

Basheer defends new educat

By P.K. Surendran

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The ongoing students' agitation in Kerala has disrupted the working of educational institutions.

Students supported by the Left Front have vowed not to allow schools and colleges to reopen till the state government withdraws the new scheme of starting financially autonomous technical institutions and privately-run colleges.

State education minister E.T. Mohammed Basheer is a worried man today with the courts repri manding the government for de viating from laws and statutes rul ing higher education.

While the opposition clamours for his ouster, some elements in the coalition government too have ex pressed their resentment against the "educational mess" as they term it. Moreover, criticism is growing with allegations that he has favoured the Muslim com munity while giving permissions to set up new colleges.

In an exclusive interview to TOINS, the minister sought to clarify his stand. Excerpts:

What led the government to adopt self-financing engineering colleges?

Self financing is not a new idea. Self-financing B.Ed, colleges have been affiliated to Kerala and Calicut universities for years. Trivandrum Law Academy too runs on the same lines. The con cept is in keeping with the new realisation that the government cannot go on bearing the heavy burden of higher education.

"Let us take an honest look of the situation. Kerala has been set ting apart 40 per cent of its total annual budget for education. We spent Rs 23.36 crores for higher education alone in 1981-82. This rose to Rs 86.56 crores in 1991-92. The higher education, as the plan ning board has pointed out, is 96 per cent subsidised in Kerala. We are not allowed by political interests to raise the fee. Last year when we did after 30 years, the Left Front criticised the government."

But why does the state need additional engineering and medical colleges?

"This state has cent per cent literacy. But a state like Maharash tra with 48 per cent literacy has 66 engineering colleges. Karnataka has 30. Kerala has just eight includ ing the two self-financing colleges.

"Malayalee parents have been going to private professional col leges in Maharashtra, Karnataka, Tamil Nadu and Andhra Pradesh.

When these people are prepared to pay hefty sums for getting their wards admitted to medicine or engineering why not make avail able the facilities in the state? A majority of students from other states seeking admission to pro fessional colleges of the above states are Keralites.

"We must decide whether the state should continue to bear the cost of higher and technical educa tion of the rich. The state spends Rs 12,000 per student annually in an engineering college. This is only the recurring expenditure. The govern ment recovers just Rs 860 from every student. How long can we continue with it. Even China has accepted the concept of financial autonomy in its higher education."

Why the state did not wait for the verdict on the two self-financing colleges when the concept was challenged in the Kerala high court?

"It is the third batch. Only now someone thought it necessary to challenge it. It is a judicial matter so we will skip the details for the time being. But I can tell you we have taken care to ensure statutory reservations and minimum financial burden to the students. Rs 1 lakh deposit from a student is refunded without interest. Yes, the deposit of \$ 5000 per NRI student is not refunded. Again, unlike in private engineering colleges of

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some states, we are not picking students at our will. We go strictly by the state entrance test list.

Why are there so many complaints against the new colleges?

"The main plea is that the self-financing colleges do not conform to the formula evolved by the supreme court in the capitation fee case last year which demands that 50 per cent of the total seats of any professional college be kept for meritorious students. In our case, 50 per cent seats are not strictly free seats. Yes, but here are government-backed, well-equipped professional colleges. A student will spend less than Rs 1 lakh for his engineering degree. In many other places ill-equipped and badly managed private colleges auction their seats."

What have you to say in regard to the 72 new colleges proposed to be given to private managements?

"Actually this was what hit the leftists and their student wings. This year we sanctioned only 34 colleges. The Communist Party of India-Marxist (CPM), which has been dominating the political scene in colleges, fears that it will lose its clout in the new colleges sanctioned to private managements. Hence its effort to rake up the issue.

"This scheme is a much maligned one. In fact, the scheme of granting 72 new colleges preserves the spirit of the supreme court

ruling in Unnikrishnan Vs Andhra Pradesh case on capitation fees.

"The state resource commission had pointed out how we are churning out good-for-nothing graduates. They fit in nowhere. Unemployment is mounting because of mindless education. Now on the other hand, we have a shortage of trained hands in many other fields: computer science, tourism, scientific research, hotel management and so on. We developed such a system to cater to the need of the times and to provide employment opportunities to students."

What have you to say on the Marxists' charge that the Karunkaran government has favoured the Muslim and Christian communities while sanctioning new colleges to draw political mileage?

"True. In the new colleges, 35 per cent have gone to Muslims and almost 30 per cent to Christians. But Muslims were educationally backward till recently. Muslims, who account for 22 per cent of the Kerala population have only 16 colleges managed by them.

"The scheme we mapped out for the new generation would make higher education quality-oriented, and colleges self-reliant. Those who graduate from these institutions will not be unemployed. Visionaries are seldom honoured in their own land."