

PERSONAL VIEW

UNESCO PROPOSES A MOVEMENT FOR LITERACY

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Earlier this week UNESCO in cooperation with PACADE – the national NGO for literacy and continuing education, held a meeting with the print and electronic media for the promotion of EFA (Education For All) in Sindh province and for enforcement of Article 25-A of the Constitution, at the Karachi Press Club.

The UNESCO Director in Pakistan Dr K.K. Nagata made a passionate plea for accelerating efforts to achieve the internationally committed targets of achieving 86% literacy by the year 2015 as also meeting the goal of universal primary education as laid down in the United Nations MDGs. While she appreciated Pir Mazhar-ul-Haq Sindh Education Minister's keen interest in promoting the cause of education, she also referred to the pressing need for seriously planning and implementing a province – wide literacy programme as the current programmes in this respect were quite inadequate. She cited the remarkable progress made in other developing countries in Asia like Indonesia, Thailand, China and India and regretted that Pakistan was lagging behind even the developing countries. She highlighted the role of the media and how as a powerful medium it could help influence the government and the society to pay due attention to this neglected field. Dr Nagata also exhorted the Sindh government to come up with a requisite law to enforce the Right to Education under Article 25-A of the Constitution/18th Amendment.

Possibly the most knowledgeable authority on literacy in Pakistan, UNESCO's Senior Specialist for Education, Mr Arshad Saeed Khan in his elaborate presentation informed participants that according to the latest official estimates overall literacy rate in Sindh is 59% -- 42% in the rural areas with only 22% female illiteracy. Also that the net enrolment rate in the primary schools for female children of age 6 to 10 is less than 45%. In other words more than 55% of the girls in Sindh province do not join schools. He underscored the fact that the overall literacy figure of 59% was mainly because of the large literate population in the two large urban areas of Karachi and Hyderabad. Again according to an official survey 22% of the primary schools have no buildings, 86% lack electricity, 46% no latrines and there is no proper provision for drinking water in 51% of the schools. As for education budget allocation there has been in 2012 a negligible increase of 0.29%. In other words considering the high 2-digit inflation

figures there has been a net decrease in the financial allocation for education. Out of these allocations not even 0.5% is being spent on literacy programmes. Mr Arshad Saeed cited example of Sri Lanka where literacy rate is 95% and where all students in schools are provided not only free education but also free stationery and mid-day meals.

With the abolition of the Ministry of Education under the 18th Amendment – a myopic decision indeed – Pakistan has no mechanisms left for national planning, monitoring and coordinating literacy programmes. Although the National Commission for Human Development has survived, its wings have been clipped and its well-developed capacity for promoting and strengthening basic education drastically cut down.

KPK where a few years back a remarkable initiative was taken through the Elementary Education Foundation today presents a dismal picture with hardly any province-wide literacy projects. It is sad that an otherwise welfare-oriented party like ANP has failed to promote literacy for millions of illiterate people of the province.

The less said about Balochistan the better. With no one goading and guiding the government to make up for the last time and start opening literacy centres, there is hardly any activity to spread literacy in the province.

Focusing on Punjab, I recall my column of December 24, 2011, captioned “Literacy, Mr. Chief Minister”, wherein I had analysed reasons for a less than satisfactory progress in up-scaling the literacy programme – Punjab being the only province which can boast of a full fledged literacy department. For years there has been no whole time minister while more than half-a-dozen secretaries having come and gone to other departments within a span of two years, little of sustained progress took place. Hopefully the present secretary who joined late last year would stay on for sometime. Last year, the government took a backward step by abolishing all posts of EDOs Literacy – Executive Districts Officers. The additional charge of the department in the districts has been handed over to the EDOs Education who already are overburdened with increasing school and secondary education chores, have little time and interest to work for non-formal education.

As for the Punjab 2012-2013 budgetary programme, it woefully lacks focus on the committed target of achieving 86% literacy by the year 2015. Instead of concentrating on opening more Adult Literacy Centres – more than 3 ½ crore people in the Punjab are utterly illiterate at present (they can't even read the number of a bus) – funds are being spent on special (and otherwise desirable) programmes for a limited number of persons. Oblivious of the pressing obligation to meet the laid down targets, a happy-go-lucky approach to the formidable task of quickening the spread of literacy has been adopted. The money spent on these special (and otherwise desirable programmes) could have made a lot more illiterate men and women,

literate. With no effective stewardship available in the districts (the posts of EDOs' Literacy having been abolished) the prospects of successfully undertaking literacy programme – limited in range and scale as these are – will remain problematic and in places, bleak.

Appropriately, Dr Nagata the UNESCO Chief in Pakistan appealed to the Media at the Karachi Press Club to take up the cause of literacy and Education For All in Pakistan, in right earnest and use its colossal clout to persuade government to provide more funds for rapidly up-scaling literacy programmes and stepping up the promulgation of the law under Article 25-A of the Constitution to enforce the Right to Education.

As pointed out at the Karachi meeting today it is primarily UNESCO which is keeping alive the cause of literacy and EFA in the country. More strength to your elbow DR Nagata. Some credit is also due to a few NGOs for keeping the literacy flag flying.

As the UNESCO Director observed at the Karachi Press Club neither democracy nor the economy can function meaningfully and pick up strength and momentum if the masses lack the basic human skills of reading and writing in this day and age of knowledge societies. As a long term crusader for the cause of literacy, I too urge my brothers and sisters in the media to support the UNESCO appeal to launch a movement to wipe-out “Pakistan’s literacy deficit”. An other suggestion. Why not also work for an International Consortium for Literacy in Pakistan so that allocations for Education and Literacy can be raised ffrom the present meagre 1.8% of GDP to at least 4% as recommended by UNESCO.

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