

When textbooks fall apart

Aren't our students entitled to error-free, quality textbooks?

Every year, as the National Curriculum and Textbook Board (NCTB) rolls out new textbooks to primary- and secondary-level students across the country on the first day of the new year, the same old issues surface: the textbooks are filled with countless silly, unacceptable mistakes, and are made with poor quality paper and print. And this year has been no exception. According to a recent report, the textbooks were printed on poor quality paper and the binding was so substandard that many of the books fell apart as soon as they were handed to the students. Since the textbooks were distributed, students, teachers, and parents from across the country have complained of blurry texts, printing errors, and unclear photos in the books. We must ask: why does this have to happen every year? Why can't the NCTB learn from its previous mistakes and efficiently print and distribute textbooks?

Reportedly, the text in some of the new books are illegible. For instance, it is not possible to understand what is written on page 121 of the English book of Class 6, according to a parent. In the History and Social Science books of Class 7, the picture of Bangabandhu is not even recognisable. Reportedly, the NCTB was directed by the government to decrease the brightness of the paper from 85 percent to 80 percent upon advice from ophthalmologists, which has resulted in the printing errors. But there are also other issues at play here. Reportedly, the NCTB did the whole printing job in a hurry and did not even look for good sources of paper before publishing the books. This is unacceptable.

This year, the government has spent around Tk 1,400 crore to print 30.71 crore books. It is public money that the NCTB has spent for the project and it should be held accountable for any misuse of funds and mismanagement during the process. Does the NCTB have an excuse for their chronic mismanagement and inefficiency?

Another question that we must raise at this point is: should the NCTB even be given the responsibility to publish the textbooks? The organisation's main responsibilities are developing curriculum and conducting research, not printing textbooks. Given its consistently poor track record, the government must take serious steps this year to ensure that past mistakes are not repeated. It must stop printing low-quality and error-ridden textbooks once and for all.

When law enforcers become criminals

Authorities must take stern action against offending officers

When those who are entrusted to uphold law and order abuse that very trust, who are we left with? According to a report by the daily *Prothom Alo*, three police officers, a sub-inspector, and two assistant sub-inspectors were reportedly involved in robbing 200 *bhori* (2.3 kg) of gold from a trader on December 14. Such sinister and premeditated actions raise grave concerns about whether our law enforcers are scrupulous enough to serve citizens.

As per investigators, a microbus intercepted the trader in Dhaka's Uttara, and out came four men claiming to be from police's Detective Branch. The group then handcuffed the victim, looted the gold and his phone, and left him near the Uttara North metro rail station. Later on, investigators managed to track one of the offending officers: Gyasuddin, the ASI of Gazipur's Sreepur police station. He was subsequently arrested, and Tk 35 lakh (the share he got for the robbery) was recovered from his home in Cumilla. Officials suspect this gang is also active on Airport Road, robbing those who pass by after flying into Bangladesh.

It's unfortunate that such incidents are not new in this country. Every few weeks, if not over days, we see news of law enforcers abusing their power, sometimes purely for personal benefits, other times on behalf of the authorities that be. Harassment of average citizens for bribes, daily extortion of small businesses, conducting dubious raids, and even abduction have been widely documented. This just goes to show that these offences are entrenched in the system itself and that, unless the government addresses the root causes of such corruption, these incidents will continue to occur.

According to a former inspector general of police, if any law enforcer is found to be involved in criminal offences, they should be ousted from the force. We cannot agree more, because for such a critical role, we need the most upstanding members of society. How can we expect our law enforcers to thwart crimes when they themselves take part in them? We, therefore, urge the government to take long-term measures to ensure that our law enforcement agencies are responsible and accountable, alongside enacting swift and strict punishment for those who violate our trust.

LETTERS TO THE EDITOR

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Celebrating the new year sustainably

As 2024 dawned on Dhaka, the capital's silhouette glittered with fleeting fireworks. Yet, beneath the enchanting glow, did we pause to contemplate the enduring shadows it had cast? The explosion of colours shattered not only the night's silence but also the fragile ecosystem of our city. Our lungs choke on its residue, our beloved Buriganga River writhes under the plague of fallen lanterns, and countless birds become casualties of the deafening celebration.

