



PHOTO: PRABIR DAS

Workers of a printing press in the capital's Matuail area readying the textbooks that were given to students this year.

New textbooks, same old errors



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WASIM BIN HABIB

The first morning of the New Year comes with a special gift for millions of schoolchildren across the country, as they are handed new textbooks in a festive atmosphere. For the past 13 years, the education ministry has successfully distributed free school textbooks to all students from grade 1 to 10 to mark the start of a new academic year.

This year, the government started distributing about 35.16 crore textbooks to over 4.27 crore students. Undoubtedly, this is a great feat that has led to significant improvements in enrolment at primary and secondary levels. The government, especially the education ministry and National Curriculum and Textbook Board (NCTB), the state-owned publishing house looking after the printing and distribution scheme, deserve applause for delivering such a mammoth task without any major hiccups. It should be mentioned that the government has overhauled the curriculum, and textbooks of classes 1, 6 and 7 have changed accordingly. Students of other classes will also, in the next few years, receive books from the new curriculum.

But the students' joy and government's success have been overshadowed by a sizeable number of errors and anomalies in the textbooks, including structural and factual errors, outdated information, spelling mistakes and distortions of history. Such mistakes have, over the years, occurred repeatedly. However, the NCTB seems to be paying no heed to these controversies, which only damages the reputation of the textbook board and the government as a whole.

As a reporter covering education for over a decade, I have seen how journalists compete with each other over breaking stories on mistakes as soon as the new textbooks are distributed. This year has been no exception. A large portion of them appears to be printed on low-quality paper, with poor printing quality. And like in previous years, the mistakes in textbooks have triggered a barrage of criticism on social media.

For example, the English book for class 6 holds many grammatical errors and spelling mistakes, but the factual errors in

the history book are far more shocking. A chapter of the book "Bangladesh History and World Civilisation" for class 9 and 10 gives the confusing information that the Pakistan army were engaged in torture, genocide and destruction in Bangladesh from March 26 to December 16, 1971. But the Pakistani army officially launched its campaign of genocide in erstwhile East Pakistan on the fateful night of March 25, 1971.

On page 200 of the same book, it is mentioned that Chief Justice Abu Sadat Mohammad Sayem presided over the oath-taking ceremony of Bangabandhu Sheikh Mujibur Rahman on Jan 12, 1972. But in reality, Justice Abu Sayeed Chowdhury had already been appointed as the country's president by then. Surprisingly, the book is based on the existing curriculum, which means these mistakes have been there for years.

Does this not speak of sheer callousness and irresponsibility on the part of the authorities concerned? Following criticisms, the NCTB in a statement on January 17 issued corrections to nine mistakes (including the aforementioned two) in three class 9 and 10 textbooks – History and World Civilisation, Bangladesh and Global Studies, and Civics and Citizenship – saying they would be sent to all schools in a day.

Sadly, this is not the first time such mistakes have been found. In 2013, when the government revised the curriculum, gross mistakes were found. In 2017, the government courted controversy by excluding write-ups and literary works of progressive authors and poets from textbooks following demands from Qawmi madrasa-based Islamist group Hefazat-e-Islam – a move that many believed to be a compromise to placate religious pressure groups. Despite massive criticism, the government still has no plans of bringing these write-ups back.

This year, apart from the mistakes, an embarrassing allegation of plagiarising content for a class 7 science textbook has been raised. Reportedly, a particular section of the first chapter of the book "Science: Investigative Study" was taken

from the National Geographic website and translated into Bangla using Google Translate, which drew widespread criticism. Prof Dr Muhammed Zafar Iqbal and Prof Haseena Khan, who were involved in the writing and editing of the book, admitted that the allegations are true. In a statement, they accepted the responsibility as editors of the book, and assured that plagiarised sections and errors will be fixed in the next print edition.

The question is, who will take responsibility for the mistakes? It lies equally on the writers and editors, and the NCTB. The board follows several steps before printing textbooks. It has separate panels of writers and editors for two wings – primary and secondary. Once a book is written, officials (who are supposed to be skilled and experienced) in the editing wing examine the textbooks to find mistakes. Books are also sent to teachers of schools and colleges, and officials of education boards, for evaluation.

It is natural to question how the mistakes exist if all these steps were properly followed. We have learnt that the NCTB carries out this complex but very crucial job in a hurry, which leaves room for mistakes, and has even caught the notice of the High Court. The HC has summoned the NCTB chairman twice, most recently in November last year, to explain the mistakes and distortions of history in textbooks.

Regrettably, the textbook board appears to have not learned lessons from the past. What is more concerning is that we have not seen actions being taken against the persons responsible for the mistakes, except for transferring some officials in the past, even though handing textbooks riddled with errors and misinformation to the future generations of the country should be considered a grave offence.

The government needs to take a deeper look into the ills plaguing the NCTB, and ensure stern actions against the people responsible for feeding wrong information to children. It spends a huge amount of money every year to print and distribute textbooks to students – a tremendous amount of work that no other country in the world does. It must now investigate why a state-run institution is yet to achieve the capacity to carry out this work, even after so many years. It should also revisit the entire process of formulating curriculum and textbooks, and if need be, equip the board adequately with logistics and other facilities to deliver error-free textbooks to students. We cannot afford to see such mistakes in textbooks anymore.

