

the Karnataka State Minorities Educational Institutions Federation challenging the Karnataka state government's 30 percent tuition fees reduction order to private schools, on February 24, the Karnataka high court ordered the state government to file its reply within ten days.

Bandana Brahmin (Bengaluru)

► WEST BENGAL

Education trump card

THE ELECTION Commission of India has announced that West Bengal's legislative assembly election will be conducted in eight phases between March 27 and April 29. Therefore acrimony between the ruling Trinamool Congress (TMC) and the BJP, which has replaced the CPM (Communist Party of India-Marxist) that ruled the state uninterrupted for 34 years (1977-2011) as the main opposition party in the state (pop.91 million), has become more fierce.

Seeking a mandate for a consecutive third term while presenting the state government's budget on February 5, West Bengal chief minister Mamata Banerjee announced a slew of initiatives in the education sector.

Among them: Juvashakti, under which 10,000 students will be inducted as interns in government departments every three years; establishment of training centres for 100 IAS and IPS aspirants, promoting 100 new Nepali, Urdu, Kamtapuri and Kurali medium schools; Rs.50 crore allotted for 500 new Alchiki or Santhali language schools and recruitment of 1,500 para-teachers for them, and Rs.50 crore for 100 new English medium schools for the SC/ST and economically weaker sections. In sharp contrast to the BJP-led government at the Centre slashing the 2021-22 budget for education by 6.13 percent to Rs.93,224 crore (cf. Rs.99,300 crore budgeted for 2020-21), the state government's education budget for next year is 12.3 percent higher at Rs.37,059 crore.

Moreover, with the full backing of the TMC government, the state government-funded Jadavpur University (estb.1905) has unitedly and unequivocally defied two notifications issued by the Delhi-based University Grants Commission, a subsidiary of the Union education ministry.

The first notification issued on January 15 (since rescinded) required all universities and higher education institutions to obtain permission of the Union external affairs ministry prior to any faculty participating in online conferences, seminars and/or training programmes. The second UGC notification of February 16 rejected by JU, pertained to encouraging the university's students to write a 'cow science' test to be conducted nationally by the Rashtriya Kamadhenu Aayog, a subsidiary of the Union ministry of fisheries and animal husbandry.

With reference to the January 15 notification, speaking on behalf of JU, **Partha Pratim Biswas**, professor of construction engineering, commented: "Campuses must allow free thinking and exchange of views worldwide. If debate and discussion is impeded, it can create barriers to the progress of research and innovation. The conditional approach does not work in academics."

Similarly, a statement issued by the 'Jadavpur Fraternity' condemned the UGC directive to encourage the study of cow science. "The Jadavpur Fraternity would appeal to other colleges and UGC to rethink the unscientific direction this examination will give to the education system of the country. University research should be conducted in scientific disciplines well-funded by the government, without any scope for diversion aimed at undermining science."

The TMC government's pro-education budget presented on February 5 at a time when over 200 million children in India have lost a full year of formal schooling due to the pandemic, and teachers have faced heavy job losses and are suffering extreme stress in training themselves on new



technology platforms, has won TMC and chief minister Mamata Banerjee the admiration of the state's influential *bhadralok* (refined middle class) on the eve of West Bengal's most fiercely contested legislative assembly election.

As a result, political commentators who had earlier written off Banerjee's chances of winning a third consecutive term in office are veering around to the view that with her liberal pro-secular education agenda and recently provided freebies, Banerjee may prove her critics wrong again.

Baishali Mukherjee (Kolkata)

► MADHYA PRADESH

Fees payment tussle

THE ISSUE OF FEES PAYABLE BY parents of children in private unaided schools during the pandemic close down which is convulsing the nation, has not bypassed the Hindi heartland state of Madhya Pradesh (pop.73 million), India's largest state by land area (308,245 sq. km). On February 12, following a public march by agitated parents in Bhopal — the admin capital of the

state — **Kamal Vishwakarma**, president of the city-based Private School Parent Association, presented a petition to Inder Singh Parmar, minister of education of the BJP government of Madhya Pradesh.

The association's petition alleged that despite numerous government notifications and high court orders, a large number of private schools are charging fees under numerous heads of expenditure. "This is unacceptable and in violation of a November 5, 2020 order passed by the Jabalpur bench of the Madhya Pradesh high court to the effect that private schools can levy only the tuition fee. This situation needs to be urgently remedied by the education ministry and state government," says Vishwakarma.

The court's judgement of last November was based on its interpretation of the Madhya Pradesh Niji Vidyalaya (Private Schools Regulation) Act, 2017 enacted by the previous Congress government of the state which was dramatically ousted by the BJP in a legislative coup in March last year.

“In order to strike a balance among stakeholders — who include students, parents, teachers and management — we direct that the students/parents shall pay tuition fee as per order dated September 1, 2020, which shall not be inclusive of library fee, computer fee, practical fee, examination fee (subject to examination not being held) and fee for programmes organised on occasions such as national festivals, sporting events and development fee,” ruled the court on November 5 in response to a writ petition filed by the Association of Unaided CBSE Schools of Madhya Pradesh. Simultaneously, the bench directed private schools to ensure that children are not deprived of online education and that teachers' salaries are paid fully with arrears, if any, to be cleared by the end of the current academic year.

Although the high court ruling has dismayed the vast majority of MP's



Siddharth Singh: cooperation call

budget private schools in particular which are confronted with an unprecedented cash crunch, some private school leaders are sympathetic to the plight of parents whose incomes and businesses have been upended by the national lockdown of industry and business for over six-eight months following the outbreak of the Covid-19 pandemic a year ago.

“The Covid-19 pandemic was a surprise disaster and the nation has to stand by the middle and lower middle-class parents community. Private schools should draw on their savings to tide over the crisis and cut their expenditure while deploying tuition fees to meet the salaries expenses of teachers,” says **Sandeep Gupta**, vice principal of the Little Angels Convent High School, Bhopal.

This point of view was accepted by Association of Unaided CBSE Schools which petitioned the government to ensure that the reduced tuition fee is paid immediately. But following a government directive to parents to pay tuition fees forthwith, the Private School Parents' Association filed an appeal in the Supreme Court against the MP high court's November 5 order.

“Private schools in MP have been very sympathetic to the income and job losses suffered by our parents during the pandemic, and our

association — even if reluctantly — accepted the MP high court's 70 percent of tuition fees-only order. However, several parents associations misled by their leaders, have appealed the Supreme Court against the high court's order. Parents should be more sympathetic to huge financial losses suffered by private schools and also by their children's Covid warrior teachers who may suffer salary cuts and job loss. They should withdraw their appeal in the Supreme Court and accept the high court order. They should also bear in mind that the Supreme Court has recently upheld a Rajasthan high court order that parents should pay 100 percent of contracted fees,” warns **Siddharth Singh**, director of the Emerald Heights International School, Indore and member of the Association of Unaided CBSE Schools.

Private school parents would do well to heed this advice and aid and enable managements of schools preparing their children for an increasingly uncertain future.

Aditi Maheshwari (Bhopal)

• GUJARAT

Cautious reopening

WITH THE NUMBER OF COVID positive cases and fatalities in Gujarat falling from a peak of 97,894 and 1,132 on September 16, 2020 to 16,577 and 120 on February 25, 2021, the state government has permitted schools across the state to reopen in a phased manner.

On January 11, class X and XII students who will write their board exams in May 2021 were permitted to attend in-school classes, subject to parental consent. On February 1, class IX and XII students started conventional classes. And on February 18, class VI-VIII children of private and government schools were given the option of returning to school campuses.

With schools obliged to follow strict SoPs (standard operating procedures)