

Import duty on schoolbooks

Prices will go up, we will go back

THE finance and planning adviser's proposal to clamp a 25 percent import duty on pictorials and drawing books for English medium schools is not based on sound logic. First, the very thought that such imported books have contents that run counter to our social and cultural values is, we believe, erroneous or at best short-sighted. The standard English books are used worldwide as study material and don't contain anything that might be treated as objectionable. If the decision makers really found something against our mores, or not appropriate in our social context, they should have pinpointed it. Exchanging views with all the stakeholders, that is, the teachers, academicians, parents, importers etc was also necessary before putting an additional financial burden on the students and the parents.

Secondly, the decision will further push up the prices of publications that are already exorbitant, to say the least. The argument that English medium school students belong to affluent families and therefore they can afford higher costs is not the issue here, what is important is the attitude we reflect by rendering standard educational materials and aids costlier. Books and all kinds of reading material, particularly those used by learners, should be made available to all at reasonable prices. This is a question of not only broadening the base of our knowledge but also keeping in touch with the latest developments all over the world. We cannot afford to close the windows of communication on the lame excuse of avoiding things that are perceived to be not conforming to our culture. Our culture has very strong moorings.

The education authorities seem to believe that the schools that have introduced the English version of the local curriculum could be a good alternative to the English medium schools. This is altogether a different issue which should not lead us to think that the best way to develop our education system is to increase the prices of imported books to a prohibitive level.

It is obviously not expected that English medium education would be made costlier only because a small section of society can afford it. The decision makers should not overlook the fact that even middle class families are keen on having their children educated in English medium schools which impart international standard education. We urge the finance and planning adviser to withdraw the 25 per cent import duty on pictorials and drawing books.