

Textbooks in Taking Democracy Forward

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Introduction

The idea of democracy has structured discussion on human societies in recent centuries. It has been a major pillar on which the construction of society is sought to be enabled. There are multiple ways of considering how democracy can be manifest in a society, but there are broad characteristic features that can be considered to be key to the idea of democracy. The Preamble of Indian Constitution considers these to be:

- a. Equality of status and of opportunity. This implies equality in terms of participation in all aspects of the functioning of the society
- b. Liberty of thought, expression, belief, faith and worship. The wording of this is over-arching and includes not just what is generally known as religion and its practice. Considering these two together implies liberty to be a part of the community of people constituting the country with your own thoughts and ideas
- c. The third is social, economic and political justice to all, and the last
- d. Fraternity, the feeling of oneness among the citizens constituting the nation.

Ambedkar, a key figure in the process of writing of the Constitution, believed that it is fraternity that is central to the enterprise of building a democratic society. Without substantial gains in fraternity, the other three would remain distant¹. The democratic citizen, therefore, needs to be able to respect the being of the others and have her own views and ideas that emerge from a belief in equality and justice. This would then enable her to analyse and recognise what would be just in a situation, thus contributing to making choices for the nation. Hence, to have the ability to distill information and judge it for its worth, she needs to feel empathy and appreciate the diversity that exists within the population. We can perhaps add to this list or redefine it in many ways but these are central to a democratic community. There are difficult choices about how to react to challenges to this democratic community, but all these have to be within this framework.

Indian schools, textbooks and democratic citizenship

While considering Indian society and the interplay between education and democracy, we will keep these four pillars in our mind, in particular, the aspect of *fraternity*. The key question is how carefully and creatively the school programme and textbooks address the question of fraternity, as a first step towards making children from all backgrounds and dispositions feel welcome and included. Can they find themselves represented with dignity and with a sense of purpose? Does the school programme leave students with a purpose and a dream on which they can construct their lives?

There is similar worry about the issue of *equality of status and of opportunity*. Can the school make children feel equal and in some way help achieve equalisation among them? Can it shift status differences and bring them on a more even keel? Are the school and the textbooks likely to mix children across backgrounds, becoming catalysts for groups that develop the feeling of being equal and being able to act in that manner?

The initial euphoria about universal education and the possibilities it holds has mellowed down in the last fifty years and it has been quite convincingly argued and empirically shown that the school experience, the curriculum and textbooks: all of these tend to reproduce the same social composition as before. The school, in fact, establishes and reifies it. That the school could provide a space for reducing the existing gaps of income, status and role, as well as build bridges of communication across communities, was shown in the initial year of educational expansions, but slowly the nature of school revealed itself by the systematic separation of children from different backgrounds into different kinds of schools. Even the curricular expectations and the efforts of the teachers in these schools displayed awareness of the wide gap between the backgrounds of the children and held out virtually no hope to those at the bottom. There were, and still are, a few outliers from the low stratum of the community and they



do make it to the next level and escape their fate of being confined to their deprived background. But these are rare exceptions and even though often held out as the models justifying the possibilities in the system, they are actually only a few counter-examples to the general reality of the school and its programme.

Education, textbooks and inclusion

Our education system was/is half meritocratic, and is so in a skewed manner. It does not give all equal opportunities to rise, but is meant to reproduce an amenable and differentiated workforce, both formal and informal. It is stated to allow equal opportunity, but in reality the nature of schools that children from different backgrounds go to, the kind of materials they are provided with, the kind of treatment they get and also the way the school deals with their parents and community, makes the opportunities extremely unequal. The school looks at the language and culture of children from deprived backgrounds with disdain and derision.

School programmes and textbooks focus on the attempt to create, in children, an awe of the system having an unquestioned acceptance of a hegemonic value system. It seeks to develop children into individuals who fit into expected gender, caste and class roles. As mentioned, there have, of course, been opportunities for a few individuals to move up to better economic and professional chances to move up for a few individuals, but there is no equalisation of opportunities across social groups anywhere in sight. Thus, education largely reproduces and legitimises inequality even while producing some rebels and radicals.

