

New textbooks again? We must go for real reform



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As the BNP government prepares major revisions to school textbooks for the 2027 academic year, the changes reported by the media once again reveal a familiar pattern—authorities continuing to alter curriculum content, historical narratives, and learning priorities without addressing the deeper structural crisis in education itself.

According a report by *Prothom Alo*, the new revisions include descriptions of the Liberation War sectors, the events of November 7, 1975, and the role of former prime minister and BNP chairperson Khaleda Zia in the 1990 mass uprising. Material related to the July 2024 student-led uprising has already been added to textbooks for Grades 6 to 10. New subjects such as “Sports and Culture” for Grade 4 and “Learning with Happiness” for Grade 6 are also being introduced, alongside greater emphasis on artificial intelligence (AI), technical skills, and vocational education. The authorities say 99 secondary-level and 36 primary-level textbooks are being revised under the framework of the 2012 curriculum, while an entirely new curriculum is planned for 2028.

These changes do contain some positive elements. But they also represent the longstanding problem of our education system being repeatedly subjected to curriculum shifts, political revisions, and “donor-driven” reforms while the foundations of public education remain deeply fragile. Textbooks continue to change, governments continue to announce reforms, but the basic realities facing millions of students and teachers remain largely unchanged.

Since independence, perhaps no sector in Bangladesh has suffered from such sustained neglect as education. Even today, the constitutional commitment that the state would take responsibility for ensuring education for all remains largely unfulfilled. Instead of building a strong public education system, successive governments have failed

to invest adequately, formulate long-term policies, or treat education as a national priority. As a result, public education has weakened while private and commercial forms of education have rapidly expanded, creating one of the deepest forms of inequality.

At the bottom are poorly funded Bangladesh-medium public schools for the poorest families. There are also English-version schools within the public system, low-cost private schools, elite private schools, English-medium schools, English-medium madrasas, Alia madrasas, Qawmi madrasas, cadet colleges, and other parallel systems. This stratified structure means that the more money a family has, the better the quality of education that their children can access. In other words, those without the necessary financial means, regardless of their academic merit or talent, are effectively denied quality education.

Every government claims to prioritise education, especially during budget speeches. Yet, while spending 4.6 percent of GDP on education is widely recognised as a minimum benchmark internationally, Bangladesh consistently spends around two percent or less. Even the limited allocation that exists is often undermined by waste, corruption, inefficiency, and poor planning. This chronic underinvestment is one of the central reasons behind the deterioration of the education sector.

Another major problem is the absence of a unified vision for ensuring standard, quality education for all. We know about the importance of primary education, that childhood learning forms the foundation of a person’s entire life. If early education is weak, that weakness often persists for life. If it is strong, it becomes a lifelong asset. Despite that, primary education remains among the most neglected parts of the system.

The condition of many government primary schools is alarming. Even within

Dhaka, from Jatrabari to other densely populated areas, there are schools housed in buildings that appear unsafe and vulnerable to collapse. Some schools remain without repairs for years. During dengue outbreaks, mosquito infestation around school premises create fear among children and parents alike. Recently, a ceiling fan fell and injured five students in a Narayanganj primary school, an incident that could

private tutoring, coaching businesses, and guidebook dependency reflects the deterioration of classroom education. Students now face pressure to attend both schools and coaching centres—because many classrooms no longer provide effective learning environments—while guidebooks, for many, have become more important than textbooks. This commercialisation of education has grown significantly in recent

Asian Development Bank. New curriculum models, assessment systems, and policy frameworks are introduced without sufficient transparency, accountability, public debate, or critical evaluation.

Textbooks themselves have increasingly become politically contested documents. During the Awami League period, some major literary and cultural elements were revised or removed following demands from groups such as Hefazat-e-Islam Bangladesh. Now, under a changed political context, new historical narratives and political events are being added once again. The problem is not whether history should be taught; it absolutely should. The problem is that educational content too often changes according to the priorities of the government of the day rather than through stable, transparent, and research-based educational principles.

There is only one sustainable path forward: the state must genuinely recognise education as its highest national priority.

First, education spending must increase substantially. Second, the state must strengthen and expand public education infrastructure across the country. If quality public schools become widely accessible, the extreme inequalities dominating the sector will gradually decline. Third, teachers’ salaries and benefits must improve so they can focus fully on classroom teaching instead of relying on coaching centres. Fourth, vacant teaching posts must be filled by qualified teachers, while regular professional training must become a permanent feature of the system. Finally, Bangladesh needs a comprehensive, transparent, and participatory education policy shaped through public consultation with teachers, students, parents, and experts at every level. Educational reform cannot be driven by donor priorities, abrupt curriculum changes, or political transitions.

One symbolic but powerful step could begin immediately and it would require no additional budget or foreign loans: ministers, MPs, bureaucrats, and political leaders should enrol their own children in public schools. If those who govern the system depend on public education themselves, it could act as a catalyst for real education reform. Real change begins when education is treated not as a political battleground or a commercial commodity, but as the foundation of an equitable society.



FILE VISUAL: REHNUMA PROSHOON

also have resulted in a far greater tragedy. Examples like this reveal the absence of even minimum safety standards in many schools.