Can we not usher in the new year with a vibrant tapestry of our own culture, with the rhythm of traditional dance, music, and poetry? Let this new year mark a dawn of responsible celebration, where joy embraces sustainability and the country's future becomes full with hope, not smoke.

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Can BNP survive the pre-election meltdown?

OF MAGIC & MADNESS



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This is not the first time that such a concern is being raised, nor is it likely to be the last if the political argument for having opposition remains as strong as it is now. But in some circles, there is an air of exhaustion around the endless rise-again-fall-again cycle of BNP that is getting a tad overbearing. Just months ago, a then-resurgent BNP pulled massive crowds to its anti-government rallies, despite severe obstacles, only to crumble as election day neared. Its retreat to the back foot amid mass arrests and convictions was as remarkable as it was rapid, and it didn't help raise morale either when questions were thrown around about the party's post-election existence.

These questions, interestingly, are being fuelled by none other than Awami League, the architect of BNP's decline. Citing violence and arson attacks that occurred in the wake of BNP's October 28 rally, ruling party leaders seem to want a harsher response to BNP. Reactions have ranged from terming it as a "terrorist" group that "has no right to do politics," to calling it an "illegitimate" party, to an outright demand for its ban on charges of terrorism. Many view these calls as an effort to further incapacitate BNP with an eye on the future. However, during a recent interview, Law Minister Anisul Huq downplayed the statements as being "political," claiming there is no plan yet to ban BNP. When asked about their strategy of dealing with BNP after the election, which Awami League is certain to win, Huq said: "We will see post-election. But Awami League believes in democracy. We do not say that we will wipe out any party. But as history has shown, many parties disappear because of their own actions."

Even if Awami League wants to avoid the optics of banning a direct rival for power—like it did with Jamaat after the High Court declared its registration with the Election Commission illegal in August 2013—nothing definitive can be said about when, or whether, BNP as a party will be able to recover from the heavy crackdown it just suffered. There are various speculations about what will happen after January 7. One columnist suggested that Awami League will double down in its persecutions, sending "an ominous



BNP reportedly plans to continue its anti-government movement even after the election.

PHOTO: AMRAN HOSSAIN

signal" for BNP's future existence. Already, Awami League is reportedly asking its grassroots to support candidates from other parties in a number of constituencies in a bid to have "a parliament of all stripes." Jatiya Party, despite diminishing enthusiasm in some circles and some 20 of its candidates pulling out of the race, may again find itself thrust into the opposition bench, although the presence of independents may complicate the situation. But it only goes to support the shift away from a BNP-centric opposition narrative.

However, in a recent interview, a BNP leader-lawyer has stressed that any plan to ban or destroy BNP will not be successful. He referred to BNP's resilience amid what he called failed attempts over the years to break the party to pieces or create a leadership crisis within it. BNP reportedly plans to continue its anti-government movement even after the election. For the party leaders and activists on the receiving end of government repression, however, it is difficult

dissuade voters from casting their ballots, planning only a two-day hartal on the eve of the election, according to a report by this daily.

Like a receding hairline behind a headband, BNP's existential crisis is being covered up with press notes, hurried distributions of leaflets, and occasional interviews and meetings by mostly second-tier leaders. The crisis still shines through. This would be considered a master stroke by the government if it wasn't so preposterous and undemocratic. Just imagine: since November 7 alone, at least 1,540 BNP-Jamaat activists have been jailed on various charges. The number of leaders and activists who have been arrested, are in custody, or awaiting trials is many, many more, running well into 20,000, as per BNP sources. A number of party activists have also died in custody. In fact, the record book for the whole election year, according to a rights organisation, is saturated with such examples. If there was a contest for "opposition cleansing" among the

can cry hoarse about how elections in general have become an enabler of the corrupt and affluent rather than the general citizens, who should be in the driving seat and be able to choose their own representatives. We can even argue about BNP, having experienced first hand how ruthless and ingenious the government can be in eliminating competition, being unprepared for all possible scenarios and thus partly responsible for its own plight.

But, after all is said and done, the fact remains that BNP—whose willing and unobstructed participation in the election along with other pro-democracy parties could right a lot of the wrongs we face today—stands at a critical point in its history. The future is uncertain. But such is the irony of our time that whether the party will perish amid sustained government assaults, or be reduced to a Jamaat/Jatiya Party-like existence, or succeed to start from the ground up, may not entirely depend on itself. It all comes back to Awami League.

