

Tax On Books

Cynics are notorious for running down virtually every budget proposed by successive governments in Bangladesh, as yet-another official sanction to "make the rich richer and the poor poorer". Another common critique is that the whole exercise is one of jugglery with figures, nothing more. This is not to say there is no serious appreciation or otherwise of annual budgets, in part or whole.

For our part it might be worth the while to look into point 35 of the Finance Minister's proposal which slaps a 15% duty on "all other books" except those that educational institutions select as text books. Also exempted are business directories, and mercifully, encyclopedia. The reason why the government has gone for taxing books is stated thus: "Dependency on importation of books is increasing and the local printing industry is being adversely affected."

Does our local printing industry churn out books that are in any way threatened by imported ones? Except for a limited selection of Bengali titles that are published here, there are virtually nothing else that are likely to suffer from the import of non-text books—for pleasure, leisure and purpose—such as 'A Brief History Of Time' by Stephen Hawking, Ibn Fattouma by Naguib Mahfouz, The Tao of Physics by Fritjof Capra and countless other gems that any civilized government would help its people get access to at affordable prices. Instead, what do we find?

The government is going out of the way to keep all the delectable food-for-the-intellect out of bounds for the middle class, who as it is, had to struggle to afford even penguin classics, which are supposedly the cheapest editions available, mostly imported (or are they smuggled?) from India. The right thing for the government to do should have been to facilitate direct arrangements between foreign publishers and our own for both importing hard copy, tax-free, and in printing them here.

World literature and books of knowledge could be printed in Bangladesh both for home consumption and export. With the revolution in computer technology all around us such ventures should be child's play—so to say. With the right kind of management, prices could be kept reasonable so that the growing middle class is encouraged to broaden its reading habit beyond the limited home-grown diet.

The Finance Minister's claims that the 15% tax on import of non-text books was imposed to protect the local printing industry is not borne out by the fact that the 30% customs duty on paper and printing ink remains unchanged. The contradictions in what the government says and does would make anyone wonder what the real purpose behind it is. On the one hand it says it wants to encourage the reading habit and on the other does everything to keep world books out of reach of people who really read them.

Are we then bent on institutionalising ignorance?