

24 JUN 1993

Privatisation Of Education

Sir,

Reference your June 17 editorial entitled, "The Case For Privatisation Of Education". Having accepted all you say as essentially correct, it occurs to me that if such an important industry as education is privatised, especially within the backdrop of a developing country, this is likely to present as many problems as it does solutions.

On the one hand, the idea of privatising an industry in itself implies acquiescence to the concept of profit as motive. That the industry happens to be a service industry in no way invalidates this. People may think it is reasonable to open schools for profit.

On the other hand, although a great deal will obviously depend on the level of education at which a school may be permitted to function, if it is taken at primary level it could prejudice the government's intent to provide free, compulsory, primary education to all. This may be true even at secondary level. For, it could give rise to conditions which contribute to the nurturing of inequitable social situations. Moreover, the question would arise as to who will be responsible for overseeing standards, curricula, syllabus, etc. if that responsibility lies with the government, the question of adequate infrastructural arrangements for the additional monitoring involved would also call upon scarce resources.

Allowing for education to "go private" can, of course have its positive side too. For it might release needed funds for other sectors which in turn could be redirected into the primary sector. A cost-benefit analysis undertaken by the World Bank on educational reform in Africa goes to support this view, since it states, "not only are universities more expensive than primary and secondary education, but the disproportionate amount spent on them may not be the best use of scarce resources".

Under such ideal conditions universal primary education could be expanded with relative ease but, there is a recognisable danger in it too, especially if the concept of privatisation goes further to include the universities, (already two or three are functioning privately in Bangladesh). Additionally, if state-owned universities are ever forced by circumstances to charge fees at cost, for the per capita cost of education at degree level to the state is always high, this could place higher education beyond the pale of most would-be graduates, a condition which must today include the progressively impoverished middle classes. The result will be the creation of a new type of educated elite who will be the privileged few, for higher education will be limited to the few who can afford it.

In turn, this could give rise to a situation in which the continued growth of the already well established intellectual and research tradition might hamper further innovation and development. Therefore, if the intention is to privatise education, I think we should be very, very, conscious of what we do to achieve this end.

Sylvia Mortza, Dhaka.