**Promoting harmony**

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With an increasing level of intolerance in Pakistan, there is a need to promote cultural and interfaith harmony. The Pak Institute for Peace Studies (PIPS) that Amir Rana leads in Islamabad has been trying to do this by discussing topics that normally get short shrift at our education institutions and media outlets.

On May 19, PIPS held a consultation on ‘youth interfaith harmony’ and invited some lawmakers, media persons, and scholars to discuss the issues and suggest remedies. Since the discussion presented an interesting outburst of intellect and emotions, some of the points may be of interest to my readers.

Ahmed Ali – project manager at PIPS – began the discussion by highlighting the aims of the consultation and Abid Sial, a professor at the National University of Modern Languages (Numl), carried it forward by sharing his experiences with various ethnic groups at the university.

He was of the opinion that young people from all ethnic groups at the university generally have ‘love’ for each other, apart from certain exceptional incidents where harmony is compromised. Another professor at the same university, Amir Zia had a slightly different take on the issue. He enlightened the audience by highlighting the importance of the Weltanschauung (worldview) that our educational institutes have been imparting. Our youth are unable to understand that just one identity such as ethnicity, nationality, religion and sect should not taint the entire worldview of a person and community.

He expressed how indoctrinated our students have become over the years, with just one identity dominating their personality and making them uncomfortable to live peacefully with multiple identities. They find it contradictory and become intolerant and even violent adults. Binary constructs have cast deep shadows over their thinking patterns, and even teachers are not free of their bigotry and prejudices. He suggested that all those teaching religious studies should be ideals of diversity themselves. If teachers are intolerant and promote hatred, what could you expect from their pupils?

Dr Fakhrul Islam – director of research and academic outreach at the Institute of Policy Studies – was another sane voice that suggested more interaction among students of diverse backgrounds. Diversity is the beauty of society, and different flowers make a garden more appealing and interesting. Pakistan needs steps to promote this beauty instead of trying to make it a uniformed entity. As various ethnic groups have misconceptions about each other, they need more exposure to cultures and worldviews other than their own. He recommended changes in the curriculum to focus more on diversity and understanding of cultures.

Another professor from Arid Agriculture University Rawalpindi, Dr Nazia Rafiq, was more focused on promoting love for humanity instead of one ethnic group or religion. It is a lack of understanding about other cultures that reduces social capital in society and to build this capital, all education institutions must have teachers with love for humanity and inculcate tolerance. Dr Munir from the Muslim Youth University stressed the need for uniting together to achieve the common purpose of society instead of focusing on differences; if we celebrate diversity, it will take root.

Bernard Lewis was the point of departure for Dr Khalid Masud who is currently the director-general of the Islamic Research Institute of the International Islamic University. “You cannot promote extremism and then hope to have a tolerant society,” his message was clear. Extremism and tolerance do not go hand in hand and to counter this dichotomy, there is a need for more critical approaches in learning and teaching. The youth in our society craves for equal treatment, and seldom do we treat our young people equally. There is a need for elders to understand that the youth of today is much ahead of their seniors.

Dr Masud was not happy with the self-righteous attitudes that our education system propagates. His suggestion was to inform our students that all ideologies need to change with time, especially when new evidence shows that a theory has outlived its utility. The methods of teaching and the methodology itself should be open to diversity, but sadly this is hardly the case in Pakistan. One could not disagree with him when he highlighted the significance of a multidisciplinary approach to education. “There is too much stress on specialization resulting in stiff opposition to diversity, be it culture or education.”

Bahria University representative Dr Adam Saud shared what his university did to promote diversity. He talked about the establishment of the Iqbal Chair and the holding of Iqbal conferences to promote the teachings of Allama Iqbal with a particular reference to the need for unity in the Muslim Ummah. “While students chase higher GPAs, we try to promote Iqbal’s message” so that they can understand religion. Bahria University appears to be doing everything possible for their students to understand the religion of Islam by conducting sessions on the Quran and Seerat.

Prof Tahir Naeem Malik of NUML wondered why students at many of our universities have to sign an affidavit pledging that they would not indulge in any political activity. He said there were too many disciplinary committees on campuses that always keep a watchful eye on students who may act differently, “and then we talk about diversity”. Disciplinary action is just a step away from all students who dare to defy the uniformity that our educational system imposes on our youth. “Education at all levels has become highly undemocratic with no dialogues on so many issues that the system considers ‘sensitive’.

Chairperson of the Islamic Ideology Council Dr Qibla Ayaz saw a major problem with our textbooks, directly or indirectly structured on faith-based exclusion. In many respects, the older curriculum was better with a broad-based general knowledge and much wider variety of topics. “Gen Zia is still alive and thriving; his policies from Afghanistan to the use of religion in Pakistan have had a devastating impact on the country.” In the 1980s, new textbooks started promoting religiosity in society and the Nebraska syllabus that the US prepared to meet its own ends, actually changed the direction of education in this country and Afghanistan.

Brain drain was the main concern for Asim Sajjad, a scholar of impeccable repute from QAU. Sharing his observations about how the youth is desperate to leave Pakistan, he said that the country’s powerful quarters had no remorse over past errors. The youth that cannot afford to leave is running after one juggler to another, dancing to the tunes of their leaders as the country witnessed once again quite recently. “Recent events have proved that the media is more interested in mud-slinging; rather than educating, it is trying to entertain viewers and certain quarters.”

Human rights activist and PPP leader Senator Farhatullah Babar observed that the youth appears to be nowhere on the radar of the government, political parties, or the state itself. The young generation has no outlets for entertainment, intellectual development, or even for the basic needs of sports across the country apart from some selected locations. Even the manifestos of political parties do not have a strategy on youth other than some oft repeated platitudes. There is a dire need to engage with the youth and allow them to form associations and unions.

Member at the Planning Commission of Pakistan and former vice-chancellor of Sargodha University Dr Ishtiaq Ahmed highlighted both ideological and structural issues by stressing that only religion could not make a country prosper. “Liberating from ideologies is the key and there should be no beating about the bush in this matter.”

Finally, columnist and historian Sajjad Azhar informed the audience that Pakistan had missed the train and the country was heading to a disaster. I protested against the gloomy picture painted, but there were not many to support my sentiments.

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