

Oh! Panchayat: loose lessons while doing social science textbooks¹

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Within the subject domain of sociology of education, which seems to have been my core area of practice, what critical pedagogues remind me about textbook is always at the back of the mind. They would say textbooks are:

- A means for the state regulate the classroom interactions of the teacher with her students and perpetuate itself;
- A tool in the hands of the state to generate a set of official knowledge, and reassure the survival of the middle class;
- An object capable of alienating children from schooling; and so on.

Yet, my engagement over the last many years has been in creating learning material, with repeated attempts to run away!

This write up is my learning(s) from doing (often seeing others do) one of the lesson in school textbooks - Panchayat. There are two reasons why this came back to my thoughts recently, 1. the infamous khaps of Hariyana and 2. the elections in Karnataka. But then I need to start the story at the beginning.....

I assume that none of my current readers would need an extensive description of what Panchayat is. But to give a crisp textbook description a Panchayat chapter will contain the following: description of its formation, power, and functions. This is usually done in a nearly sanitised rule book vocabulary. Over the last few decades in the name of 'child friendliness' text narratives were abused often by introducing characters into the descriptions who will rattle out the same set of information often in condescending manner.²

Lesson 1: Days before Budha smiled (actually wept!)

That was 4 football world cup seasons ago. It began while waiting for spiced up tea to be served at a dhaba near a guest house in the then outskirts of Jaipur at Jhalana Doongri. I was still struggling to be convinced that I understood the right "meanings" from Eklavya's Social Science textbooks in Hindi for class 6. I listened to Arvind's reading of Panchayat chapter. It was probably 5th time that we read the chapter together. And remained unconvinced that in spite of all the critical examination of various functions of a Panchayat the chapter ends with the feeling "and then they lived happily ever after".

The key storyline that's used in this chapter is the struggle of a woman to get a hand-pump dug near their colony. One among the radical departure of the Eklavya textbook was from the fact that while normal textbooks described all the functions and powers of institutions, as it is expected to be 'textbookishly', this chapter showed dysfunctionality of the institutions, the manner in which real politics of villages play an important role in making decisions, how corruption is prevalent etc. These real life portrayals are then used to build in critical thinking. An element that is sorely missing in our Indian social science textbooks.

¹ This article refers to many real people, but this is not an unbiased reflexive practice. It is a smoked bio-ethnography that depended on fantasised memories. It is not written for truth seekers, even though it does replace the name of drinks "educational correctness". There is an attempt to leave the lessons with questions to ponder. Unlike the traditional Indian pedagogic faith that everything ends with a moral of the story.

² This article does not touch upon those issues or forms of marginalisation could be read in "If Eve could be Steve" <http://expressbuzz.com/magazine/if-eve-could-be-steve/84204.html> (optional footnote may delete in case of the need for space, or any other reason)

Further I sat in the discussions with Mehamood and Sudheer in spite of the fact that Rajasthan considered themselves to be 'progressive' than Madhya Pradesh the political life scenario was not be much different. Yet rules and regulations vary from one state to the other. But they would repeatedly insist, in correcting my newly learned Hindi vocabulary that I did not live at the foot of Dewas " *tekari*" as MP-walas call it, and its actually a "doongri" as Rajasthanis call. And I had to wonder how much of the local flavour will keep the child hooked to it? While critical thinking in textbooks are generally or highly emphasised, like in the last assignment for the Kerala State's textbooks none would have the courage to end the story of political institutions in a negative manner. But is it not important to accept while doing textbooks for the state it allows us a certain freedom to reflect a set of arguments? Is it not clear that textbooks have the ability to "bring in" the real political world into the classroom? Is it not important to have some faith that the child can unravel the mystery of unexpected positive twist at the end of the chapter if there had been enough critical practice?

But then one day the Indian Government decided to do the Pokharan II, and slowly Lok Jumbish got wound up. The current textbooks of Rajasthan does not even vaguely reflect there was any efforts of reform.

Lesson 2. Is this Colonialism from neeche ke log?

