

# The Ideological Elephant in the NCTB Textbooks



**BLOWIN' IN THE WIND**  
  
Dr Shamsad Mortuza  
is a professor of English at Dhaka University.

SHAMSAD MORTUZA

The newly introduced textbooks for Grades 1, 6 and 7, prepared by the National Curriculum and Textbook Board (NCTB), have created quite a stir. The issues are more than the presence of some glaring oversights that allowed typos to creep into the texts. Instances of plagiarism in science textbooks have been traced, and the editors have already apologised for their scholarly negligence. The use of Google Translate to change a source text into Bangla for writing sections of textbooks is an event of scandalous proportions, to say the least. The involvement of some high-profile writers in such a shoddy job of academic thievery has stigmatised the entire process.

Some of the controversies are also ideological in nature.

I scanned through the Science, and History and Social Sciences textbooks to understand the nature of the “ideological” controversy. The education minister has already told a press conference that these books are pilot versions, and after receiving feedback from stakeholders and correcting factual and typographic errors, the final versions would be made available.

Questions may be asked about why



VISUAL: STAR

**The NCTB has been strategic in instilling inquisitiveness and openness in the minds of young readers. The objective of making a textbook for the 21st century is commendable. The book is designed to make the students critical and creative. Without creativity and a critical outlook, our young generations will fail to become global citizens. However, the noble purpose of the textbook has been diluted by some fringe agendas. These could be products of some over-enthusiastic scholars, politicians or bureaucrats.**

these pilot versions were printed then. It would have been much easier and less expensive to make such amendments in soft copies. I guess the answers to such queries would have exposed the myth of internet penetration in our country, and the shortage of digital devices.

Before I address the elephant in the room: the embedded ideological issues in texts meant for an adolescent audience in their formative years, let me commend the writers and NCTB for adopting a learner-centric narrative tone. In science textbooks, the applied section (exercise book) complements the investigative study quite nicely. The books are rich in content and cover extensive areas, including some contemporary issues of climate change and sustainability.

However, the extent of the topics covered in these books makes me worry whether

students who are 11 to 13 years old will be able to grasp so many ideas in one academic year. Since this is a pilot version, I would suggest that the lessons are tried out with detailed lesson plans with sample groups before being finalised. Whether a 140-page plus book packed with information can be covered in 10 months is something that needs to be tested and validated.

Critics have found fault with the way archaeological history has been presented. They think that the books have given more focus on pre-history, and the lack of attention on the Muslim and British eras, thereby, does not reflect the identity formation of the majority in a predominantly Muslim country.

The Class 7 book randomly starts with images of friends of our Liberation War, and ends with an image of Bangladeshi refugees taking shelter in India. Yet, the first chapter deals with the early period of South Asian urbanism, while locating Indus cities in their larger regional landscape. The picture of Indira Gandhi has been enlarged, deservedly so. But the out-of-context placement and highlighting of the photo make the issue unnecessarily problematic for a textbook prepared by our national curriculum board. The distribution of the topic seems lopsided, as the book cursorily refers to some architectures and mosques to come to an abrupt end about the fusion of cultures in the region.

The NCTB earlier tried to bring changes to the textbooks in 2012, but was forced to omit some major sections as they were objected to by certain Islamic groups. The internet barometer suggests that a similar backlash is brewing. Already, there have been objections raised to the supposed inclusion of the theory of evolution. Critics are claiming that the NCTB textbook has

suggested humanity evolved from apes, which contradicts the origin of man found in organised religion.

In a press release, the NCTB clarified its position against various propaganda. For instance, one of the narrators in the text says, “Many claim that man has come from monkeys. It’s wrong.” The text then goes on to exclaim the branching out of species, and includes an interesting side story on Lucy,

a fossil of one human ancestor that dates back to 3.2 million years.

Already, claims are being made that the Darwinian theory of evolution should be dropped from the syllabi. There are many Islamic scholars today who have given ample logic to show that scientific views of origin can only solidify religious views. Holding on to a traditional view, without being aware of evolution, which literally means change over time, will fossilise our education. Hamza Yusuf is one such scholar, who uses the lens of al-Ghazali to reach an alignment between Islam and Neo-Darwinian evolution. In a lecture, Hamza Yusuf says that it is important for Muslims to acquire the symbolic logic of the West to engage with their ideas.

I think the NCTB has been strategic in instilling inquisitiveness and openness in the minds of young readers. The objective of making a textbook for the 21st century is commendable. The book is designed to make the students critical and creative. Without creativity and a critical outlook, our young generations will fail to become global citizens.

However, the noble purpose of the textbook has been diluted by some fringe agendas. These could be products of some over-enthusiastic scholars, politicians or bureaucrats. The books will serve a greater purpose if it assumes a more neutral and objective tone. Many of the images and additional information can be made available online for further reading.

Overall, I think these textbooks are in the right direction of making students lifelong learners by equipping them with the tools to ask questions. Stylistically, the printing needs to be error-free. And the method needs tweaking, precisely because of the controversies it has espoused already.

# Metro magic and the charms of development



Shehzad Marifeen  
is Senior Lecturer (on study leave) at the Department of Economics and Social Sciences at Brac University.

SHEHZAD M ARIFEEN

Dhaka greeted the new year with the country’s first metro – the first of six planned Mass Rapid Transit (MRT) lines promising to revolutionise how we get around the city. Despite the “soft” opening (restricted hours, no intermediary stops) and a seemingly rushed and electorally-timed inauguration, almost 4,000 people rode the metro on the first day in just four short hours, queuing up in lines stretching to half a kilometre.

Interestingly (and understandably, given the partial opening), most of these early visitors appear to have been tourists, many of them middle class families with children who had come to share in the experience of this new addition to their city.

