

The Bangladesh Observer

Private Higher Education In The United States And Bangladesh

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BEFORE any comparison may be made between the higher education systems in our two nations, I must spend a moment defining the scope of the private not-for-profit sector in America. In recent years we have come to appreciate what is often called the Third Economy. Presently, the nonprofit segment of the United States employs more civilians than does the federal government and the fifty state governments combined. Their collective income and expenses exceed the budgets of all but seven nations in the world. The nonprofit sector is most commonly defined in the negative — what it is not. A nonprofit organization is one that is not a part of government and does not exist to make a profit. They are usually defined by their mission. Whereas business exists to make a profit and government exists to provide an essential structure of law and order, nonprofits exist to provide some service.

In the United States, when government takes on a responsibility for a social need, it does not necessarily launch programme to meet that need. Often it gives funds to nonprofits to do it. This arrangement is simple, efficient and politically wise. The agencies got money, not competition. The people in need get help. Government increases its influence, reduces its overhead costs, gets credit when things go right and can get out when things go wrong. What else is sweeter?

Now we must speak about education. I begin with a story. It's an old fable but it contains some allegorical truth. "Once there was a king of a remote and isolated kingdom where the crop failed and the kingdom had to use its stored reserves of older grain. They found that the reserved grain had gone bad, had become diseased and rotten. People who ate the poisoned grain went mad. A small supply of this year's crop was saved and it was healthy and good. But it was a very small amount and next year's crop was a year away. The king faced two unpleasant possibilities; share the poisoned grain and watch many go mad or destroy the poisoned grain and watch his people starve.

The king decided to distribute the poisoned grain. No one was to starve and their madness may be healed in the future. But, he selected certain subjects and saw that they consumed only the new healthy grain, never the poisoned grain, so that a few will always remain that will realize that the majority are mad."

It's only a simple story about a king and his grain. But I believe it is timely. Any study of our newspapers, our television, the happenings of this world in every corner, tells us that the world is mad, eaters of poisoned grain. It's an allegory for educators who presume to feed the minds of our children, but also it's a story for parents. We all desperately want our sons and daughters to eat the healthy grain, not only because they are ours and we love them, but also because we realize that all we have created of physical, intellectual or spiritual character will one day be in their hands. There is no task in this world more imperative than preparing the young to receive this world. If

that fails, no other successes have meaning. I want my children to have healthy grain, I'm as fierce a father as anyone. But I want others to have it also, so my sons and daughters are not a minority in a world gone mad.

I haven't been in Bangladesh long enough nor studied hard enough to speak wisely about university education here.

I do, however, find widespread concern. One official expression of that concern is in the Report of the Task Force on Bangladesh Development Strategies for the 90's. This report states, "The university system has not been able to accommodate the demand for higher education generated by demographic and developmental factors. The rigidity of the system, non interaction with output users, imbalance of content planning, absence of adequate specialization and research opportunities, wastage in the use of available resources, all have been the cause of lowering the standards despite the presence of qualified teachers and selective admissions. Rapid expansion has brought depersonalization, conflict situations, inefficiency and bureaucracy bordering on group autocracy." The report also says that the nation needs an accreditation system and needs more universities, structured in totally different ways. And finally, it says that if these steps are greatly delayed it will place an unaffordable cost on the nation. I recall my own warnings to American higher education twenty years ago. In support of a vigorous independent system of universities I said in 1973, "The alternative would be monolithic public enterprises, managed by absentee state boards and central state bureaucracy, heavily influenced by Washington, readily susceptible to politics and often marred by impersonality and uniformity. The value of the independent sector is to guard against monopolies through diversity of financial support and pluralism of control." Note the similarity of these two warnings, made twenty years apart.

Both are pleas for variety and choice. To again use the grain metaphor, I live in middle America near a state that has one, and only one crop. Iowa grows corn, nothing else. In the interest of operational efficiency, Iowa has become a monoculture. Bangladesh has an agricultural heritage of two thousand years. Iowa first felt the plough one hundred and forty three years ago and in that short span the Iowa top soil, never much more than twelve inches at best, has declined 25 per cent. Iowa must change her ways or be out of business in a little more than another century. The monopoly is the enemy. Iowa shouldn't grow only corn and universities, anywhere, should not be only what government declares them to be.

