

## 22/1 The Big Way With Big Output In Literacy

As between public enterprise and privatisation the key difference is the absence of competition in the former and its stimulation in the latter. But for standard and quality competition is a must. Free economies are based on this principle and are sustained by it. A controlled economy eventually turns on itself and strangles it.

This rule applies to enterprises irrespective of their nature or traditional line of development. Education kept free from competition, as between students in a class, or between two or more schools or colleges, will only nose-dive, as it has done in our case. Primary education was nationalised in 1973, and as of today the country boasts 48146 primary schools. To this has been added the new programme launched from this year of universal compulsory primary education. This is a colossal commitment and operation. A beginning has been made, under present constraints of resources, in a phased way.

Questions that require more than routine consideration are quite a few. First, the basic one: how far, or whether at all, to go for nationalisation—examining nationalism as a principle in educational development. For one thing, nationalised schools (primary or secondary) are a huge financial commitment, and if all the primary schools, to be established (in phases) from now on, are to be run at government cost they will consume a big slice of the education budget, and not much will be left for other necessary expenses on education. Of course, if funds were available (locally or through aid) and if spending so generously on primary education would not squeeze education at other—particularly technical and scientific—levels, there was nothing wrong with it.

But financial reality is vastly different,—so much so that nationalisation would be reasonably thought a luxury. If the idea or aim is to see education spread on a much larger scale among the people and the schools run more efficiently under government control, neither is practically achieved. With the pay-packet guaranteed at the end of the month and inspection (i.e. accountability) as good as nil, efficiency and quality remains casual, if at all. Now, therefore, here is a rash of negatives: high cost, low-grade output, low standard of devotion to duty and low efficiency, lack of accountability and so on.

It may be useful to know that in Britain for instance primary or even secondary education is a private sector project. And even they have problems mainly concerning the curriculum, where declines in the standard of performance in given subjects have been marked. The anxiety is to make up leeway and get things back on track. They are said to be returning to traditional methods of teaching and so on.

Government has also started nationalising one school and college each in all districts. This has also become cause for complaint by rival schools in a district when what is actually happening is not on merit but by (political) preference. Suspicion of government being led by political considerations is as easy as the temptation by the deprived to accuse it of bias, apart from the additional financial burden it brings.

One answer (not necessarily simplistic) is to aim at a compromise between private and public: side by side with the set of nationalised institutions there could grow privatised schools. Let the government be selective and take in as much as it can chew, and let the private sector be brought in as a matter of policy on spreading literacy and education as a national priority. One tangible good thing (provided government does not relax in matters of supervision and inspection aimed at first rate performance) will emerge from it is competition in management and output between the two sets of schools.

This may seem to clash with the concept of free primary education. To offset it is the benefit of getting down to the job rightway on a really universal scale with revolutionary results in the matter of national literacy. Philanthropy, charity and patriotism plus the altruism and generosity of munificent individuals may be marshalled in to make such an enterprise a quick success—rather than a slow-moving, phased one moving increasingly into the incertitudes of a not-very-certain future of a country like Bangladesh.

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