

## THE BANGLADESH OBSERVER

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## The Problem Of Text-Books

There has been a recent criticism in the local press about the delay in the printing and supply of school text books for the academic year 1985. The Text Book Board has since explained its position in this regard blaming the delay, among other factors, on 'the non-supply of paper in time.' Among other reasons cited in the government hand-out is irregular power-supply.

Be that as it may, the fact is the delay has occurred and been responsible for the lacuna in the distribution of text books. But the problem bears examining at a deeper level. And there one is confronted with one primary question: the demand for books at the primary level itself for the year 1985 is three crore and forty-four lakh; and the Text Book Board is to make necessary arrangements for their supply to students. Apart from paper or power shortage the problem is basically one of management in the most complex sense.

To begin with, this is a formidable quantitative problem. And where the quantity remains so unwieldy, quality is bound to suffer. And that is exactly what has allegedly happened. And public criticism is directed not only against belated or irregular supply of books,—but also sharply about the quality of books, the suitability of the syllabus to student age-groups, the student capacity to receive and benefit by their class-work, to assimilate what they are taught and a host of other problems facing the young children down the entire line from the primary to post-primary levels. The fact is the Board has bitten off more than it can chew.

The crux of the problem is the monopoly one single agency enjoys in the preparation, distribution and supply of books. And any monopoly which means exclusion of competition is bound to have an adverse effect on quality. While free competition improves quality, monopoly blocks it. And to allow this to happen in regard to children's education is a serious matter.

In a historical perspective the present position concerning text-books and their preparation etc. bears comparison with the system prevailing during a whole period under British rule and sometime after,—till the change came in favour of bulk production by a single organisation. One thing that stands out is the superior quality of those books. And it was made possible by an open competition among writers and publishers and the freedom of choice by the schools concerned to make their selections out of a variety of publications. The result was reflected in the quality of education. And that is—and ought to be—the aim of education in any society, particularly in one in the making. And we are a society very much in the same stage.

Besides, this is a form of centralisation which is out of keeping with the concept of decentralisation the administration is trying to work out. We can allow freedom and choice at least where we can do so with no difficulty whatever, in fairness to a generation of youngers whose educational and intellectual equipment has been entrusted to us as leaders and administrators.

About text-books there are also other complaints: among them are: they make, mostly, difficult reading for fledglings in education. This is primarily a language difficulty. And to make books readable and therefore enjoyable, specially to children, is a specialised skill. The books are also overloaded with topics and details. In most cases they lack a scientific arrangement of subjects. Most of them are unimaginative in their overall make-up and selection of subjects. The propensity to 'teach' rather than to delight and inspire puts out the young reader. An unnecessary seriousness—and message-mongering—spoils much of the humanities taught.

Specific complaints have been heard about some groups of books such as social studies, mathematics and science. The main problem with science books is that most of the topics have been so treated as would call for classroom-demonstration or laboratory experiments for which few, if any, facilities exist in most schools. On top of all is the oversize syllabus. The anxiety to teach nearly everything under the sun (a permissible hyperbole) and in a dry and uninviting style is out of place so far children and their mental responses are concerned. The old-fashioned pedagogic need for students to cram long poems plus the cudgelling of the brains required by difficult (often ill-proposed) arithmetical problems is almost the last straw on the young reader's back.

The remedy obviously lies in one, breaking up the monopoly of preparation and distribution of text-books, two, a thorough review of the syllabus and the texts of the books by a group of experts; three, cutting down the overloaded syllabus; improvement of the language—and, last not least, redistribution of emphasis in favour of technical education. Above all, a streamlining of the whole range of primary to post-primary education with a thrust on bringing it close to our intellectual and socio-economic needs. Such a renovation will be possible, as we have said, only in an open and free competition in the preparation and production of text-books.

The purpose behind children's education is primarily to give them a grounding in language which is the vehicle of knowledge. Next, to stimulate a sensitiveness to subjects and not exactly to teach them. Not to turn a child into an adult overnight, but to help him grow into one as naturally and organically as a sapling grows into a tree.