Namgyal offered cups of gur-gur chai. Then he first asked "aap neeche se kab aaye?" Having had become familiar with many Ladakhis asking you that question, we fumbled some answer. Then Namgyal began explaining the travel plan to Sujatha, Vineetha, Sumathi³ and me. "On the day after you walk for about 3 hours you will reach the first village, just beside a small stream. It has 4 houses. You can eat your packed lunch there. Then you walk another 4 hours. You will reach the second village, it has 7 houses. Those people will allow you to have the home stay. Next day after you walk for some 4 or 5 hours you will reach the first village, it has one house....."The description went on like this as how to enter the snow leopard reserve in Ladakh. It does not matter if we managed to do the trekking, But I had my Panchayat chapter in the mind. How can you have wards if there is only so few houses? How big an area the Panchayats will cover? My images of Panchayat's were strongly built the idea that villages have populations in 1000s or at least hundreds! And so it goes I need to unlearn quiet some of my wisdom.

You notice that the new sets of 4 & 5 textbooks that came out of SECMOL in 2003 which was supposed to be used in Ladakh region that has [had] certain unique ways of organising their social relationship. Textbooks bring in children towards the traditional roles of goba, lorpa, churpon etc. in enabling variety of collective need of the society. Lorpa made sure that animals that entered into the fields of other people are confiscated; Churpon decided which field would get water on which day, how many times; Goba used to be a village head etc. Well the modern state structure does not retain any of these Ladakhi words into their labelling of people in Panchayat. They have imported words like 'sarpanch' 'panchayat' from the "neeche". In the margins one cannot stop noting down 'are these not the long hand of cultural colonialism, happening through textbooks?

However there are two questions that remains un resolved. Why should panchayat be an institution that is shown as having an important role to play in local governance for children of Ladakh? Ladakh is governed under an Autonomous Council, so are many different districts in the state of North East. Yet given the understanding of the "neeche ke log" who largely define syllabus do not identify or are unfamiliar of such an institution. In the textbooks that belong to 'neeche ke log' one does not even hear the existence of

³ [Do not correct these spellings \(they are south Indians named that way with "th" delete this footnote](#)

Autonomous Councils. Are Autonomous Councils merely anomaly when they think of 3 tiers of government? Or does it reflect an attitude of the state system that visualise the tribal communities to be in the margins? Hence does it become obvious that there is a skewed priority in choosing what is worth teaching? Or by negating the presence of other administrative structures, certain institutions and people does the Indian state keep them in the margins? Ironically why does even a state that wants to perpetuate itself through textbook knowledge subverts, sidesteps, and ignores the existences of such institutions?

Another prominent dilemma emerges from nostalgia. It is very prevalent in the textbooks of the neeche ke log to start the description of a panchayat - as follows. 'panch means five, in the ancient times our villages were ruled by five wise people....' In order to claim the validity for a modern institution we hark upon from the past. Textbook would casually remark that but those days women did not have much role, and see "we" have now resolved it. But often an occasional, puncturing of this nostalgia 'you mean like the khaps in Haryana' immediately puts things back in perspective: the un-representativeness and undemocratic nature of feudalism. Yet the question to think is - what exactly does it mean for a 9 or 10 year old to relate to either the supposedly ancient institution or a modern one? Is it really possible to assume that, a 10 year old would make a difference when the textbook examples point out that your father is the village khap head and your neighbour is village panchayat member are very different implication?

Lesson 3. Accidental crossing of Brahmaputra....

Once, Arvind took me to Guwahati, it was a 3 day workshop of a class 5 book that was already in progress. In a way I had hoped that Panchayats would never again comeback to me. But even more curiously, I never thought the theme water could be a point of discussions near the banks of Brahmaputra, and my textbook knowledge about this state was limited to the fact of most rain in the country! To me they could be problems of MP or Rajasthan. Yet it was decided that the chapter can discuss common property resources. And it turned out that the most important of it was the ponds (water!) While textbooks of Rajasthan and MP discussed how / which colony could be chosen to implement a program, it was some theme relating to maintenance and protection of ponds that were important to Assam. Hence, image of role of Panchayat could be built around a need that children who come to school may otherwise experience. But aside from this commonality I would like point out is another learning.

