Social Science Textbooks: Changing Mindsets?

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Social science textbooks created within the NCF-2005 attempt to tackle a whole range of human prejudices, hoping to bring about a sea change in mindsets. They are designed to inculcate respect for diversity, democratic values, critical thinking and questioning. As is widely acknowledged, these textbooks are framed within a progressive educational, social and political understanding *(Ritubala and Joshi, 2008-09: 29-42)*. The matter in these textbooks is engaging, varied and playful: the wall between the world and the school has been broken and the child can bring her rich experience of the world into the classroom *(Rai, 2006: 152-57)*. But we must remember at the same time that the textbook is no magic wand, nor really a vehicle for transformative education. In fact there are many hazards on the textbook's journey, as it moves through the classroom, and the world of the child.

Social science deals with the whole big human circus, including our own actions and emotions. Children learn about human agency, creativity and possibilities across time and space, and this may encourage them to expand their horizons, question their prejudices. When the EVS Class 3 textbook chapter *Foods We Eat (NCERT, 2007a: 38-44)* explores different items cooked in different homes, the intention is to encourage students to appreciate the enormous range of viable foods and food cultures and question prejudices absorbed from early conditioning. Indeed, it may well do so. In the hands of an open, imaginative teacher this could provide rich material for discussion and strengthen mutual understanding across differences of culture, class, caste, gender, religion.

However, the same exercise can go horribly wrong, particularly with an insensitive or deeply prejudiced teacher. If she holds, for instance, that 'non-vegetarianism is bad', she may flaunt this notion in her classroom, allowing some children to feel superior while others feel belittled and humiliated. Such interventions can dilute, distort or even subvert the learning process. The danger is most acute in the case of social science, for this is where human prejudice, emotion and belief are often most intense.

Similar is the case with questions like *On which vehicles have you travelled?*, followed by: *Which ride did you enjoy the most? Why?*, in EVS Class 4 textbook *(NCERT, 2007b: 62)*. A child who has travelled widely and on varied modes of transport may end up feeling immensely superior to the child who has barely ventured out or used any vehicle. However, a well-prepared and democratic-minded teacher would be able to transform the same situation into an opportunity for engaged discussion and mutual learning. The point is that bringing in children's experiences into the classroom creates a concomitant responsibility. The education system must be prepared to handle the consequences, when interpersonal differences and personal vulnerabilities emerge into the open.

The power of textbooks – and teachers

Until recently, the multiple forms of life that children experience at home and elsewhere was seldom accorded space in the classroom *(Bhattacharya, et al, 2008-09)*. NCERT textbooks have tried to reverse this trend by consciously inviting children to share their experiences within the classroom. Alongside, somewhat paradoxically, there is an effort to de-emphasise the role of the textbook. NCF-2005 *Position Paper on Curriculum, Syllabus and Textbooks* noted

'The present day classroom practices are, in almost all schools of the country, totally dominated by the textbooks,' *(NCERT, 2006, p viii)*.

The new textbooks, however, try to limit their own use. *A Note to Parents and Teachers* in the EVS textbooks for Classes 3 and 4 states

'The textbook is only one of the many teaching-learning materials used by teachers. Thus, this textbook should only be viewed as an aid to the teacher, around which the teacher could organise her teaching to provide learning opportunities to children' *(NCERT, 2007a: xi; NCERT, 2007b: vii)*.

Since there has been no effective re-education of teachers on the philosophy underlying NCF-2005, motivating them to change their modes

of teaching, most teachers still continue to place textbook lessons at the centre of their teaching process. The new textbooks are fitted into old modes of transaction. What happens then to the multiple questions and exercises in these textbooks, carefully designed to bring out children's independent thinking, respect for diversity and so forth? In some schools, the new textbooks are indeed helping do this – those schools, or the rare classroom, where there is a supportive, democratic ethos. In other classrooms the textbooks perhaps create more problems than they solve. For instance, take the question, *Has it ever happened to you that on some day you were very hungry but there was nothing to eat? If yes, why? (NCERT, 2007a: 39)*. A deprived and vulnerable child may end up feeling more vulnerable, as she admits to hunger and poverty in a class of well-fed, or relatively well-fed, children. The system provides no scaffolding.

