

SPOTLIGHT

I am puzzled that in my lifespan of only 30 years, I have read two versions of the history of our Liberation War and now I am teaching my students a third version of our great national struggle," shares Md Rakibul Hasan, a teacher of a prominent Bengali-medium school.

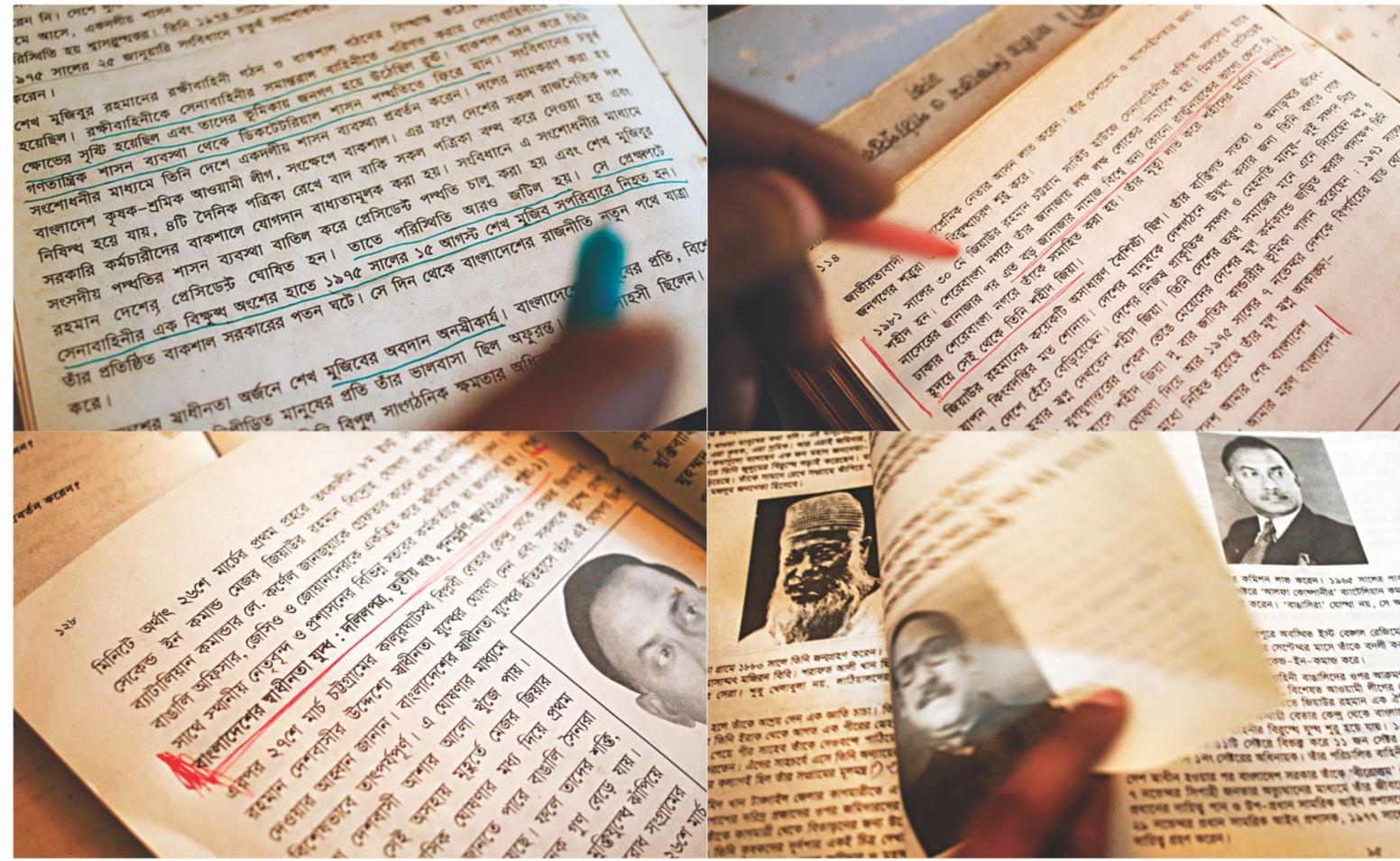
Rakib was a student of grade five in 2000. "I learned about the historic speech of March 7 in school. I also wrote an essay on Bangabandhu's life in the primary school final exam," he remembers. However, four years later, things changed completely.

"It was around 2004 to 2005 when I was a student of grade eight or nine. To my surprise, I found only a few words about Bangabandhu's life in the history chapter of our social science book and learned that the proclamation of Bangladesh's independence was actually made by Ziaur Rahman," says Rakib. On the other hand, he found that the Bengali literature textbook was full of tributes to the former President Ziaur Rahman. And the only thing he learned about Bangabandhu was that he was the founder of Bangladesh Krishak Sramik

history of Bangladesh's Liberation War was only sparsely described in the textbooks till 1991. After the return of democracy in 1991, some elements of the history of 1971 were introduced, but those were inconclusive. For instance, in the primary and secondary grade textbooks published in 1991, a one-page biography of Bir Shresthas (highest gallantry award winners of the war) was the only content related to 1971. The language movement, mass revolution of 1969, and six-point movement were nowhere to be found.

