

Home to school

Idrees Khawaja | Published April 19, 2017



THOSE who lynched Mashal Khan are educated people. Obviously, the quality of education that they and many others have received leaves much to be desired. How to improve the quality of education right from the grass roots?

In line with the model elsewhere we have schools for children close to their homes, but we have miserably failed to give these schools sufficient teaching staff or facilities.

Alif Ailaan's website says that 40 per cent of school-age children (ie 24 million) are out of school. The majority of those who go to school access only a poor quality of



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education. On any given day, 11pc of teachers are absent from the classroom. The government has failed to implement Article 25-A of the Constitution, which makes education the right of every child from five to 16 years of age. Forty-five per cent of government schools lack basic facilities including furniture, bathrooms, running water, electricity and boundary walls. Budget allocations for education are grossly insufficient.

Given how many facilities are missing in schools, it may take ages to gather the funds required for their provision. Making sure that teachers are there in the required numbers is even trickier, while the difficulties involved in having quality teachers are simply unimaginable. Making education compulsory across the country may not even be on the policy agenda in the foreseeable future.

Can we think of an alternative model to improve the quality of education? Rather than making an effort to provide primary schools closer to home, maybe within a radius of say two kilometres, how about having primary schools within a radius of, say, 15km from home. What are the advantages? We can have fewer and bigger schools, thus reaping scale economies. This would help overcome the scarcity of good teachers. The cost savings can be used to raise teachers' salaries. This will attract better teachers to the profession.

Fewer but better-equipped schools might be the solution.

In the school-near-home model, a large number of children walk to school. They cannot use transport to reach school even if they have the resources — there are no roads that connect remote villages to schools. In these remote areas, children still manage to reach school because the latter is located at a walking distance from home. How will children reach their school if it is located 15km away?

The solution lies in constructing decent roads that will take children from homes in remote villages to schools in towns in school buses funded by the state. The extra costs involved would be in developing roads from villages to towns and providing, maintaining and running school

buses. What will be the savings? Instead of having 10 schools with maybe 200 children each, we may have just one school with 2,000 children. The benefits are likely to outweigh the cost and even if this is not the case, the access to good teachers would be enough to justify the additional costs. Moreover, private schools that cannot serve children in remote areas may find it feasible to operate in towns.

The rationale of the school-near-home model is to reduce travel time for children, but walking to schools does not do so. A distance of 15km with low-intensity traffic between villages and towns could be covered within half an hour on a road of average quality. Children in urban centres also spend the same amount of time travelling to schools.

The state of healthcare is no different from the state of education. We have Basic Health Units and Rural Health Centres close enough to home. But just like schools near home these are marred by the absence of equipment and staff. It makes sense to have well-equipped and better-staffed health facilities a bit farther from home than to have these nearer home but without the equipment and staff.

The roads from remote villages to towns would not just be roads from home to schools. They would also be roads from home to hospitals and from home to markets. To make growth inclusive, we need this kind of bottom-up connectivity – from villages to towns, from towns to cities and then from cities to metropolises. Connectivity from Karachi to Kashgar would form the top tier. First let the villages and towns of Pakistan trade amongst themselves. We can think of facilitating trade between Karachi and Kashgar later.

The road from home to school reflects a bottom-up development paradigm while the road from Karachi to Kashgar reflects the top-down paradigm. Which one to choose? Developed societies settle such questions by way of independent bottom-up research and debate. To set the debate rolling, one can begin with hashtags like #HometoSchoolRoad and dedicate the proposed paradigm to Mashal Khan.

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