

The Question Of Text-Books

Concern about the progressive deterioration in the quality of text-books prescribed for Bangladesh schools at secondary and higher secondary levels, has been persistent for years. Many of them are not badly written and edited but also badly illustrated and printed on inferior quality paper, and fail as a result to impress the young and give them the education and training which text-books are supposed to impart.

The National Text-Book Board which has the sole responsibility of getting text-books written, prescribing or recommending them, often seems either unresponsive to criticisms or to blame it all on the publishers. Two sessions ago, the Board was forced by pressure from the press to withdraw a text-book for English. The pieces of English prose included were shown by the critics who were drawn from parents as well as University staff to contain idiomatic and grammatical errors.

The publishers who are often blamed for their inability to put on the market error-free books counter by saying that they are usually given three to four months in which to contact writers, print and publish the books. Few publishers anywhere in the world, they complain, can possibly market in three months whose contents and appearance would be satisfactory.

We have always thought this view to be correct and recall pleading on more than one occasion for a change in the Text-Book Board's procedures. It passes our comprehension why the Board should seek to change its prescriptions at regular annual or two-yearly intervals and announce its decision to adopt new books only about six months in advance of the session for which they are meant.

The latest notification from the Board that we have before us marks a slight change and has invited books for the school year beginning in January 1991. Excellent we might have said, but the whole point of the change has been cancelled out by the insistence in the notification published in newspapers early in August that all manuscripts or publications must be submitted for the Board's approval by 30 November 1989. This gives the writers and publishers barely three months in which to complete the entire process of writing, editing and printing. To say that it is a tall order is to put it very euphemistically. What we are afraid, will happen, is a repetition of the old story, a set of books prepared and printed in a hurry. Even the best of writers, would be hard put to produce for children really first-quality books in just three months.

We do not understand the justification for this hurry when the books will not be needed until January 1991. The time for submission should in our judgement be extended up to middle of 1990 in order that writers and publishers may have a reasonable opportunity to do their best.

We take opportunity to draw attention to one special matter in which as an English-Language newspaper we are particularly interested. The Text-Book Board, we notice, invites reading material in English also from local writers and publishers. We have always held the view that reading material in a foreign language, chosen for children should be selected from the work of established writers born to the language concerned. Publishers in the United Kingdom have produced hundreds of children books written by experts which under contract could be re-published locally at cheap prices.