And it is this that we see being virulently attacked by strong proponents of inequality and hegemonic stability. Attacks on universities and on textbooks have been routine in the past decades and are becoming sharper and more violent and gaining a wider resonance in a society torn by fear, anxiety, self-centredness, with a desire for excluding and declaring as many as can be as the *other*

Curricula, textbooks and the nation

Curricula and textbooks, too, are affected by this onslaught of a concept of nation, devoid of an acceptance of *diverse people living in it and their practices*. The recent additional emphasis on patriotism has been focused on the borders, parading a sense of superiority and pride in dominating others, including other nations. All this gives a sense of belonging to the nation

without ensuring the commitments that would propitiate such sensibilities as are suggested by the Constitution and a democratic citizenry and has led to reducing further the space for exploration, free expression and exercise of choice. All ideas of critically reviewing the functioning of the state, bringing to the discourse personal experiences contrary to democracy, be it in the curriculum, textbooks, classrooms or the campuses, has come to be considered as acts of sedition. Reflections on the social realities and diverse cultures of the children coming to the school have to be sanitised, and shorn of raw truth by painting it with, at best, the brush of middle class liberalism. But what is even more likely to be seen than that is the vulgar display of upper classes' dominant and hegemonic sense of acceptable and proper behaviour. Even pictures showing children, home, family, their available resources, their dress, what they are playing or doing reflect the rich, the powerful and the elite. It is their manners, their way of life, beliefs and experiences that are seen in the books, excluding the life experiences and choices for the large majority. Their lives and ways of living and their rituals appear, at best, as an exotic lifestyle that is outside the desired goal of the mainstream schools, and most often it is reflected as abhorrent, ignorant and avoidable. School curriculum and textbooks conflate education as development of sensibilities that are most effective in consolidating status quo.

School, textbooks and culture

One important way to do that has been to constantly argue about a superior culture and a superior language linked to it. The languages of the children are not allowed in the classroom for fear that they would pollute the superior language. A fear against allowing children's languages and culture, and having the possibility of its mixing with the dominant language is sought to be created on the erroneous principle of monolingualism as the proper mechanism for being educated and capable. There is an excessive focus on spelling, on pronunciation and improved handwriting. All these are required for efficient workers in a system where ideas developed and decisions and choices will be made by those who may not have the skills to do any of this. Large numbers are needed to transcribe, to attend to customer calls and to do other such things requiring repetition and concentrated rule-following. Yet teachers (perhaps as they have come to believe wrongly or perhaps because it a part of their current identity) conduct the classrooms



in a manner such that students are oppressed by mindless repetitions, copying and avoidance of all aspects of their culture, identity and language. The only correct way of development seen by the school for any child is to escape from her reality around her and seek individual salvation by attempting to ape the ways and manners of the elite.

Nai Talim an alternative?

Nai Talim made some ineffectual attempts to create an alternative definition of education and essentially came up with the conclusion that the textbook is to be aligned with the ambience (social, cultural, economic and political) that the child grows up in and is to be constructed with the teacher. Later formulations notwithstanding, in the early principles of *Nai Talim*, the importance of the child's language and of a common language of communication was an essential element. However, *Nai Talim* and the linked theories of development unfortunately could not adequately address the need for modernism and a change in political and economic status quo. Their idea was that all children work together with their hands in different forms of manual work. They must learn around their environment and through issues that are relevant for them and their community. The community leads the school programme and the school is placed in the economic, social, and linguistic context of the child. All this would help in blending children and communities and link the learning children to the economy in a meaningful fashion, and children would grow up respecting all forms of manual labour, their language, culture and their whole being. They will be more rooted and not lose themselves by chasing mirages. These are perhaps crucial aspects which, if it had been possible to incorporate them properly, could have led to a concept of justice and opportunity that is more equitable.

