

## WE AND THE SOCIALLY MARGINALIZED

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*The article explores the text book and its transactions that often contradict each other so much that the claims laid by the text gets reverted through class room interpretations. Even after NCF, 2005, text books do not seem to be fully liberated from the worldview that the marginalized are responsible for their own plight and classrooms seem to reinforce this even further.*

Education is a process of democratizing, a process aiming at bringing equality and bridging the social gap between different classes and community of people. The National curriculum framework 2005 has stressed on this objective of education. The position paper of pedagogy of social science also stresses on this. However what is stated in the policy papers may operate very differently on ground. For quite a long time I had been intrigued by the effect of new curriculum framework on textbooks and classroom transactions specially with regard to social sciences. Last year I got the opportunity to observe a social science class<sup>1</sup> through which I tried to see how the objectives of NCF are actually being transacted in the class. The text book I have chosen for the study is of a private publisher<sup>2</sup>, of class 8 Civics.

In this article I would look at the linkages between the curriculum framework, teacher and the text book. It is often said, a curriculum framework provides the broad guidelines on the basis of which textbooks are designed. These textbooks form the basis of classroom interactions. However, in real life the situation is far more complex because the route from curriculum framework to students is not a linear path. It is a dynamic process in which many factors intertwine and decide the course of the route. In this paper some of these factors are examined by analyzing (1) the content that was transacted; and (2) the process by which it was transacted.

### **Role of the textbook**

The chapter 'Social justice and the marginalized' was being taught by the teacher. It contained sections on

- Marginalized sections- SC, ST, OBC, minorities
- Forms of social inequality- Caste inequality, gender inequality, educational inequality, regional inequality
- Effects of social inequalities on economic inequalities- inequality in work choices, income inequality
- Constitutional provisions relating to social justice
- Reservation
- Untouchability- different forms of untouchability, manual scavenging
- Law on manual scavenging

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<sup>1</sup> The classroom observation was done at an Army school in Nahan, Himachal Pradesh

<sup>2</sup> Holy Faith, 2007; its introduction says that it is written on the basis of NCF, 2005.

The class I observed was centered on the text books as the main way of looking at reality which seemed to be above all the experiences of the reader of the text (teacher as well as students). The content of the text was taken to be non negotiable. For example:

The teacher said “The exploitation on the basis of caste is a thing of the past and now because of the government policies there is much more equality. The inequality which they see around is on the basis of class and those in the lower rung are suffering because of their own laziness and incapability. If they want they can also become more educated and raise their standard of living.” While the teacher was explaining thus, she came across an example in the text which contradicted this view. The text stated how in tsunami dalits did not receive food supply as the suppliers were not often ready to reach out to the m. We got freedom in 1947, untouchability was abolished in 1950’s but still it is practiced today.

To resolve the contradictions between her own statements and that of the text, she said that untouchability is being followed in the backward part of the country- in backward villages but can hardly be seen in urban areas. Though there might be some evidence of untouchability being followed in urban areas like not drinking water from a sweeper on the day of fast or having separate utensils for sweepers etc, these, she said, are rare occasions.

She even asked children to find out if caste discrimination is done at their homes. Next day when children came, none of them said that it is practiced in their homes. There was no space in the class to admit such things. Moreover it seemed that students have not even asked their parents or grandparents about it. This question is not given the kind of weightage given to writing answers of the questions given at the end of the chapter.

It was also assumed that all the relevant knowledge that is worth knowing is already researched and has become part of the textbook. There is nothing new which can come up that is not written in the textbook. Though the teacher did give many examples outside the textbooks - from newspapers or from the locality, her attempt was to emphasise the world view presented in the text. However, no example was given to counter argue it. No debate was encouraged in the class. Yet, the text was getting interpreted by the teacher in her own ways. In the sections below (portrayal of depressed class and portrayal of gender) I would discuss two examples where the teacher interpreted the message quite contrary to what was written in the text book. Moreover I also feel that a text can be used in multiple ways. It is the teacher who decides what has to be given more importance and which section has to be touched and not stressed. As would be revealed in the sections below, the teacher’s stress was on how the government is trying to uplift the depressed classes. Her focus was not on the struggles of the depressed classes. A different teacher could have used the text differently. Hence I want to stress that though a class may revolve around the textbook, still what happens in the class depends on the actors of the class, that is, the students and the teachers.

