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National Book Policy

The Bangladesh Cabinet recently approved a new book policy. We have not seen the details, but what the State Minister for Cultural Affairs said in her comments leaves much unexplained.

The fact that Bangladesh is believed to need a national book policy is, it should be realised, a reflection of its cultural needs. It is only culturally needy countries, wholly or partly dependent on foreign books, which have to regulate the flow of foreign publications on the one hand, and on the other, to promote publishing by local incentives, as Bangladesh has been trying to do.

It is here that we confront a paradox. Local publishers, such as they are, resent the import of foreign books even when they are unable to meet local demand, and they want the government to restrict the entry of books from outside in order that they may be spared the competition of superior products.

This is true of other industries also. But in the case of intellectual products, the matter calls for consideration in the light of our need for better books which will help improve our standards and provide superior models of excellence. A country suffers no loss if it is obliged, in the interests of local industry, to make do with coarser linen or with ill-made shoes or less refined ceramics. But there are two areas where protectionism would spell disaster. These are pharmaceuticals and books.

We need the best medicine to save lives, the best equipment for the treatment of the sick. An alternative course would mean death for thousands.

Inferior books destroy us mentally. To deny the population the right of access to the best that creative minds elsewhere produce is to ensure the suppression of future possibilities of intellectual growth.

We hear of complaints about the flooding of our markets by books from abroad. If the buyer prefers these books to the products of our local writers, it is plainly because comparatively the latter are inferior. It is up to the local writers and publishers to put on the market superior publications which would attract the buyer away from foreign books.

Any other policy, we repeat, would be short-sighted and calamitous.

We have been told that one aspect of the policy of discouraging the import of foreign publications is the recent practice of charging duty even on gift books. What comes in by way of commerce in bulk may be liable to duty, but to tax gift books on any grounds is indefensible.

If the government does not wish to transform this country into a replica of the totalitarian states, where as in the defunct USSR, people could not even read their own classics, all duty on gift books must go forthwith.