

Recognising the Role of Private Education

by Yasmeen Murshed

It is evident that private sector initiatives in education fulfil a demand which cannot be supplied by state-run facilities. In all the countries of South Asia, for example, private sector investment, particularly corporate investment, in schools has reached noticeably high levels in the last decade.

THE reintroduction of democratic government and economic liberalisation has both been important landmarks in Bangladesh's recent history. Modern technological advances in the form of satellite television and access to global communications networks have also had significant influence on socio-economic conditions so that it has become necessary to re-evaluate traditional thinking on many important national issues. As policies have changed to accommodate the principles of a free market economy, so the role of private enterprise in all fields of development has been recognised and given due appreciation. Therefore it is now more relevant than ever to examine the state of private education in the country.

Successive democratic governments have to be commended on the measures that have been taken to promote the growth of state-run educational facilities across the country. The decision to allow the establishment of private universities was also a pioneering move in the development of private sector participation in this most important of tasks for the future of our country. However an important question, which has long been ignored is the status of the so-called "kindergarten" and English medium schools and tutorials which cater to the educational requirements of growing numbers of children in Dhaka and other large cities.

Housed mainly in rented, residential buildings, unregistered and unregulated by the government, these schools exist in the vacuum created by the inadequacies of the state-run educational facilities, operating outside the pale of government, yet catering to the children of many politicians and bureaucrats.

A popularly elected democratic government is best placed to remove anomalies and legitimise the role that private enterprise has been playing in this field therefore the recent initiative taken by the Ministry of Education to begin this long delayed task has been greatly welcomed by most of the better quality schools themselves.

A brief survey of the background in which these institutions exist is necessary in order to understand the present situation. The changeover to Bangladesh as the only medium of instruction in the country,

shortly after the independence, led to the demand for private education in English, which was fulfilled by the eventual establishment of many private educational institutions, called tutorials, kindergartens or schools, that began to prepare students to sit for British school leaving examinations conducted by the British Council under the University of London Examinations and Assessment Council.

However, the absence of any regulating or supervising body and the resultant uncontrolled and unstructured growth of these tutorials and schools has led to uneven, sub-standard or poor academic levels, inadequate facilities and other kinds of mismanagement in many institutions. Accusations of commercialism and exploitation have been made, in many cases not without some justification, and the public has come to see all such privately owned and managed institutions with a jaundiced eye.

The media, too, has played a part in reinforcing this image because of the sweeping generalizations that are often made about private educational facilities. These generalizations affect the better run institutions and an unhealthy situation has been created where private schools are regarded, by many individuals and the media at large, as exploitative organisations, nevertheless the demand for admission to a few such institutions continues to exist and even grows considerably each year.

Since most people recognise the need for that intensive care and individual attention, which state schools can seldom impart, and are willing to pay for it there is more reason to ensure that these facilities are provided according to a standard criterion or requirement. Any sector of development which is unregulated will develop unevenly and a sector as important as education cannot be left to the vagaries of individuals.

It is now time to take official notice of the demand for private sector education which is being fulfilled by these privately owned and run primary, secondary and high schools. It is

essential that the government ensures that these institutions are able to impart a minimum quality of education for those who have the financial ability to avail of such facilities for their children.

It is a reality that all those who are able to afford to choose private education over state-run institutions not only in Bangladesh but all over the world and the recognition is evident that private sector initiatives in education fulfill a demand which cannot be supplied by state-run facilities. In all the countries of South Asia, for example, private sector investment, particularly corporate investment, in schools has reached noticeably high levels in the last decade.

The Bangladesh government is committed to an economic policy which encourages private enterprise and a free market economy where standards are maintained by supervising and regulatory bodies that impose minimum controls and maintain basic standards allowing the forces of 'demand and supply' to determine price. For private sector education too, exactly the same principles can be applied and quality can be assured without affecting the incentives which bring about private enterprise in this field.

There is therefore an urgent need to find a mechanism to ensure minimum academic standards and administrative quality in private educational institutions without over-regulating them so that the incentives to provide the services are lost. In the face of the clearly indicated need for cutting back on the size of government, one cannot advocate adding to the bureaucratic machinery and creating further responsibility for the already overworked officials of the Ministry of Education.

Therefore one suggestion has been to set up an independent Commission (on the lines of the proposed National Broadcasting Authority) composed of representatives of the academic, professional and corporate sectors which could act as a watchdog body to monitor private (English medium) schools to ensure that the basic requirements of a well-rounded education are fulfilled in proper surroundings by adequately qualified persons.

