawn.com/news/1641105) (SNC) requires them to do. Some are quietly resisting.

Proposed by Imran Khan, SNC was turbocharged by Sharif’s government. To accommodate a massive amount of religious materials within school hours, many schools have been forced to drop their library period.

On one child’s report card I saw ‘Art’ scratched out and replaced by ‘Nazira’. On another, computer classes had been sacrificed.

The principal of a school in Chakwal told me his teachers, including female ones, were recently herded to rural “teaching centres”. To fulfil SNC’s tajweed requirement, for days they practised the proper pronunciation of Arabic words.

Elsewhere magistrates and police are strictly enforcing other religious parts of SNC. That most schools don’t have labs, libraries, or fans matters not.

This being Pakistan, laws work differently for the rich and the poor. British-linked ‘O’-/‘A’-level schools for the upper and upper-middle classes largely evade SNC.

Greasing the palms of magistrates, police officers, and school inspectors is part of the game. But it works because Pakistan’s ruling classes agree that children — all except their own — must be obedient robots.

For the reader a quick quiz: which army general or political leader sent his progeny to a madressah or an Urdu-medium school: Ayub Khan? Yahya? Bhutto? Zia? Benazir? Nawaz? Musharraf? Zardari? Imran Khan? Shehbaz? Answer: none.

The oligarchies from 1947 onward have permanently entrenched themselves. Imran Khan’s minister of education, Harvard-educated Shafqat Mahmood, assured them SNC would never replace the elite ‘O’-/‘A’ system.

If extreme privilege and extreme deprivation are to safely coexist, for the poor to think clearly and critically could be fatal. What Marx called opium for the masses is needed as much today as 200 years ago.

A dumbed-down country lacking geostrategic saleability or oil has to walk on crutches. Our education system is precisely why Pakistan shall return to the IMF for the 24th time next year and, to use Mr Sharif’s words, initiate a new round of begging.

*The writer is an Islamabad-based physicist and writer.*

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