An accompanying illustration shows children sitting in a circle describing what they ate last night. One says nothing was cooked in her house. But her poverty is sanitised: her clothes as clean as the other children's, no sign of visible under-nutrition in her body *(NCERT, 2007a: 38)*. It is an idealised image and, as such, dishonest. While the lesson urges children to talk about their real worlds, it fails to fully acknowledge and therefore dignify the reality of the underprivileged child. Deprivation is skimmed over, uncomfortable realities ignored. A footnote states, 'It is important to develop a rapport with children and create an environment where they can express themselves freely and their views are heard with tolerance' *(NCERT, 2007a: 39)*. However, when children do begin to express themselves, a far higher order of facilitation is required than is conveyed by the word *tolerance*. The teacher has to ensure a safe space, where she and her students are non-judgmental, deeply caring and respectful (not just tolerant) of each others' realities and diverse worlds. Self-expression must not be considered an end in itself, but a part of the complex process of developing mature and sensitive human beings.

In fact our classrooms are seldom safe spaces, for they are but a cross-section of wider society. Most classrooms are rife with conflict and prejudices based on caste, class, gender, religion. These may emerge into the open when impelled by a text, exercise or pedagogic mode. Strong emotions may be evoked—pain, shame, anger, guilt, aggression,

arrogance and so on. For teachers to play the role of facilitators, they would need to be non-judgmental and transform conflict through reasoned discussion and carefully nurtured trust. Effective teachers would help students reflect on their experiences, actively listen to others, analyse multiple realities and develop wider perspective on social structure, inequalities and injustice. Such teachers would be deeply committed to democratic social change, as well as personal growth—students', as well as their own.

For education to be transformative, the educator must first be transformed! Clearly it is true that:
'To enable the child to grow up free from prejudice, one has first to break down all prejudice within oneself…. It is constant inquiry, true dissatisfaction, that brings creative intelligence.' *(J Krishnamurti. 2008: 54-56)*.

Rather than genuine commitment on the part of educators, we often have the mere effort to be politically correct, thus we mouth platitudes, even as we serve up old wine in new bottles.

Sustained work with teachers can yield significant change. Schoolteachers, such as *Eklavya* worked with over long years in Madhya Pradesh, can become extraordinarily motivated when approached with respect and initiated through a transparent, participatory educational process. *Eklavya* engaged intensively with teachers as well as students in ordinary schools, resulting in:
'a richer and more vivid image of things being talked about, the ability to go beyond banal explanations into more substantial ones, a beginning as far as seeing the interconnectedness of social phenomena, and, finally, perceiving 'other' people in a less judgmental manner.'

Eklavya educationists realise that a genuine process of change is long-drawn and multi-faceted; a lot still remains to be done:
'A great deal of non-textual activity is necessary, we have learnt from our experiences with children - oral narrations, drawing pictures, making clay representations. They need greater feedback on their writing, greater orientation regarding the structure of the texts, more time to read and prepare, more attentive discussions and explanations from teachers, and, what is very important--a far greater space to talk about their experiences in the course of the lessons' *(Paliwal and Subramaniam, 2010: 43-47)*.

Transaction of the curriculum: subversion along the way

NCF-2005 recommends flexibility in teaching-learning modes, so that `the process of acquisition of knowledge becomes the process of active creation by the learner *(NCF-200: 26-27)*.

There is tension, however, between the Central National Curriculum on the one hand and its own espousal of alternative modes of teaching and learning on the other. Textbooks, produced within a calibrated education bureaucracy, are part and parcel of a vast system of mass instruction, with print orders running into the order of five crore copies *(Gohain, 2018)*.