A concerning rise in income inequality



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Although Bangladesh has experienced exceptional economic growth in recent years, the growth has, unfortunately, bypassed the majority of the population while higher-income groups have been its main beneficiaries. According to the Household Income and Expenditure Survey (HIES) 2022, published by the Bangladesh Bureau of Statistics (BBS), the rich-poor gap in terms of income distribution has been widening in the country. The report indicated that 30.04 percent of the income generated in Bangladesh is concentrated within the top five percent of households. This proportion was found to be 27.82 percent in the 2016 HIES. Furthermore, the top 10 percent of the wealthiest households in Bangladesh hold 40.92 percent of total income, compared to 38.09 percent in 2016. Concurrently, despite a relative decline in the poverty rate, the income share for the bottom 50 percent of households decreased to 19.05 percent in 2022 from 20.23 percent in 2016.

Income inequality and poverty are directly interrelated—the rise in income inequality reduces growth, which in turn deepens poverty. The economic growth we have experienced

recently has failed to create an adequate number of jobs. According to the BBS' Labour Force Survey, the number of unemployed individuals in Bangladesh increased to 25.9 lakh in the first quarter of 2023, from 23.2 lakh in the last quarter of 2022. This has added to rising inequality and resulted in slow progress of poverty reduction.

While it may sound unpleasant, the fact remains, money and politics have become deeply intertwined over the last few decades. For example, while millions of people in the country lost their sources of income and became jobless during the pandemic, businessmen and politicians have grown richer than ever before. The affidavits submitted to the Election Commission by candidates contesting in the 12th parliamentary election prove this. The number of candidates with movable or liquid assets of at least Tk 1 crore has increased from 274 in the 2008 election to 571 this time around. Moreover, a staggering 18 candidates possess movable/liquid assets worth over Tk 100 crore, with some even holding between Tk 200 crore and Tk 300 crore in liquid assets.

Inflation is generally believed to cause income inequality. In recent times, prices of daily essentials (including eggs, chicken, onions, potatoes, sugar, and oil) have consistently increased in Bangladesh, despite the global trend of decreasing prices. People from low-income groups are struggling to make ends meet, with many unable to afford two square meals a day. Apart from the low-income group, many middle-class individuals also queue up in front of the Trading Corporation of Bangladesh's Open Market Sale trucks to buy goods at subsidised prices, which proves that people have their backs against the wall.

Experts say that the soaring food inflation in the country is linked to flawed government policies, poor market management, and the profit-seeking businessmen involved in syndicates. Moreover, the control of essential commodity imports by a few large businesses has resulted in a market monopoly. As a consequence, poor and low-income people have been going through immense financial hardships, as their income has not increased at the same rate as the rising prices of essential commodities, forcing them to cut down on their consumption.

The primary factors which deprive poor and vulnerable people of their most elementary rights—and which lead to greater income inequality—are unequal access to education and employment opportunities, low-wage jobs, unchecked corruption and systemic irregularities (such as those enabling the various scams in the

banking sector), tax evasion, money laundering, and so on.

In Bangladesh, another pervasive factor that contributes to income inequality is people's lack of access to credit. While banks funnel loans worth thousands of crores of taka (by violating banking rules and procedures) to influential and politically connected businessmen, many small businesses and poor farmers/sharecroppers usually have no access to credit due to lack of collateral such as land and buildings. Even if they manage to secure small loans, the poor are put under constant pressure for repayment.

Winnie Byanyima, executive director of UNAIDS, said in a lecture, "The widening gap between rich and poor... are signs that much of what we have been doing, especially in terms of models of economic growth, has been wrong." Therefore, our policymakers must end the culture of disproportionately rewarding those at the top and refocus their efforts on serving the entire population equitably. The key objective should be to ensure inclusive growth. Priority should be given to issues of social protection, good governance, and policies of redistribution of wealth—moving money from those with too much of it to those with too little—through the tax and benefit system, as well as spending the revenue in sectors and areas such as free/subsidised healthcare, housing, and education/skill development schemes for low-income groups so that they can access jobs that are more productive and rewarding.