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Pravada in contemporary usage has a range of meanings which includes theses, concepts and propositions.

FREE EDUCATION VS. REFORM

A stormy debate has already begun to rage over government proposals to reform Sri Lanka's education system. The campaign to oppose reforms is being spearheaded by the Janatha Vimukthi Peramuna, which during the past two decades also led two abortive insurrections aimed at seizing state power. In the JVP's present campaign of protests, university students and school children are being mobilized under the slogan of defending free education.

Proposals to reform Sri Lanka's entire regime of education — from primary to university — have been in the making for the past six years. In the early nineties and under the then UNP regime, soon after the Youth Unrest Commission completed its mandate, and in compliance with some of its recommendations a National Education Commission was set up under the chairmanship of Professor Lakshman Jayatileke, who had headed the Youth Unrest Commission. The task of the National Education Commission (NEC) was to make recommendation to government concerning suitable and necessary reforms in the school and university education system. The Commission held public sittings for three years, obtained evidence from many sections of the population and submitted its recommendations to the government in 1994. The reforms that are now sought to be implemented and opposed are essentially the recommendations made in that report.

Recalling the time when the NEC held public sittings even in provincial towns in order to solicit public views on education, we note that, despite continuous coverage given in the press to the Commission's proceedings,

there was no immediate interest or concern among political parties and groups with regard to educational reforms. There were other issues on their agenda at that time, issues primarily concerned with questions of political power.

However, those who followed the reporting of evidence given before the Jayatileke Commission would remember the extent to which the sham of so-called free education in Sri Lanka was exposed by many persons of the rural middle and poor classes. Many teachers working in schools in rural areas expressed the view that, although they had themselves benefitted from free education, their own children had now become victims of a vicious system of unbridled competition solely geared to success at examinations. Many who came before the Commission were particularly critical of the exclusive examination orientation of the present system, which has given rise in turn to a massive 'tutory industry.' Educationists told the Commission of the ill consequences of examination-driven school education on the personality and skills development of young children. The fact that 'free education' merely meant free tuition was also emphasized.

In another memorable narrative of evidence, a school teacher from the rural Anuradhapura district told the Commission how school children as well as teachers had become targets of caste victimization.

'Free education', nevertheless, is an enduring myth among nationalist and radical groups in Sinhalese society. This myth originates from a powerful sociological fact that was evident in Sri Lankan society over the

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past sixty years: free education had played a socially emancipatory role for many persons of the oppressed and backward class and caste groups while enabling the middle strata to achieve further upward social and economic mobility. As an integral component of Sri Lanka's welfare state, free education also became in the ideologies of nationalist and radical groups a basic entitlement.

One real problem now with Sri Lanka's 'free education' is not whether education is free of fees or not, but whether Sri Lanka's younger generation receives a quality education. With regard to cost-free 'free education', it is rarely acknowledged by opponents of reform that parents do indeed spend a considerable share of their monthly income on private instruction, which is available outside the school system. The examination orientation of the existing free, public education system has paradoxically given rise to a lucrative private sector in school education, which still remains an informal sector, although it operates within a well-organized network.

Some statistics on education will reveal how 'free' education as it operates today goes against the interests of the same social groups which it earlier served. Out of nearly half a million students who sat for the G.C.E. (O.L.) examination in 1996, a mere 21.7 percent qualified to enter G. C. E. (A.L.) classes. Only 22.3 per cent could claim to have passed the examination with a minimum of passes in six subjects.

The severe bottle-neck that characterizes the present school education system is again felt at the post- Advance Level. Out of 170,000 students who sit the A.L. examination, only 12,500 get an opportunity to enter the university system.

In the university too, students generally receive a sub-standard education. This is particularly so in the faculties of arts and humanities which admit the largest share of university entrants. Outdated syllabi, academics with little exposure to new knowledge, ill-equipped facilities and libraries, obsolete lecture and evaluation methods, development of over-sized administrative bureaucracies and students with no skills in languages other than their own — all these constitute signs of a massive crisis in the entire university system.

Reflecting this crisis, the moneyed classes, both old and new, have already begun to shun local schools and universities. The recent proliferation of fee-levying private schools, euphemistically called 'international schools', to train local students to sit for British, American and Australian examinations is a sign of an unmistakable trend — the elite has totally lost confidence in the local public education system. This is an ominous sign of a vicious trend that has public policy implications. As the examples of Sri Lanka's public health and public transport systems clearly indicate, once the elite begins decisively to move away from a state service, the state's capacity to sustain that public service with quality is in serious jeopardy.

In this age of the post-welfare state, reform is long overdue in a system of education which has already rendered itself obsolete and of no particular use to its recipients either in terms of employment or personal development. However, reform is not easy

because even an inefficient, useless system tends to have generated its own networks of vested interests. Today, the slogan of 'free education' is primarily raised by those vested interests. They are the sections who try to politicize the educational sphere of public policy.

If the existing system of school and university education were to continue for the sake of preserving the concept of free education, its immediate victims would be the vast masses of persons of lower and middle class backgrounds, whose children are destined to receive a low-quality, substandard and goal-less education through the public education system. The historical period in which free education served the social interests of the Sri Lankan masses has effectively come to an end. What remains, with power to grip the emotions and move people and students on to the streets, is the mythology of free education.

But, how should this regime of public education be reformed? All recent Sri Lankan regimes that have tried to change the system have had to face grave political consequences. The United Front regime of the 1970s introduced the district quota system to regulate university entry, ostensibly to benefit rural Sinhalese youth coming from underprivileged backgrounds. However, it immediately resulted in the curtailment of higher educational opportunities for Tamil youth in the Northern province and directly contributed to political radicalism and rebellion in Tamil society. And when the UNP regime in the late seventies introduced a White Paper on educational reform, the oppositional forces immediately seized on it as a plank for mobilization. The setting up of a privately-owned medical school in the mid eighties gave rise to a particularly violent, anti-systemic campaign. Now, in the late nineties, are we going to witness another similar upheaval?

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