Technology comes to the rescue of teachers and students who wish to continue in the old mould! The internet is replete with online gurus who provide solutions and solved question papers. Between teachers, tuitions and online gurus, there is ample pre-digested material now available for students, which he can memorise rather than having to develop his creative thinking and questioning skills! If pre-set texts, disinterested teachers and tutors (in-person and online) dominate the learning process, the space for active construction of knowledge by learners is severely compromised.

Here I list a few instances from online gurus: some of the 'solutions' a cursory search on the net has yielded. There are several websites similar to the one I quote from, which is called *CBSE Tuts*. The examples I have picked *(Bhagya, 2018)* are for students of Class 10, Political Science, relevant to the chapter *Gender, Religion and Caste (NCERT, 2008: 39-56)*:

Q: Suggest measures to check casteism in India.

A: 1. Spread of education…; 2. Economic equality…; 3. Abolition of reservations – Reservation in government jobs, education and other sectors creates conflicting attitude among members of two different castes. When the people of higher castes having adequate educational qualifications are deprived of all facilities, they revolt against the lower caste people.

Q: How is gender division understood in Indian society? To what extent does political mobilization on gender basis help to improve women's role in public life?

A: In the Indian society gender difference is taken as socially constructed basis to differentiate between the roles played by men and women. Sexual division of work has become the mindset of the society. Because of this women face discrimination and have become the victim of patriarchal system. Even after adopting the concepts of equality and liberty, we lack practical approach. It is therefore necessary that political mobilization helps to improve women's role in public life. Political parties should come together to frame policies for equal representation of women in the national and local politics. This will widen the horizon for women. Taking part in the decision making will encourage them in their day to day affairs. They will develop maturity and responsibility.

Q: Define communalism as an ideology.

A: Communalism is a strong sense of belonging to particular community especially a religious community, which often leads to extreme behavior or violence towards others. It cannot tolerate and respect people belonging to different religious communities.

The (above) answers provided on the net are in complete contradiction to what the textbooks try to teach. They are downright crass, regressive, casteist/ patriarchal/ communal. And yet, many students use such websites and write in appreciative comments, grateful for sub-standard material they can mug up, rather than have to think out answers.

The Kothari Commission noted:
'…it is a long and burdensome task to convert a school system that is based primarily on memorization into one involving understanding, active thinking, creativity…. Each step is not a step but a leap into the unknown… (Kothari, 1966).'

In the case of the social sciences, a wrong step could convert classrooms into seething hotbeds of open conflict, reinforce unjust power, suffering and violence, rather than meaningful engagement and transformation.

Texts and Contexts

I turn now to some flaws in NCERT textbooks, a kind of democratic deficit in the context of underprivileged children and communities.

A Note to Parents and Teachers in EVS textbooks Class 3 and 4 (NCERT, 2007a: x; NCERT, 2007b v-vi) states: `Activities in the book that demand that children be taken for observations to the parks, fields, water bodies, into the community, etc,

reiterate that EVS learning primarily occurs outside the walls of the classrooms.'

Class 3 activities include:

Spend some time under a tree. Observe the animals carefully

Choose a tree near your school or house and make friends with it

Go outside and look for birds on trees, in water, on the ground, in and around bushes. How many birds could you see?

Copy the sounds made by any three birds. Collect feathers which you find lying around

From where do the plants growing around your house get water? *(NCERT, 2007a: 8, 17, 54, 60)*.

Geeta Kumari, teacher in a primary school situated in an urban slum, has found it impossible to carry out any of these activities, for there are virtually no trees, plants or birds to be found in or near her school! Another activity advocated is taking the children to a post office *(NCERT, 2007a: 115)*, which she has tried and found utterly impractical: 'The school refuses to give me permission because how will I ensure safety of 45 girls during the two kilometre walk to the nearest post office?'

Geeta has a few children of *rikshawalas* studying in her class. She observes that, for them, the ethos reflected in the textbooks is too alien, an ethos of fun and careless leisure which they can barely relate to. Working class children do not easily connect with the bright and happy images and the flowing language of the textbooks. The books fail to acknowledge the grime and dirt, the pain and suffering, the indignity and deprivation which are a large part of their everyday worlds.

