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**The textbook heist**

Part - I

The government is not only proving itself to be a poor provider of education but an even worse regulator.

At first the Single National Curriculum (SNC) was defended as just a “minimum standard” and private schools would be able to teach beyond it if they could manage – which begs the question why it is labeled a curriculum at all. As the months passed, the government began preparing “model textbooks” that would serve as a sample implementation of this minimum standard. Schools and publishers would be allowed to use alternative textbooks as long as they covered the SNC’s contents.

Some private schools and publishers began work on their own textbooks, but as more time passed, the goalposts for private schools began to move. A few months after publicly releasing the SNC, the federal government quietly made amendments to it, throwing a spanner in the ongoing effort of developing alternative textbooks, forcing delays and renegotiations with authors.

Since then, Sindh has rejected the SNC; Punjab, Khyber Pakhtunkhwa, and the ICT are rolling it out for the next academic year, August 2021-March 2022. None of the provinces or the federal government are ready though.

Punjab, eager to toe the federal government’s line on the SNC, took three steps: a) decreed that for the upcoming school year all schools, public and private, only use the government’s model textbooks; b) decided to start enforcement of textbook approvals, asking to vet the entire booklist, by the Punjab Curriculum and Textbook Board (PCTB), a process that has in the past taken 2-3 years; and c) raised book approval fees for good measure.

The PCTB is also asking all publishers to prove that their books are following the SNC, not just at each level of schooling (primary/ middle/ secondary), but at every grade-level.

On February 11, the Special Secretary (Planning) of Punjab’s School Education Department issued a notice to collect samples of textbooks of Islamiat, Pakistan Studies, Urdu and English taught in all private schools from grades 1 to 12 within five days. These books will now be scrutinized for ‘blasphemous materials.’

According to some private schools in Okara, the PCTB has threatened to cancel their registrations if they do not switch to government textbooks. Not only has this put publishers and distributors sitting on excess private textbook inventory in a fix, it has also opened the door to bribery.

Publishers asking for book manuscript reviews have been told that the PCTB will begin accepting manuscripts on April 15, without specifying how long the review process will take. ICT does not even have a review process in place yet. According to some private school owners, the National Curriculum Council that prepared the SNC is yet to hire reviewers. KP is the only province where, according to the same publishers, the concerned directorate has begun accepting manuscripts for a review, although publishers are not ready to comment on how seamless that process will be until they receive results of the first review, the date for which is not specified yet.

Assume a very modest number of 50 publishers, each with a booklist of 500 books (plus supplementary books!). The reviewers (let alone the capacity of those reviewers) needed to complete the PCTB’s typical three-stage review process in the available time are simply not available in sufficient numbers, and no reviewers have been hired yet. The whole process adopted so far is clearly ad hoc, lacking forethought and planning. This sudden enthusiasm for reviewing all textbooks, in numbers far exceeding the PCTB’s capacity, has the appearance of a ham-fisted money grab.

According to some, the reason some big chain schools have signed off on the SNC (a fact often repeated by the government to support its blanket claim that no one has a problem with the SNC) and are willing to adopt government textbooks is because they can afford workarounds. Also, the cost of going against the government is too high for them. Big chain schools in the public eye are more likely to be targeted for inspection and can purchase government books but prepare their own supplementary printed materials for regular teaching and learning in the classroom. Middle-income or stand-alone private schools are not going to be able to do that. The end result will be fewer publishers getting NOCs for fewer textbooks, giving schools and teachers fewer options to enrich your child’s learning experience.

According to a large publisher I talked to, Punjab’s PCTB will be charging the highest rates for NOCs – between Rs100,000 and Rs150,000 for a single textbook, at minimum. Even worse, a textbook sold in multiple provinces will require NOCs from each. In another blow, inexplicably, the PCTB is also demanding it be paid a royalty fee (manuscript management cost) of 7.5 percent per printed copy of all private textbooks. ICT and KP may follow suit. The justification apparently is: ‘we may be taken to court over one of your books, we need a pool of money to cover eventual legal expenses.’ The board is also insisting on setting the selling price for books published by private publishers, asking publishers to specify numbers of copies of books to be printed. The Punjab Publishers Association has rightly taken the issue to the court.

As for the quality of reviews, a publisher narrated several experiences from years past. Review comments are almost never pedagogical in nature. As an example, one time a PCTB official reviewing Charlotte Bronte’s 1847 classic ‘Jane Eyre’ objected to the mention of the word ‘Bible,’ deeming it culturally inappropriate, and demanded it be replaced with the term ‘holy book’. So much for inter-faith harmony, celebration of differences and coexistence. What good can we expect from a review of thousands of textbooks by a bureaucratic machine made of cogs as bigoted as this?

It is also worth noting here the cost implications on the government’s end. A certain provincial textbook board has quoted a 126 percent increase in the annual cost of the new primary textbooks for all public-school going children. The board claims that this is because the new textbooks will have a higher page count.

The lack of planning and politically motivated and hurried roll-out is evident from the delayed start of the next academic year to August 2021, instead of the regular start in March, just because books are not ready. Even private schools preparing students for the local school system cannot adhere to the regular academic year’s timeline because books will not be ready. Schooling has already been hit hard due to Covid closures. Children will now receive only seven months of instruction in the next academic year.

A family friend was reminiscing about how schools used to operate in his younger years. From time to time, schools would notify students of small changes to the school uniform to necessitate the buying of all new uniforms. A uniform shop would already be given the new specifications, essentially giving it the monopoly on supplying new uniforms. The school, or someone at the school, would pocket a commission on sales of these new uniforms. Then, after notifying students of the new uniform requirement, a teacher or someone on the school staff would (helpfully) drop the name of the shop where said new uniform would be available. Students and parents wishing to avoid any fuss, would swallow the bitter pill and cough up for new uniforms. Others, however, would buy their uniform elsewhere or try (a cheaper) home-made fix. When these students with their workarounds were found out, they would receive a good beating, for wearing a shirt, pants or tie of a slightly different shade. In the end, all had to fall in line, some only after taking a beating, others skipping it.

Publicly, government departments proclaim that private schools, which are outperforming public schools on every metric on average, may use their own books and curricula, if only they jump through some hoops. In reality, it is enforcing previously unenforced rules, raising the cost of doing business, and (specifically in Punjab’s case) explicitly blocking them from using any textbooks other than their own – it is making the use of alternative textbooks as difficult and as expensive as it can. Like school children of yesteryears, private schools are being told to fall in line, either voluntarily or after taking a beating.

To be continued

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