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The Case For Privatisation Of Education

If literacy and education is the country's number one problem—both people and government are at one on this—the one feasible way to achieve at least a sizably partial solution of it is privatisation. True, across the country privately run schools and colleges (not yet universities) function side by side with the government-run ones and the public sector in education is seen expanding following the policy announced by the government of nationalising as many schools, colleges as possible in addition to primary schools run by the government.

In the cities, though, private teaching institutions, most of them labelled as tutorials, or bearing similar educative titles, have come up over the years.

In favour of these privately set up educational facilities one strong argument is that, whatever the cost, increasing numbers of boys and girls have taken to them and are receiving knowledge and education as well as a grounding in some skills. The other fact to be noted about them is that for the most part it is only those who can afford to pay for such education services are the beneficiaries.

Even in the cities a huge number of children and youths have to go without education or even rudiments of it for lack of schools or similar facilities delivering education. Among the deprived are also those who have either dropped out of schools or have discontinued their education, having failed in their final school or college examinations. They comprise students from primary to secondary to intermediate levels.

Besides, admission tests (often made unnecessarily tough) for students wanting to get into the few existing schools in the cities screen out huge numbers of them with few alternative places for them to go to for further education. The situation is as true of the universities of the country including the engineering, technical and medical colleges. We know of students unable to get into a medical college or an engineering university cooling their heels for two or more years, with hardly an opportunity to get themselves admitted to any institution at home or abroad.

This is a widening void in the delivery of education services in the cities which at the moment house nearly 15% of the middle class population of the country, apart from the thousands of children in the urban ghettos or semi-ghettos. The situation, educationally, in the rural sector, is far worse.

Scarcity would be an understatement. The overall position, despite the schools and colleges, state-managed and privately-run, is a shambles. The government is going ahead with nationalisation of some of them but, as public complaints have it, this is being done in most cases along political lines and not from considerations of quality, viability or other essential matters of management. Most important, nationalisation has meant a bigger shift of emphasis from the private to the public sector schools and colleges, with consequences for the former easy to imagine.

For one thing, nationalisation on the scale the government seems set for, is financially an uphill task, if not unfeasible, for a country like Bangladesh. As in the past, as far back as colonial days, there can be only a select number of schools and colleges run by the government as models of efficiency of management, and claiming other excellences. One recalls state-managed zilla schools in the districts or colleges, in the thirties, which not only sustained a high standard of teaching but turned out batches of brilliant students.

Side by side with them were privately run schools or colleges who competed with their public counterparts, in many cases, quite closely, despite the relatively poor quality of their recruits, the best students having found their way into public schools. They included specially those with top places in their M.E. school or secondary final examinations. But the fact for us to note is : there was a fairly keen competition between the public and private sector. For instance, an institution like Feni School or Feni College built up a reputation of being among the best in the province. Many of them were on a par with government-run institutions, some even with an edge over them.

That is the historical model the country needs to revive and, as it has done in industry, translate it to the private sector. It should aim at achieving it within the same frame of management as applies to government institutions bar only the financial responsibilities which will be the private entrepreneur's. Prospects of success in education through private entrepreneurship is much more assured than in industry.