



The Pristine View

What Price Education?

THE middle classes, traditionally the standard bearers of education have long since been priced out of education. No longer able to patronize local institutions due to their poor educational standards and not able to afford the cost of sending children to the new breed of schools that have grown up since liberation, the middle class children have nowhere to go.

Although no-one can argue with the principle of public education founded on equal opportunity, in a country where class differences are vast and where funding for public education is one of the lowest in the world, no middle class parent is unlikely to send their children willingly to schools that more often than not, offer only a sub-standard education. As under present conditions there appears to be little scope for improvement, this class of children must either go without a proper education or attend one of the private schools, no matter the cost.

What happens to the children who are forced by their circumstances to attend a public school? Here they must follow the prescribed curriculum which has been designed as a stepping stone to higher education. For the middle classes this form of education may be ideal, at least in theory for it is dependent on maintaining standards. But for most children, the form of education on offer is one to which most will never aspire. In effect this means money spent for their education often goes to waste. Even those who do opt for higher education soon find that without the services of a private tutor, they flounder within this system that lays stress on memorization rather than on problem-solving and analytical skills.

But the fact of the matter is that the role of the state as exclusive provider of education has long since undergone a dramatic and radical change that cannot be undone and, although this change, at least in theory, provides a student with a greater (if not better) choice of schooling and systems,

this may not always either benefit the child nor the nation as the mushrooming of private institutions with their foreign orientation are neither subject to state control nor do they have a responsibility toward the child.

As they can do very much as they like in deciding the amount of fees to charge, many follow a line of seeing what the market will bear rather than what is reasonable or socially responsible. Curriculum and educational standards are not uniform but the alternative, the state run schools are, by the admission of the Ministry of Education, under a sector that not only has a large leakage of funds, is also crippled by corruption and misappropriation of funds. Any residual hope anyone may harbour about improving the quality of education quickly fades when faced with these facts. If an increase in budget allocation would make a difference the people should press their representatives for more funds provided that such a move does not force the ministry to raise the fees, thereby pricing out the poor.

However, poor as these schools may be in quality education the curriculum was designed to achieve the goals the nation has set for education. In fact it would seem that a good deal of thought went into its design yet despite this, there are still a good number of defects. Why this is so is inexplicable because there is no dearth of genuine experts and experienced educationists, so why is it we are unable to create an environment conducive to equitable education.

With so many children not receiving the education and training they need to get them through life, it is time to remedy the defects, but first we must know what education should do for the nation. Unless it is a means for upper social mobility, it is a sheer waste of time. In other words, the role education plays in our lives must be clearly defined and just as clearly understood by all the people for though education must meet the needs of the nation, if the government is concerned only

with economic growth, we may end up with the poor getting the short end of the stick at the lower end of the scale and the middle classes getting the short end of the stick at the upper end. So how do we strike a balance?

Obviously we need a wider vision of what we, as a nation, hope to achieve from education which means if we really do want to improve the social and economic fabric of the nation, the role education must play in the life of the nation must be more clearly defined. But as much will also depend on how willing people are to forego private income expenditure and conspicuous consumption in favour of developing and sustaining a strong educational system, a new role for education must be in doubt despite the fact that the goals of the Primary Education Development Plan (PEDP) for 1997-2002 are crystal clear.

Although everyone agrees the education system is in crisis and say it has reached a point where something must be done, forthcoming remedies seem few and far between. Of course this is easier said than done, for the teachers themselves seem to have lost direction and instead of being the guiding light as they should be, they seem to be ready to self-destruct. If the teachers cannot function as the conscience of society, as a nation we are lost. Therefore in addition to redefining the role of education we must also redefine the role of the teacher by spelling out his responsibilities. If as a nation we cannot reach a consensus on this we cannot provide our youth with the guidelines they need. If we cannot inculc in them their private and social responsibilities, then the deficiencies cannot be erased. In other words instead of being a force for positive action the teachers have themselves become a retrogressive force and if this has resulted in a chronically low standard of education, we must find the answer quickly.

Unless immediate measures to restore excellence in education in public schools is undertaken and

for establishing the constitutional right to higher education for all who seek it are not confirmed, the standard of education on offer will plummet further. These private schools have emerged in response to the concern of parents and guardians about the state in which sending their children to these schools is not always practical since only a small fraction of people can afford to pay for this education which is costly because these private institutions have to generate their own revenue. A most common source of these fees must of necessity be high. The question is, will the patronage of these private institutions lead to the growth of schools that will be within reach of the general public or will they be confined only to the rich thus creating an increasingly divided society.

Any division within society undermines the sustainability of democratic institutions and perpetuates social unrest so we must be very careful in what we do. We do not wish to set the stage for more social unrest. In other words we must find a way to close the gap in standards and equal opportunities for men and poor. One of the problems of state run schools is they can no longer meet the demand, which of course for these private institutions, all chance to grow but by patronizing them we cause further divisions in society. This must be addressed soon. What it really means is that the old elitist form of education that has never been eradicated must be set aside. We cannot deny that a stream which caters to encouraging science and technology and its associated hi-tech formula can only be effective when the right conditions are met. Although we may define those conditions, we must also remember that the computer is a tool and not a crutch but the bottom line is that as teachers and parents are still the most important factors in influencing a country's education, everything will ultimately depend on them.