### **Role of the teacher and students**

Most of the time the teacher spoke and children only spoke to answer the recall- based questions. Students were passive recipients of the knowledge rather than active agents in constructing knowledge. There was no opportunity given to children to reflect on their experiences, the social interactions around them and to critically analyze them. Teacher did not inquire into whether the students could relate to what they were reading or were finding it relevant. Students do see many social inequalities in front of them- they might have themselves faced/witnessed the discrimination on the basis of class, caste or gender. In army school, children from diverse backgrounds study together. It could have provided an opportunity to the students to know about experiences of different communities related to marginalization or social justice. But no such discussion was encouraged. It was assumed that students are like blank slates and do not carry with them the experiences from outside the classroom. Whenever a question was asked from students it was to test them on the facts that they have learnt in previous classes.

As soon as something was written on the black board it was copied by the students in their notebook. These were often the facts picked up from the textbook. Focus was on the facts and not on the issues. For example teacher wrote the data related to female infanticide and articles of the constitution which were related to social justice and marginalization. The teacher also asked the students to learn them.

The exercises given at the end of the chapter also had their own status. It appeared as if the chapter is being read so that the students can answer the questions given at the back. Everyday, after the chapter was read the teacher asked students to find the answers to the questions. Next day the correct answer for that question was discussed. Thus it assumed the practice of a ritual.

### **Dealing with conflict**

There seems to be the hidden assumption that conflicts are bad and are to be avoided. As would be revealed in the next section any point which shows that there is constant conflict in the society among different classes is not told. Conflicts are either shown as things of the past or of remote villages. Government is shown to be providing for the depressed and the underprivileged and this process is shown to be very smooth. The conflict between the depressed class and the state, how they constantly fight for their rights and why and which policies of government come into practice are not shown.

### **Content of the Text Book**

In this section I would look at the content of the textbooks and analyze how different issues have been dealt with in the textbook and in the class.

- **Portrayal of depressed classes**

In the text as well as by the teacher the depressed class is shown as being themselves the cause of their oppression. To quote the statements said by the teacher- “There are people who carry on the job of their parents. Have you seen Ramesh Bhaiya- one who sweeps in the school. His mother is a sweeper at the railway station. He is following his mothers’ occupation. Had he done some studies he would have become something else, but he chose the easier way of not studying and following the mother’s occupation. Their pathetic condition is the result of their own actions. Government has provided facilities for them and made provisions. It is their fault that they are not taking advantage of the government policies.” Hence it can be clearly seen that the poor and low caste people are shown as being responsible for their poverty.

It is also interesting to see how the text book gets interpreted in quite different ways through classroom teaching. For instance, the text stated: “When an educated youth of a dalit community goes to the employment exchange looking for a job, he was automatically put down for a *safai karam chari*’s position or some other low job. This is social conditioning: people feel this way because it is natural for them to do so.”

When the teacher explained this she said- “SC went to the employment exchange and got himself registered as a safai kaaram chari, though he was educated. Why did he do so is beyond my imagination?” She completely misread the text and interpreted it on the basis of her world view. According to her the schedule caste person himself chose to be a safai karam chari though the text said it was the person in the employment exchange who registered him as a safai karamchari. This could have been a good example to illustrate how caste system is still entrenched in the minds of people (including the educated people living in cities) and in spite of the constitutional provisions how it continues to be manifested in different forms. However the teacher fails to recognize the role of the privileged section in contributing to the pathetic conditions of schedule castes. She feels that the caste system was practiced in the past and after independence the government has made the provisions for their upliftment. Now it is up to them to make use of these provisions. If they are not making use of these provisions it is because they do not want to work hard.

