

# Tinkering with textbooks

## A game politicians love to play

MOFIDUL HOQUE

BA NGLADESH is one of the ten most populated countries of the world with literacy being denied to 40 percent of its population. On the other side of the coin is its large number of young students; with almost 95 percent enrollment the intake of students at schools, madrasahs and other formal or non-formal institutions is so large that it exceeds the total population of many countries. We also know that the dropout rate is very high; almost 40 percent of the students never finish their primary education. It serves as a warning to everyone related with education and national development that not everything is well with our education system and critical evaluation leading to major reforms is urgently required to change the scenario for better. Everybody is aware about the importance of investment in education but this investment cannot be measured in monetary terms only; the question of quality of textbooks and other related problems are at the core of this issue.

We all know very well how with every change of every regime the textbooks also go through changes; in most of the cases such changes are made very hastily, without giving much thought. In our country the government has exclusive control over the preparation and publication of all the textbooks at primary level and most of the books at secondary level. At the higher secondary level it is gradually assuming the supervisory role and the task of writing and publishing books has been rendered to the private sector. The same is true for madrasah level textbooks also. National Curriculum and Textbook Board and Madrasah Education Board enjoys the authority over textbook publishing. By the sheer number of copies they print annually and the number of students they reach they can easily be termed as the largest publishing house in South Asia, if not in the world.

One should also admit that lot of planning and brain-storming goes into the preparation of textbooks and this has been reflected in the improvement that has been made in

English, Bengali and Science books. In case of English textbooks the shift has been made over the years in the method of learning and instead of teaching language and literature the emphasis now is more on communicative and functional English. The process of preparing a textbook can be understood following its trial which took about five years of continuous work. Following the recommendations of NCTB the draft textbooks were prepared and evaluated by a team of national and expatriate experts. Each part of the book was tried in schools, both urban and rural, government and private. Then revision was made

persons from India? They are Anwarul Haque (sic), who is a writer and Runa Haque (no relation), who is a journalist. Among the eight of such 'other people' besides Runa there are two women, one is Janet Jones from UK with a very predictable profession of nursing and the other lady Susan from US strangely is a housewife.

In the lessons for communicative English there is a passage titled "Our Country". Previously it depicted only the land and people, without mentioning anything about its emergence and liberation struggle. The committee formed during Awami League's tenure, headed by

four national leaders, AK Fazlul Huq, Maulana Bhasani, Sheikh Mujibur Rahman and Ziaur Rahman. Whereas each prose piece is of 5 to 6 pages long this newly inserted one altogether has 21 pages to its credit. Such intrusion upsets the balance of the textbook and does not serve any useful purpose. If one looks at the text critically even the article on Ziaur Rahman is full of spelling mistakes and wrongly constructed sentences. Such tinkering shows party in power could not care about the quality of textbooks and is more happy with the 'politically correct' one.

Allah so that this can be the source of all his thought and work.

2. To awaken the spiritual, social and moral values in the student on the basis of full faith and belief in Almighty Allah.

These two aims, the way they have been formulated, excludes the followers of other religions completely and do a disservice to the concept of universal primary education irrespective of cast, creed and race. Such formulation can be made for theological education but not in a society aspiring to be liberal and moderate and providing universal education. In this 19-point objectives no mention has been made to teach the child to be tolerant and respectful to other culture, religion or language. Arrogance of the majority not only brings disaster for the minority but also proves harmful for the proper development of the majority and ultimately harms the entire nation. In today's world the concept of tolerance and respect for otherness is of fundamental importance and this has been brutally tampered by our policymakers in education year after year, regime after regime. In this basic document of primary education the importance of internationalism has been emphasised in a wrong way and on point 18 it has been written that, "the concept of universal brotherhood and internationalism should be awakened on the basis of the belief that all humanity is the creation of Almighty Allah."

There are many distortions in the textbooks derived from such brutalisation of majority people's religious belief. A child can be imbued with moral values only when his religious values are set in harmony with human values. Our textbooks are not only on the wrong side of history, they are also on the wrong side of moral education. The issue needs much more attention and care from those concerned with it.

Mofidul Hoque is a publisher

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with participation of teachers and specialists. The revised and modified textbooks were finally introduced nationally along with a teacher's guide and detail lesson plan. As development of curriculum and textbook is a continuous process periodic evaluation and revision remains very much integrated with textbook publication.

