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# Private Education In Bangladesh

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THE reintroduction of democratic government and economic liberalization have both been important landmarks in Bangladesh's recent history. Modern technological advances in the form of satellite television and access to global communications networks have also had significant influence on socio-economic conditions so that it has become necessary to re-evaluate traditional thinking on many important national issues. As policies have changed to accommodate the principles of a free market economy so the role of private enterprise in all fields of development has been recognized and given due appreciation; therefore it is now more relevant than even to examine the state of private education in the country.

Successive democratic governments have to be commended on the measures that have been taken to promote the growth of state run educational facilities across the country. The decision to allow the establishment of private universities was also a pioneering move in the development of private sector participation in this most important of tasks for the future of our country. However an important question, which has long been ignored is the status of the so-called "kindergarten" and English medium schools and tutorials which cater to the educational requirements of growing numbers of children in Dhaka and other large cities.

Housed mainly in rented, residential buildings, unregistered and unregulated by the government, these schools exist in the vacuum created by the inadequacies of the state run educational facilities, operating outside the pale of government, yet catering to the children of many politicians and bureaucratic officials. A popularly elected democratic government is best placed to remove anomalies and legitimize the role that private enterprise has been playing in this field therefore the recent initiative taken by the Ministry of Education to begin this long delayed task has been greatly welcomed by most of the better quality schools themselves.

A brief survey of the background in which these institutions exist is necessary in order to understand the present situation. The changeover to Bangla as the only medium of instruction in the country, shortly after Independence, led to the demand for private education in English, which

was fulfilled by the eventual establishment of many private educational institutions, called tutorials, kindergartens or schools, that began to prepare students to sit for British school leaving examinations conducted by the British Council under the University of London Examinations and Assessment Council.

However the absence of any regulating or supervising body and the resultant uncontrolled and unstructured growth of these tutorials and schools has led to uneven, sub-standard or poor academic levels, inadequate facilities and other kinds of mismanagement in many institutions. Accusations of commercialism and exploitation have been made, in many cases not without some justification, and the public has come to see all such privately owned and managed institutions with a jaundiced eye.

The media, too, has played a part in reinforcing this image because of the sweeping generalizations that are often made about private educational facilities. These generalizations affect the better run institutions and an unhealthy situation has been created where private schools are regarded, by many individuals and the media at large, as exploitative organizations, nevertheless the demand for admission to a few such institutions continues to exist and even grows considerably each year.

Since most people recognize the need for the intensive care and individual attention, which state schools can seldom impart, and are willing to pay for it there is more reason to ensure that these facilities are provided according to a standard criterion or requirement. Any sector of development which is unregulated will develop unevenly and a sector as important as education cannot be left to the vagaries of individuals.

It is now time to take official notice of the demand for private sector education which is being fulfilled by these privately owned and run primary, secondary and high schools. It is essential that the government ensures that these institutions are able to impart a minimum quality of education for those who have the financial ability to avail of such facilities for their children.

It is a reality that all those who are able to afford it choose private education over state run institutions not only in Bangladesh but all over the world and the recognition is

evident that private sector initiatives in education fulfil a demand which cannot be supplied by state run facilities. In all the countries of South Asia for example, private sector investment, particularly corporate investment, in schools has reached noticeably high levels in the last decade.

The Bangladesh government is committed to an economic policy which encourages private enterprise and a free market economy where standards are maintained by supervising and regulatory bodies that impose minimum controls and maintain basic standards allowing the forces of demand and supply to determine price. For private sector education too; exactly the same principles can be applied and quality can be assured without affecting the incentives which bring about private enterprise in this field.

There is therefore an urgent need to find a mechanism to ensure minimum academic standards and administrative quality in private educational institutions without over regulating them so that the incentives to provide the services are lost. In the face of the clearly indicated need for cutting back on the size of government one cannot advocate adding to the bureaucratic machinery and creating further responsibility for the already over worked officials of the Ministry of Education.

Therefore one suggestion has been to set up an independent commission (on the lines of the proposed National Broadcasting Authority) composed of representatives of the academic, professional and corporate sectors which could act as a watch dog body to monitor private (English medium) schools to ensure that the basic requirements of a well rounded education are fulfilled in proper surroundings by adequately qualified persons.

However even before doing so, the government needs to develop a syllabus for these institutions that takes into account the requirements of the Overseas Examining Boards together with essential elements of the National Curriculum so that students receive a grounding in their own history and culture while being prepared for the demanding requirements of the British examinations.

In fact the better English medium schools, such as "Scholastica," have already devised such a curriculum and are maintaining strong levels of Bangla together with English so that

their students have equal access to higher education at home or abroad. Awareness of national identity, appreciation of national heritage, community service and involvement with the needs of the less privileged, are all features of the curriculum in some of these schools albeit in an unplanned and uncoordinated manner. Therefore rationalisation and standardization should be relatively simple if the models in current use are compiled and used as basis.

Another important requirement for improvement of the overall standard of education in the country is to promote and sponsor locally written and published textbooks in Bangla and English. The revision and removal of the glaring errors, omissions and misprints present in all the Board textbooks should also be an urgent priority of the authorities concerned. Once again, private sector resources can be effectively utilized for the purpose if this sector is also open to private enterprise.

Last, but not least, an effective means of improving all-round educational standards is to facilitate the import and sale of all kinds of books but specifically textbooks and reference books for schools and colleges as cheaply as possible. In recent years there has been rampant smuggling of cheap, even pirated, editions of textbooks which are sold at very low prices to undercut the legitimate publishers and importers. Apart from the malpractice involved, the loss of revenue to the government is considerable and the quality of the printing is poor and in some cases inaccurate. Consultations with legitimate booksellers and publishers followed by strong action to enforce copyright laws to bring this aspect of the import trade into the purview of government should also be taken up on a priority basis.

Given the sincere efforts being made by the present government to bring about significant changes in national educational policy and its implementation, it is reasonable to expect that unlike previous attempts to solve this vexing and anomalous situation this time private English medium schools will be permitted official recognition and registration so that they can be fully integrated into the mainstream of national education.

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