- **Issue of untouchability-** Talking on untouchability the teacher discussed about manual scavenging. She said, “They remove human excreta with bare hands. No body wants to touch them. It is also not hygienic. Leave caste aside. We do not follow caste, but do you think you would like to take water from the hands that have cleaned toilets? *Kiska man karega pani pene ka? Germs ho sakte hai.* We believe everybody is equal, but hygiene is something different. *Ha agar wo gloves pahan kar toilets clean karenge to alag bat hai.*”

Here we can see that though the teacher has said that untouchability is bad she herself gives another argument to reinforce the ideas that those people should not be touched. Instead of telling things from the point of view of manual scavenger and stressing on the fact and it should be banned she reinforced the existing perceptions. She also says if that person wears gloves then things would be different. But why aren’t gloves

provided to them? Who has the responsibility to provide gloves to them? Why is it that though manual scavenging is banned that it continues to exist? What is the role of government? Are they there only to make laws? Who would see to its implementation? Who are the people who employ manual scavengers? Why do people go for manual scavenging? All these are questions which could have been discussed and debated but there was complete silence on these issues. Such issues create conflict and school curriculum always shies away from creating such conflicts. (Kumar, K, 1996; 7) It is resolution of such conflicts which lead to a deeper understanding of issues like untouchability; just saying that manual scavenging is banned does not help any understanding

- **Portrayal of villages**

The text and the teacher portrayed the villages as being backward places where social discrimination on the basis of caste and gender is done. The urban areas were depicted as places of educated and civil people who do not believe in such discrimination.

In the text it was written – *“in general urban Indians are less particular about the caste system than the rural folk. Use of public transport and public places has become a necessity rather than a privilege enjoyed solely by the upper castes. It is one of the preconditions of the city life that enables to mingle with each other, but in rural areas caste based discrimination still exists.”* One of the pictures shows a classroom of the village primary school and below it the following line is written–*“Village primary schools seem to keep casteism alive by discriminating among students.”*

The teacher reinforced the idea from the text by saying that caste- based discrimination is not practiced in urban areas but only in rural areas. Even while talking about gender discrimination she said, *“Urban areas mein situation is different but rural india mein aaj bhi bahut problem hai.”* When I interviewed children they also said that the discrimination on the basis of caste/ gender etc is done in villages which are backward but not in cities.

Discrimination on the basis of caste and gender is practiced even today in cities though their form might be different. Even in cities people are not ready to go for inter- caste marriage. If one picks up matrimonial ads in the newspaper one finds ample examples. Similarly even the educated people do the discrimination. Female feticide cannot be done without the help of doctors which happen in cities.

- **Portrayal of govt/ state**

In the textbook the government is shown as the welfare state. Teacher said, *“India is a welfare state, aim of government is welfare and it rolls out different programmes and policies like pulse polio drive, consumer rights, disaster management for the welfare. Crores of rupees are spent by the government on these schemes. That is the duty of the government.”*

Here also the conflicts between the state and the society are hidden. The issues in the chapter provide opportunity to discuss and debate about different actions and policies that government has implemented. Government is not a benign organization which is always doing right things at right time. There are many loopholes in the policies and actions of the government. What are the hidden agendas of the people who are in power? What are the factors which lead to a particular policy? What were its consequences? Why after so many years of independence, abolition of untouchability and right to equality being the fundamental right, we still have so many discriminations? All these questions are not debated in the class.

- **Portrayal of gender inequality-** The way gender was discussed in the class it seemed that it is a thing of the past and now there is no exploitation on the basis of gender. Many aspects of gender were left untouched. Children failed to recognize gender inequality. On the surface it appears that everything is equal. The underlying inequality is neither questioned by the text book nor by the teacher or the students.

