

Worrying failures in textbooks for national minorities

THE government yet again failing to provide students from national minorities with textbooks in their first language is unacceptable. The government in 2012 planned to publish primary textbooks in six languages of national minorities with January 2014 as the deadline in sight, later extended till January 2016. The government has already missed the January 2016 deadline and has now expressed fears that the task could not be accomplished before June this year. While the proposition for a middle-of-the-year distribution of textbooks only looks ludicrous, as students cannot be taught in one language for half of the year and then be forced to switch to another language for the other half, the reason that the government gave for the delay, a fund shortage amounting to a meagre Tk 30 lakh, is equally ridiculous. The National Curriculum and Textbook Board said that it was still left with a third of the task unfinished, purportedly because of the fund constraints. It is time that the government realised that such a situation only adds to the school dropout for the students from national minorities, which is disproportionately high only in the Chittagong Hill Tracts, with 59 per cent in 2012 against the national figure of 26 per cent that year.

In addition to the problem of funds and slow progress, the plan for the publication of textbooks has already faced another setback. The government originally planned to publish the textbooks, beginning with books for students up to Class III and then gradually going upwards, in six languages — Chakma, Garo, Marma, Sadri, Tripura and Santali; the plan in the Santali segment faced a controversy regarding the option of Roman and Bangla letters to be used in writing the language. The publication of textbooks in Santali was then deferred till 2016. Now with cumulative slow progress in all the segments of the plan, the whole project has been delayed. But it is time that the government understood that, as education research suggests, students taught in the language used at home and within the community for the initial years of their lives, are more likely to succeed in school and tend to develop better thinking skills while such a situation helps parents to participate in their children's learning, thus, stopping much of the dropout caused by language barrier. The government's dilly-dallying also continues to be in breach of the CHT accord of 1997 by way of which to government is supposed to arrange for the primary education for national minorities in their first language.

Under the circumstances, it is an immediate imperative for the government to seriously attend to the primary schooling of national minority children, by removing all the obstacles, in the first languages. The government needs to do this to live up to its constitutional obligations and to its commitment to Ekushey February, now International Mother Language Day which means to promote linguistic diversity and multilingualism, and to remain true to the aspirations for linguistic pluralism that has guided the nation from the language movement to the emergence of Bangladesh.