

A case neither for nor against private universities

For majority of students, what is learnt at the undergraduate level is only good enough to get them a grade in an exam which leads to a degree that gives them a good chance at securing a job. Today, it is the accepted norm that we use education as a tool to get ahead in life. Some people use wealth and power, some use politics and some use gimmickry. What separates education from this unholy lot is the years of commitment that it requires. But what worries me most is not the fact that we use education to get ahead in life but the fact that we need education to get ahead in life. Obviously one needs to learn new knowledge and acquire new skills to make a living and survive in this world. But why is it that everybody has to go through this institutionalized learning process that we call education in order to have a satisfactory life? The role of an education system should be to produce learned people who are able to disseminate, synthesize and create knowledge. Instead our education system has narrowed down its role to act merely as a social stratifier. It is not an exaggeration to say that this system is designed to stratify an entire generation of students into different social status according to some subjective criteria determined by examinations. Those who do well get the material benefits in life and others don't. One is forced to go through this process because education has become the most dominant form of social stratification in our society. In my mind, this formula isn't much different to the formula that gives wealthy people or the people with political power the good life. It just looks little more credible. I think social stratification is one of the major goals of the education system that we inherited from the British. Back then only those who went through it were given access to material benefits of life. Rectification of this anomaly later led to the establishment of what we now call the free education system. But its role as a social stratifier still plagues it.

The social stratification aspect of our education system has made education a prime commodity giving rise to various non state educational institutes including tuition classes, International Schools, various diploma courses, private universities etc. These have resulted in parents pumping enormous amount of money in to these institutes and students spending all their time either going for various classes or studying for exams. This has stressed our society to its limits. We didn't feel it fifty years ago not because the system was any better but only because there were lesser number of people who had access to it.

The social stratification as the cause for the ailment is quite apparent in its symptoms in the form of the current public debate about private universities and the emotions that goes along with it. In spite of various rationalizations against private universities, the emotional claim is that a person of wealth should not gain an advantage in gaining employment and social status. Indirectly this is equivalent to saying that government supplied education should replace wealth as the rightful social stratifier. There is some selfishness attached to this emotion. Most of who oppose private universities also opposes forming of more government universities and giving out more degree certificates claiming that it will degrade the quality of the degree. But the selfish goal behind this opposition is to limit the number of graduates in the market so that the competition for the existing graduates is less. Then there are some who say that it is OK to have private

universities giving out certificates in certain fields of studies but not in others (or otherwise lot of sick people will die, they say). In all these arguments what is apparent is that those who have an advantage from the social stratification imparted by the present education system wants to selfishly keep the status quo while denying others the same benefits. These are just symptoms of what ails our education system. As a beneficiary of free education, far be it from me to promote wealth as a social stratifier or private universities for that matter. But, whether it is based on wealth, educational qualifications or any other, I am against any kind of social stratification process that works against the homogeneity of the society. The education system we inherited from the British is designed for this.

What about the education system we had in the past; the Pirivenas that taught Buddhist philosophy, languages etc and the Guru-kula systems that taught various skills from performing arts to medicine? Given that even the kings lead a modest life, engaging in farming as their livelihood as the rest of the populace, it is likely that ours was an egalitarian society. This would have minimized the need for a social stratifier to begin with. These institutes were not known to have been centrally controlled, making education to be less effective in acting as a social stratifier (could we benefit from a non centralized education system today?). Additionally, the most educated were the Bhikkus. They were considered the highest intellectuals and were also the most venerated. But more importantly they were detached from material life. Indirectly, this left little room for education to be used as a social stratifier by the lay people. Thus a person who had completed Pirivena education couldn't have been any better off materially than a one that didn't have any formal education or one that learnt medicine. The education must not have acted as a social stratifier but then the society itself must have been pretty homogenous socially and economically to begin with minimizing any need for a stratifier.

It is clear that the homogeneity of the society and the role of the educational system are cyclically related. That is when the society is homogeneous its education system tend not to promote social stratification and when the education system does not promote social stratification it helps create a society that is homogeneous. Conversely, when a society is inhomogeneous it gives rise to a system of education that strives to balance it by making education as the great equalizer but ends up creating another form of social stratification which contributes to the inhomogeneity of the society. We may not achieve an ideal education system in an egalitarian society before the next general elections but we could try to come up with series of innovative solutions that will get us there in the near future. Tinkering with policies regarding private universities or tuition classes will not effectively address the real ailment because they are not the root causes. In fact there are no root causes! We only have a cause-effect cycle between the role of education as a social stratifier and the (in)homogeneity of the society. Therefore any solution that addresses the social ailments we are faced today due to our education system must take this cyclic relationship into consideration.

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