065

The Campus Problem— And The Price

Bangladesh University of Engineering and Technology (BUET) stays closed for the 10th day, following a decision by the university authorities. The immediate reason for this extreme step was the student protest over two main issues, class-tests (to be dropped) and an increase in stipends. This seems to have become a routine method of dealing with campus trouble generally in the country. But in most cases students, guardians and the general public have reacted most resentfully against such uncommon methods of tackling a very common problem.

If this has become a vogue then the rational conclusion is that hardly any university—or any other educational institution, for that matter, would keep functioning regularly. In actual fact that is what has happened with such results as session jams, delayed examinations, unfinished courses of study, delayed examination results, loss of academic years and opportunities for jobs, careers etc. The loss is, in the first instance, personal for the individual victim of the circumstances and, next, national.

Almost all the universities including BUET are finding it a hard job clearing the past mess. The country cannot just afford to have more of it. The cup is already full.

To stop the slide, our approach from now on to campus trouble has to be absolutely pragmatic. We should explore all ways and means of nipping such trouble in the bud. Closing a university would come, if at all, as the last resort, only in a national emergency sort of situation. In anything less than that closing a university or an educational institution should, in principle and by law, be banned. Unscheduled closures of the universities or other institutions occur at a huge cost to students and the nation.

BUET is the premier technology institution in the country, and, unfortunately, it does not appear to be behaving as one. For students, they must realise that by boycotting classes they only add to their loss. Class tests are a universally recognised means of improving the efficiency of a student. We would rather have the students demand more facilities (practical and theoretical) for learning their subjects better. Our science and technological laboratories are still poorly equipped. Students could even ask for more work-hours, indeed for anything that will improve the knowledge of their subjects. The escapist mentality that seems to have grown among them or, allegedly, even among teachers, has to go. There is no short-circuiting knowledge; certainly science and technology never. The stipend issue is a peripheral one and none to precipitate crisis like the closure of a university.

The need is for a radical change of approach to campus trouble henceforward, if we are serious about turning the tide in favour of progress in education and technology. At bottom the whole problem of educational decline is one of recurrent trouble compounded by weak management at the local level. A positive administrative policy, at both local and state level, based on the determination to keep education going by keeping academic institutions running at all cost is more than due. Just a whiff of trouble, as of now, must not lead to closing down any education institution.

Trouble at BUET is a metaphor for the overall messy educational situation in the country. As if mimicking the universities smaller institutions have started closing the shop using some campus trouble as an excuse. Teaching like learning is a very demanding occupation, and a good teacher must feel a qualm of conscience that he is drawing his pay packets for work he has not done. The worst part of the story is that trouble, traditionally confined to arts institutions, has over the years spilled over to science and technology ones (medical colleges and technical and engineering instituions). Is not yet time we turned round and mended our ways and stopped the slide? For the government, the academics and all others,