

Watching English Medium Schools Only?

The State Minister for Education let it be known on Sunday that the government is considering working out some kind of a mechanism for monitoring the mushrooming 'English medium' schools in Bangladesh. The reason why this particular type of institution needs watching is that some of them seem to be involved in irregularities grave enough for the government to be concerned about.

Among the anomalies mentioned are the employment of foreign teachers (mostly Indian) without legal work permits, the indiscriminate use of textbooks not relevant to Bangladesh, and in one case, the teaching of another country's national anthem as our own! This is unthinkable, but coming from the horse's mouth, as it were, one cannot help but be stunned by the audacity of the schools concerned. 'Are the founders/managers/proprietors of these offending institutions so ignorant (or is it 'arrogant') that they care not for the minimum of national allegiance?

As for foreigners stealing their way into lucrative teaching jobs, it is by dint of their craftier, cosmopolitan marketing skills vis-a-vis the rather unprofessional/parochial attitudes of home-grown candidates in general. But Bangladeshis have their natural hospitality towards guests to blame as well, a trait that friends would call 'innocence'. The uncharitable simply sneer at such artless open-arms attitude to foreign job-seekers in Bangladesh's English medium schools as sheer idiocy.

'Free-market liberalisation', critics say, is no excuse for us to be unaware of the need to protect our own. It is alleged that commercially-minded owners of English medium schools prefer to employ 'smart' foreigners and they are offered much more lucrative pay and perks than natives, because the xenophilic public have a thing for teachers with a foreign flavour and winning ways. Besides, anything not home-made must be better, they think, although it may not always bear scrutiny.

Given this situation, we welcome the thought that some monitoring of schools is necessary, but how do we propose to do that? Existing schools—both government and non-government—do not reflect the sagacity of successive governments in Bangladesh or give any indication that we have a national vision at all with regard to education. Let us therefore have a vision first, and then a strict set of regulations that do not stifle an enlightened approach to building a knowledge-based society—and let it be for all schools and colleges, not just English medium ones.

There is no doubt that the entire education sector needs a thorough overhaul. The latest survey by the Education Ministry, of 23,000 schools and colleges in both the public and private domain, revealed how deplorable the situation is. Nearly seventy per cent of all surveyed institutions were found to be 'below' or 'semi-standard' with regard to performance, teacher-student ratio and infrastructure, such as library and laboratory facilities. A little over thirty per cent scored the 'standard' level while only 2.60 per cent could be counted as 'high standard'. Besides, corruption and incompetence plague the sector through and through. Drastic reform is therefore, imperative if this nation is to take off in the near future (hopefully) with a reasonably educated and skilled labour force coming out of our schools and colleges.

Virtually all aspects have to be shaken up for the better, including recruitment and continuing education and training for teachers, up-grading the content and teaching methodology to ensure that the 'getting by rote' habit is totally overcome and students learn to think and think to learn. Much is being made of science and technology without really internalising them. Also, other extremely relevant subjects for Bangladesh's socio-economic realities are being ignored, such as Health and Human Biology. This should be considered vital for learners in a country plagued by horrendous malnutrition and poor-hygiene-and-sanitation-related diseases; morbidity and mortality.

Health Science should, and must be a compulsory subject, starting from the primary up to secondary level. If a comprehensive school text book of the standard taught at the O-level is introduced in all our schools, this nation would not take long to overcome much of primary health-care problems. Knowledge of the way the human body works, its nutritional needs and other dos and don'ts could deliver us from a great deal of misery with regard to day to day health needs.