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Why civic education is a must

By Shafqat Hussain

Children need to be taught at an early stage how to become responsible citizens, writes **Shafqat Hussain**



PAKISTANI society, keeping in view its pre and post independence history, reflects its plurality in all spheres of social life. However, the factor of peace, tolerance, respect and coexistence is absent. This proves that social institutions like family, school and society at large have failed to develop such qualities among its citizens. There is ample research to suggest that a school, after a family, is the major institution where children develop civic qualities. Proper civic education model not only focuses on civic skills but also pays sufficient heed to the civic knowledge and civic disposition.

Civic education is composed of three layers: knowledge, skills and disposition. Civic knowledge is concerned with the context of what citizens ought to know. The second essential component is civic skills which allow citizens to think critically and act rationally. Finally, civic disposition is a quality which brings a sense of moral responsibility, self discipline, respect for human dignity and civility.

However, when I look at the education system and the civic learning outcome in the Pakistani education system, it reflects the dilapidated condition of civic education in our private and public sector institutions. This subject does not exist in its independent status. Subjects like social studies, Islamiyat and Pakistan studies have limited chunks of civic education. The national education policy does not explicitly contain civic education objectives. Therefore, from the educational policy document to the publication of our text books the component of civic education in its quality and quantity is marginalised. Moreover, the major focus of civic education in Pakistani context is merely imparted knowledge and sense of loyalty for the state in the citizen (Ministry of Education, Policy document, 1959).

Since the inception of Pakistan in 1947, political destabilisation has brought biased educational policies aiming to confirm political and ideological agendas instead of creating positive, rational, tolerant and critical citizenship. In 1958, the Sharif Commission was appointed by Ayub Khan to

develop a national education system. This commission identified that the education system is lacking in national unity and technological progress (Ministry of Education, 1959). However, development of civic competencies, skills, attitudes and dispositions among the citizens of Pakistan was overlooked by the commission. Moreover, during this period civics was merged in the subjects of history and geography (Dean, 2005). Therefore, it can be claimed that separate status of an important subject, vital for the citizenship education lost its independent existence in martial law period.

In 1972, political frustration caused by economic and social inequality left its marks on civic education. The social studies subject was introduced in class 9 and 10 to develop patriotism and built national unity but the essential and required skills, disposition and knowledge for effective and positive citizenship were set aside for political goals. Another set back was during the martial law period under Zia-ul-Haq in 1979 where the prime objectives of civic education were changed. The aim of 1979 educational policy was to Islamise society and objective of citizenship education was to develop true practicing Muslims (Dean, 2005).

Finally, the National Educational Policy of (1998-2010) is also like the previous national educational policies of government of Pakistan. It focuses again on sound Islamic ideology while ignoring important aspect of effective and positive citizenship education in shape of knowledge, skills, attitude and dispositions.

The ministry of education appointed a National Curriculum Development Committee in the year 2000 to suggest reform in the social studies curriculum. The committee report says that philosophy of national curriculum is based on Islam and ideology of Pakistan and it further asserts that the objective of civic education is to develop the peaceful and civilised citizens. However, the major objective of civic education is to develop responsible, active and informed citizenship and that was neglected. Moreover, the objectives of the proposed reformed curriculum say that love for Islam, Pakistan and strong sense of national cohesion are the prime objectives of the civic education (National Curriculum for Social Studies of Class VI, VII and VIII, 2000). In addition to this, the content and the suggested instructional strategies of proposed curriculum suggest that students should be involved in group discussions, locate Muslim countries on the map, and collect national flags of Muslim countries. The outcome of these activities is to describe, evaluate and understand the things.

However, the objective of citizenship education is much more beyond than collecting, locating, discussing and describing. Civic education focuses on effective, participatory and active citizenship. The social studies curriculum 2007 (for classes 4 and 5) reflects that it aims to prepare young people to become effective, participatory citizens in a democratic society. But the implementation of this curriculum needs strong will and commitment at government and private level, otherwise it would fail to produce the desired results.

In addition to this, under curriculum objectives and guidance text books are published. These books carry such content which instead of developing peace, tolerance and respect among citizens brings further conflicts and intolerance. The analysis of eight text books of Sindh Text Book Board suggests that instead of instilling tolerance, respect and critical thinking and

participatory skill, five out of eight books entrench biases against women, other nations, religious groups and people with disabilities (Dean, 2005).

This shows the bleak picture of history and present of civic education in Pakistan.

Efforts have been made by NGOs and a few private educational institutions in the country for the promotion of civic education in schools. It is also high time for the political leadership, policy-makers and educational managers of private and public sector schools, colleges and universities to recognise the importance of civic education and work together to bring this subject in the center of learning and teaching process.