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Denationalisation Of Education

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The ministerial announcement that institutions in the country will be temporarily halted should be welcomed with relief as a step in the right direction by anyone familiar with local conditions. The decision to nationalise education and the manner in which nationalisation has so far been carried out are found on scrutiny to have caused endless confusion to the detriment of the cause of education itself. This is not to say that the government can be absolved of its responsibility in the matter of public education, but a major decision of this kind involving millions of pupils and thousands of teachers should, in the first instance, never have been made without careful study of a number of factors. First, there is the question of tradition and history, the questions of the way educational institutions have grown up, their organisation and structure. Secondly, what needed to be examined and weighed was whether the government could overnight, even over a period of ten or fifteen years, take over the tremendous financial burden of running thousands of schools and colleges efficiently. Thirdly, the government's financial resources apart, one could legitimately ask whether the government Directorate of Public Instruction had the necessary machinery and staff to oversee a gigantic scheme of this kind.

Then there is also the question whether nationalisation, in a country with a diversity of educational traditions was desirable at all. Do we really want all institutions to be bull-dozed into a rigid uniformity which deprives local bodies of all initiative and all freedom of manoeuvre.

Nationalisation has actually been in process since before the establishment of Bangladesh, and the experience, we must dolefully admit, has been far from satisfactory. When, for instance, scores of well-established private colleges were nationalised in the sixties and they were called upon suddenly to conform to government rules of recruitment and promotion, hundreds of teachers who were found, not to possess the second-class Master's degree which was the primary condition for appointment to the government educational service, were thrown out of work. In many cases, replacements took several years to find, and meanwhile the entire educational scene was disrupted.

The same thing was repeated in the case of the schools. The result despite the government's best intentions, was retrogression, not progress.

There are several other aspects of the matter which call for attention. Government control, however, efficient or inefficient, has meant the imposition on all institutions of officially sponsored text-books which are badly written and printed but which cannot be done without; it is on them that examinations are based. Teachers and guardians write to us from time to time to complain that under the existing scheme of nationalisation, nothing that carries the government's imprimatur can be avoided. The public grievance about the Text-Book Board's publications which we have discussed before proves how correct these complaints are.

Last we mention an unpleasant fact, the conversion of educational institutions into employment centres at the expense of their real function. New institutions are still being founded by private parties, but always or nearly always with a view to using them as pretexts for a demand for a grant for a batch of people who turn to teaching as a last resort after having failed to obtain any other jobs. The outcome, in the name of educational progress, is the growth of unprecedented irregularities.

We need a clean educational policy consistent with our financial and administrative resources, which must reflect the country's traditions. But denationalisation of education, justified by the circumstances, cannot be a complete answer to the mess into which education has been thrown by the irregularities and inefficiency in its management over the past years. If quality education and improved standards of academic discipline is the goal set before us educational growth under private control will perhaps need more specific public attention ensured by the Education Directorate. This may look like a contradiction in terms. But where public management has failed to produce the desired results it would be naive to expect that privatisation will change things for the better overnight. Certainly the Education Ministry cannot wash its hands of the responsibility to see to it that the education system is run efficiently. The responsibility has become rather greater than smaller because of the government's decision to denationalise education.