

Ahsan Iqbal's Speech at the National Launch of ASER 2013

ASER team, fellow parliamentarians and ladies and gentlemen; it is an honor for me to be here. Nothing is more important for us than education. A nation's security and progress depends on its human resources. In 1960s, Pakistan was ahead of East Asian countries but now we are lagging behind. The only difference was that they focused on education while we neglected it. The reason behind this lag was that for 35 years our country was under Marshall Law and under every Marshall Law the allocations for Education and Health sector were reduced. We were underfunded because the priority wasn't Human Development.

In today's world, security of nations isn't guaranteed by missiles and weapons but rather by the brain power. The nation which performs better in the classrooms and labs will be a better nation in the future. What we have seen here today is not just a wakeup call but ten times a wakeup call for us to focus on education. I have called for a meeting of Federal education Ministries in the coming week to think how we are going to coordinate our future course on Education.

In the coming 10 to 15 years, we may face a situation where a degree of one province may not be recognized by the other. We already have a class-based education system and now we may end up having four different provincial educational systems as well. So while we respect the devolution there is a need to create a linkage between the federal and provincial governments where we can convene and deliver some national standards on education.

In the end the government of Pakistan will be held accountable for the Millennium Development Goals but now after the devolution, the MDGs are totally in the hands of the provinces. Given the new situation, there is a need for coordination between government and the provinces. Otherwise, the developed provinces will get even better and the under developed provinces may lag behind further. This is one challenge that we are facing.

Another challenge is to reform our national curriculum. The current curriculum was not designed to produce creative and innovative minds for the future. This curriculum has not departed from the basic system which was given to us in colonial times- its purpose wasn't to impart a high level of thinking in the subject as then the people would have demanded freedom. Its purpose was to produce compliant servants who could serve the system. Moreover, it wasn't designed to create a group identity but to produce individual thinking. Our education doesn't produce dynamic groups where differences are accepted. So, the new curriculum should enhance group cohesion- we must develop an ability to deal with diversity and opposite points of view. Furthermore, our curriculum doesn't teach us how to do self evaluation and is instead based on external evaluation. But now increasingly children will have to make decisions for themselves. We need a curriculum which trains children for problem solving skills. Thus, our fundamental challenge is: HOW FAST WE REFORM OUR CURRICULUM- DO WE NEED 4 DIFFERENT SETS OF CURRICULUM OR A NATIONAL SET OF CURRICULUM? Unless we have consensus here, we are going to face real challenges.

The medium of language is also very important. In our society, the elite have used English as a medium of monopoly which has kept 90% of the population out of development. I do not mean to undermine the importance of English as a global language but if a nation thinks in one language and expresses in

another, it will be a step down thinking. In our nation we need to train our young minds in their own local language. In early childhood education, the child needs to form concepts about the world. If in that stage the child can't understand, he or she will only memorize! English is a competency and we do not want to lose it. We neither need a pure system of Urdu nor English- we need 'Urdish'- we need to adopt English nomenclature so that children don't feel alien to this terminology. We need to combine both Urdu and English. We can retain the terminology from English and put the explanatory part in Urdu so that children can understand the phenomena. Combining Urdu and English we need to come up with the right blend so that children can learn in a better way.

Lastly, education is also a matter of our COMMITMENT to action. We are hypocrites. We make good speeches but when it comes to action education isn't part of our priority! It's a shame that we are being told that we should send our children to schools by friends of Pakistan. It isn't our national institutions which are supporting education, rather we are being urged towards it by others. As a nation it's a shame for us. But thanks to the friends of Pakistan which are supporting initiatives like ASER. We need to create awareness among the people that they need to educate their children.

The role of media is also extremely important. There is no media coverage about education. If you are saying media, then you should develop its ability to write about education. We need to ask how many centimeters of column and on which page is which newspaper giving space to educational news? I was in Malaysia for 5 days and on 2 of those days I found education related super leads in their main English newspaper. That's the importance of education for them. But can you think here, in Pakistan, it can happen? Educational super leads should be in our newspapers. We need to train media to create sensitivity in society about education- not on sponsored campaigns, but in editorials. We need to change our narrative: we have become too good at giving the bad news and not highlighting the good news which has created this crisis that we have lost collective thinking. These 10,000 volunteers who took part in ASER campaign need to be appreciated- it's a success story- but would this happen?

We want to propagate glass half empty so much that general beliefs are that the glass is a bottomless pit. Pakistan is a mix of good and bad stories- we need to keep our media strategy balanced between the two and not concentrated on bad news only. The gender gap has reduced in the past 20 years with the growth in female education almost twice that of male education. It's a shame that when it comes to education we are the worst performers in South Asia. But in the next 5 years the government is going to focus on education and the vision for the year 2025 is to see a developed and progressive Pakistan.

Although the ideologies of different political parties are different, yet we all agree on the importance of education. One such incident was Vision 2025 meeting held in November where the Prime Minister of Pakistan and the Chief Ministers of all four provinces (who belong to different political parties) sat together to ponder upon the goals that need to be set for the future. The entire Federation depicted that although we may have differences in political ideology but the goal is the same.

In the end I would like to thank the ASER team for their amazing effort.