

The textbook failures

by Abu Jar M Akkas

IT HAS in recent times become a norm for students to smell and feel textbooks fresh off the press on the first of January that begins the academic year. Such was the occasion this time too, on the first day of the year, but only for the students — some in a while and some in a couple of days — to be sad to have owned sets of textbooks most of which looked like cheaply printed magazines.

In just about a week that the students received the textbooks, many of them, mostly side-stitched rather than perfect-bound that they mostly were in the past years, started shedding covers and leaves at the slightest pressure, when they are put inside the bag, are taken out and are opened. The spines started loosening and breaking off, reducing the books to spineless, difficult-to-use, stitched or glued piles of poorly-cut papers with the back side shining through, almost.

The pages, which look more like cheap paper stock with an apparent feeling of offset, shows through the text printed on the other sides even with the book held flat down on the table. Earlier, guesses about the text printed on the other side of the pages even after holding them up against light could go wrong. Paper stocks of various shades, and perhaps grades, are used in printing a single book and paper stocks, and their grades and sizes, in different books are different. A few covers are also printed on wastes from the printing of other covers, giving a miserly feeling about the books.

The cover pages are barely thicker than the inner paper stock and are not laminated as is meant for sustained use. While colours are misregistered, as they say at printing presses, by five millimetres, at most, making the illustrations — in the information and communications technology book for Class VI, for an example — illegible, in some cases, the photographs appear much too blackened, whitened or flattened by a lack of contrast beyond recognition of the figures and objects therein. Some of the books are not even cut rectangularly as one diagonal is larger by half an inch than the other and they stoop and tilt among a bunch of books that stand erect.

The condition of the books just described may not apply to all of about 333.8 million books that the National Curriculum and Textbook Board has printed as the description defines just a sample set that a student received at a private school in Dhaka. The books that others received or the books that other schools distributed, in other areas, might be in a good condition, at least better than this. But many of them may also be in a bad condition, worse than this. Reports coming from outlying areas — Dhaka as the capital may certainly have had the best off the press — point in the second direction, with stories of many of the books distributed there not even having the pages in order and leaves having been torn and glued. Students and their guardians are reported to have lodged complaints with the school authorities who, in turn, have replaced the distribution on an 'as

long as the stock lasts' basis.

Textbooks, which theoretically are not the only resources of learning and teaching, do not need to be of utmost importance and should, therefore, not be something to worry much about. Yet they play a central role in supporting learning and teaching at least in Bangladesh, where students, teachers and schools all use them as the single most instrument of learning and teaching. Books, therefore, need to be books, feel like books and look like books. But many of about 333.7 million books that the textbook board had printed for about 44 million primary and secondary students of general stream and madrasah education gives an otherwise feeling about them.

Books for secondary students had, mostly, always been printed locally, but with a problem of delayed delivery, as had been the case with books for primary students. The delay in delivery of books — earlier said to be deliberately done by the local commercial printers so as to advantage traders in guides and notebooks that are prohibited — came to be so delayed that students in successive years had to wait even till the middle of the year to lay their hands on the books and feel them as their own. The textbook board had blamed the printers for their failure in the delivery and the printers had pointed the finger back at the board for its failure to provide the paper and the text matter in time. About two dozens of the printers had also been black-listed around 2010 so that they could not try at a share of the pie the next year.

The textbook board in 2010 decided to put the printing of primary books out to an international tender, with three Indian bidders winning the print job of just over one quarter — 30 million — of the total books for about 16 million students, as New Age then reported. The delivery of books had been delayed again, both by Indian and local printers, putting the image of the textbook board at risk and allowing the local printers that failed to win the print job to speak against the printers that won the bid and the textbook authorities. There had been a whiff in the air that the printers who were not to be part of the printing process, because of their earlier failures, had come to have their share of the pie with the collusion of some textbook board officials, as reports that time said.

Books for the next academic year were to have been shipped between October 30 and November 15, but about two-thirds of the primary books could be sent to destinations in time for distribution. As textbook board officials had then been quoted, more than 95 per cent of the secondary textbooks and more than 85 per cent of the primary textbooks could be sent for distribution by an extended deadline in the third week of December. Not all the students had all the books but all had at least part of the sets on the first day of the 2011 academic year. This came to be considered a major hurdle overcome.

