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Dhaka University Problem

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Dhaka University is once again in turmoil. This time, happily the issue is not political rivalry between two student organisations and the consequent bloody clashes between them. Regrettably though, the students resorted to violence to protest the authority's decision to raise admission and other fees. The agitating students ransacked the Vice Chancellor's and Pro-Vice Chancellor's offices and caused extensive damages to a number of rooms of the Registrar Building. They have also announced to enforce strike on July 26 and 27. The Ganatantrik Chhatra Oikya (GCO) has already observed strike the following day, Thursday that is.

Clearly, Dhaka University's academic schedules are going to be badly affected by all such programmes. Now the question is: was this confrontation unavoidable? That the students were angry at the authority's decision to raise fees is clear. The authority also would not budge. So the unfortunate incident was not quite unexpected. What is however surprising is that the university authorities — who are teachers as well — and the students could not talk to each other about such an important issue. Neither side can take into confidence the other. This is very sad. An antagonistic relationship such as this can be of help to anything but not education.

Now what is most intriguing is the controversy over the amount of enhanced fees. The university authorities have given figures for different faculties, showing that only a little over Tk 700 has been added to the previous amount. A student survey as carried in a Bangla daily however presents a completely different picture. It claims that the education expenditure at the DU has increased 1066 per cent over the past five years. Unbelievable figure, no doubt! But the year to year break from 1993-94 upto 1997-98 of the increased fee corroborates their claims. Without going into details, we take for instance the rise in tuition and other fees from Tk. 682 in 1993-94 to Tk 2,730 in 1997-98.

It appears there is a deliberate attempt to hide something by some quarters. It is because of this it would be wise to put the issue of raising fees to an expert committee comprising eminent educationists, representatives of different groups who have stakes in the university. No fool will suggest that the decades-old tuition fee of Tk 12 a month should still continue. There is also rationale behind making higher education a little costlier. That is how the quality of education can be improved. Unless we can do this, everything else becomes almost meaningless.

Although the authority says the increased fees are intended to raise the standard of education, we are not aware of any steps in that direction. Without streamlining the education, the move to raise fees can only make the worst fear as expressed by different quarters a reality. That is higher education will be commercialised and its door will be slammed before the poor but meritorious students' faces.

A thorough reform of the higher education is called for. Courses offered at this level will be compatible with the best in the world and they must as well as need-oriented. In that case specialised subjects must demand excellence and when human excellence is in order, it tends to be highly costly. Obviously, the university needs a huge investment to cope with the demand. In that case the students will be asked higher fees but more importantly, the university will have to look for various means of income. The seats of excellence in countries like America have long made arrangements with business houses to augment their income. That is how they have got rid of government subsidies as well. Let university's performance be demanding. This done, even the poor but meritorious students will get their opportunity to study at this level. In American universities almost half of the students continue their studies with scholarships. Our universities must also come to terms with similar arrangement.

There is no piecemeal solution to a serious issue like this. Let the reform to the higher education be brought about first and then go for other measures if raising standard of education is the objective.

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