The *Nai Talim* idea had, however, also flagged the problem of the difference between being literate and what they euphemistically called being being educated. They warned that the education that schools provided led to greed for power and for wealth, a desire to exploit and a feeling of being superior to the rest. It did not help imbibe, or develop, a feeling of inclusion, compassion, sharing, cooperation and a sense of equality. It did not make students change or want the world to change. Rather, it only enabled them to be exposed to more consumerist desires, strive for a greater share for themselves and climb over others to reach coveted places.

That education does not develop an urge to promote equality, justice, liberty and freedom is also argued by others. Even if there are justified reasons given for the need for equal opportunity, space for expression of ideas, feelings, religions dispositions and for justice and the students argue about them, discuss them and write about them fluently, these do not reflect in their sense of action. The knowledge they have does not translate into a desire for making a difference to the world. It does not encourage them to work towards equality of opportunity, justice and freedom of expression and of prayer. It also does not increase the fraternal feeling.

The challenge of education is therefore to build a public education system and textbooks that would be able to make a more rigorous attempt at developing a fraternal feeling and a sense of inclusion. They can also depict in some manner equality of opportunity and a sense of justice, freedom and liberty, expression of ideas and common forms of prayer.

Can education make a change?

The period of the last fifty years in India and in the world has been one of intense effort to educate everyone and then the pressure of ensuring that this happens with quality. As Anyon points out, quoting extensively from the work of other scholars, an analysis of the progress of education and movement towards equitable opportunity across countries and the nature of the governance of the education systems and their processes, suggests that these systems and processes are led and peopled in a manner that it is impossible for them to change status quo. He and many others have argued that we must recognise that whatever we do, the effect it might have is limited. The larger influence comes from the family, the society around and economic necessities. For children to develop a feeling of inclusion and a sense of equality of opportunity requires changes in social and political behaviour.

It is not easy to reflect equality in the short time children are at school through one set of textbooks, when the larger social processes, rituals and the vast set of literature available are predominantly encouraging superiority for oneself and disdain for the rest. The freedom and liberty of expression and religious practice requires a sense of empathy and humility, and also requires that children be heard and provided space to explore their ideas and thoughts. They need space to speak their mind



and receive encouragement for what they have learnt and thought. Even when wrong, they need to be given reasons as to why they should change what they think. So it is only through fair dialogue that they can learn the importance of other views. It is only when they themselves, their ideas and fancies are worked with through concern, rational conversation and patience that they will experience the purpose of such exchanges. The manner in which the school, textbooks and the ambience around reflects childhood and deals with it also needs to be re-examined. Developing children with respect and concern for others cannot happen unless they feel respected and see others being respected and cared for.

Current textbooks and challenges

Textbooks in India have always been hegemonic and skewed, reflecting as desirable and aspirational elite modes of living. They exclude the majority of children from their content in subtle and sometimes fairly gross ways. I will just give a few common examples:

* *Woh garib tha par imandar tha* (He was poor, yet was honest).

In a similar vein *Aadivasi jungle mein rahte hein aur kand mool khate hein* (Tribals live in the forest and eat fruits and roots.)

or *Ladki hote hue bhi wah ladkon se sab khel khelti thi* (Despite being a girl she played all boy's sports.)

or *Ladki hote hue bhi bahadur thi'* - (Despite being a girl, she was brave).

Diwali Bharat ka tyohar hei aur id hamare Mussalman bhai manatehein - (Diwali is a festival of Bharat and Id is celebrated by our Muslim brothers)

Besides this, stories of kings and their battles, replete with myths and tales of their courage, are scattered across books with hidden, subtle messages about the undeserved hardships they had to go through when they lost some battle. Sometimes, it is described as if they were so unfortunate that they only had dry bread. This, in a country where the midday meal in schools is a means to support survival of children and prevent extreme malnutrition, seems grossly unequal.