I have a friend in the middle of America working for diversity with that same grain, corn. Wesley Jackson is a geneticist who has decided that the plough is the enemy of our top soil. He has created an experimental agricultural station dedicated to the development of perennials for all of man's food, the

eventual elimination of annual ploughing and planting, and watching our top soil go down the river. When Wes began, many called him a madman, an eater of poisoned grain. In 1968, when I realized his mission, I asked him if we were, in the future, to eat our roses. His answer was, "Corn", and he showed me a strain of corn from the Andes Mountains of Peru. Struggling to grow in over 20,000 feet height, this corn was more of a bush than a stalk, but it did have a small ear and it did reproduce itself with no help from man. Wes began to cross breed this corn in 1967. I asked him when he would have something to be commercially successful and feed people. He estimated about fifty years. I laughed and called him a madman. In this world who can wait fifty years for solutions? That was twenty-five years ago. Wes is still cross-breeding, I'm still giving Rotary speeches and his no-plough corn is a few years away. Which one of us is mad? May be it is those of us who see only short term answers and believe that the future must always resemble the present.

A few words about the cost of university education. It is, often generally agreed that the public university is low cost and that the independent private university is high cost. In fact the cost is usually the same. Actually many would agree that the worldwide bureaucratic inefficiencies of government probably make the cost higher at the public university. We confuse cost and price. In the United States the independent universities are not high cost, they are high charge. Let's not be deceived. If it costs Tk. 25,000 for each student at Dhaka University and the student pays Tk. 500, where does the rest come from? Higher education is an expensive product, but so necessary for the survival of our world that we all share in the cost. No one has worked out the perfect equity in paying that cost, surely not the United States. I'll tell you of two of my neighbours. The first is a carpenter, his wife is a typist, they have four children, a modest income and their oldest son attends a private university. He lives at home but the price of tuition is \$12,000 a year. Not cost, price, I'm sure the real cost is much higher yet.

The university established what my neighbour could pay and arranged for the rest to be taken care of by loans, grants, scholarships and discounts. I am pleased. My neighbour's son is getting a good education, and it isn't costing me one penny. Another neighbour is a medical doctor, a radiologist with a lucrative practice. He has more discretionary income than anyone in our neighbourhood. Both of his children are in medical college to follow in his footsteps. Our Medical College is supported by the State and every taxpayer in Nebraska is sending a few pennies of taxes each year for the education of his children while the radiologist pays low tuition and uses his savings to build a winter home in Nebraska. Bangladesh isn't the only place with inequities.

But, we have two systems. Don't

forget my first neighbour. The institution I served for twenty years takes pride in having the highest tuition charge in Nebraska and the highest financial aid programme to help students meet that charge. Doane announces a tuition of US\$13,000, realizing that about three per cent of the students will pay the full rate. The other 97% fill out the Financial Aid Form (FAF), a nationally approved instrument that factors family income, size, cost of living and informs both parties what the student or student's family could pay.

That, then, is what they pay. That is the best system yet designed for equality. Equality is not the same cost to everyone. My neighbour, the radiologist should pay more. I get nervous making public statements that sound like socialist slogans about arrangements that fit the needs and abilities of each person. However, I believe I'm afraid of the "to each" and "from each" only when they address government promises. In the nonprofit sector the idea of each paying according to their abilities and receiving according to their needs sounds, to me, like perfection indeed.

One final point. You may ask, how does the independent university make up the differences between high cost and the student's ability to pay? In the United States it is widely accepted that the non-profit institutions deliver more services more efficiently and at a lower cost than any government that we have yet devised and that the US government would never duplicate this third economy at any price. Therefore, government challenges the non-profits to serve — they hand them responsibilities. They encourage them to serve — they offer tax deductions.

The government even pay the non-profits to serve with direct grants for services. I believe the recent decision in Bangladesh to terminate tax exemptions on charitable contributions is a major strategic error. That "hunting license" in the United States has allowed non-profit institutions to aggressively seek large gifts and has created billions of dollars in service to the public. I am persuaded that Bangladesh would be well served by a healthy network of independent universities.

I suggest them that you support the efforts of your pioneers in this work, not only the Independent University where I serve, but all educators who forsake personal profit and government bondage. I suggest that you join your voice with others to recover tax deductions for charitable contributions. You should demand that your educational system educate more of the young, educate them better and keep them here. You should, in every way possible, commit the money and the energy to feed healthy grain to the largest number possible. And, believe me, you can trust the healthiest and the wisest of your young people to want that healthy grain, to want it here, to partake of it here and to lead your country forward.

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