

## **EDUCATE AND EMPOWER THE PEOPLE**

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In discussions on development in Pakistan, the dominant emphasis is on macroeconomic growth leading to the neglect of social change and of providing substantive freedoms to those caught in the trap of poverty. Rates of economic growth are undeniably important indicators but what has to be really examined is whether they meet the test of reality and are manifested in reducing deprivation and increasing the capabilities that lend value and meaning to the lives of around a third of the population barely managing to exist on the subsistence level. Our indifference to distributional aspects of economic planning has to be overcome and the theme which sings of equality of opportunity has to be perched on the front burner. The vital social dimension of enhancing human freedom by providing greater access to opportunities for dignified livelihoods is missing in our lopsided concentration on the conventional economic aspects of growth. It is revealing that the concept of social opportunities, inextricably linked to implanting human feet on the first rung of the ladder of development, is given scant attention by our policymakers. Social opportunities have been viewed by economic analysts as the preconditions for sustainable development which lift all boats. Social opportunities, according to Nobel Prize Winner Amartya Sen, refer to the arrangements that society makes for education, healthcare and so on, which influence the individual's substantive freedoms to live better... but also for more effective participation in economic and political activities. Successive governments in Pakistan, with the acquiescence of elected politicians, have averted their gaze from the strategic sector of social opportunities and its crown jewel of universal primary education.

Universal suffrage is a vital element in launching democratization. Likewise, universal primary education inclusive of the female population is to be viewed as the first rung on the ladder of development. My assignment as Ambassador to Japan brought about a profound change in my thinking and convinced me that the development of human resource in late industrializing countries is to be accorded the highest priority. A brief but succinct look at Meiji Japan of the 1870s is warranted while keeping in mind the fact that Japan has virtually no natural resources. The Ministry of Education in Tokyo was established in 1871 and promulgated the Fundamental Code in 1872. The Code preamble has an authentic ring of conviction in declaring: Education is the key to success and no man can afford to neglect it... There shall in the future be no community with an illiterate family or a family with an illiterate person . The young leaders of modern Japan in the 1870s realized the supreme importance of universal elementary education in attaining their lofty goal of equality with the West which had imposed unequal treaties on it. As the eminent Education Minister put it: our country must move from the third to the second class and from the second class to first; and ultimately to the leading position among the countries of the world. The best way to do this is by laying the foundations of universal primary education . The goal of universal compulsory attendance in elementary schools was attained in thirty years of the establishment of the modern school system in 1871 and universal literacy achieved in another twenty years.

The linkage between basic education and faster development was indisputably established by the impressive economic performance of the East Asian countries until the slowdown in 1997. The high rates of economic growth in China, after its switch to the fast track in 1980, were sustained by the spread of education across the country. Pre-reform China witnessed major educational advancement. By 1982, literacy had climbed to 96 percent for

males in the 15-19 age group and 85 percent for females in the same age group, laying the groundwork in the words of a perceptive observer for participatory economic expansion possible in a way it would not have been in India then and is quite difficult in India even now.

Why in Pakistan, faced with the incontrovertible evidence that educational achievement attested by universal literacy is the key to modernization and sustainable development, we are continuing to carry the debilitating and heavy load of illiteracy that is casting its long shadow across the lives of around 56 million of its citizens. Our understanding of the role of social and non-economic factors in development has serious gaps in it. We have a strong inclination to ignore the lessons of economic history with the result that our sense of reality has gaping holes in it. We are deluding ourselves in thinking that we have a special immunity from the consequences of our choices. Unlike East Asia, we are not an education-conscious society. We have ignored the contemporary empirical finding of the impact of female education on reducing fertility rates. The gender gap is distressingly wide in the country: it consigns virtually half of the population to cramped lives and deprives the nation of their distinctive talents which remain underdeveloped. Without institutionalized democracy and the rule of law, political opportunism stalks the land and diverts attention from nation-building issues of education dissemination and poverty eradication. In an age of globalization, with knowledge-centered economies, we have to make up for our long neglect of learning by increased allocation of resources to diffusion of education and instituting accountability for insuring that the nation gets a satisfactory return from the investment in education.

The obscurantist and feudal thinking in our society is remote from the realization that the eradication of illiteracy enhances human capabilities and the quality of life. The elitist groups,

influenced by the British legacy, concentrate on university education and express skepticism about the benefits of primary education. The negative view concerning primary education requires dispassionate examination. Regarded from the unassailable imperative of grass roots development and keeping in mind the formative phase of individual growth, primary education is much vaster in its coverage than cloistered university learning and implants habits of mind in the impressionable years of children from the age of five to twelve. By the time the secondary schooling is completed at the age of sixteen and university education begins, it is more difficult to change attitudes and habits acquired in earlier learning stage. The schooling age provides the seeding times for inculcating values that retain relevance for a lifetime. Elementary education has a socializing effect on children through its egalitarian and unifying experience. The meaning of the word primary in The Oxford Dictionary is: of the first importance, fundamental, basic. We have the primary, secondary and tertiary (university) stages in education and it is a distortion of priorities to neglect the many languishing in misery in rural areas where the vast majority of our population lives and mainly focus on the relatively well-heeled minority engaged in university education. The creation of social opportunities providing access to basic education, health care and clean drinking water to all is a road map to a progressive and prosperous Pakistan.

The quality and equity issues concerning public education in Pakistan arise from widespread deterioration in public schools brought about by lack of motivated and trained teachers, the deficiencies in textbooks as well as in essential equipment, the lack of core curriculum and glaring disparities in schooling standards. Within the public schooling system, there are unacceptable disparities between the well established schools in the main districts and helter-skelter teaching institutions springing from devolutionary exigencies in certain areas. Fairness and justice are

foundational societal values and should not be imperiled by providing profoundly unequal opportunities to children with different social backgrounds. Teacher absenteeism is a growing problem. It is not a wild exaggeration that on single day more than half the teachers are not taking classes. Even while taking classes, quite a few teachers are just physically present but are not engaged in teaching. A glaring malpractice is keeping teachers on the payrolls of schools and letting them draw monthly salaries without performing their allotted duties. The non-performing teachers act with impunity in an environment of political patronage. Our public schooling system is dysfunctional and remedial action is rendered ineffectual by entrenched vested interests. It is crystal clear that there is an urgent need for accountability with a view to ensuring that public goods like basic education of good quality are delivered to the recipients and the political considerations are not allowed to muddy the learning stream.

In the new millennium, the greatest challenge facing countries, where more than 25 percent of the population lives in extreme poverty on less than one dollar per day, is the eradication of poverty and the empowerment of the people through the dissemination of education which plants the seeds of self-improvement and of accepting responsibility for lifting themselves to a higher and humane existence. We should draw inspiration from the inimitable lines to provide the motivational fuel for the spread of education in the country:

*EDUCATE YOURSELVES BECAUSE WE WILL NEED ALL YOUR INTELLIGENCE. ROUSE YOURSELVES BECAUSE WE WILL NEED ALL YOUR ENTHUSIASM. ORGANIZE YOURSELVES BECAUSE WE WILL NEED ALL YOUR STRENGTH*