

Upgrade Education, Don't Warp

The Education Ministry has reportedly made a policy decision to bring all private educational institutions, 'English medium' in particular, under its control—or shall we say, positive regulation—so that some discipline and standardization can be imposed in the way they are run and the curricula that are followed.

It is difficult to conceptualize a kind of 'uniformity' across the country with respect to all levels of general education, but the government we hope is not thinking of warping the better schools rather than upgrading the bad ones, in its bid to show the mushrooming private, English-medium kindergartens and secondary and higher secondary (O and A level) institutions, who is boss.

It is unthinkable that schools can be started without getting the required registration from the relevant authorities but the fact that the Education Ministry has declared 'All English Medium Schools must be registered with the Education Department',—as reported in a section of the Press—implies that a laissez-faire situation does exist. Nothing surprising, for the same applies to so many kinds of commercial and 'non-government' activities as to make registration an optional requirement.

And reportedly there are countless spuriously registered schools set up to rob the national exchequer with fictitious teacher-student rolls. From time to time the press exposes a number of them, but isn't the existence of these, on the government's list of beneficiaries enjoying subsidies, telling on the moral status of officials who are supposed to vet the list? Given such, built-in incompetence—if not corruption—of people within this sacred 'authority', we may be pardoned for being a trifle skeptical about the Education Ministry's performance on its latest move.

While it cannot be denied that there is a need to supervise the growing number of schools coming up to fill an obvious dearth of educational institutions in the country, we hope the government officials assigned to oversee them are not tempted to use it as a stick to beat the better schools out of business altogether.

But it must be said that a good number of them allegedly fleece guardians by charging fees and deposits out of all proportion, holding them hostage with the demand-supply rationale. There is no denying that schools which deliver 'products' capable of competing internationally are too few and far between—and those guaranteeing direct entry into world-class colleges and universities across the globe happen to be English medium and expensive. Yet even average parents who do not have surplus money are, understandably, found moonshining to raise the funds for an 'elite' education for their wards.

The government should think hard on how to bring those institutions that are not world-class in curricula and teaching methodology up to acceptable standards so that children coming out of such schools would not be lagging far behind in the real world of competition.

The current controversy over madrasah education would be needless if the same concept is applied to modernizing both the content and method of teaching in this theology-dominated institutions. The purpose of education is to enlighten the taught. Some secular sections of the intelligentsia who are somewhat wary of madrasah education would do well to remember that the greatest universities in the world were founded by monks and priests and even today church and chapel remain a part of 'secular' education.

Let us be pragmatic and do away with the inadequacies where need be, but let us not create more problems by imposing less-than world-class curricula on those English medium schools that are doing a fairly good job despite their faults.

Sometime hasty tinkering with existing systems does more harm than good. Faults and abuses, uncovered, need to be addressed rather than overturning a whole system, or set of institutions.