

Education On The Decline

A clean half century of education in what was Bengal, East Bengal and, later, East Pakistan will reveal three distinct periods of steady growth—and decline, starting from the twenties through the 30's on to the late forties, and thence to the eve of, and after, the 70's. The pre-independence phase witnessed more than one system of education from the primary to the secondary and post-secondary level. One was the general system in place under British rule and the other growing by its side was the Reformed Scheme based on Junior Madrasah to High Madrasah to Islamic Intermediate College. Both systems worked complementarily in a way that marked a positive contribution to the overall educational growth of this part of the subcontinent.

Very specific, though, was the contribution made by the Reformed Scheme of education. For one thing it helped cut across the tradition of Muslim aversion to the British-based education system identified with the existing general one. For the first time children from hitherto conservative Muslim families (it was a very hard task breaking through the encrusted social taboos of those times so far as Muslims were concerned) started enrolling in sizable numbers in these Madrasahs. The New Scheme was an imaginative amalgam of modern English-based education (of the time) and religious instruction. The religious ingredient in the compound attracted Muslim students, English-based modern knowledge or the knowledge of English itself came more as a bonus, less intended by the learner or his guardians, but more fulfilling to the reformer.

Be that as it may, what mattered most then, and now, as a base of comparative study is that under both systems a sustained standard of education was maintained from School (Junior) to College to University. As a tribute to this period of steady, undiminished academic growth are the scores of university graduates produced by both systems, particularly that set of Muslim ones that were readily available, on partition, to staff services and educational institutions from the lowest to the highest echelon.

The picture came to assume perceptibly gloomier shades coincidentally with the political change, although this need not have been so and could be an avoidable setback. The decline, in fact, has continued unchecked till today and there is no telling how and where it is going to end. Historically speaking there might be a plausible expectation for the decline to bottom out after more than 1½ decade. But it does not appear to have. Rather the signs point to further decline, if campus unrest, falling quality, examination irregularities and corruption in hitherto inaccessible academic areas are a guide.

The reason for the predecessor system to prove viable was: (i) discipline in academic institutions, (ii) strict enforcement of academic rules of discipline and efficient administration under able commands, (iii) dedication of students and teachers, (iv) demanding teachers and responsive students, (v) stimuli all the time available for students to sharpen their intellectual curiosity and make them study-and-knowledge-minded.

What we have now arrived at seems to be a condition shorn practically of all the above attributes. So the way to recovery—and about the only way—is to restore the positives and remove drastically the negatives.

It may be added that degrees obtained by money, examination results rigged by money or influence, or teachers taking their work lightly were things unheard of in those days. Incidentally, the decline is popularly blamed on students' involvement in politics. That is passing the buck as is usual in our kind of world. True, politics has done quite some damage. But it had existed in the past as well. And you are not going to exorcise education of politics wholly as long as you are not putting the political house in order.

But the real snag is elsewhere: administratively speaking schools, colleges and universities have as good as collapsed. With men of personality, principle and character and erudition in command, things would be far different. Along with this, enforce the rules and laws that now lie on the statute book. At least the process should start with everybody concerned meaning serious business. Has it or is it likely to, soon? — we anxiously ask.

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