Reading through testimonials from news reports, I came across a little vignette in *The Daily Star* that reminded me of how, growing up in the 90s, I took every opportunity to ride the escalators at Hatirpool’s Eastern Plaza: “Finally, we got the tickets. The line was long, the wait even longer... but it was worth it!”

I recognise my delight at Eastern Plaza now as the uniquely “elevating” experience of the modern. The escalators too, just like the metro, required learning; but once you did learn how to glide up those magical stairs, the city outside seemed very far “behind” indeed.

I bring this up to suggest that the magic of “development” is something we can dismiss too easily; hardly surprising given the kinds of policies/politics that can lead to it. To critics, this fanfare – like the entire package of megaproject-led development – may appear like a political spectacle. The fervour surrounding the metro’s inauguration have been met in many quarters with disdain. Yet, if all this is the naivety of “irrational” crowds, why does it sustain so well?

Answering this requires us to take the magic of development seriously. The first riders of the metro spoke in rapturous terms of dreams coming true. These are dreams of elevation and escape, an experience powered by what they can now leave behind: the constant state of war that is Dhaka’s streets. It is not an accident that a very similar promise – that of escaping the struggles of Dhaka – was invoked during the inauguration itself.

Undoubtedly, these are class aspirations of a neoliberal age (indeed, the fixation with “solving” traffic and the neglect of housing, utilities, sewage, etc betrays the classist nature of the “problem” of Dhaka); yet they are nevertheless real, and powerful. That is perhaps why accusations of corruption and wastage – shared features of megaprojects the world over – rarely seem to make an impact. Perhaps what matters most is the simple fact that the metro now exists, as a tangible reality and promise.

And that is how development works its magic: by the futures that it projects, and the shadows that those futures cast on the past and present. As with the Padma Bridge, the allure of the metro depends just as much on what it helps us escape from.

So which (and whose) Dhaka is the metro helping us escape from, and why? Development’s power lies in illuminating certain realities while shrouding others, turning possibilities into inevitabilities. Whatever else the metro does, we can be sure that it will stop us from looking elsewhere and asking why we should be leaving anything behind.

Our planners, for one, are not oblivious. The Revised Strategic Transport Plan (2015-2035) recommends not only MRTs, BRTs (Bus Rapid Transit) and elevated expressways, but also water transport and bus route franchising. Yet only half-hearted efforts

were attempted with the “water bus”, even though people were willing to use it, and the Hatirheel water taxi service was a success. In the land of development, the road and the bridge are king, while water and rail can only look on in envy. The BRT project has already taken a toll without offering any fundamental restructuring, and route franchising remains a chimera.

The perverse flipside of the metro’s promise, however, is that all we can do with Dhaka now is escape it. It paints a picture of a city simultaneously on the brink of utopia and dystopia, an urban apocalypse whose air will always be thick, and whose roads a war zone. And it is precisely because of how commonsensical this picture is becoming that we need to be suspicious of it.

growing more entrenched and intractable, suggesting that perhaps we are not dealing with a merely “technical” problem at all.

Despite the tremendous investments in roads and bridges (and the clout of the corresponding agencies/ministries), great swathes of Dhaka’s roads remain barely usable. Despite having an agency mandated with regulating things like bus route permits (the Dhaka Transport Coordination Authority), it is an arcane body called the Regional Transport Committee that has de facto reign, presided over primarily by traffic police and Bangladesh Road Transport Authority (BRTA) personnel.

Hardly surprising, then, that the city’s most important mode of mass transport – the bus system – behaves more like a nexus of private competition and accumulation, with owners and politicians taking advantage of its significance as an economic conduit for aspiring working-class people with nothing to fall back on. I suppose it is much easier just to build another flyover and leave the city to fend for itself.

Yes, it is a good thing that Dhaka now has a metro. But I worry that this could mark, not a radical re-visioning of the city, but a reinvigorated effort to “bypass” it altogether – like a moving satellite town in the sky. The promise of escaping the struggles of Dhaka may naturalise those very struggles, turning the city into some kind of monster that exceeds our grasps.

If the movements around road safety have taught us anything, however, it is that this monster is a social and political arrangement – the mirror image of our collective alienation from the means of getting by. This same arrangement also undergirds the very plans and projects that are supposed to save us, meaning that only by claiming our right to the city and facing this arrangement head on, can we hope to be free of the spell.

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CROSSWORD BY THOMAS JOSEPH

ACROSS

1 Start of “celery” or “cymbal”

6 Sidewalk eateries

11 Sung story

12 Conspicuous

13 Ranch animal

14 Painter Rivera

15 Reduced amount

17 Aura

18 Like the Sahara

20 Writer Morrison

22 Take in

23 Greek resort island

26 Multin rock

28 Trigon topic

29 Diplomat’s base

31 Outlaw

32 Bounce back

33 Make finer

34 Sister of Amy, Jo, and Meg

36 Subpoena, e.g.

38 Quartet doubled

40 Spare

43 Film’s Garbo

44 Exorbitant

45 More confident

46 Painful spasm

DOWN

1 Urgent call

2 Make a choice

3 Making a recovery

4 Cornered

5 2006 Pixar film

6 Atlantic catch

7 French city

8 Resentful

9 Therefore

10 Hide away

16 Pig’s place

18 High point

19 Be nomadic

21 Sanction

23 Use a pestle

24 German chancellor

25 Dispatched

27 Jungle chopper

30 Boar’s mate

33 Foot, to fathom

34 Marshy spots

35 Beige

37 Musical symbol

39 La Brea stuff

41 Early auto

42 Clumsy one

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YESTERDAY’S ANSWERS

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45						46			

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BABY BLUES BY KIRKMAN & SCOTT