Even the textbooks produced following such arduous methodology cannot be completely free of mistakes, omissions, bias and prejudice. If one looks at the books from a gender perspective, lot of distortion and bias will pop up. There are other kinds of bias also. In the English books so many names have been used to depict different characters in their communication with each other. Sabina, Salam, Belal, Hasan, Arif and many more people of the community has been named, but among all these Bangladeshi names not one Hindu, Buddhist, Christian or for that matter any tribal name is to be found. Interestingly, in English for To-day for Class VI, 'other people' have been introduced from Nepal, USA, UK, Malaysia, India and Germany. Can one guess the name of two

historian Prof. Salahuddin Ahmed has added the following lines at the beginning: "Bangladesh declared independence on 26 March 1971. It became free from Pakistan on 16 December 1971, after a great liberation war. It is a democratic country with many kinds of people. They follow different religions and customs. All these people are free and enjoy equal rights."

Although the subsequent BNP government changed almost all the revisions made by previous regime it kept this passage intact, one of the rare statements with bonafide claim of national consensus. But the other changes made hastily showed that tinkering with the textbook is the game politicians love to play and they play it very badly. This can give them a sense of political correctness but end up with messing the whole concept of designing and writing textbooks. A glaring example is the effort made to politically correct the Bengali textbook of class VII, Shahitya Kanika which has 16 prose pieces on different subjects following the criterion set in the curriculum. With the regime change one biographical piece was replaced with brief biographies of

Textbooks need regular evaluation and upgrading. A good textbook is not only a well-written one but also a balanced one which takes into consideration the present reality with aim to project into the future. A textbook has to be properly graded, be effective in both urban and rural areas, in different cultural and social milieu and providing tool to the teacher for the proper upbringing of our future generation. It is imperative that not only textbooks, the curriculum and educational objectives should also be evaluated from time to time.

Here attention can be drawn to one aspect of our declared educational aim. NCTB has formulated 19-point objectives that a student has to acquire at terminal stage of his or her primary education. This is apart from the skills that the student will acquire. It has been stated that the main aim of primary education is to ensure overall development of child's physical, mental, social, spiritual, moral and human aspects. Then the 19 points were laid out as the common aims to be fulfilled. The first two aims are as follows:

1. To imbue in the mind of the student unflinching faith on Almighty

# Current market dynamics of steel industry

AAMEIR ALIHUSSAIN

THE RE is a lot of hue and cry these days about increasing prices of steel in the whole country and a lot of negative campaign is going on to discredit the whole industry. Through this article, I am to explain the real situation behind all the price increases and that no one in the industry has any control over it.

Bangladesh is basically an import dependent country for basic raw materials for a lot of industries, steel being one of them. The following are some of the reasons for the price increases of steel world over:

a) Over the past year, world economy has been growing steadily but when talking about China, it is a fact that it has been growing rather quickly. It is said that these days China's growth rate is nearly 20 per cent mainly due to the various export zones set up by the Chinese, the Olympic preparations going on and the huge infrastructure projects going on in China, and hence it has become the biggest consumer of steel in the past year. Its appetite for steel is continuously growing over the past year which has led to increase in raw material prices for world-wide.

b) The oil prices are at record high which is making the shipping industry asking for more freights. Previously one charter vessel from UK used to cost say \$55 and now the rates are over \$90 per ton with demurrage rates over \$30,000 per day for a vessel of 20,000 tons.

c) The US dollar has depreciated by nearly 40 per cent against euro and as a result automatically all the European suppliers are asking for more dollars for every ton of steel it sells for every euro currency that they want. Bangladesh currency is so weak that we could not revalue our currency. Rather our currency is now worth Tk 58.80 as against Tk 58.55 few days ago.

d) The earthquake in Iran and the reconstruction of Iraq are sucking away all the finished steels in the market.

Prices of raw materials as well as finished products of steel have touched levels never ever recorded in the history of steel trading which says a lot of about increasing prices not only in Bangladesh but all over the world. Even iron ore and coke which were available abundantly earlier are now scarce. It takes nearly one and half months of waiting for Pakistan steel mills iron ore vessel to take cargo from Australia to Karachi, which eventually has led Pakistan steel to increase their prices by nearly Rs. 10,000 per ton in the last

one year alone! (This fact can be easily verified by the Bangladesh High Commission in Karachi).

## Reasons for price increase

As mentioned above, increase in international raw material prices has led to increase in prices of goods in Bangladesh. The table

Particulars	1 year ago \$ per ton	Landed Cost Taka per ton	Current Price \$ per ton	Landed Cost Taka	% increase
Melting scrap	\$137	11,200	\$380	29,200	160
Ship breaking	\$145	12,200	\$400	28,000	129
Billets	\$200	16,600	\$480	36,100	117
Local Rod Price		18,000		37,000	106

below shows the increase and effect on landed costs:

Ship breaking landed cost of plates has been calculated after including breaking cost as well as VAT.