With complacency of a sort, printers, paper mills and the textbook board did not, or forgot, to notice one aspect of the

international tender. A portion of the primary books coming to be printed in India — amidst criticism, rightly or wrongly though — eased much of the pressure on the local printers, enabling them to supply, at least to try to supply because of a fear of losing the job the next year, secondary and remaining primary books on, if not in, time. The textbook board started taking pride in its success, which came to be counted more in the wake of repeated textbook failures, but with the board, paper mills and printers blaming one another for not so major failures in the process. The number of students continued to increase, so did the number of textbooks, with the board remaining unaware of the hard task in store.

While less than a third of the primary textbooks continued to be printed in India, easing the pressure, failure in other areas of the textbook printing process but for the timely distribution continued. But no one, apparently, turned towards the quality of printing and binding as certain standards continued to be reached and the books were distributed in time, overshadowing minor problems. The local printers who failed to win the print job kept blaming the other group, which won the bid, and assuring the textbook board that the whole of the job could be locally arranged. The capacity is there; what the local industry needs is policy and government support. The Printing Industries Association of Bangladesh in 2012 started saying that such an arrangement could save foreign exchange.

Reports on irregularities involving textbook board officials in allowing low-quality books to be distributed in exchange for money, in a hushed-up manner though, made headlines, but rarely. The association, which claims to represent about 7,000 local printing houses, in July 2014 took up its demands with the textbook board and also sent letters to the education ministry and other relevant authorities seeking government intervention in ensuring the quality of paper stock in textbooks and adherence to specifications in printing and binding, and penalty against failures. The association then talked about 'unethical practice' of a few officials and some book suppliers.

All this could mean that the association was sincere enough about the printing quality and the making of books. If it so had been, it could have been a matter of pride. But it could also mean that the association was only trying to stop the printing job being put to international tender as the book suppliers, that had till then been blamed for some failures, were members of the association and it had not ever lifted a finger in taking any action against them. Few reports on embezzlement of a huge amount of money started coming out.

Official investigations finding certain paper mills to have violated specifications and penalised were reported by newspapers in the middle of 2014. Even a later date waiver of the penalty by the textbook board was also reported. But the imposition of penalty was more reported than the waiver.

Coming clean by way of the wait it again became possible for paper mills or printing presses to take up in the printing job the next year.

In the printing of about 110 million primary books for the 2011 academic year, which has just begun, 22 commercial printers entered into an alliance and offered in the international tender process called in April 2010, to print the books at a price which was 31.94 per cent, or reportedly more than Tk 1 billion, lower than the estimate quoted in the tender. It was done, unofficially subscribed to by many, officials and printers, and reported without being named, to block out Indian publishing houses.

A fracas ensued. The World Bank, which has a substantial contribution to the funding for textbook printing and a larger contribution to the funding for primary education, sought an explanation, set conditions for payment to printers and, amidst rejection by printers and discussions, put in place a quality assurance protocol. Six monitoring committees, reports said, were set up for printing oversight. Everything went well, roughly; only the printers, who had already been under an increased workload — the number of books to be printed increased, but the number of printers did not — had much less time left to complete the job.

Printers have customarily had 130 days for printing textbooks — the period from the beginning of the textbooks to sending them to delivery points that has already proved inadequate for the job — but the price, explanation, condition, rejection, quality control and oversight committee issues left the printers with fewer days, with all other factors having a telling effect on the printing of textbooks, all of which had not reached the students by the first day of the academic year.

Now after students are reported to be unhappy about the quality of books, printing and binding, and guardians and teachers to be complaining, the textbook board has, even if to play to the gallery, announced that it would be taking action against the printers who failed. A textbook committee is reported to have said that it would ask printers to replace the torn books and they would face being penalised and blacklisted, and their performance guarantee and security deposits would be cancelled, in case they fail to comply with the board's instructions.

Now there are a few questions the textbook board to answer. Why has the board earlier failed to stick to punitive measures it had taken against errant printers? Why is the board again taking such punitive measures if they cannot guarantee against failures in future? Why has the board entrusted printers with such a big job, that too on short notice, without assessing their capacity? What have the textbook committees, set up under the quality assurance protocol, done when the books were being printed? And, last but not least, why did the textbook board agree to buy cakes at the price of breads? A solution probably lies in the answers taken together.