

## Expert opinion

Exclusive interview with Prof Anita Ghulam Ali

## Return of the native

**T**he bad news early last year was that as a result of a notification from the Sindh Government, nullifying all contractual employments, the strong connection between Prof Anita Ghulam Ali and the (SEF) Sindh Education Foundation, which she had set up in 1992, came to an abrupt end. The only asset she was given 17 years ago by the provincial government was a clerk, a three-legged table (the fourth leg had to be improvised) and a chair. She didn't get her salary for 18 months but, out of sheer dedication to the cause of education, she saw to it that the SEF went from strength to strength. By 2008 it became a result-oriented and highly successful government department under the stewardship of Prof Anita, as she is commonly known.

But the good news is that three weeks ago she was re-appointed the Managing Director of the SEF. Prof Anita is currently involved in doing the repair work. Fortunately enough, most of her lieutenants are still there so things will in all probability be back to normal soon.

Prof Anita does not like to dwell on the subject but I found, not surprisingly, that the people who work for her are jubilant. She has, however, not severed her links with the Habib University Foundation, whose management had got her in a very senior position the moment they heard of the end of her contractual employment with the SEF. "My taking over the reins of the SEF does not mean an end to my association with

the Habib University Foundation. It's an invaluable set up and I will try to help it in any way I can," she says, as I visit her apartment in a middle-class locality.

I refer to the non-functional schools in Sindh and the figure that she throws up is appalling. "There are 7,000 such schools. The buildings are in bad shape. The ceilings in some cases are crumbling, the doors and windows have been taken away by scavengers, and the teachers surface only once a month to take their salaries. The government staff members who disburse the salaries get their kickback so they are not bothered about the attendance," laments the professor.

"What about the adopt-a-school programme you launched a few years ago?" I query. "I am pleased to say that it is functioning quite well despite all odds. Based within the ambit of public-private partnership, the idea behind it is to improve the functioning of government schools," she says.

For those who aren't aware of the scheme one may like to add that the objective is achieved through resource mobilisation within the private sector, NGOs, community-based organisations and philanthropists.

"You must be making sufficient enquiries about the adopters before handing over a school to them?" I ask, to which she replies "Our first consideration is that the people who come forward to adopt schools should have the time and the resources

to run them. They should preferably be from the neighbourhood, and most certainly be well educated. We also give preference to old students of the schools for

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they are obviously attached to their alma maters. The project envisages increased involvement of parents and communities in school management. The SEF has a section, comprising more than ten people, who keep a tab on the functioning of the adopted schools."

Dilating on the subject she adds that those who devote their time, energy and resources deserve attention from the government and their problems need to be addressed. If they complain about the heaps of garbage near their gate, the authorities ought to remove them. Also the registered private schools, which are run on no-profit-no-loss basis should get electricity at domestic rates and not at commercial rates.

"I am told that a former Governor of Sindh, Gen Moinuddin Hyder and his late wife, Shahnaz, collected enough donations to build a three-storied school in Pathan Colony. The contribution came from the Bohra community in Canada. Is that true? I ask.

"In fact they adopted a school in Baloch Colony as well. Both the schools have full-fledged computer labs also. But then there are others. Not to speak of many who have set up new schools. You have heard of the great job that the singer Shahzad Roy is doing in the field of education but you haven't heard of many



unknown whose service to the cause of education is no less impressive. For instance, there is a lady called Shamim Bilgrami, who is running a school in the slums near the hill close to North Nazimabad. In spite of her indifferent health, she manages the school from her own resources. Then there is a young man called Vijay Kumar, who is himself a student of an engineering college, but he is running a school for

the economically underprivileged students in a small town called Dhoro Naro beyond Mirpurkhas. His English is excellent. Such people deserve encouragement. I recommended some of them for awards but the government just ignored my requests," laments Prof Anita.

She then refers to what she calls pockets of excellence in this country and in this context she mentions The Citizens Foundation, which has built and

managed more than 500 schools, not to mention the teachers' training schools. She also makes a special mention of schools run by different communities, notably the Bohra community.

Prof Anita opposes the idea of introducing the teaching of science and mathematics in English in the government schools. In this context she quotes an eminent educationist Prof Mujeeb of the Aligarh Muslim University, who maintained that it takes quite sometime for a person to translate a question in his mind from English to his first language and once he has found the answer then to mentally translate the answer from his own language to English. She is of the firm belief that English ought to be introduced as a second language from class 6 because by the time the students would reach that level the basic concepts of the subjects taught to them in their own languages would become easier to understand.

