

A victorious end | Dhaka Tribune

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I came to campus at 11am to talk to the protesting students, and to gauge what they were planning for the coming days as the No VAT on Education movement continued. A few colleagues and I had decided the night before that it may be a move in the right direction.

Less than an hour of arriving on campus came the news of the government's withdrawal of VAT from private universities. Cheers of victory and jubilation soared through the roads, as students converged towards the cafeteria, enlivened with hurrahs and TV news channels airing the breaking news. This is such a victory! In my eight years at the university, I don't think I can recollect another moment that was so joyous, so inspiring.

The victory is the students' and theirs only. The fact that they could convene, co-ordinate, and demonstrate peacefully and consistently against a faulty policy, reinstates our faith in the youth of Bangladesh. The fact that the youth can traverse personal and political differences to tackle real policies that infringe on the lifeline of a nation, says that apathy may not have yet erased passion in the hearts and minds of those who have a stake in Bangladesh, who believe that this is their home, and will fight to make it a better place.

Their resolve showed a way for those who feel that the country can no longer be salvaged from divisive politics. But more substantively, the students brought to the fore a debate on the commodification of education, and who has the "right" to it in a developing country such as ours. In relation to the discussion on education, the protest movement has also brought to surface the fairly contentious, yet long-held, discordance between the government and private streams of tertiary education.

In the course of the past few days, many learned for the first time that, contrary to popular belief, private universities do not educate the children of wealthy families only, but that a good 50% of the students are from middle income or even lower-middle income groups. I, along with a few colleagues, personally know many stories of students working part-time to cover costs, whose families are struggling to ensure that their children receive a university degree.

While government universities overwhelmingly continue to be the first choice, barriers such as limited seats and session jams have diverted a flow to the private ones. That being the case, private universities have opened themselves up to students from mixed socio-economic backgrounds, and have been nurturing all their pupils equally. Given this scenario, the long-held schisms that have rendered privatised domains of creative activity and initiative, the "other" of national progress, especially in the field of education, are archaic and call for a substantial revision.

Juxtaposed on the private/public binary is its evil twin, constituted by the English/Bengali divide. This may be a good time to re-evaluate what these distinctions mean in a globalising world, whether and how these fissures can be mended and what every institution that identifies itself with any one, or several, of the epithets may do to bridge these gaps. Education is a right and one of the most important routes to self-flourishing and nation building. We envision a nation where these flourished selves do not float around like self-interested, self-sustaining atoms, but have the capacity to become organic and congealing particles of a bigger whole.

I believe, in the last few days, private university students have amply demonstrated that they will put themselves out there for a bigger, greater cause, thereby clearly making a case that they too, through numbers matched with conviction, are an integral part of nation-building. I applaud the private universities for their ability to harness and nurture diversity, to inculcate a spirit of belonging to and owning the nation, and for instilling the ethos of discipline and non-violence.

But the story of the No VAT movement could not have ended on a victorious note without the government. By retracting the faulty policy, the government has shown that they can take responsibility for bad decisions and change the course of events for the better, and that it is acceptable to do so. They have, perhaps, signaled that

they do not believe in belittling education by commodifying it, themselves.

But most importantly, given certain allegations of high-handedness levied at the current regime, they have shown that they too can listen to the people, respect their right to protest, and allow citizens to be engaged in decision-making. This is what good politics is all about.

We hope that the No VAT movement will be a model for future dialogue between people and the powers-that-be, so that the conceptual and definitional parameters of nation-building can be further expanded and people's participation may truly be factored into the democratic development of Bangladesh.

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