Besides the above, costs of chemicals, silicon, manganese, consumables, etc which are all steel related, have increased

same at 7.5 per cent even though there is maximum value addition in the melting sector than all the other sectors. There was no need to alter the duty structure and if it needed any alteration such as this, then scrap duty should have been kept at 0 per cent for the industry to be in balance and keeping government policy consistent. Even with such a

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substantially. This fact can be easily verified and confirmed by the Chittagong and Benapole Customs Houses. Situation is even worse because even at the above prices, material is not available and who knows the raw material prices would have probably become even higher!

From the above table it is clearly seen that raw material prices have increased more than the local steel rod prices hence pressure for upward push in rod prices is imminent. Local prices have not increased as much because the industry always has some older stock at lesser price which is enabling everyone to survive. However, stocks are very much depleting and nearing end. No significant purchases are being made by the industry for raw materials because by altering the duty structure recently, government has negatively affected the whole operation cycle.

## Government actions and effects

The steel industry is being blamed for the prevailing high prices. Government probably listened to some incorrect advice and decided

drastic and sudden reduction of duty on rods, prices have not decreased mainly because of continuously increasing prices in the international market. Moreover, government has reduced the amount of VAT on finished products and removed AIT and IDSC charges at import stage. Since international prices are increasing, these kinds of small reductions will not help in reducing prices, only it will lessen the growth rate of prices in the short term.

One questions the emergency created by some quarters when construction costs have risen only by Tk 150 per square feet with the current rod prices as mentioned in some newspapers recently. Construction cost of an average apartment comes to around Tk 800 per square feet without land when the selling prices are nearly double, therefore, this kind of increase in no way threatens their existence. Furthermore, it is natural to pass on some of the increase to the potential buyers of flats since no one has any control of these prices as prevalent in the international market. However, with the current duty structure and negative public-

ity, the whole steel industry's survival is threatened.

## Recommended government actions

a. *Maintain a balanced duty structure:* Government should not think about maintaining or decreasing duty on finished steel as that will just crush the whole industry in some time. Policy has to be consistent for all industries. It should be 7.5 per cent for raw materials, 15 per cent for semi-finished such as ships and billets and 30 per cent for finished products. If government does not maintain this and arbitrarily changes the duty structure, it loses credibility in other industries as well and hampers investment due to inconsistent policies. Steel contributes a huge amount per year to the government in terms of VAT, power, gas, taxes, duties and most important, employment and value addition. If the duty structure is not made balanced, the whole industry is threatened where entrepreneurs have made huge capital investment to set up plants based on a specific government policy.

b. *Fix tariff value for steel scrap at \$125:* Focus of the government should be to concentrate and help

for the PSI company to come and do the inspection at their convenient time. Scrap stuffing in containers take time and suppliers do not want to go through the hassle in waiting for the PSI company to come according to a fixed schedule or cannot arrange a convenient schedule for the PSI company to come and see the loading. Hence they prefer not to go through this hassle and therefore, sell the material to other countries. Thus all scraps from the Middle East is going into Pakistan and India at \$250 per ton levels. Customs could do 100 per cent inspection at Chittagong Port after arrival of scraps.

e. *Remove VAT at import stage:* Removing 15 per cent VAT at import stage for steel raw materials will help in substantially reducing the cost of imports. For instance, at current prices, for melting scraps, VAT amount at import stage comes to Tk 3,600 per ton, for ships for breaking Tk 1,900 per ton and for billets Tk 4,300 per ton. This is a big contributor to national exchequer hence government may think about removing this head for the short term till international prices do not come down. By doing this the entire industry will be at even levels and no growth problems will be encountered in this sector, rather than adjustment of duty and taxes.

It is expected that international prices are not going to come down at least till 2008 when there is Olympics in China. Some believe, these prices will remain for an even longer period of time until the slowing down of China takes place and reconstruction of Iraq is finished, we do not have any option but to adjust with these prices and bear this extra cost. We have to take this with a pinch of salt. As a country and as in the whole world, we do not have any other option.

If the government starts making arbitrary changes in the policy under pressure of some quarters this will lead to closure of major steel industries and will definitely encourage all other sectors in the country to press the government for giving them support against every type of turmoil they face in the international market.

The notion that some vested quarters have manipulated steel market is a very sad one. Our own company was buying steel scraps from the local market at Tk 15,000 some six months back and today we have bought the same melting scraps at Tk 25,000 per ton which gives an idea where the market is going.

