

Private University: An Initial Proposal

১৭/৮/৮৮

—Junaid Kamal Ahmad

CAUGHT in the cross-fire of urban politics, the universities are more often closed than open. Examinations are continuously delayed, some even postponed. On average, an Honours programme takes five to six years to complete, even then completion is not guaranteed. Faculty demoralisation is dramatic and acutely visible.

The problems facing the educational system in Bangladesh are complex and by definition do not allow for a unique solution. However, the establishment of a private university may be part and parcel of a general reform of the educational system and it's certainly worth exploring. In an ideal world, the notion of a private university would encompass the whole gamut of academic disciplines in the areas of science and humanities. However, the implementation of such a university would prove too ambitious a project to undertake. Instead, it may be worthwhile to concentrate on a smaller scale version of a general private university, perhaps a school of public policy capable of providing undergraduate degree in fields such as economics, public administration, sociology and finance. This article seeks to propose such an idea.

The motivation for a private university is almost self-evident. First, there is a great need to isolate education in Bangladesh from the uncertainties of the political system. In one sense this is already an impossible task. All institutions, whether private or public, cannot be isolated from nationwide hartals or Government imposed closures. However, it seems that the commo sine die closures are more a result of the permeation of urban politics in the student body. Tragically enough, this linkage between urban politics and the student

body is being promoted by a few at the expense of the majority. A newly established private university, which would cater to a much smaller student body, would be more effective in seeking to cut this political linkage. It is tragic and ironic that a country born out of student politics must now seek to isolate education from politics. But there is no doubt that a more subtle balance between politics and education must be found, and a private university may be a component of that balance.

Secondly, the possibility of working as a faculty member in a private university may prove to be an attractive option for many Bangladeshis living abroad. more and more, there are cases of expatriate Bangladeshis, representing a variety of educational background and work experience, seeking ways to return to Bangladesh permanently, or temporarily. Furthermore, a whole group of Bangladeshi students, pursuing their doctoral programmes in the US and UK in the fields of social sciences, are often in search of institutes to base their research work. Both of these groups are perfect candidates for developing a faculty base in a private University. Indeed, the ability of a private University to attract both these groups is, in itself, a justification for the creation of such a University. Needless to say, the creation of new faculty position will also be an incentive for students and professionals in Bangladesh proper.

A third reason for the need for a private University is the near monopoly status enjoyed by the national University system. It seems that there is a stagnation in the academic work provided by the faculty. This, one can hope, is not the rule,

but certainly it does not seem to be the exception either. There is an urgent need to infuse enthusiasm and healthy competition in the system. Job security can not be guaranteed solely on a seniority basis. A system where excellence in teaching and research is rewarded needs to be introduced. A privately run University would have a better chance in introducing such a change and also provide a yardstick to judge the faculty in national Universities.

Finally, there is a need for reforming the curriculum of some of the major departments in the national Universities. Reform of such curriculum must be based on the notion of its suitability and applicability to the problems faced by Bangladesh. However, a caveat must be raised. When teaching a subject, for example economics, a whole body of work must be covered before a student can be considered an economist. This is a self-evident proposition. However, it seems that once these tools are taught it becomes important to ask how they may be adapted to the context of Bangladesh. Even if one accepts that the departments within the national Universities are effectively covering the gamut of topics necessary to grant the students an undergraduate degree, a proposition that can be justifiably questioned, one can be wary as to what extent the national Universities have equipped the students to contribute to solving the problems faced by Bangladesh.

Implementation and Finance

An important first step in the formulation of a private university is the issue of accreditation and acceptability

of the faculty and the degree both nationally and internationally. One solution would be establishing an affiliation with one or two recognised universities abroad. In the past, American universities have had campuses overseas and have often assisted in the development of curriculum and faculty training. one would need to carefully assess the possibility and feasibility of foreign university involvement. This is certainly an area where the Bangladeshi community living abroad can play an important role.

The issue of affiliation is also important in the context of finance. one cannot overemphasize that a venture of this type crucially depends on the amount of finances initially established as an endowment for the university and its ability to earn current income on a non-profit basis. Potentially the sources of finance are manifold. First, international organisation, including foundations, are always willing to finance local educational enterprises in developing countries. An affiliation with a well known university may facilitate the ability to raise money from international sources. Secondly, one should not underestimate the amount of money that can be generated in Bangladesh. Various private groups have already expressed interest in assisting the development of such a university. The growth of a new industrial private sector in recent years has slowly transformed the need of the private sector specially in the form of skilled management cadre. Furthermore, many of the upper middle class would prefer to see their children studying at a local university versus bearing the burden of a foreign education. (To be continued)