

COMMUNALISING TEXTBOOKS

How others may look at us



MANZOOR AHMED

THE opening words of an education blog posted under the auspices of UNESCO Global Education Monitoring report concludes that the new version of textbooks from grade one to grade ten display a deliberate move to give the content a religious if not communal slant. (See Global Education Blog, 8 February, 2017).

It goes on: Bangladesh has always had separate religious books in schools for followers of different faiths, and textbooks for other disciplines have always been secular. This year, however, the new text books, even those that are not related to religious studies, have been tailored to please religious groups. First graders now learn that 'O' is for 'orna', a type of scarf worn by girls and women, rather than for 'ol', a type of yam, for instance. In addition, 17 poems have been removed, which local media has reported, at the request of a group -Hefazat-e-Islam - who reportedly told the government those were 'atheistic'.

It further adds: Some commentators believe the changes in Bangladesh's books might have a political motive, given that the next general election is in 2019, and pleasing these groups could win over a particular electorate. The government has been quick to say this is not the case.

The blog refers to the GEM Policy paper on textbooks published last year. The paper had pointed out that textbooks can easily breed and reinforce intolerance, prejudice and discrimination. "In 16 countries in Europe and North America, for example, 50 percent to 75 percent of all coverage of Islam and Arab societies in world history secondary school textbooks is related to conflict, nationalism, extremism or terrorism, representing these societies as violent and unstable," the policy paper noted.



PHOTO: STAR

What should be a matter of concern for Bangladesh policy makers is that the recent incidents in Bangladesh are cited as an example of the bigotry and distorted views seen in text books in many countries. The Blog's concluding words warn, "This story reveals... that monitoring education progress cannot rely on access data alone... there is an urgent need to monitor the content of education if we are to ensure that education is

promoting sustainable development." As part of the Ekushey Book Fair, Bangla Academy hosted a public discussion on education and social progress on February 20. This writer was invited to present the main paper. Professor Emeritus Sirajul Islam Chowdhury was in the chair, while the discussants included Prof. Abdul Mannan, UGC Chairman; Prof. Harunur Rashid, Vice-Chancellor of the National University; and

Rasheda K. Chowdhury, Executive Director of CAMPE. I drew attention to the fact that the first education commission of independent Bangladesh, the Kudrat-e- Khuda Commission, had made a distinction between learning about religion and religion-based education. The Commission had recommended a common universal education for all children

up to grade 8. Madrasas, after this primary stage, would be a form of vocational education for those who may become teachers for family religious instruction, religion teachers in general schools, imams and muezzins of mosques, and kazis or registrars of Muslim marriages.

The Commission never envisaged a parallel religion-based system of education from pre-primary to university, supported by the state revenue along with the secular system. We have strayed far from the premises of the Khuda Commission.

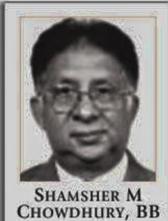
It is hardly discussed, and not a politically correct question to ask, whether the state should support a faith-based system of education; and if it does, what proportions of students, institutions and public budget for this parallel system should be compared to the secular system. The madrasa proponents have already raised the logical demand for a full parity with the secular system claiming access to public service jobs for madrasa graduates. Soon there may even be a demand for quotas for madrasa graduates.

Let's not forget that the madrasas supported by public funds and the quomi madrasas run with charity raised at home and abroad prospered since the military rulers assumed power in 1975. The irony is that once the genie was out of the bottle, even the elected governments found it impossible to put it back.

The discussants and the chair at the Ekushey forum agreed that it would be a dangerous game to appease religious extremists out of short-sighted political calculation. The characterisation of the Bangladesh textbooks in the GEM blog may not be entirely fair. But it would be quite fair to say what happened with the textbooks recently is not acceptable and must not be allowed to be repeated.

The writer is Professor Emeritus at BRAC University.