In fact since the teacher feels that in cities there is hardly any gender inequality, she interprets and explains the facts written in the text very differently to the students as would be illustrated in the following example- In the text it is written "... gender inequality also influences income disparity. Women get less remuneration in many areas of economic activities and women's proportion in employment in the organized sector is still much below that of a man. Women are being paid an average 12-23% less than men for doing similar jobs. The higher women rise up the promotion ladder, greater the pay gap becomes."

Teacher explains this paragraph by saying "female are paid less in unorganized sector - not in government or semi government places. Sex ratio is less; therefore the employment % would be less. *Women kam hai to representation bhi kam hoga.*"

Before teacher started the explanation one of the students (girl) said "girls are less employed because they have the responsibility of household work." This could have provided the opportunity to discuss how gender division of labour forces women to give more priority to house hold work rather than be employed outside home. Reasons for women being paid less could also have been discussed here. However the teacher makes it appear quite neutral. She assumes that women are employed less because the sex ratio is less. The politics behind the gender division of labour remained untouched.

- **Educational inequality-** while dealing with the educational inequality also the text as well as the teacher says that government schools in the villages have very poor condition because their teacher- pupil ratio is large and teachers are not properly qualified. If teachers' qualification, their attendance or teacher pupil ratio is the criteria to describe a good school then many schools of even the capital of India, Delhi would not be able to fulfill this criterion. This problem is not limited to villages but is also prevalent in cities.

Moreover the private schools are shown to be good because their medium of instruction is good and to get a good job which fetches you good money one needs to know English. The schools teaching in vernacular language are shown to be poor. This shows how a certain ideology is being propagated through textbooks. Instead of discussing about the politics of language, children are taught that English is superior language as a neutral and natural fact which are away from politics.

## **Conclusion**

Though the chapter under review is taken from a book based on NCF, 2005, practices seem to rest on conventional and dominant understandings. State is shown to have done its job by including all the relevant articles in the constitution and by providing positive discrimination for the unprivileged section of the society. Now it is up to the people to take its advantage. The people are not able to develop because of their own lack of will to work hard. This tone of civics textbooks continues.

Michael Apple's view of how there is a constant effort by the dominant class to include the voice of the less powerful under one umbrella by mentioning about them but not changing the larger framework of the discourse is quite relevant in this context. He says- *"As disenfranchised groups have fought to have their knowledge take center stage in the debates over cultural legitimacy one trend has dominated in text production. In essence little is usually dropped from the textbooks. Major ideological frameworks do not get markedly changed...progressive items are perhaps mentioned, but then not developed in depth. Dominance is partly maintained through compromise and the process of mentioning."*

This seems to be exactly what happened with the observed textbooks. Though they have talked about different forms of discriminations but so much is squeezed in one chapter that enough understanding of the issue is not built. As stated above, while talking about gender there is no mention of gender division of role, gender stereotypes etc which children encounter in their daily lives.

Characterization of villages as backward is the legacy of the colonial civics education which on one hand talked about the work done by the colonial government like setting up of the railways, telegraphs, manufacturing and mining industry, building up canals etc, (for the benefit of the natives). On the other hand it portrayed the image of natives as irresponsible who cannot take care of themselves and need to be trained and educated by the British. There was also stress on Indians being unclean who need the training on hygiene and sanitation. After independence, similar 'civics' continued in Indian school books. Middle class Indians assumed the role of British and tried to make the citizens responsible, clean and obedient. There were many negative references made to the poor, women and villages. Poor are shown as themselves responsible for their state. Women were shown in sex stereotypes roles, but most often not written about in the text. Whenever a reference was made about the village it was to show how ignorant the villagers are.

*Payal Aggarwal was a student of MAEE (MA in Elementary Education) in TISS, Mumbai. This paper was written as part of the requirements of the Course in Social Science in 2008-9. Yemuna Sunny, her teacher for the course, has edited it.*

**References**

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