



Free books made conditional

BULBUL AHMED, *Natore*

The joy of the government-sponsored textbook festival eluded many young learners in the district town on the New Year yesterday as several schools made it virtually obligatory to pay the school fees during distribution of free textbooks among students.

Visiting different areas of the district town, this correspondent found that different high schools were taking Tk 300 to Tk 600 under different heads including session charge, sports fee and milad mahfil fee from students during the distribution of new textbooks.

Although schooling at government primary schools is totally free, different government schools in the town are taking Tk 50 to 70 as fees from students during textbook distribution.

Sumaiya Khatun, Monisha Sarker and Hasibur Rashid, Class IX students of Dighapatia PN School, said they had to pay Tk 520 each as fees at the time of receiving new textbooks.

Nayon Sarker, another Class IX student, said he got only three books as he failed to pay the whole amount of Tk 520.

"It was not possible for my poor father to manage Tk 520 on the first day of the year. My friend Hridoy Hossain of the same class did not come to school to take new books as he failed to manage Tk 520," he said.

Sumitra Rani, a Class VI student of Dighapatia PN School said she got new books after paying Tk

580 as school fees.

"The teachers are collecting Tk 580 during distribution of new textbooks.

"I am a poor day labourer and I had to take loan to manage the money for my daughter's admission," said Rahima Begum, mother of a Class VI student.

Alim Uddin, headmaster of Dighapatia PN High School, said they are taking Tk 520 to 610 as session fee, sports fee, milad mahfil fee and rover scout fee.

"But students do not have to pay any money for textbooks," he added.

Santu Pramanik, 35, a day labourer of Ishlabari village, said he could not get her daughter admitted to the play group as the teachers of Islabari Government Primary School demanded Tk 50 for the purpose.

Many other guardians faced the same situation, he said.

Asked about the matter, Rabindranath Sing, headmaster of the school, said, "We are taking the small amount for different programmes like annual sports and milad mahfil.

Contacted, District Primary Education Officer Nafisha Begum said, "The government is providing new textbooks for free to promote schooling of children from all sections of the society. It is illegal to collect money from the children during disbursement of textbooks. We will investigate the allegations."

Shahina Khatun, deputy commissioner of Natore, said, "There is no scope to take money under any pretext during the distribution of free textbooks among students. Stern action will be taken if such corruption is found."