In 1993, the NCTB edited the primary school Poribesh Porichiti (Shomaj) [Introduction to Environment and Society] book, which included a very brief description of the Liberation War [Poribesh Porichiti (Shomaj), NCTB, Dhaka, 1993, page 45-48]. However, its preceding events and movements were omitted as well. The textbook stated that the proclamation of independence was aired by M A Hannan, a leader of Chittagong Awami League, and Bengali army officer Major Ziaur Rahman, through Kalurghat radio station. This version remained unchanged till 2001.

In 1996, the AL-led government made some major additions to the secondary level textbooks regarding the history of



Excerpts from textbooks published by the National Curriculum and Textbook Board

PHOTOS: KAZI TAHSIN AGAZ APURBO

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Awami League (Bakhsal) and was assassinated by the army due to his failure to tackle his government's corruption, which had led to famine and public outrage.

After more than a decade, in 2016 Rakib took up secondary level textbooks again, but this time, as a school teacher. "I found that everything had been changed again. Major Zia had been completely deleted. Bangabandhu Sheikh Mujibur Rahman and our struggle for liberation had returned with greater prominence. However, the references to Bakhsal were also removed."

It is needless to mention that Rakib's experiences have resulted from the tendency to change textbooks according to the ruling party's ideology and its own version of history. Although there is an autonomous body called the National Curriculum and Textbook Board (NCTB) to formulate curricula and to author and regulate textbooks, they could do nothing to prevent such unethical interventions. According to Professor Narayan Chandra Saha, "NCTB has to act according to the executive order passed by the Ministry of Education. However, we are in the process of formulating a draft National Curriculum Policy Framework. Once it is passed, it will not be so easy to make abrupt changes in the textbooks."

However, the damage has already been done in the last two decades. The

1971. For instance, two poems ("Prio shadhinota" by Shamsur Rahman and "He kishor shono" by Mahadev Saha) and an essay ("Rokte lekha muktijuddho") on the Liberation War were included in the Bengali literature book for grade six; in the Bengali literature book for grade seven, a short story titled "Shomoyer hridpindo" and an essay on the four national leaders were incorporated; and in the Bengali literature textbook of grade eight, a short biography of Bangabandhu Sheikh Mujibur Rahman and a poem ("Shadhinota, ei shobdoti kibhabe amader holo" by Nirmalendu Goon on Bangabandhu's March 7 speech) were included.

However, in 2001, when the BNP-led government came to power, they abruptly changed all this content. They started with the primary school textbooks. In the Bengali books, references to the March 7 speech as well as all references to his name were erased from the biographies of Bir Shrestha freedom fighters. But perhaps the most notable of "edits" took place in Paribesh Parichiti (Shomaj). Where it was earlier stated that Awami League leader M A Hannan and Major Zia had proclaimed independence on behalf of Bangabandhu on March 27, M A Hannan's name and the words "on behalf of Bangabandhu" were deleted and the date was changed to March 26, thus making Ziaur Rahman the only one who proclaimed independence [Poribesh

A CONTENTIOUS HISTORY

How textbooks distorted and ignored the history of 1971

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Porichiti (Shomaj) NCTB, Dhaka, 2001, page 45-47; Amar Boi-Ponchom Bhag, NCTB, Dhaka-2001, page 56-59).

The changes were more prominent in secondary level textbooks. Bangabandhu's proclamation was erased from the essay titled "Rokte lekha muktijuddho" and Ziaur Rahman's name was introduced in place of Bangabandhu's. The essay on the

biographies of four national leaders was completely erased from the grade seven Bengali literature book. Similarly, Bangabandhu's biography and Nirmalendu Goon's poem were erased and replaced by brief biographies of Huseyn Shaheed Suhrawardi, Maulana Abdul Hamid Khan Bhashani, Sheikh Mujibur Rahman and Ziaur Rahman. In this chapter, Bangabandhu was portrayed as a failed administrator whose role was insignificant in the nine months of war and Ziaur Rahman was portrayed as a national hero and the savior of the nation [Shahitot Konika, grade eight, NCTB, Dhaka, 2001]. In all other primary, secondary and even higher secondary level books, Bangabandhu was carefully replaced by Ziaur Rahman as the proclaimer of independence, and the former's name was mentioned as little as possible. This distorted version of history was studied by millions of students of Bengali-medium schools and Alia madrasas for over eight years. When the AL-led government won the ninth

general election, one of the first steps they took was to change the textbooks. The government also made some significant changes in the curriculum by introducing a new education policy which recognises "realising the spirit of the Liberation War" as a major goal of education. A new textbook titled "Bangladesh and Global Studies"—where a brief history of the Liberation War has been included—was introduced and made compulsory for students of all education systems. Bangabandhu's biography and his name as the proclaimer of independence have been reinstated. And, to no one's surprise, Ziaur Rahman's name has been eliminated from all the textbooks. According to curriculum specialist and historian Dr Mamta Uddin Patwary, Professor of Bangladesh Open University, "The great history of Bangladesh's Liberation War has been tarnished by these practices. Even during his reign, Ziaur Rahman never claimed himself as the one to proclaim independence. Bangabandhu Sheikh

Mujibur Rahman is the founding father of Bangladesh's liberation movement and during the war Ziaur Rahman was nothing more than one of the many sector commanders. It is outrageous to present him in the textbooks as comparable to Bangabandhu." "Those who participated in the Liberation War and fought against the Pakistan army have already secured their places in our national history. We cannot change their positions. Our Liberation War should not be a part of party politics; it should be respected as an honoured part of our national history," he adds.