Remembering a dear friend



SHAMSHEER M CHOWDHURY, BB

SERAJUL Haque Kazi, more popularly Sipi to all his friends and countless well-wishers, passed away in the early

valued friendship in its purest form. Helping others was second nature to him and he did so selflessly. Of the so many Bangladeshis who had been to Boston over the years, either to visit, study or work, very few among them would not have had the pleasure of enjoying the warm hospitality and friendship that Sipi and Jessy offered at their apartment in Boston that they, and their loving

He had come from Saint Gregory's High School. Within days we became friends. This extended to the cricket field as both of us played for the Press Club team in the Second Division of Dhaka's famed Cricket League. He was the opening bowler for the Club while I opened the batting. Over time our bonding gelled and was to transcend a lifetime. Sipi went on to teach at Boston's prestigious Northeastern University. Passage of time and the challenges of distance notwithstanding, we managed to remain in touch, even if it was just to say hello.

From what one heard from Jessy, it seemed that Sipi had a premonition that this trip to Bangladesh would be his last journey. Before they left Boston for Dhaka, Sipi called his uncle, Mama, in London and expressed his wish to be buried on his Nana's grave in Banani when he died. In fact, he and Jessy spent part of the Friday before last at the Banani graveyard offering Fateha for all of their elders who are buried there. He spent a few extra minutes at his Nana's grave, as if making preparations for his own final resting place. Barely a week passed before Sipi was buried at that very place he had wished to be. Our friend had indeed come home for his eternal rest.

May you Rest in Peace, Sipi.



SERAJUL HAQUE KAZI

daughter Paula, had made their home for twenty seven long years. The flood of messages that flowed from all across America on Sipi's death and the glowing tributes paid at his Doa Mehfil on Friday is testimony to how much he was loved and how much he would be missed.

I first met Sipi in 1965 when we were first year intermediate students in Notre Dame College in Dhaka.

BEETLE BAILEY by Mort Walker

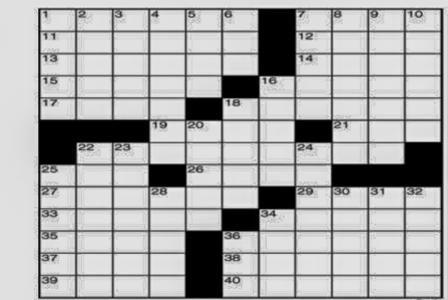


BABY BLUES by Kirkman & Scott



CROSSWORD BY THOMAS JOSEPH

- ACROSS**
- 1 Dealer's need
 - 5 Increase
 - 11 Car bar
 - 12 Lease signer
 - 13 Whirled
 - 14 Tenor Bocelli
 - 15 Kidnapp victims
 - 17 Summit
 - 18 Hair clusters
 - 22 Play part
 - 24 Bowler's challenge
 - 25 Road goo
 - 26 Thurman of film
 - 27 Starts business
 - 30 Trouble
 - 32 Bike part
 - 33 Leaf lifter
 - 34 Slim cigar
 - 38 Most important thing to do
 - 41 Wrinkle remover
 - 42 Full-price payers
 - 43 Split
 - 44 Stand up to
 - 45 Daring
- DOWN**
- 1 Morse T
 - 2 Trade fair
 - 3 Tightly grouped
 - 4 Jazz great Stan
 - 5 Un-escorted
 - 6 Beliefs
 - 7 Finishes
 - 8 Hole number
 - 9 French article
 - 10 School org.
 - 16 Clumsy fellow
 - 19 Rattled
 - 20 Watch reading
 - 21 RBI or ERA
 - 22 Organ part
 - 23 Matador's need
 - 28 Port of Italia
 - 29 Biases
 - 30 Meadow cry
 - 31 Whole
 - 35 Comfy spot
 - 36 Drawn out
 - 37 Opie's dad
 - 38 Mayo buy
 - 39 Pindar piece
 - 40 Tour carrier



YESTERDAY'S ANSWER

G A I T S T I B E R
 R E C A P A T O N E
 I R E N E R O U T S
 P I C C O T I R E
 E A R I R S L E T
 S L E W E D A L E S
 A R S E N I O
 A R M Y R A D N E R
 M A C T I M C R O
 A D O N E U N O
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