

What price education?

By ATAUS SAMAD

All the government leaders seemed to have suddenly taken a fancy to the term "disparity" on the question of doubling of tuition fees. The government's justification—it does not like to be reminded that the World Bank had advised it to raise fees—is that the tuition fees charged by the government-run schools, colleges and madrasahs are much lower than those charged by those which are run or owned by private persons and therefore by increasing the fees charged at the government-run educational institutions an unjust disparity has been removed to some extent.

To say the least, this is a perverse sense of justice. Throughout the country parents have felt and they have said so many times that many of the private schools are engaged in a rip-off and that the owners or managements of these schools are making the parents of the students pay through their noses.

Letters have appeared in the newspapers that when the government is paying financial grants to most of the private schools and when these schools have to gain a formal approval of the Education Directorate and the boards of secondary education to get such grants and to place their students for the examinations of the boards the government is in a legally happy position to stop this plunder in the name of education.

If I have heard the

Finance Minister correctly at his post-budget press conference—the minister himself was happy to describe it as a discussion with journalists—he said that he had not heard till then of any formal protest against the raising of the tuition fees from any quarter other than from the opposition political parties.

But indeed, the President of the Dhaka Chamber of Commerce and Industries told me specifically that his organization was asking the government to reconsider this decision because the DCCI considered education a vital input for development and its cost therefore must not be made grater.

The Acting President of the Metropolitan Chamber of Commerce also said in a friendly advice to the government that for the nation that was not the best time to get embroiled in a controversy on school and hospital fees.

Therefore arises the question, does the government hear anything but the noises only it itself makes.

The question of school fees certainly can be viewed from more points than only the point of raising or saving government revenue. To my mind, the question in this respect which should be considered with great urgency is: Why should not be education made free and compulsory up to the secondary school certificate level?

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According to the Finance Minister the government is supplying up to 70 percent of the pay of the teachers of the private schools. The government is also spending a lot of money for giving free primary education. So the government can indeed do some exercises to figure out from where it can cut some fund and instead spend it on giving free education up to the secondary level.

In defense of my suggestion may I ask this to be considered that a lot of the parents in the villages who do not mind their children dropping out from primary schools will perhaps be a great deal more willing to ensure that their children go to the schools if they knew that the state has come forward to give education to the latter up to a reasonably useful level.

At this moment these unconcerned parents perhaps believe that the years spent at the primary schools will be a waste of time if those studies cannot be followed up by some more studies in higher classes.

The second point in defense of my suggestion for making education free and compulsory up to the secondary level is that education is a social input which most often adds to production—be it due to greater skill that comes with education or be it due to the proper use of the entrepreneurship that a man may possess but is ordinarily unable to make use of due to ignorance and lack of education.

Having taken a look at the revenue expenditure of the government in the last couple of years, I find that the spending on defense has been, as usual, exceed-