

Discrimination against kids

*Allege parents as students
of English medium schools
paying VAT on tuition fees*

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The value added tax on English medium schools is burdensome for many families and discriminatory against the students, parents and legal experts say.

There is no VAT on Bangla medium schools and government-approved English version schools that follow English textbooks published by the National Curriculum and Textbook Board.

But in 2010, the government imposed a 4.5 percent VAT on fees and services in English medium schools. Last year, it was raised to 7.5 percent.

"I think it is absolutely discriminatory against the English medium students that they have to pay VAT on their tuition fees," Shafayat Ullah, a Supreme Court lawyer, told The Daily Star yesterday.

In 2010, the government had also brought the private universities under the VAT net (4.5 percent), but lifted it following days of student protest. In the current budget, the government again imposed VAT -- 7.5 percent this time -- on tuition fees at private universities and medical and engineering colleges. In the face of street agitations in Dhaka and elsewhere, the government withdrew it on Monday.

However, the VAT on English medium schools remains.

In the current budget, Finance Minister AMA Muhith had in fact sought to increase the current 7.5 percent VAT on English medium schools to 10 percent. The move drew huge criticism from guardians and English medium schools

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associations. The government later shelved the plan.

Barrister Shafayat Ullah said the government should look for alternative means to make the English medium schools pay more -- by increasing the tax, for example:

"But subjecting students to pay VAT on their basic education, I think, is arbitrary and an affront to common sense. If VAT is not payable for higher education, then how on earth can it be payable for basic education?" said Shafayat, who teaches at the London College of Legal Studies (South):

According to eminent jurist Shahdeen Malik, the English medium students are being made to pay the VAT perhaps because they do not take to the streets.

"It's an absolute discrimination between two similar groups [students of private universities and English medium schools]," he told this correspondent.

This goes against article 28 of the constitution that unequivocally speaks against discrimination, he said.

The VAT on English medium schools also runs counter to the fundamental principles of the state policy. Article 17 of the charter stipulates state's responsibility to provide children with education.

Guardians said the VAT on their children's fees was not only discriminatory, it was also an additional burden.

"We thought the government would have a realisation about it following the protest by private university students. We thought the government would lift VAT from all educational institutions," said Khairul Alam, whose son studies at Sunnydale School.

"Is it because our kids cannot take to

the streets?" he said.

There was a time when children from only well-off families studied in English medium schools. But now, many kids from limited income families go to these schools for a lack of seats in public schools and also for quality education, parents and teachers said.

"These families are feeling the pinch. Is it an offence that I send my children to an English medium school?" said Sakibur Rashid.

His son goes to SFX Greenherald International School at Asad Gate. A KG-1 student, the boy's monthly tuition fee is Tk 5,950, including Tk 447 in VAT.

"The amount of VAT may look insignificant to some. But it's a burden for people like us who count every coin, especially when essential prices are skyrocketing," Rashid said.

The admission fees and monthly tuition fees in English medium schools are already high. And the government is further increasing the education cost by imposing VAT, guardians said.

"The government is silent about the extremely high fees here. Instead of checking it, the government has put an extra burden on us, forcing us to pay VAT," said Ananya Ahmed, mother of an English-medium student in Dhaka.

"Of all the people, why should children be forced to pay tax? Do they earn?" she asked.

Wishing anonymity, a teacher at Dhanmondi Tutorial said, "In the long run, it [the VAT] will hurt our private education at a time when government schools cannot live up to the expectation."

MA Mannan, state minister for finance and planning, said the VAT on English medium schools was justified. "It [the VAT] should be there."