However, even before doing so, the government needs to develop a syllabus for these institutions that takes into account the requirements of the Overseas Examining Boards together with essential elements of the National Curriculum so that students receive a ground-

ing in their own history and culture while being prepared for the demanding requirements of the British examinations.

In fact the better English medium school have already devised such a curriculum and are maintaining strong levels so that their students have equal access to higher education at home or abroad. Awareness of national identity, appreciation of national heritage, community service and involvement with the needs of the less privileged, are all features of the curriculum in some of these schools albeit in an un-planned and uncoordinated manner. Therefore rationalisation and standardisation should be relatively simple if the models used are completed and used as a basis.

Another important requirement for improvement of the overall standard of education in the country is to promote and sponsor locally written and published textbooks in Bangla and English. The revision and removal of the glaring errors, omissions and misprints present in all the Board textbooks should also be an urgent priority of the authorities concerned. Once again, private sector resources can be effectively utilised for the purpose if

this sector is also open to private enterprise.

Last, but not least, an effective means of improving all-round educational standards as to facilitate the import and sale of all kinds of books but specifically textbooks and reference books for schools and colleges as cheaply as possible. In recent years there has been rampant smuggling of cheap, even pirated, editions of textbooks which are sold at very low prices to undercut the legitimate publishers and importers. Apart from the malpractice involved the loss of revenue to the government is considerable and the quality of the printing is poor and in some cases inaccurate. Consultations with legitimate booksellers and publishers followed by strong action to enforce copyright laws to bring this aspect of the import trade into the purview of government should also be taken up on a priority basis.

Given the sincere efforts being made by the present government to bring about significant changes in national educational policy and its implementation, it is reasonable to expect that unlike previous attempts to solve the vexing and anomalous situation this time private English medium schools will be permitted official recognition and registration so that they can be fully integrated into the mainstream of national education.

The writer is Chairperson, Board of Management, Scholastica School, Dhaka

Breastfeeding Nature's Way



"As trees turn to the sun babies turn to their mother's breast. Such is nature's way....."

by Shah Didarul Alam

THE breastfeeding culture is a culture of peace, balance and harmony. It involves trusteeship and responsibility towards our young. Even all great world religions recognize breastfeeding as essential for nurturing the young, and respect women's role in doing so.

The World Alliance for Breastfeeding Action (WABA) has chosen the theme "Breastfeeding Nature's Way" for World Breastfeeding Week '97, with aims to raise public awareness of the environmental benefits of breastfeeding and show the ecologically damaging effects of bottle feeding. It also calls for co-operation with environmental groups to ensure that governments and communities worldwide support ecologically sound practices.

There are many positive reasons for women to breastfeed their babies: breastmilk is the best and most nutritious food protecting them from illness and ensuring their healthy physical and psychological development. For mothers, breastfeeding provides such health benefits as reducing the risk of breast and ovarian cancer, reducing post-partum bleeding and anemia, and is a natural means of spacing births by delaying ovulation.

Breastfeeding benefits all sectors of society economically, ecologically and socially. However, over the past decades, women's self confidence in their capacity to nourish their infants has been undermined by many factors, including the aggressive marketing tactics of the artificial baby milk or infant formula industry and a lack of social support.

Millions of babies fall ill every year because they are not breastfed. The World Health Organization (WHO) estimates that more than 1.5 million infant deaths could be avoided every year if all babies were breastfed.

It is vital to increase our efforts to support, protect and promote breastfeeding. All sectors of society need to learn about its advantage. As a natural and renewable resource, breastfeeding protects the environment by reducing the demands made on it and eliminating waste and pollution.

Artificial baby milk is factory processed and converted into powder at high temperatures. The process uses vast amount of electric energy that usually comes from hydroelectric or nuclear power plants, both expensive and damaging to the environment.

But breastmilk is naturally produced. A mother's normal diet is transformed into a natural, invaluable and specialized food for her baby! This is the most energy efficient food pro-

duction system ever known. Artificial baby milk is an industrially manufactured food that undergoes multiple processes, additions and alterations as it is converted from cow's milk to a can of powder. No, wonder it has proved vulnerable to contamination by harmful bacteria, radioactivity, chemicals and foreign bodies. Furthermore, the water mixed with powder poses additional danger of communication.

But breastmilk is a living substance. Each woman's milk is tailored for her own baby. What's more, her milk changes constantly — both during a feed and day by day — to meet her baby's evolving needs.

When a mother is exposed to pathogens in the environment, she produces antibodies to combat them. These antibodies are then passed on to her baby via her breastmilk.