Socio-political concerns are reflected in language/ literature textbooks as well. The story *Sunita ki Pahiya Kursi*, in Class 4 Hindi textbook *(NCERT, 2007d: 97-102)* describes Sunita, a differently abled girl, going to market on her own, entering a grocery shop with a bit of help from a young friend, Amit; later, she races down the road, Amit on the back of her wheelchair. The story tries to convey that a child with disability is as 'normal' as any other: but it may well be overstating the case and overdoing her independence. The depiction of Sunita careening down the road, with another child riding pillion on her wheelchair, is unrealistic and dangerous. Wheelchair users often require some assistance for activities of daily living, such as dressing, eating etc. The story may perform a disservice to them, trivialising their troubles and obscuring their needs.

In fact the story seems to impose a new stereotype of `normality', which is actually a fresh expectation and pressure on the differently abled child.

The NCERT Hindi textbooks for Classes 3, 4, 5 *(NCERT 2007c, NCERT 2007d, NCERT 2007e)* also fall short on grounds of gender. A count of characters in the three textbooks indicates a startling imbalance: 75% characters mentioned in the text are male, 25% female. There is similar acute imbalance in visual representation: in Class 4 textbook, 74% figures in illustrations are male, and 26% female *(Mehrotra and Ramachandran, 2010: 54-61)*.

Hindi Language Textbooks	Total characters	Male characters	Female characters
Class 3, 4,5 (combined): TEXT	162	121 (75%)	41 (25%)
Class 4: ILLUSTRATIONS	381	280 (74%)	101 (26%)

Such skewed gender composition presents children with an excessively masculine, male-dominated world. Additionally, girls and women are rarely shown in groups, while boys and men are in groups—playing ball, students with teacher, in the marketplace, on the street etc. And, although women are shown pursuing diverse occupations, when it comes to household tasks, overwhelmingly it is women who perform these--as if that is the natural order of things.

1. Household chores are overwhelmingly performed by women, in a seemingly `natural' way:
As in this image from the story 'Sunita ki Pahiya Kursi' (NCERT, Rimzhim 4, Hindi textbook for Class 4, p 98)

The textbooks try to give politically correct messages, but sometimes the result is a kind of doublespeak, or sophisticated hypocrisy. For instance, the lesson `Drop by Drop' has text and visual, in EVS Class 3 textbook (NCERT, 2007a: 134) of women and girls fetching water in pots from a pond, and a footnote stating 'In the above visual, consciously defined gender role of women has been shown (fetching water). Discuss on this issue in the class to remove gender discrimination.' While the aim is laudable, it is strange and highly reductive, to expect that gender discrimination can be removed simply through a classroom discussion on gender roles. It betrays lack of understanding of social complexity and deeply entrenched gender asymmetry.

2. An `asura' whom the boy-hero wishes to kill, as did Ram: a dangerous depiction:
`Khilonewala, (NCERT, Rimzhim 5, Hindi textbook for Class 5, p 21)

In the Class 5 Hindi language textbook, the poem *Khilonewala'(Chauhan, 2007: 20-23)* begins beautifully, with a small boy looking at an itinerant toy-seller's ware. He decides to buy a sword, bow and arrows to female demon) and the *asuras* (demons). The accompanying illustration depicts an *asura*, a forest-dweller, who could well be conflated in an adivasi (tribal). An adivasi group called *Asur* in fact to date dwells in Jharkhand.

The portrayal is extremely problematic: more so at a time when tribals are being forcibly displaced due to land acquisition by corporate and state forces. Through such literary and visual tropes, tribals get subliminally identified as evil figures, which the righteous are justified in killing. An aggressive and hyper-masculine version of *Ram* is valorised, no doubt encouraging school-boys to emulate this stereotype. Some of the exercises make a bad situation worse by and presuming that all students must already be familiar with *Ram, Ramayana and Ramlila*; and failing to provide any secular, historical frame to the poem.

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