Adding to Bangladesh's failure to teach its youth a consistent historical narrative on the nation's liberation struggle is the fact that we have educational mediums which do not pay much attention to national history. More than 1.4 million students of around 14,931 Qwami madrasas do not study the history of 1971 at all. In these institutions, all of which are beyond the purview of government monitoring,

Taqmeel degree. After these reformations, we will also edit our textbooks." On the other hand, the history of 1971 is also ignored in the curriculum of English medium schools. History is taught in every grade of these schools, but Bangladesh is almost absent in the subject's textbooks. Most of these schools teach history books approved either by Edexcel or Cambridge Education board. The primary grade book published by Cambridge, called "Children's World History Bangladesh Edition", does not include any chapter related to 1971. The third part of this book, taught in grade four and five, only includes a chapter on the Language Movement titled, "An important issue: the Language Movement", three other chapters on medieval ruler Isa Khan, Sufi saint Hazrat Shah Jalal (RA) and ancient scholar Atisha Dipankar. However, the book includes 12 other chapters on Indian and European history. From grade six to O level, the schools teach a history book titled "Human Heritage: A World History" which excludes the history of Bangladesh and its liberation, although it has comprehensive chapters on ancient Roman wars, crusades, Napoleonic wars and so on. On the other hand, the history books approved by Edexcel do not include any chapter related to Bangladesh let alone the war. For these students, the only source of learning about 1971 is the 10-

Bangladesh's history is taught only up to grade five. And, in their books, which are printed by publishers enlisted by Befaql Madarisil Arabia Bangladesh (Qwami Madrasa Education Board), the history of 1971 is full of distortion. In the history book of grade five, an essay titled "Shadhin Bangladesh er jonmo" (Birth of an independent Bangladesh) has been recently included in 2016 after much debate on Qwami Madrasa's reluctance to teach the history. In history textbooks published in 2014, Ziaur Rahman was mentioned as the sole proclaimer of independence. However, in face of criticism, they changed it to "Ziaur Rahman proclaimed independence on behalf of Bangabandhu Sheikh Mujibur Rahman", although the High Court passed a verdict in 2009 stating that Bangabandhu is the only proclaimer of independence. In addition, in the books of grade three and four, there is a chapter on the birth of India and Pakistan but there is not a single line about our liberation. Maulana Mahfuzul Haque, Joint Secretary General, Befaql Madarisil Arabia Bangladesh, says, "We have already incorporated some corrections. We are now very busy with the organisational reformations after the recognition of our

page essay on Bangladesh's independence struggle that has been included in the first chapter of the "Bangladesh and Global Studies" textbook. According to Khairul Bashar, principal of Cardiff International School, "At present, English medium schools are teaching 'Bangladesh and Global Studies' up to grade eight. But in the O levels, guardians and students actually chose their subjects and unfortunately Bangladesh Studies is not on their priority list. However, if they want, they can take the course and continue it in their O levels." Despite the inclusion of "Bangladesh and Global Studies" in all streams of education, the improvements have been far from adequate. According to Dr Mamta Uddin Patwary, teachers who teach the history of the Liberation War must be trained properly. "History is an analytical subject and it should be taught very carefully as historical events can have multiple interpretations. In our schools and colleges, history graduates do not teach history and those who teach do not know how to teach it. For this reason, our students are learning a distorted, false history and are becoming desensitised

In the books of grade three and four, there is a chapter on the birth of India and Pakistan but there is not a single line about our liberation.

"Besides teaching the authentic history of our liberation, we should also teach the history of preceding events such as the partition of the Indian subcontinent, the Language Movement, the six point movement, the mass revolution of 1969 and all the related events even in the post-71 era," he adds. Eminent historian Muntasir Mamun further suggests, "A course on Bangladesh's national history and the Liberation War should be made compulsory up to the higher secondary level. And research facilities to conduct objective research on the war should be established in universities." In 2021, Bangladesh will celebrate its 50th year of independence. It is really unfortunate that even after 46 years, the history of our liberation is a contentious topic among its own people. As a result, many Bangladeshi youths like Rakib are still puzzled and many others are completely ignorant about their own history. If we cannot document the real, authentic history of our liberation through our textbooks, if we fail to disseminate the true spirit of the war through trained teachers, all our development efforts will be futile as the famous proverb says, "A nation which does not know what it was yesterday does not know where it is today." The writer can be contacted at shahnawaz.khan@thedailystar.net.