

Literacy Is No Panacea
by
Pervez Hoodbhoy

To suggest that increased literacy should not be the most important goal for Pakistani society invites immediate criticism. Some angry citizen is bound to ask: don't you know that there are over 80 million illiterates in this country of something like 130 million? (By the way, no one really knows the numbers for sure because the government has been unable to carry out a census, either for population or literacy, for over 2 decades. The last census was scheduled to be held 2 years ago but was postponed because of bad weather. Whether it is the weather system that still remains problematic, or the bizarre power politics of the political system, is not relevant here. Eighty million plus or minus a few million is still a mind-boggling number.)

To be sure, shorn of the ability to read, each of us would be immensely diminished. Most areas of human endeavor and achievement -- philosophy, literature, poetry, science, technology, and so forth -- would become infinitely removed. Employment, except for the simplest of tasks, would be difficult because modern industry requires trained or trainable people who can read. Without the ability to read a newspaper, follow road signs, or recognize street numbers, no one can be integrated into a society where others possess these skills.

Why then is literacy not the most important thing for us? The answer, I feel, is that literacy is a mere vehicle that can move society, by virtue of moving the individuals who constitute that society, in a direction wherein the rule of law prevails, rights to free expression are protected, economic justice is a reality, men and women have equal rights, individuals are free to hold any beliefs, governments are democratically elected, and, above all, humans behave humanely. The primary issue is, or should be if it is not, to move speedily along this road.

Let me be more specific: the newly literate in Pakistan, who live in the villages or the urban slums, have next to nothing to read in the language they have become literate in, Urdu, which could be useful for making a better society in the sense defined above. Only a few bookstores are to be found in the big cities, and almost none in the towns. Those for upper-class Pakistanis are stocked mostly with imported books, exclusively in English, and have prices in dollars or pounds.

For the rest, who do not read English, bookstores have only a skimpy selection of Urdu books. A cursory glance at the shelves will show that the majority of these are about the Islamic faith -- rituals, beliefs, history, and bitter polemics. Not surprisingly, fundamentalist and violently sectarian movements derive a good part of their strength from those in the lower middle-classes who have been enabled by their education to read such literature. A close second is fiction with themes based on supernatural horrors, romance, crime, and so forth.

Pornography comes third, a remarkable fact given the extreme sexual conservatism of Pakistani society and a testimony to the universality of human desires. Next come the do-it-yourself kind of books for health, electrical wiring, plumbing, computers, and so forth. On the bottom shelf, if at all, come the books which can actually give literacy meaning and importance. These books, read in the least numbers because they are considered serious (even if in fictional form), are precisely the sort that Mashal Books publishes.

Why publish books that do not sell well? For which the market has to be painfully created, and readers persuaded and cajoled? Modern ideas, creative literature, feminist novels, educational philosophy, themes of war and peace, and so forth, are not for the ordinary Pakistani reader. Nor,

for that matter, are they for the ordinary reader of any other country in the world. We all know that nothing sells better than pulp fiction anywhere.

In the last analysis, however, there is nothing comparable in power to the serious book as an instrument for communicating the power of ideas. And, ideas alone can liberate us from the prisons that we have built around ourselves. They inspire the artist and scientist, create music, build cities, and send humans to explore the depths of outer space. Ideas are the essence of civilization, the engines of revolution and evolution.

I cannot remember anything that shocked me more, and changed me so completely, than when as a 13 year old I chanced upon the works of Bertrand Russell and, later, Bernard Shaw. And nothing inspires me more than the poems of Faiz Ahmed Faiz, arguably the greatest poet of the Urdu language in this century. Each one of us, I am sure, can point to some author who has made an indelible impression upon our minds. Ideas are, therefore, what books ought to be about. Yes, serious books are worth publishing no matter what. Literacy can never be the end goal, but just a means to access the limitless treasures which await discovery by the educated mind.

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