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Reflections On U.S. Education System

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THE world is growing smaller. So there is a need to develop greater understanding and awareness of other countries, cultures and peoples. Attempts are being made to bring nations close to each other through mutual exchange of academic programmes. Fullbright Fellowship is one such attempt undertaken by the Council for International Exchange of Scholars. I had an opportunity to avail of the fellowship to join the Department of Sociology/Corrections and Social Work, Mankato State University, U.S.A. during the academic year 1986-87. I was entrusted with teaching both Sociology and Anthropology courses on Bangladesh.

The respective courses included topics such as the family, economy, government, culture and social control in Bangladesh. I was also invited to speak as a guest speaker in the State Universities of Virginia, Wright, Arizona and U.S. International, New York.

The busy academic year provided me with a rare experience of the educational and intellectual environment in the U.S.A. Against this backdrop, it is hard to resist temptation to write my teaching experience in U.S.A. reflecting on her educational system and academic environment.

The educational system of U.S.A. may be understood in the context of Plato's idea of education. Plato considers a sound educational system as the basis of social justice. Though in his idea of education, Plato advocated education for all, he actually entertained the view that higher education should be meant for the extraordinary students—the philosopher kings/the guardian class. In

elaborating his scheme Plato proposed the study of literature, music and mathematics for the students up to the age of 17 to 18 years, and the practice of rigorous physical exercise and military training for the students between the age of 18 to 20 years, and the study of mathematics for a smaller number of brilliant students on selection between the age of 20 and 30 years. The study of Dialectic/Philosophy and Ethical education has been advocated for a selected group of students between the age 30 and 35. These selectively educated students will be appointed in the various posts of state administrative management bodies within the age of 35 to 50 years so that they can gather experience of the real life. Finally these students will achieve perfection in their practical and theoretical knowledge and employ their time and knowledge in matters of state administration.

The western countries have tried to follow some fundamental principles to establish Plato's educational scheme in their own educational system. In the U.S.A., educational system though apparently having enormous diversities in structure, form and grading, the basic philosophy of her educational system always imbibe the Plato's idea of education.

The structure of American educational institutions seems to be classificatory. The classifications are difficult to make because of decentralised administration and control. For examples, there are some universities that do not offer degrees beyond the bachelors while there are some colleges that offer doctoral degrees. So generalisations about institutions on the basis of their official titles is very difficult to make.

Elementary and High Schools: The elementary school and high school (or secondary school) generally require at least 12 years study/education. Students usually have remain in school till the age of 16. On the completion of high school education, they graduate at the age of 17 or 18. Division is generally made in phases: elementary school (six years of elementary school), junior high school (three years of junior high school), and high school (three years of high school) though it is not always the case. 8-4, 7-2-3, 6-2-4 and 6-6 plans can also be found in the U.S. educational system. The following are the categories of institutions found in America.

Two-year colleges. The community colleges usually offer academic programmes suitable for transfer to four-year institutions, and also terminal technical and vocational courses. This is the preparatory phase for various technical fields of education. These institutions usually serve local populations within specific areas. In addition to these, there are also a few private two-year colleges to prepare students for transfer to four-year colleges and universities.

Four-Year Liberal Arts Colleges. These institutions mainly offer programmes of general undergraduate education including studies in the humanities, language, arts, social sciences, and physical and natural sciences and also the professional studies of upto four year. These liberal arts colleges that offer four years bachelor's degree are mostly non-public or independent. This phase of education is completed (usually) in preparation of graduate and professional schools. Major universities

also offer the opportunity of undergraduate liberal arts programmes like these colleges.

There are also a great many state and private four-year colleges, many of which were formerly teacher-training colleges, that offer only official programmes or special training along with liberal arts. Credit from these colleges is normally recognised by universities for admission into graduate and professional studies.

Universities

The U.S. universities offer both undergraduate, graduate and professional education (post bachelor's degree). These universities usually offer degrees like bachelor's, master's, doctoral and in many instances also professional programmes in medicine, law and engineering.

There are also other types of institutions normally, and specifically secretarial training, trade and vocational programmes, some adult education and extension services, some health related programmes and training such as in computer programming. The study and training here are mainly for profit making, not for further study in other colleges or universities.

Courses in the U.S. colleges and universities are of so many different categories. For instance, lecture courses, seminars, laboratory courses, independent study and research work. Technical institutions provide first hand experience with necessary tools and equipment. But what is more important and needed is an extensive work outside the class. Assignments are also given by teachers. (To be continued).