

Private univs and the new middle class



AND WHAT DO YOU THINK?

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THE resistance of private university students against the government, the rich and powerful and its own authorities, in the past three years shows quite a militancy that is unusual and unexpected. In each case, the students took to the streets and each time, they won, however big or small the victory.

What is interesting is that these private universities are supposed to be producers of docility but instead have become breeding grounds of a new robustness. It is militant, but non-violent; self-motivated, not political party-led; issue-driven rather than partisan; and non-funded by vested interests elsewhere. This makes the activities more about their own immediate world rather than supporting any distant political agenda of a party hoping to come to power. They are not agents of a political party, but free agents of their own cause.

Private university students were not supposed to be like this. They were supposed to be a quiet lot, who study to get employed and finish. In fact, private universities were attractive to many parents on the ground that it was 'non-political' hence agitation-free; so, students would not lose time and graduate quickly. That is happening but what has also happened is that the class alignments in society has shifted and the old middle class, Tagorean and based loosely on the principles of the first constitution, has withered as the Shahbagh movement showed.

This middle class was very government-focused, traditionally bound by the idea that all roads came and lead to the government house as the source of legitimacy. This idea is still very valid in public universities, the nurturer of the ruling class particularly through the BCS examinations and the much more sought after BBA/business studies degrees. The authorities have a big stake in them and it makes sure that higher education is loyalist. Which is why the public universities, traditional seats of resistance, once have become

new seats of agreement.

This model has been strengthened by the academic community there that is very partisan and tied to the ruling parties. In fact, so close are the ties that the factionalism hitting various factions of the ruling party has affected them as well leading to unseemly court cases and mutual suing. This is because public universities have become the upper-class-in-waiting and there is a distance between the rest of society. They originate from the middle class but are headed towards the upper class and willing to pay a price for that. The middle class is very fragmented now, making older distinctions obsolete.

The earlier nationalist middle-class model is not applicable because the members and their brood are the ruling class now in power and no nationalist movement exists. Having become the upper class, they cannot function as the resisting middle and are in contradiction with the rest. Thus they uphold the state at all costs as they benefit most from it. On this equation, the lesser citizens, academically or ambition-wise, go more to the private universities.

The upper class goes abroad mostly to study, but a chunk does stay at home but they are not affected by the problems of local economics. The middle is split into three broad divisions and merit plays a role. The best students go to the public universities and most hope to join the BCS. They are very focused on the government labour market or higher echelons of the commercial market. Clearly, public universities are elite production units.

But those who are in the private universities fall into the middle range, are not driven by Tagorean ethos or the 1972 principles which are generally considered never to have been applied unless politically useful. Their parents have to fork out huge fees but then education is the only survival tool of that class. With almost 100 private universities, many with below standard and even dodgy credentials, they represent the weak structure of this class as well. But that applies to the entire middle class in general except those patronised by the government.

But the spontaneity of resistance should interest social history students

because they, in the three instances took on the most powerful and were not cowed. This is also significant that in the last two decades, the economic pillars of society has also changed with the government supervising investment in the two largest sector, infrastructure and energy. The rich will come from this cluster and the managers will mostly be from public universities or from abroad. The middle-middle and lower middle will have to work harder to find their livelihood niche.

But living and growing up outside the inner privilege circle, private universities, private media and small time entrepreneurs may be forming a class cluster that has escaped attention as social resisters in a post-nationalist world in the urban domain.

In the rural urban divide, such divisions are also obvious as linkages with the government become a key factor in becoming the upper class. To that extent, the private sector hyper wealth is also an extension of the public sector. Hence mega wealth making is not possible without official support. This diffusion is key to the understanding of

emerging social equations.

It is interesting that private media and private universities are both following the same model in some respects when it comes to ownership. Wealth is not enough to initiate such projects but connections to political power is also needed. Thus, both media and universities have been pitted in the same struggle. However, media workers are less free as they depend on employment but students are not, hence they are more militant and more successful. But the power equation relation is not any different.

If Hefazat is the most powerful representation of the rural middle class, they seem to have politically overwhelmed the Shahbagh class who were the ones most representative of the older middle class. But the public universities are producing a new middle class we may not have come across much before. It may become influential as well, more than we are contemplating now.

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