



The Pristine View

Private Universities And Social Costs

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The history of university education in Bangladesh since the partition of India and independence from colonial rule has been marred by an inability to keep pace with rising costs. But today, with state-owned universities coming under pressure to open their doors to an ever increasing numbers of students, and as these universities have failed to become self-supporting institutions, the government had no choice but to open up education to the private sector, despite knowing that this would lead to fewer opportunities for the poor to gain any access to higher education. But due to session jam, terrorist and political activism on campus and the political instability that prevails throughout the country, thousands of students have been forced to go abroad for higher studies, inevitably adding to the already considerable brain drain. In addition the rise in the cost of providing public education at subsidised rates, and the lack of accommodation in government-owned universities have all provided an impetus for establishing private universities. Although not a new concept, for such universities already exist in some neighbouring countries, the idea raises certain social questions for this type of educational institution, by virtue of its cost, is exclusive. On other words, the establishment of private universities unequivocally means education is confined only to the privileged few.

But with more students passing the BSC examinations than can be accommodated in government-owned universities, and with the cost of sending students overseas spiralling, the private university was seen as a means for accommodating the excess and containing the cost of sending students abroad, at the same time arresting the brain drain. But what was overlooked was that, although there was a need for establishing new institutions, this should have been at costs the people could afford and not aimed for the up-market, for the current fee structure of the private universities is to invite social problems in the form of greater class divides. In addition, they could hamper the growth of intellect and research in the country because the poor will be excluded and with them the possibility of a brilliant mind. As the tradition on which universities are founded is to produce researchers and academicians, private universities may not be able to fill this role or at least, will not be in a position to do so for some years to come, as such we should take a closer look at their performance to date in the hope

of getting a preview of the future.

It is interesting to note that the common and most persistent of the complaints and cause of dissatisfaction mirror closely the complaints that are levelled against the English medium kindergartens and tutorials. One guardian has even gone on record as saying "they are not universities but big-size kindergartens." Some indictment! But it is the high rate of fees charged for what are generally very poor facilities that bother parents the most. The private universities seek to justify these high rates with two arguments—one, they charge less than the current cost of a Masters programme in the United States and two, investment in this sector is high. But placing the burden of such high fees on students in a developing country places a great strain on the resources of the private individual who sometimes has to beg, borrow or steal to keep his children in the university as in some circles having a child enrolled in a private university as in the case of the English medium schools, has become a status symbol.

On the other hand there is a tendency for parents to expect too much from these new establishments with the result they are naturally disappointed, and once disappointed they are very likely to come to think of this type of education as a waste of money. But to those founding a private university, education is not so much a service but a commodity to be bought and sold in the market place, therefore the focus is always on the demand which is undeniably strong, but which scatters the concept of equality and social justice to the wind.

This is unfortunate for in a democratic set up, sooner or later it is society itself which determines the way a university is to be run—whether it is private or state-owned. However unless the private universities can generate more of their own resources, we could see the collapse of many in the near future, which apart from the loss will create innumerable problems for the students enrolled.

In other words with the cracks in the system showing, the main problem these universities are up against is a lack of resources which is why not a single one has been able as yet, to shift onto its own campus. It is ironic that it was the lack of resources in the state-owned universities that laid the way for the establishment of private institutions in the first place, which rather places the country—and education—in a quandary, for it allowed a private university run

by an astute group of people to thrive without any responsibility to students and guardians. But as parents are not interested in the economics of the establishment and are concerned only with getting value for money, once the cracks widen, many are likely to remove their children from these universities and send them abroad.

The question we have to ask ourselves is are we been hoodwinked into believing the private universities can provide higher education at international standards at prices we can afford? Or is it that this superior education is simply a mirage? For reports say the education as provided in these hallowed halls is often well below international standards and the study environment leaves much to be desired. Classes for example are held in make-shift campuses, sometimes even in unhealthy surroundings. The question is what are we to do about it? Do we keep quiet because these universities satisfy a demand the government cannot fill or do we take the responsibility for maintaining standards for private universities can contribute a lot to higher education and research.

When in 1988 some educationists and retired bureaucrats took the initiative to replicate the model of private universities of India, Pakistan and Japan, the result was the establishment in 1989 of the first in a long line of private universities. Three proposals were then submitted to the University Grants Commission and the ex-Chairman of the UGC, Dr. M. A. Bari recommended that the government give approval for the establishment of private universities. As a result the Private University Act of 1992 was passed in Parliament, paving the way for the private sector's involvement in fulfilling the increased demand for higher education. Today there are 16 private universities with another 22 waiting in line for approval.

But there seem to be problems for although prospectus speak of spacious surroundings and air-conditioned classrooms, well-adorned libraries and developed laboratories, the true picture may shock for most universities are accommodated in rented houses or on a few floors of a commercial building. Classrooms like those in English medium schools are inadequate and cannot accommodate students comfortably and most do not have an air-conditioners. The number of books in the libraries are also too few for the needs of a university and as there is generally no provision for residential students, out of town students have a problem finding accommoda-

tion.

Although the Ministry of Education is contemplating serving notice on those private universities which have not yet, despite being five years in operation, transferred their campus to their own sites, this will hardly solve any of the problems. Nor will it solve the problem of a shortage of skilled full-time teachers. Most private universities are running on part-time teachers who are employed on contract basis. Teachers of the government universities and colleges are also reported to be working in these private universities. Some even take classes in more than one private university, which is immoral.

When applying for approval, a private university has to submit a list of full-time faculty members who will represent the core of the teaching staff but it is often seen that after getting the approval, most do not appoint these teachers. Private universities also like to engage expatriate Bangladeshi teachers during their vacation who then return to their adopted land—sometimes in the middle of a semester.

S. 14 (3) of the Private University Act states that the Syndicate, Trustee Board or Board of Directors are to be formed with persons having long experience in the field of education, culture, science and technology, etc. But generally there is no monitoring committee for which the standard of education suffers. But to be able to maintain a standard of education, Dr. Chowdhury of UGC suggests they should be made accountable to the UGC and if any university is run commercially, or fails to maintain an expected standard, the UGC should be empowered to cancel its certificate.

Many of the guardians will agree with this but what is of more concern to them is the value of these degrees on the job market and in foreign universities. As graduates from these private universities have now started to come on the workforce, the time has come to evaluate their and the students' performance. But whether or not these private universities have been able to check the drain of foreign currency or the emigration of talent is doubtful, for most of these children from rich families will in all likelihood still go to other countries to settle so, although in theory the private university reduces pressure on state-owned institutions, creates new jobs for teachers and raises the standard of education in the country, the actual situation may in reality be quite different.