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# Super-sizing the president

**George Bush has never fully inhabited the role of president. He still often seems to be impersonating a commander in chief.**

JONATHAN ALTER

CAN George W. Bush be sold like Ronald Reagan? Within weeks, the president will begin the biggest political advertising campaign in history, unloading more than \$150 million in TV ads in a dozen swing states over six months. Those expecting an onslaught against the Democratic nominee will be disappointed; the law now requires this tag line in the candidate's voice: "I'm George W. Bush and I approved this message."

That means that for all the nastiness injected into the political bloodstream on sex or shirking guard duty or Hanoi Jane, the big ad buys in prime time -- the ones most Americans actually see -- will be largely positive. The idea is to portray the president as a principled wartime leader who kept us safe and revived the economy. It's a "Morning in America" theme -- homage to Hal Riney's legendary ads for Ronald Reagan's 1984 fall re-election campaign. The only problem is that it's not morning and Bush is not Reagan.

Running ads many months before an election is relatively new, and it's not clear that it works. In 1996, Bill Clinton ran positive re-election ads early in the year in selected states. But in November, Clinton did no better in those states than elsewhere. So why is Bush doing it? First, because he can; his fund-raising is a perpetual-motion machine. And second, because he has to: he's already slipping behind John Kerry in some polls.

This is a stunning reversal of fortune since mid-December, when Saddam Hussein was captured. The hyping of Saddam's WMD threat and the dishonesty of Bush's budget numbers (his new budget doesn't even include the cost of the war in Iraq) are eroding the trust that the president once took for granted. It's all part of a larger miscalculation: Bush had a chance to heed the 2000 election returns and the 9/11 consensus by governing from the center and staying fiscally responsible. But he squandered that historic opening by pandering to his right-wing base and failing to ask for sacrifice from anyone except soldiers. Lost opportunity leads to lost credibility. Polarization precludes trust.

But I think there's another reason that Bush needs a Madison Avenue makeover. Despite a few fine speeches to Congress, he has never fully inhabited the role of president of the United States. He still often seems to be impersonating a commander in chief. When he goes off script, as he did during the "Meet the Press" interview, he looks uncomfortable and out of his depth (which is why he has had fewer press conferences than any other modern president). Bush acts on

instinct and faith, not facts and information. That makes him resolute but not judicious, bold but not wise.

Impersonation can be an important part of political development. As a young man, Franklin Roosevelt impersonated his fifth-cousin Teddy, down to wearing pince-nez and shouting "Bully!" LBJ and Reagan tried to emulate FDR, while Bill Clinton and now Kerry have a thing for JFK. Bush began by modeling himself on his father, entering the oil business and running for Congress. But early on, he established a pattern of barely qualifying instead of excelling, assuming that no one would notice the difference. Bush thought that by enlisting in the National Guard, he could get the best of both worlds -- credit for service and the freedom to do what he wanted at home. He could be a hawk without having to face the risk of being killed. Accountability -- for not showing up for his flight physical, squandering \$100,000 in taxpayer-funded training -- was for other people.

Thirty years later, not much has changed. Bush put his war and tax cut on a credit card for someone else to pay off. And there's something callow and cavalier about "playing dress-up on an aircraft carrier" (Kerry's words) -- impersonating a soldier when you've sent more than 500 real ones to die fighting a country that didn't pose a clear threat to America. The president apparently believes that accountability is like that dental work he had done on the Alabama base, a hardship to endure once or twice a year but hardly the real substance of democracy.

One of George W. Bush's greatest assets is supposed to be that, unlike Al Gore, he's comfortable in his own skin. But is that comfort enough to master the job? In the Tim Russert interview, he struggled in vain to channel Winston Churchill and had to settle for poorly delivered platitudes. No matter. The Bush campaign edited out the "uhs," and (before NBC objected) posted excerpts on the Internet to show steadfast leadership. It's all part of an effort to super-size the president.

The Whopper of recent super-sized presidents is, of course, Reagan, whose spirit Bush now hopes to inhabit. A recent collection of his original radio commentaries from the 1970s, "Reagan in His Own Hand," shows that whatever one thought of his politics, Reagan had been thinking deeply about complex public-policy issues for many years. George W. Bush has not, and even \$150 million in ads cannot make it so.