Cow's milk, grains and additives used in making baby food travel long distances even before processing, and then additional long distances on the way to central, regional warehouses, and finally, to retail outlets. Many countries import artificial baby food and feeding bottles from the other side of the world. Such transportation wastes fuel and contributes to air pollution everywhere.

But Breastmilk does not have to be shipped around the world; every mother has a ready supply wherever she goes.

The packaging of manufactured baby milk wastes tin plate, paper and plastic. Bottles, teats and other feeding equipment also waste plastic, rubber, silicon and glass.

The 550 million tins of artificial baby milk sold each year to bottle feed all US babies, stacked end to end, would circle the earth one and a half times.

In 1987, 4.5 million feeding bottles were sold in Pakistan alone. These feeding bottles stacked end to end would reach the top of Mount Everest.

A 3-month-old bottle fed baby requires a litre of water per day to mix with the formula powder. Another two litres are needed to sterilize the bottles and teats. If the water is boiled over a wood fire, more than 73 kg of wood are need to prepare a year's food.

In many parts of the world, water and fuel are so scarce that few mothers are able to keep the bottles and teats clean and use only boiled, cooled water to make up the feeds.

But breastmilk is ready to use at the right temperature, does not need to be sterilized, and causes no pollution.

The writer is president, Nutrition and Environmental Awareness Programme (NEAP)

SCIENCE AND TECHNOLOGY

Sensing Biological Signal Biotechnological Approach

by Md Iqbal Hassan Khan

THE momentum of biosensor development stems from the exciting advances of the life science. The preparation of pure enzymes in large quantities, evolving potential of protein engineering techniques, propagation of monoclonal antibodies by animal tissue culture on an industrial scale, progress in our understanding of function of receptor molecules, and availability of an ever increasing number of microorganisms and mutants covering a host of metabolic pathways and ambient conditions are extremely useful for analytical exploitation and stimulating the field considerably.

In a simple sense, the general scheme of a biosensor consists of bio-catalytic component and the transducer which are closely connected, thus combining specificity and sensitivity. In view of the large number of enzymes available and the wide range of reactions catalyzed, it is not normally difficult to find an enzyme that will accept a given analyte as a substrate and provide the basis for an analytical procedure. The enzymes are not used in soluble form, rather it is used in un-mobilized state.

Immobilized enzymes tend to have greater resistance to loss of activity and have featured in the development of sev-

eral analytical biosensor devices, namely the enzyme electrode the enzyme analytical reactor, and the diagnostic reagent strip.

The enzyme electrode system is a combination of thin layer of enzyme with a suitable electrochemical electrode sensor. Practically, the analyte diffuses into the enzyme layer and the catalytic reaction occurs and the products are formed. The function of the sensor is to monitor and signal the biochemical change; i.e. the biological signal is converted into electrochemical change. For example, it is the appearance of product which gives rise to an electrochemical signal that can be registered by an appropriate meter. The signal produced by the transducer could follow either amperometric or potentiometric principle. An amperometric sensor gives rise to a flow of current (micro-amps) between the sensor and a reference electrode and the current is a linear function of the concentration of analyte. A potentiometric transducer gives rise to a potential difference (milli volts) between the sensor and a reference electrode.

A number of enzymes are used in enzyme electrodes. These enzymes have got potential application in the areas of medicine, bio-process control, food process control and analysis.

Clinical biochemistry has become an important branch of modern medicine, struggling with increasing pressure from the clinician who is looking for quick answers and with economic pressure from the public health systems, sophisticated automated analytical devices have been developed which allow measurement of hundreds of samples within an hour. An apparent situation can be resolved if it is highlighted with the inside fact of estimation of blood cholesterol. About half of all deaths in the developed countries are caused by arteriosclerosis (hardening of the arteries) in this disease.

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World Breastfeeding Week begins today

World Breastfeeding Week 1997 begins today with a renewed commitment to create awareness among the mothers to feed their babies breastmilk, reports UNB.

The first day of the week, August 1, will be observed in Bangladesh as elsewhere in the globe as World Breastfeeding Day.

This year's theme of the week — Breastfeeding: A Nature's Way — was chosen giving more importance on environmental aspect of breastfeeding and creating mass awareness about the harmful effect of artificial bottle-fed milk.

President Justice Shahabuddin Ahmed and Prime Minister Sheikh Hasina gave separate messages on the occasion and wished the World Breastfeeding Week '97 a success.

The week will be observed by the Ministry of Health and Family Welfare in collaboration with the Institute of Public Health Nutrition (IPHN) and Bangladesh Breastfeeding Foundation (BBF).

Children, baby display, publication of special supplementaries in newspapers, putting up special programmes in radio-TV, and awareness creating drive for mothers.