In addition, textbooks in general are very kind to the rich and the powerful, depicting them generally as nice, kind and generous people and are loathe to discuss the poor and the inequity, the injustice, the terror and the exploitation unleashed by the rich on the majority. They cannot talk of real

examples of caste discrimination or about the ways in which people and resources are being exploited. They do not reflect the poverty and the deprivation of people or their struggles to improve their condition, but only reflect what the state wants to convey to take forward its agenda. The conflict over textbooks when regimes change is only around some of the superstructural elements of culture and history. The rest of the information, including the choice of knowledge and the manner of its presentation, remains unchanged. There is no attempt to build an alternative that uses the knowledge of the community in any way, not even to examine and test its veracity. The possibility of attempting to move towards greater participation in the functioning of the democracy and inclusive participation of children from all backgrounds recedes far into the background.

In the absence of any meaningful representation of the realities of the majority of children, there is no way for textbooks and school programme to show non-elite children as role models or help them build a sense of identity and pride in themselves or their community. They do not build for them any sense of hope and purpose, nor help them imagine and dream of roles and possibilities outside the narrow confines of their lives. And then for some reason, textbooks have to be correct, politically benign and toothless or, in other words, aid in maintaining status quo. They cannot even reflect alternative perspectives or question the dominant one. In that sense they fail to provide the crucial element of criticism and arguments as essential components of democratic citizenship. The attempts to develop checklists of don'ts and do's in developing materials results in mechanical filtering and weeding out of any depiction of reality and, with that, any possible hope of bringing in conversation about the real, live experiences of the students.

Going forward and slipping back

Even as I say this, I must point out that, in the last four decades, there have been serious attempts to reshape textbooks. These efforts have emphasised building up parts of it from the lived experience of children, allowing children and teachers to construct stories and tasks that they would like to study, bring in the community to share their experiences, present case studies and stories that are somewhat reflective and even mildly critical of the reality of the situation, ensure inclusion of diversity of children in pictures and names, making a deliberate effort to be sensitive to the enormous amount of work women do outside the home

(apart from what they do at home), build humour around important persons, give more rigorously tested information and tasks that are possible for children to do on their own, etc.

These efforts are, however, not unidirectional and progressing towards more inclusion, more context and more space for democratic conversations. They get reversed and changed through various interventions. It has also to be recognised that even when put in to the books they are often ignored or even actively resisted and opposed. The challenge of a democratic school programme is not only to have appropriately constructed materials, but, more importantly, to have teachers and a system that understands, agrees and empathises with the project. If the system, including particularly the assessment, seeks to value the dominant hegemonic perspective and knowledge as the only correct one, in the process ignoring and deriding the existing culture, knowledge and language of the majority of the children, there is no way in which the most carefully created inclusive textbooks reflecting some possibility of accommodating multiple perspectives and critical discussions, can lead to construction of democratic classrooms.

What textbooks do we need?

What is needed to challenge the current view of education as an enterprise of individual salvation or escape is textbooks constructed with a vision of collective and egalitarian purpose of education to

build co-operation, and transacted in that manner. If education is competitively organised and structured to serve as a sieve, a race and a battle to survive and then capture maximum resources, authority, power and comforts, then it can never be inclusive, fraternal, sisterly or familial and democratic.

Textbooks need to help teachers and children examine the ills of society, namely, greed, consumerist desires, exclusions, disdain for the others, anxiety and fear, irrational response to other communities or backgrounds, immoderation, gender discrimination, violence, etc. To examine these, it needs to present and then discuss them. Sanitising textbooks to preclude all such 'ills' makes the school toothless even to be considered as a possibility for challenging the existing state of affairs. Textbooks thus need to be realistic and present carefully constructed situations that open up scope for discussion. They need to be pragmatic in the sense that they only challenge currently held opinions and beliefs to the extent that the school and the teacher can carry it through at that point. The extent and nature of the challenge to present situations and bringing in of discussions on ideas of democracy and inclusion can get more and more incisive as times become more appropriate. The challenge is the danger of slipping back towards old forms as political and social challenges to liberty freedom, equality and fraternity increase.

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