The shortage of teachers is another severe crisis. Many government primary schools operate with only two to four teachers. At the same time, these schools lack office assistants, librarians, cleaners, or technical staff. Teachers are expected to handle every administrative responsibility themselves. On top of that, education authorities impose endless reporting requirements and bureaucratic tasks on teachers. They frequently promote “digital” and “multimedia” education, requiring teachers to submit reports online, yet many schools still do not have computers, reliable electricity, internet access, or technical support. Teachers are also assigned to government surveys and non-academic administrative activities, creating an environment where they struggle to focus entirely on teaching.

The rise of coaching centres and guidebooks is another symptom of the system’s decline. The explosion of

decades. One reason for this is the shortage of teachers and the additional burdens imposed on them. Low salaries also force many teachers to seek extra income through private tuition or coaching work.

Equally concerning is the absence of a consistent national education policy. Bangladesh has formed several education commissions over the decades, including the important 2010 Education Commission that included many of the country’s leading educationists. It proposed some significant reforms, such as extending primary education to Grade 8, increasing investment in schools, and creating a more unified curriculum across different streams of education. But despite remaining in power for more than 15 years, the Awami League government failed to meaningfully implement most of those recommendations.

The frequent curriculum changes seen in recent years often appear disconnected from any coherent national vision. Instead, many reforms seem politically motivated or driven by donor-funded projects supported by institutions such as the World Bank or the

We need to confront sexual violence both online and offline



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Violence against women and children has recently become a disturbingly regular occurrence in the country. Looking into the nature of these crimes makes one wonder if not humanity but savagery has taken us over. It also makes one wonder if the foundation of our moral education is gradually weakening. In reality, morality cannot be taught through books; it is something that must be practised. Families, teachers, society, and the country—everyone has a role to play here.

While we prioritise highlighting crimes committed in physical



FILE VISUAL: ANWAR SOHEL

One can get an idea of the shocking perspective many hold about women and children by looking at comments made under social media posts. First and foremost, our society needs a change in mentality.

or traditional spaces, we do not give equal importance to crimes happening in digital spaces. Publicly threatening people online, exposing personal matters on social media, spreading false and baseless information through digital media, cyberbullying women and children, and even sexual harassment—these promote harmful behaviour and lead to even more heinous crimes.

One can get an idea of the shocking perspective many hold about women and children by looking at comments made

under social media posts. First and foremost, our society needs a change in mentality. This holds true for both physical and cyber spaces. In this regard, following examples of other countries, including Europe and Australia, we could introduce eSafety, Privacy, and Defamation Regulation (EPDR), a framework designed to protect individuals from online harm, data misuse, and reputational damage. Many people confuse this with cyber security laws, but they are quite different. For instance, if important information from a bank or state institution is stolen or attacked through cyber means, that falls under cyber security law. However, if someone’s personal information is spread on social media to humiliate them, it would be more appropriate to address it under EPDR.

Now, to demonstrate how dire the situation is in Bangladesh, we need to look at some data. According to Ain o Salish Kendra (ASK), some 118 children were raped while 17 were killed between January and May

20 this year. An earlier estimate by ASK last year studied rape cases data between 2015 and 2024 and found that at least 5,632 reports of rape of girls aged below 18 were recorded across the country in the last 10 years. Additionally, some 318 of these children were murdered after being raped. In just the three years from 2019 to 2021, some 2,778 children

became victims of rape, which is nearly half of the total number over the last decade. In 2020 alone, the highest number—1,018 children—were victimised. Between 2001 and July 2020, only 3.56 percent of cases filed under the Women and Children Repression Prevention Act 2000 have resulted in a court judgment, according to data from the government’s One Stop Crisis Centre, and only about 0.37 percent of cases have ended with convictions. Such low conviction rates contribute to the breakdown in public trust when it comes to the law.

Furthermore, it is unfortunate that in a country of nearly 18 crore people, there are not enough DNA testing facilities. Cases of sexual harassment are increasing day by day in the country, and not having adequate DNA testing facilities often hinder the investigation process. This is also one of the reasons behind delays in the judicial process.

Now, if we were to look briefly at how child protection is ensured in Australia, in every state there,

those who work with children (under 18 years old) are required to obtain a “Working with children check” card. Although the name of the card varies in different states, the main objective is the same: ensuring a safe environment for children. People from any profession such as teachers, researchers, nurses, doctors, caretakers, and heads of religious institutions, who need to interact with children must obtain a children check card before joining their profession. This card is issued transparently after checking police databases and child sex offender databases. If allegations of sexual abuse against a regular school teacher or religious teacher are proven, they

can never again get a job involving interaction with children, and it also becomes very difficult for them to obtain other jobs.

America has an even stricter system. In Australia, sex offender databases are not publicly accessible in many cases. However, in America, they are. They have a “National sex offender public website” from which everyone, including ordinary citizens, can obtain information and guidance.

If we could introduce such a database in our country, it might help us bring down the number of violent incidents our women and children are subjected to. Before hiring staff in schools, appointing teachers in madrasas, hiring private

tutors, renting houses, appointing caretakers in orphanages, or employing security guards, online checks should be considered.

Violence against women and children is not only a legal or a social issue, it is also a reflection of our humanitarian and moral crisis. To overcome this situation, coordinated initiatives are needed from families, educational institutions, society, and the state. Alongside strict law enforcement, moral education, digital awareness, child protection systems, and speedy justice must be ensured. Learning from initiatives that worked for other countries, Bangladesh must take realistic and technology-driven measures.



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