

Sri Lanka: Inequality in field of education fraught with serious consequences

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The education services being provided by the state, is generally taken for granted as free education.

The public assistance to education is one aspect of the free education but, that is not the essential aspect. Even in a bourgeois society it is possible to have a selection mechanism to get the individual merit of the youth, to be recognized and identified in a quantifiable order. All developed capitalist societies have taken steps to cut down the family influence in judging the ability of an individual. The ideal will be a meritocratic order that bypasses the power and the resource of the family. At least, the youth should feel that irrespective of the family background, there is complete freedom to rise up in society, by one's own ability and persuasion. This situation is not necessarily a part of a socialist order. It is a vision for a democratic bourgeois society. I believe that this was the ideology of free education as practiced in Sri Lanka immediately after independence. At that stage there were government schools as well as private schools. But all were expected to sit for a common examination and qualify if they wish to go further. What one achieves in this common exam is what counts for any selection for higher education or for employment. Even the organized private sector was compelled to respect this mode of selection.

Significance

When the University of Ceylon came into existence, there was an entrance exam which later coincided with the Advanced Level and the Higher School Certificate examination. Whether one came from a central school or from a private school if the person has passed the examination, then that person's position in the order of merit had significance for further selection. Hence there was the feeling that if the person was bright, irrespective of the family support, a place in the society was assured.

I sat for the A/L examination in 1960. At that stage Ananda college was run by a Buddhist mission. Of course there was government assistance. Yet our principal Meththananda was a leading figure in the Sinhala Buddhist campaign! Thus it was a school managed by an NGO. At that stage if one passed in all four subjects, then a place in the university was assured. To a certain degree, the standard of education was maintained even at central schools throughout the country; and private tuition outside of school was rare. Of course it was a backward society where education was considered a privilege. But within the arrangement in the education sector, it was a fair struggle, where the poor depended on the state facilities. Even at that time there were students who sat for the local A/L and obtained good passes, but thereafter went abroad to do further studies in foreign universities. There were others who followed classes at private university colleges and sat for London university exams from here. Still, it was considered to be free education, because the result of local A/L was the decisive factor for all selections for higher education. Today the difference is that the success in the local A/L examination has the same validity. Out of over 120000 students who are successful in the A/L exam only around 20000 gain entrance into local universities.

Make the situation worse

That means there is no fair and free acceptance of the merit shown in the A/L examination. For the last few decades there were thousands of youth, with passes in the A/L to qualify to enter university, some with higher merit, are pushed around in the society without any hope for higher education. In such a situation, private university facilities will make the situation worse, by giving undue advantage to those, who are with means over and above those who have passed with merit. In fact, instead of enlarging the facilities at state universities they are neglected. To make a bad situation worse, it is proposed to establish private universities. The minister of higher education argues that private universities will be compelled to offer 20% of their total intake to grant scholarships to local students who are eligible for university admission. But that will be an eye wash planned to deceive the gullible society. The minister admits that he has no way to stop the destruction of free education which was prevalent in Sri Lanka in the past. If all those who qualify are taken into university, then it does not matter whether some have this option of going to private universities. As I stated above the private university option was available even during 1960. But the elimination of fair play and equality in the field of education will, prepare the ground for a serious uprising of the youth irrespective of nationality and religion.

P.S.

* lakbimanews 6 june 2010 column.