You may have noticed that in the three episodes, Panchayat chapter is being discussed at class 4, class 5 and class 6. Ever wonder what is the logic for them. This partly emerges from the complicated hierarchies of schooling that we practice in different parts of the country. The so called national (say in CBSE and ISC) and many hindi speaking regions practice, define class 6 to 8 as middle school. Most States in the peripheries have middle school as class 5 to 7. Often there is the desire to 'match' up with national level, (while those elite in the national level have already moved to think of IB's where Panchayat's are probably non-existent). Is it possible that education remains a concurrent subject, but curriculum, syllabus, textbooks seem to get anchored on to a national model?

And by some interesting pedagogical rules "spiralling" and "local to remote" are slogans of textbook writers. Therefore at the national level Panchayat appeared (past tense, we seem to have come over this obsession) in class 3, state government in class 4 and central government to UN in class 5. The so called "spiralling" brought it back to class 6,7,8 and then again clubbed the local governments and state governments to class 9 and to class 10. But then since schooling system in various States had different definition of where the primary ends and upper/middle begins, the textbook content often either got manipulated around. Am I not supposed to realise that this psychological determinism that

a concept or theme could be taught only at a particular level as fake jingoistic belief, which we do not know how to practice? In the name of spiralling were we not merely asking children to recall information how the Panchayats were formed 3 times during their school lives? (and probably forget to vote)

Lesson 4. Unfinished chapters

In spite of the fact that by now half my life has been lived outside the so called home state, people still consider me to know a whole lot of things about "back there" Kerala. It becomes even more a difficult situation because textbook writers often want to talk about the so called participatory democracy that is supposed to have happened in that State. And I trace my roots to one amongst those villages - Chapparapadavu Panchayat - that had become an icon of the event. Apparently the year I began to work with textbooks & panchayat was also the time when the so called participatory planning began back there, as a red Latin American import. By then many States had reinvented the Panchayati raj institutions under the "new" amendment and therefore inevitably harked on the idea that "power to the people" needs to get reflected in textbooks. Moreover the World Bank funded DPEP had selectively insisted on experimenting with Kothari commission report that Panchayati Raj institution as a solution to the problems of education system. Within the whole discussion occasional recall to the memory of Gandhiji would make Panchayati raj a something that people all political colours seemingly want to promote. Amongst these voices how does choose for a relevant text? Why is it often found that adults themselves forget every new idea that they find fascinating and newly learned should be useful and be 'given' to the child?

Thus, it is hard task to figure out how chapters need to be saved from becoming NGO manuals for Panchayat training. Similarly, this was a subject which itself carried a burden of making citizens and expecting the readers to be future voters and not necessarily the struggler or a fighter woman representative. Is this where the middle class values come into conflict and allows the state to perpetuate? A stronger faith in democracy was considered to be an important, inevitable part of school education. Apparently, now looking back, the trust in local self government - participatory planning - itself was a bubble. World Bank funded SSA seems to be in the process of disowning them⁴. The left in Kerala keeps the idea of fourth world out of its mind. Yet, most people would agree that class 6 is "too early" to have a very meaningful discussion on participatory democracy. Discussions would further thus end with a promise this could be done in higher classes. And thus there remain many unfinished chapters on Panchayat, since institutions and processes continue to dominate what is considered worth teaching. Will I ever do it?

Epilogue. Never be sure about anything

Having had done some tweaking at many corners of the country (and having retired to think about teacher education) I sat cosily on my newspaper chair, with a cup of coffee asking Ranjan about his vote during the previous month in a village in Dakshina Kannada. He said he has elected 5 members for his ward. There are some 14 panchayat members and 5 wards. This was unacceptable to me, I realise that the "new" NCERT class 6 textbook is all wrong. To me democracy of textbooks is that of one woman - one vote - one representative! But he reminded me "but you have only seen textbooks and rule books of some States and I am the one who has voted". Oohs how much I hate looking at the inedible ink on his middle finger!

⁴ Look at the epw article on "Public Participation, Teacher Accountability and School Outcomes in Three States" Priyanka Pandey, Sangeeta Goyal, Venkatesh Sundararaman June 12, 2010 vol xlv no 24
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