

Private University Bill leaves many niggling issues unresolved

TO REGULARISE the affairs of the private universities had been a prime imperative of the education sector. Many irregularities in the private universities were reported in the past and while their number is above 50, those which could ensure the minimum acceptable quality of education could be counted on the fingers of one hand. Higher education became very disorderly and the University Grants Commission was blamed for not keeping tabs on the errant ones closely. Parliament has just passed the Private University Bill which has greatly abridged the powers of the commission in many areas. That will not matter if the safeguards against abuses one is seeking can be written into the bill itself which will soon take the shape of law. After all, the commission did not prove itself to be an effective body.

The bill has indeed addressed some conspicuous shortcomings in this regard. It requires the private universities to float a reserve fund of Tk 5 crore in Dhaka and Chittagong, and Tk 3 crore elsewhere. Addressing a long-standing concern, the bill has made it mandatory that a private university have its own campus on at least an acre of land in Dhaka and other cities and on a two-acre plot in the outlying districts. Another requirement is that it must have a trustee board of 9 to 19 members and it must have at least three faculties. The bill provides for reservation of seats for poor and talented students and for children of freedom fighters but none for the differently able students.

However, the most vociferous criticism of the private universities arose from their exorbitantly high tuition fees which virtually barred access even to middle income people. The amount of tuition fee cannot be legislated, since fee is variable over time but here too the commission has been divested of its powers to fix fees or make the universities accountable for charging their students.

The private universities are in existence for 17 years or so and their number grew fast in the first ten years. It is time to assess their impact on the sphere of education and society at large. They fulfilled a need because the public universities were unable to meet the aspiration for higher education of a growing number of youth. But in few cases did they fulfil the basic requirements. Many of their teachers are public university teachers who double here for extra income or are on leave from their parent institution. In either case it creates a gap in the public universities and students suffer.

Then comes the seminal question of the cash nexus. We have nothing against private university but private university is not the same thing as profit-driven university. For many the motive is not spreading education but making money which makes them fully commercial ventures. In the view of academics any institution that calls itself a university must teach language, philosophy and the liberal arts and social sciences. Liberal arts are farthest from their minds and they mostly teach business and computer. By overemphasising employable skill rather than knowledge private universities have destroyed the urge for pursuing knowledge for its own sake and downgraded the concept of university education. One way to discipline private universities is to set up more public universities.