Talking about the government's contribution to the cause of education, Prof Anita says that the most that a federal government allotted to education was 2.4 per cent of the GDP. But by the time the money reached the provinces only 1.6 per cent could be spent.

Rampant feudalism in our country, she agrees, has been one of the major causes of lack of education. She says that on her trips to villages in the interior of the country the poor

women folk requested her to arrange for educational facilities for their kids. "Strangely enough, the poor and the undernourished women give priority to education. They don't ask for money or for food... It is in the selfish interest of the landlords to deprive the people, living in their villages, of education because they know education brings with it awareness and power. Their writ would then be challenged."

In this context she pointed out that in what was once East Pakistan, its first Governor Khwaja Nazimuddin saw to it that landholdings were considerably reduced, thus the literacy rate increased noticeably, which is why when we lost our eastern wing, Pakistan's literacy rate fell by 38 per cent.

Prof Anita is much worried about the bomb attacks on the schools in places like Swat and Bajaur. "It's shocking to see that the Taliban are doing to their countrymen what Israelis have done to Palestinians in Gaza recently, they bombed the schools as well."

The lady has an uphill task ahead of her because rebuilding what was lost when she was away from the SEF is quite an unenviable job. But knowing her dedication to her work and the presence of a good number of her old team members one can safely conclude that the SEF should soon be back on track. —Asif Noorani ■

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## 'When ignorance is bliss, 'tis folly to be wise'

By Rumana Husain

**I**gnorance is bliss. Isn't that an age-old dictum? Why then are we, the Pakistanis, trying hard to disprove it? Look around and you will find parents sending their little ones off to schools and madressahs. Turn any corner and you will find a school of a different hue and shade. As if that wasn't enough, we even opened ghost schools. What next?

Ah, 'education, knowledge'... the opposite of ignorance, of true bliss...when will we, as a nation, finally abandon our quest for this scourge, this menace?

As soon as a child is born, the new parents start to worry about selecting a play-school or a Montessori, although they have absolutely no right to do so. After all, it is the prerogative of the school's administration to select them and their child, not the other way around. Parents are audacious enough to go and have the name of their two-month old (and in some cases week-old baby) 'registered'. With our population already bursting at its seams, how can they expect to be so careless if they really want their newborn to be accommodated in a good school? Many schools are already telling them that they should have come when they were planning their weddings, rather than wasting time shopping for clothes and furniture.

Why can't parents see the value of happy-go-lucky children running around joyfully in the streets, observing other people hanging around, instead of those who stare at their boring books and the lifeless teachers who pretend to 'impart knowledge'. Parents can be so ignorant! They cannot see through teachers who have hardly anything worth 'imparting' and are actually only looking for scapegoats on who to unburden themselves. These poor, innocent children are continuously made to believe the opposite of what some very wise men and women realised hundreds of years ago when they pronounced that, preferably, ignorance is what one should strive for!

Every other person one

meets these days is in the business of running schools in Pakistan: businessmen and young entrepreneurs, the rich and the poor, people with tall claims, mullahs and pop singers...the list is endless.

The question is, why is everyone hell-bent on providing 'good education and sound knowledge' to children. Surely there are other businesses that are similarly lucrative? There is bound to be a conspiracy at work behind this. Can we blame the well-wishers of our nation if they point their fingers towards all those who plot against the very existence of our country? We should let them identify the hands that are pushing us towards acquiring education so that we lose our state of blissful ignorance.

Have you ever paid attention to the costs incurred in the name of education? We can feed all the poor and hungry people in our blessed homeland if we divert the funds spent on schools to other, more urgent and important issues. We can make our lives and our children's lives idyllic if we let them sleep it off every morning, instead of pushing them into cage-like contraptions called school vans. We will also have more straight-backed children if they are not burdened with heavy bags which, as research shows, are useless because essentially all students — even the 'best and the brightest' — have predictable difficulties grasping many of the ideas that are covered in their textbooks.

To achieve our ambition of acquiring powerful positions, roaring SUV's in which to move around at aggressively high speed, and other trappings of material wealth can come without much difficulty in Pakistan with the help of a gun or the power of good contacts. Why bother with 'education' then.

Lately, an army of self-styled saviours have risen in the north of our beloved country. They are systematically blowing up schools for girls, and seem to have wide support and, therefore, resounding success. Now what we can all do as good citizens of this country is to further support them actively, or encourage them in their self-righteous cause by passively staying put. ■