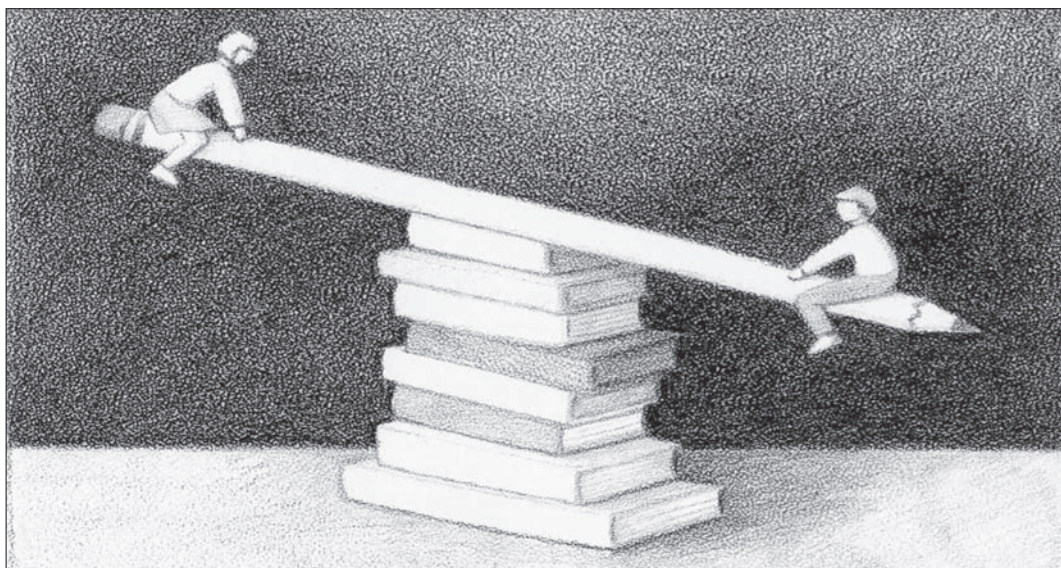


Education and policy



A stark case of inconsistency can be seen in the government's policy as a result of pressure exerted by private school operators



SHAK BAHADUR
BUDHATHOKI

Over the last three years, the government of Nepal has issued two directories pertaining to the issues of private schools in the country. That the share of private school and student enrollment is only 16 percent at the basic level (from class one to eight) as indicated in the Department of Education's Flash Report of 2015. The rapid growth of private schools mainly in the (semi)-urban locations has intensified debates and concerns among stakeholders in the recent years, triggering framing and reframing of policies to manage the private education sector.

The recent directory, the Institutional School Fee Fixation Directives 2016, mostly reiterates existing policy provisions while introducing a few other new ones. Some of the provisions that are repeated in the directory were left unexecuted for no apparent reasons in the past. Thus, it is unlikely that they will be readily enacted simply because they are restated—the poor implementation in the past makes one skeptic about the fate of the new policy again. In this context, enforcing existing policy could have been the top priority.

The policy provision

While looking at the new directory in relation to existing policies, one of the identifiable points is that many provisions get repeated with some additions and modifications. For instance, there are three new categories added for collecting fees which involves educational tour, inter-school competition, and teaching material. Hence, it is clear that with this provision in place private schools can charge fees in the name of a few more topics now. Meanwhile, the provision of pasting fees structure in the notice-board has been modified as displaying it into a flex print at the main gate of school and an estimated fees structure for the new academic session has to be submitted to the District Education Office three months earlier in place of two months in the past. Since the existing provision was hardly put into practice, it is hard to assume

that minor changes in them will bring positive outcomes.

As one of the new issues in the directory, it sets out 32 minimum standards for the existing as well as new schools. The existing schools have to fulfill these standards within three years, lest they will be notified for merging with other schools as an alternative, while the new schools will not be permitted to open without fulfilling such requirements. In a sense, this goes against the existing policy provision of classifying schools into four categories A, B, C and D based on the facilities they provide. On the one hand, policy assumes the existence of a great diversity in private schools; on the other hand, it attempts to homogenise them. In this case, the lower category schools will face the brunt of fulfilling such standards because higher category schools already discharge them. Hence, the lower grade schools will have to struggle hard

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to survive and to continue to offer education for financially poorer students mainly at the fringe away from metropolitan city.

The other new point is the process of determining fees structure through two-third of the teacher-parents gathering called by the school. This is one of the major issues objected by private schools. In fact, private school operators believe that they are operating business in which it is unlikely that consumers fix the price. The fact is that they want return out of their investment while the government wants to make the financial aspect transparent since there has been heated debate on this issue time and again. Against this background, to what extent it is justifiable to get returns from private education and how the state manages the private education sector becomes very crucial. Therefore, the role of the state has to come out very clear for managing the sector in better ways.

The recent education bill passed by Parliament allows opening up new schools either as education

trusts or co-operatives while the existing company schools would continue to remain so until they wish to be registered as otherwise. This point clearly indicates that the new bill is unjust in the sense that schools already registered as company will continue to make private profits while the new schools will not be allowed to do so because they will have to be registered as educational trusts. Therefore, the monopoly of the company schools will go on unabated in the form of syndicate. At this point, it shows a stark case of inconsistency in the government policy as a result of pressure exerted by private school operators with a significant proportion of their representation in Parliament at the moment.

Issues of implementation

Comparatively, the simpler policies largely remained unimplemented in the private education sector in the past. Therefore, it is difficult to believe that the new policies will be executed unconditionally in anyway. Since teachers and parents are less powerful than school operators, it is unlikely that they will have any influence in determining fees structure even if the policy is implemented. Similarly, the case of allowing operating schools either as education trust or cooperative shows the state's motive to control the emergence of profit-motivated private schools, but it looks difficult to be realised for long because the opposition is likely to be built in due course against the syndicate of already existing company schools that are allowed to operate as they are.

The provision of 32 minimum school standards is unlikely to be implemented within three years under the existing situation for a number of reasons. First, private school operators have grievances against this and positive outcome is almost impossible without their support as experienced in the past. Second, this undermines the diversity of private schools across the country while the proportion of lower category schools is significant that consequently finds it hard to fulfill those standards on time. Third, the monitoring and supervision and enforcement mechanism is utterly poor by far, so much so that unregistered schools operated in the past. And there is hardly any substantial shift in the state mechanism in this respect at the moment.

Budhathoki is Researcher at Martin Chautari