Health and Family Welfare Minister Salahuddin Yusuf will inaugurate the national level programme of the week tomorrow (Friday) at the Osmani Memorial Auditorium.

At present only 14 per cent babies of the country are being exclusively breastfed by their mothers till the age of five months, said BBF Chairperson Dr MQK Talukdar.

"Many of the rest 86 per cent are being fed breastmilk, but not properly," he said at a press briefing.

Monno Ceramic's gratitude
By Staff Correspondent
The management of Monno Ceramic Industries Ltd has expressed gratitude to various government organisations and chamber bodies for helping them in resuming production in the mill.

US non-immigrant visa fee raised

Fees for US non-immigrant visas will be raised from Tk 880 to 900 with effect from August 3, says a press release.

Applicants for non-immigrant visa will be required to pay the enhanced visa application fee to the American Embassy's account at the American Express Bank, located at 18-20 Motijheel Commercial Area.

Applicants who have already deposited the application fee before August 3 will not have to pay an additional fee.

The American Express Bank at Motijheel receives payments for visa application fee between 8:30 am to 2:30 pm Sunday through Thursday. Applicants are not charged any additional fees to make the deposit. The fee for non-immigrant visa is payable in Bangladesh currency only. Non-immigrant visa include tourist, business, and student visas.

JS body on gov't assurances meets
The Jatiya Sangsad committee on government's assurances yesterday decided that it would regularly meet in every month, reports BSS.
The decision was taken at a meeting of the committee held yesterday at the Jatiya Sangsad Bhaban with its chairman Sheikh Fazlul Karim Selim MP in the chair.

AL leader Sayedur Rahman dead

Former Member of Parliament and veteran Awami League leader Principal AM Sayedur Rahman died of brain hemorrhage at Suhrawardy Hospital yesterday. He was 56, reports UNB.

His first namaj-e-janaja will be held today at Sobhanbag mosque at 7:30 am while the second at Manikganj Debendra University College mosque after Juma prayers.

Death anniversary

The third death anniversary of MA Awal, freedom fighter and former MP, will be held observed today, says a press release.

To mark the day a *milad mahfil* and feeding of destitutes will be held at late Awal's residence at 135 Nabab Salimullah Road in Narayanganj after Juma prayers today.

Qulqhwani

Quikhwani of ARK Shamsul Alam Chowdhury, retired Manager (IMS), Finance Department of Bangladesh Biman, will be held at his residence at 85 Ka, Pisciculture Housing Society in the city after Asr prayers today, says a press release.

Bangabandhu Parishad programme on Nat'l Mourning Day begins today

Bangabandhu Parishad will hold a mass rally today at the historic Suhrawardy Uddyan in the city as part of its month-long programme to observe the National Mourning Day on August 15.

In an interview with BSS yesterday, General Secretary of the Parishad Dr SA Malek, who is also Political Advisor to the Prime Minister, said Bangabandhu Parishad has arranged the programme as the initial phase of all out efforts to resist anti-liberation and anti-democratic forces.

The programme includes mass rally on August 12 at Gulshan section number one and placing of wreaths at graveyard, discussion on 'Bangabandhu's dream and Bangladesh in the 21st century' on Aug 13, a week-long photo exhibition on life and works of Bangabandhu Aug 14-20 and mass rally on Aug 15 at Suhrawardy Uddyan in the evening, which will be followed by a mourning procession.

Joy Bangla Sangskritik Oikya Jote

The Joy Bangla Sangskritik Oikya Jote has organised a month-long programme to observe the National Mourning Day.

New telephone exchange opens at JS Bhaban

A 100x1000 line modern telephone exchange set up at a cost of Taka 1.62 crore to increase the telephone facilities in the Jatiya Sangsad Bhaban and parliament members' hostel was inaugurated yesterday, reports BSS.

Speaker Humayun Rasheed Chowdhury opened the exchange by talking with Telecommunications Minister Mohammad Nasim.

TARMA advisory body formed

An 11-member advisory committee of Tunku Abdul Rahman Memorial Academy (TARMA) was formed recently with Mohammad Faizullah as chairman, says a press release.

Other members of the committee are Ali Asgar, Kalam Azad, Iqbal Sobhan Chowdhury, Akhtar Ali Khan, Ghulam Mostafa, Delwar Hussain, Omar Feroq Bhuiyan, Mosharraf Hussain, Shokwat Ali and AKM Patwary.

The committee will deal with issues pertaining to development of TARMA, established at Nazarpur under Shenbag thana of Noakhali in memory of the national leader of Malaysia.