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Text-Book Publication

We have had occasion more than once to air complaints about the quality and content of text-books published under the direct auspices of the Bangladesh Text-Book Board which controls and supervises the selection, prescription and printing of material intended for use in primary, secondary and higher secondary institutions. We have consistently maintained that it is futile to expect any marked improvement in the standard of education unless the text-books we impose on children are written and printed in a manner which would give intellectual and aesthetic satisfaction to their users.

Now the Bangladesh Printers' Association, obviously in a mood of exasperation, has levelled against the Text-Book Board charges which are serious enough to call for an immediate enquiry into the organisation, staffing and working of that body. Publishing is big business, and what, according to the Printers' Association, is happening is that the Board is abusing its powers to patronise a huge black market in the production and sale of books which are an offence to the eye at the same time that their contents are characterised by errors of diverse kinds, factual, grammatical and ethical. The specific charge which on the present occasion the printers have made in unambiguous terms is that the foreign offset paper which the Text-Book Board is authorised to import, is regularly supplied to certain firms who sell it on the black market for profit and use inferior-quality paper in the books they publish under the Board's aegis with its knowledge and approval. The printers allege that there exists a regular profit-sharing understanding between certain members of the Board and the firms concerned. The publishers involved in these black market deals are reported to have made a profit of 27 lakh taka in the last season. The printers have gone as far as to demand the dismissal of certain members of the Board.

A statement by the Text-Book Board just published refutes some of the charges brought by the Printers' Association and concludes by saying that "Only two cases of black markets of the Board's paper have been detected in recent years".

Nonetheless, even if some of the allegations are found on enquiry to be true the need for a thorough investigation into the state of affairs in and around the Text-Book-Board remains great.

While judgement on the accuracy of the figures cited must depend on enquiry by a competent body, it is common knowledge that the text-books our children handle and are supposed to study for their intellectual advancement are printed on inferior-quality newsprint which even a respectable newspaper would hesitate to use. That this should be happening in spite of the Board's access to foreign offset paper is, we think, a major scandal. How the Board could have accepted books printed on cheap newsprint and acquiesced in their circulation is not a matter that can be lightly explained away. Is it to be believed that a publisher would dare dispose of its quota of offset paper on the black market and confront the Board with a fait accompli in the form of books on newsprint, if it could not count on acquiescence and approval?

This revelations which have come from the Printers' Association call in question the current practice of empowering the Text-Book Board to undertake the responsibility of having text-books printed and published under its own supervision. This gives rise to a monopoly which is apt to be misused anywhere. Free competition among publishers with the Board retaining the right to reject books which fail to comply with set standards will greatly reduce the risks of the kind of scandal which has now been exposed.

The Text-Book Board should be an academic body rather than a business organisation as it seems to be at present.