

School And Teachers' Strike

Teachers going on strike on questions of 'demands' has become as common as students doing so. Nevertheless there is a difference made by the teachers' importance to the country's education. For one thing, by using 'strike' as a weapon they can be a much greater pressure factor vis-a-vis the administration. For another, this very same thing may also lead to stiffening of the administration's attitude to the issue once it is made to feel that the strategy adopted is as much to pressurise it as to bring into sharper focus their demands.

We start by saying this for the simple reason that the S.S.C. examination under the four Boards are scheduled to be held on May 2. Teachers, teaching (of students in their classes, or class work) as well as invigilation duties to be performed by school and college teachers, apart from a host of other minor or major bits of work, either in matters of obligations at their schools or colleges, including those related to a public examination, are such essentials as cannot be lightly spurned.

Just by a strike all this is thrown into a state of chaos. And at the losing end are tens of thousands of students—and, of course, their parents and guardians—to suffer losses that turn out to be irreparable. And there is the history of a huge back log of such losses in the country's education sector, including those happening at university level, resulting from session jams much of whose baneful effect is yet to be fully redeemed.

One might say: well, all this has since become a tolerated or accepted fact of life, and any press comment on it has consequently lost most of its relevance. No. The relevance of education to the interest of the country, or to the interest of the people, specially of the students, never loses its relevance. And since it does not and outtops all other considerations, factors—human or official, responsible for such a stalemate in normal education operation, have to be taken seriously. They are, in the present (teachers-government) encounter two: Teachers and the administration, both remain equally accountable for such a situation.

Both in the short and long run, it is and will be the administration if it has not cared to look into the 'demands'. But if it has done so in the best way it could, by all rational and plausible standards, and the other side has rejected what the administration has done or offered, the accountability fastens on the latter more.

The known facts of the case of non-government school and college teachers vis-a-vis the administration is that the issue is as old as 26 months. Negotiations were held, agreed responses to demands were made only for the teachers to await in suspense steps towards implementation of the recommendations formally made. But, as they allege, and as is clear from the circumstances, the government has dragged its feet and done next to nothing to deescalate the trouble.

That seems the crux of the problem: As is also clear from the teachers' side, their demands are negotiable and they would participate in a dialogue with the government. If it is so, for the government not to respond and forestall the strike from April 18 has been, we would say, a serious miscalculation.

Since these recommendations by a high-powered committee set up by the Prime Minister provide a dependable basis for solving the issue and defusing the tension that has arisen owing to the administration's procrastination, one immediate step to be taken by the government is to convene an urgent joint meeting between representatives of the two parties to re-create mutual confidence with firm assurances of implementation of the recommendations in a joint bid to head off the strike. This for the simple reason that the country cannot afford a disaster caused by teachers of private schools and colleges going on strike. They represent 85% of the country's teachers and students. Neither side can also afford to throw into total disarray the education of nearly 85% of the country's youth and children.

To allow the issue to slip off the negotiation process is fraught with consequences which both sides will come to rue even if neither do care about the interest of students.

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