The Dreamer and Doer

The Unfinished Journey of Farzeen Ferdous Alam

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SELIM RAIHAN and ZIHAN FARAH

Our student Farzeen Ferdous Alam, born on January 6, 1989 in Dhaka, departed the world at the very young age of 33 on July 14, 2022. Younger son of Professor Dr Ferdousi Begum and Late Khorshed Alam, and younger brother of Tanzeen Ferdous Alam, Farzeen was a brilliant youth leader on a remarkable quest to change Bangladesh's agriculture. He loved to introduce himself by saying "I am a proud farmer; an economist-turned-farmer". He loved his motherland and was determined to make life better for everyone.

Farzeen was the Founder Chairman of Oggro Ventures, a social enterprise – the first of its kind in the country – dedicated to the agriculture and social development of Bangladesh. He completed high school from SFX Green Herald International School, Dhaka, and graduated from Dhaka University's Economics department in 2014. He established Oggro Ventures in 2007, modelling the business as a social enterprise where the profits went into solving social and humanitarian problems. Within a decade of his professional journey, he succeeded in establishing himself as the country's youngest social entrepreneur. He chose an unconventional path early on in life, and it came with big personal sacrifices.



Farzeen Ferdous Alam (January 6, 1989 - July 14, 2022).

PHOTO: COURTESY

At his TEDx talk in 2019, Farzeen mentioned to a young audience that his vision was to transform rural Bangladesh through sustainable agriculture and education. He wanted young Bangladeshis to see the cool side of being a 21st century farmer.

In 2004, when he was 14, he was awarded by the Jacob Foundation in Switzerland for writing a composition about Bangladesh, and invited to visit Oxford University. He had always been active in UN youth volunteering activities, and visited more than 20 countries representing for this social work, including as the special envoy of Ban Ki Moon, Former UN General Secretary, in Doha.

In 2007, Farzeen worked in Hounslow, UK for three months as part of a volunteer exchange programme. At the time, Bangladesh was affected by cyclone Sidr. He then engaged the local community there to raise funds to help the affected people of Sharankhola. He also worked in remote areas of Bangladesh, where he established the Horizon School, and helped set up female toilets and drainage systems.

His first inspiration came from a documentary by the famous singer Bono, where he learnt that every three seconds, a child somewhere was dying of hunger. It got him to start reading books on the Millennium Development Goals (MDG), and the more he read, the more he realised his true calling lay in the development sector. He decided he could start by supporting farmers in rural communities, who desperately needed access to markets and technology.

As an adolescent entrepreneur, he took risks and remained optimistic, even declining a job offer with the UN. He singlehandedly sorted out logistics and sat for hours with his farmer friends in the paddy fields, or sometimes on rooftops of trains from Badarganj to Rangpur. The uncertainty of building a business from scratch did not bother him. His favourite quote was, "I want to be the Richard Branson of social business."

His relentless efforts did not go unnoticed. The UN featured Oggro via the UN Web TV in

of 17 visually impaired girls by personally importing Braille machines and funding their studies. He also established Oggro Stationary and Oggro Crafts so the visually impaired could have a stable livelihood.

Despite the gruelling demands of Oggro, he found respite in his favourite subject, economics. By 2022, he had taught about 2,500 O level and A level candidates over a period of 15 years, and his young students looked up to him as their mentor and life coach. Farzeen also attended many programmes of SANEM as a guest speaker. In a podcast with Stephen Ladek, he had said, "I love economics religiously and spiritually," and mentioned, "Time management is nothing, but just managing energy which comes from the love for the work." He was preparing for a PhD at the London School of Economics and had started writing a book about agriculture, education and health.

Farzeen was a great listener, and could break a tense moment with a good joke. The bonds he made in his lifetime keep him alive in many hearts. He touched everyone around him through selfless acts, and stood by his friends in their darkest times. Farzeen used to say that he was able to fulfil his dreams only because his family stood by him. In his own words: "I could achieve my dreams, only because my family allowed me to be crazy."

He was popular in school and played sports zealously, with a bevy of followers drawn to his natural charm. He was a prodigy bowler and had played with national cricket legends until a back injury put an end to his dreams of becoming a cricketer.

Deep down, Farzeen relished the small things in life, like kicking a ball that rolled his way, reading stories to his doting nieces, or staying up late to finish his favourite book. His presence will live on in the hearts of every person who crossed paths with him, and all those who knew him are now left with a sense of sudden, inconceivable loss. As darkness looms over us all with the fall of this bright, shining star, we hope that his story inspires us to work towards a better future for all.

/Opinion

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CROSSWORD BY THOMAS JOSEPH

ACROSS

1 Waiting rewards

5 Twitch

10 Plain silly

12 lasagna or linguine

13 Navel

15 Mendes of movies

16 Poetic "always"

17 Harry's friend

18 Think back about

20 Venice official

21 Push away

22 Not new

23 Panache

25 Face feature

28 Quick snacks

31 Angry states

32 Dwellings

34 A thou thou

35 Some amount of

36 First numero

37 Shimmy expert

40 Loosen, as laces

41 Nephew's sister

42 Organ parts

43 Nicholas II, for one

DOWN

1 Rome's river

2 Indignant cry

3 Royal home

4 NBC show since 1975

5 Boot attachment

6 Light touch

7 Texas team

8 Fall guy

9 Like some space flights

11 Lace's place

14 Narrow book jacket

19 Church areas

20 Because of

24 Tripoli resident

25 Rain cloud

26 Set straight

27 Have as a customer

29 Draws out

30 New York tribe

33 More tender

35 Pro votes

38 Mouth part

39 Minor complaint

YESTERDAY'S ANSWERS

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

BEETLE BAILEY BY MORT WALKER

BEETLE BAILEY

BABY BLUES BY KIRKMAN & SCOTT

BABY BLUES

BABY BLUES