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# Dhaka traffic



SHAWKAT ALI

WHILE many high-falutin, high cost proposals are being banded about in some quarters to help resolve traffic congestion crisis in Dhaka (and perhaps to line some pockets as well) -- proposals like maglevs, monorails, subways, host of flyovers, etc. -- a few practical steps can be taken immediately as cost-effective measures to relieve the unbearable traffic conditions on Dhaka roads:

1. **Stagger hours:** Fix educational institution start and end hours at 7am and 2pm respectively. The majority of transports working around these hours would be for carrying the students to and from their institutions. Let office hours be staggered starting from 8am through 11 am and likewise staggered ending 5pm through 8pm. This staggering could be done industry or sector-wise, after due analysis, to provide maximum business hours overlap among related industries or sectors. For example, garment industries could start their shifts non-coincident with start of workday of government office hours or other non-related industries. Likewise, private firms, banks, etc., could arrange their work hours in similar manner, maintaining several core overlap hours. This, of course, needs a little research to arrive at the best combination. Delivery vehicles and cargo carrying trucks be restricted to operate only between the hours of 9 pm and 2 am, or some similar hours (you get the idea).

2. **Provide greater co-ordination among all city bus-lines to schedule buses to stop at designated bus stops (no random pickups) at posted scheduled times to achieve optimum interlinking among different routes.**

3. **Make several roads one-way, after due analysis of traffic patterns.** Bangkok has an interesting way of making one lane one-way in either direction depending on the time of the day and traffic flow. Study that.

4. There are something called traffic lights. It seems that the powers-that-be have given up on the idea, though I remember traffic lights being introduced in Dhaka even before liberation. I guess we all got liberated from traffic lights as well. Yes, traffic lights by themselves mean nothing if they are not observed. Driver education, maintenance of the lights and vigorous traffic law enforcement are necessary corollaries of much wider deployment of the lights than there is now. By the way, this will also cut down on tooting of horns and the noise and air pollution that are rampant today.

5. **Traffic conditions reporting on AM band or even FM band (if there is one such) would help drivers determine alternate routing or even alternate hours of travel.**

6. **Pedestrian crossings:** Been there, done that. But varied ineffectually. It seems that every time this topic is raised the powers-that-be come up with civil works that siphon off public money to line their pockets without delivering any results. Witness the much-publicised overhead bridges, the skeletons of which remain even to this day. Clearly demarcated crossings on the road combined with traffic lights work pretty well. We don't have to be in the dark ages about such simple solutions. And I don't buy that our people can't be trained about road etiquette. Just check on the many DV immigrants from many of our remote villages using the streets of L.A. or New York.

7. **Co-ordination among the different works department so that street digging and impediment to traffic flow is**

minimised is a topic much under consideration. I understand there are some movements in vesting powers centrally to make this happen, but whether that will happen is a different matter. The willy-nilly building up and demolition of traffic islands and roundabouts under successive administrations bear ample testimony to the lack of planning and governance, and make-work programmes to drain the public exchequer.

8. **On an intermediate time frame, active consideration should be given to rehabilitating rickshaw pullers and withdrawing rickshaws altogether, first from bottleneck areas and later throughout the city.**

9. Likewise, active consideration should be given to relocating several industries, in phases, away from the city, garment industry being among them.

10. Along the same lines move back several government ministries where they properly belong. Ports Authority, Railway, the Navy, to name a few, should move their HQ to Chittagong. Let other cities flourish and their outlying areas develop. Spread the money and income generating activities around the country. Since the public sector activities form a major proportion of the GDP let's start there. The private sector will follow. Decentralize!

11. **Root cause for the traffic problems in Dhaka lies in the tremendous influx of population from outlying areas, an influx that the infrastructure is unable to handle.** Let's turn it around. Satellite towns served by speedy commuter trains would be a start. (Today it takes over half an hour to get the train to move from Kamalapur to Tongi!). The rolling stock and infrastructure are mostly there, an incremental expenditure would be needed to upgrade existing facilities as opposed to deployment of a TGV type of service. We cannot afford bullet trains, contrary to what some 'interested' ministers, secretaries, consultants and lending institutions would have us believe.

12. Last but not least, like Singapore, Dhaka authorities should think actively of ways to dissuade private vehicle ownership when public transport would work just as well, if not better. Making vehicle ownership cost-prohibitive would be one of them; making public transport convenient, safe, pleasant and cheap would be another. In this regard, there is much to be said about the poor state of the public transit system.

I am sure many of the enlightened readers of The Daily Star will have many other suggestions. And much, if not all, of what has been said in the foregoing are not new. There is nothing fantastic in these suggestions. A conservative estimate would place a loss of between one million to two million productive person hours lost per day by the commuting public of Dhaka due to traffic congestion problems. I am hopeful that this will elicit several responses from the readership and even from relevant authorities.

Finally, I would like to suggest to the Editor that a specific column be dedicated as a forum for discussions on improving Bangladesh, call it "Better Bangladesh" or something of that ilk and let the ideas flow specific to this subject. We are making strides. We can be a lot better than what we are today! And where there is a will there is a way. It has been done; the polybags and two-strokers are cases in point.

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