

Essay

Texts in school

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One of the many forms of illiteracy that we encounter around us is the lack of perception about processes of social change. Matching this is a block against acknowledging the validity of the life of people who are 'different' – who are 'other'. Whether as social activists, as bureaucrats, as experts, or as consultants engaged in monitoring and reviewing programmes, we expect the *ultimate* transformations as a result of the effort we are engaged in. We do not recognize that these efforts are merely elements in a larger process.

It is in this context that the social role of the historian becomes important. The historian's function, or responsibility, lies in describing social processes closely and faithfully, but with a view to *answering questions*. The need, then, is to move away from both 'empiricism' and the fetish of abstractions, to a description informed by theory. Close assessment of the processes of social change has a staying power: it trains the mind to perceive life the way it is being lived around us.

Executing this responsibility was the most exciting part of the venture that we, at Eklavya, undertook – development of new textbooks for school children. The social science group at Eklavya, comprising people from disciplines of history, economics and geography, began by reviewing the existing texts, observing the standard social science classes being conducted, and discussing with teachers their experiences and the problematics of teaching the subject. After a ground work of about three years, we obtained permission from the Madhya Pradesh government to formally implement our texts in nine schools from classes VI to VIII, and to conduct separate public exams for these schools in class VIII. That was in 1986. These texts have undergone several rounds of revision after feedback was received from these schools. *This curriculum has now been introduced in ordinary government schools*. The teachers have undergone training programmes devoted to the content of the books, teaching methods, and evaluation of students, etc. A system

of open book evaluation has been developed, and question papers are set keeping in mind the objectives of the programme. We are currently trying to evolve methods for evaluating the impact of a programme of this kind on the teaching and learning of social sciences.

Forming Concepts

In order to ascertain the difference in understanding gained by children using different texts, we conducted a small study in two of the schools using our books and in two others using the normal texts.

We gave a set of identical questions on the hunter-gatherers (the *shikari manav* or *adi manav*) to both sets of children. Many children in the schools following the traditional system passed some or the other kind of value judgement on the life of the hunter-gatherers: '*bahut bekar*' (very useless), '*bahut kathin*' (very difficult), '*asambhav*' (impossible). The questions were worded in such a way that the students were not called upon to make such comments. On the other hand, not a single child from schools following our programme made a value judgement. In addition, they were able to give many more details about the life of these people.

Responses to other questions such as 'why did the hunter-gatherers not live in houses' or 'not use pots and jars' also illustrate this difference. The most common answer given by children belonging to the normal stream was that the hunter-gatherers did not know how to make or use houses or pots and jars. Probably such answers are not uncommon even among undergraduate history students. However, only a small number of children undertaking our programme gave such simplistic answers. About two-thirds of them attributed the lack of archaeological findings of pots and jars to the exhaustion of food and water resources. Others said that possibly these people collected their food from the forest and consumed it directly, not having much left to store, or that they were nomadic people and could not keep large pots, etc.

These answers displayed, to our mind, a deeper understanding of the problem.

Such, then, are the results we seem to be getting: 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 prejudiced manner. Other dimensions of the effect of the new history texts have emerged in the course of our interaction with children over the years, as part of the Eklavya effort. We would like to share some of these interactions here.

Breaking into Language

We recall our reaction while discussing the Mughal emperor Akbar with the class VIII students in a village school. Their involvement was astounding: It enthused them to construct a plot, to take it apart in threads, and think and react to every query coming from us on Akbar's relationship with the Rajputs, Turanis, and Iranis.

Why did Akbar conquer the Rajputana kingdoms only to return them to their respective ruling elite? '...so that the Rajputs could help him in times of need,' and again, '*taaki rajpooton ke raajya Akbar ke raajya ke naam mein aa jaayein*' (so that the Rajput kingdoms would be counted amongst his territories). Why were the Turanis unhappy? Here the complexity of the situation was tougher to comprehend: '...because they were deprived of their posts.' No, we said, and they replied, 'because they were deprived of the *important* posts which were given to the Rajputs.' We informed them that this was also not true, and enacted a mock play with the students to concretize and bring the situation closer home to them. Watching us with avid interest and rapt attention, they nodded in understanding, almost hinting at us to stop clarifying further so that they could get back to the answering mode, and said '*haan, matlab Turani ameroon ko lagaa ki unkee pooch nahin rahee*' (the Turanis felt that they no more had any say in important matters). We see here an attempt at coining phrases and using idioms to express the concepts being formed in the minds of children.

Another incident comes to mind. This happened at the class VII level. We talked to a very quiet boy about the pictures in a chapter. The pictures were on the emergence of dynasties in early medieval India. The three

pictures showed two men of a powerful family sitting astride horses talking to a brahmin, a coronation ceremony with a brahmin helping with the rites, and a king presenting a copper plate to a brahmin respectively.

'The two men on the horses look angry... because... it may be that the other, poor people are not accepting them as kings... because may be *unko pataa nahin ye do log kaun si jaat ke hain...*' (maybe they do not know which caste these two people belong to). 'In this picture *vo pandit se kaha raha hai ki mere ko bhari sabha mein mukut pahana do... mein raja ban jaaoon, ... vo khud mukut pahan lega to jo koi uski sabha hogi vo maanegi nahin ki yah raja hai, sab koi pandit ki baat mante hain...*' (he is telling the priest to perform his coronation ceremony in the presence of a large audience, and thus, he can become king; if he were to crown himself on his own then his people/subjects will not accept him as the ruler, but everyone accepts the word of the priest). '... *Ab raja dan de raha hai ...kyonki brahman se kaha tha, so usne uska kam kar diya*' (now the king is giving a gift, for he told the priest and the latter did the king's work).

What the boy narrated in response to the pictures in the lesson was another text, not the one we had written with the help of our researchers and historians. As we talked to him, we wondered whether this village boy, thirteen years of age, was actually closer to the context of lineage, power and religious legitimation of authority than people like us? This can perhaps be said even in the case of the questions regarding factional politics and the clout in the times of Akbar, about the nature of responses these elicited.

How were we to understand the responses of children to the new texts developed by us? It seems that when historical processes are concretized and reconstructed before children, a resonance is created, a chord is struck, and an empathy begins to emerge with other people, and other times. Children start drawing upon their own experiences and language to assimilate and express the history they are studying.

When we cut away the denseness, the abstraction, the pointless empiricism enveloping history texts, when students are able to see in texts issues they are familiar with, they can relate them to dimensions of their own lives, their experiences. The shift to their indigenous vocabulary and phraseology in the act of narration

is an indication of the empathy these children feel with the subject. In contrast, traditional texts only allow repetition of textbook language, requiring a mere memorizing of dates and events.

Children, especially in rural areas, are deeply connected with the labour processes and keenly aware of the social and political reality around them. Any superficial or abstract treatment of social issues, whether historical or contemporary, dampens their interest. Not all children, however, relate to different contexts in the same way. We have observed, for instance, that children who have been exposed to forms of labour and modes of payment show a sharper grasp of such matters than more privileged children.

This need of children requires us to go deeper into socio-historical situations and explore the changing conflicts and predicaments there. It was with this need in mind that we tried to explore in our texts the relationship between: an ordinary Aryan tribesman and the *rajanyas*, the Paraiya labourer, the Vellala tenants and brahmin landlords in a medieval *brahmadeya*; the *maharajadhiraja* and the *saamanta*; or the adivasi, the forest guard and the moneylender in British India.

The incorporation of the experiences of various categories of people into the textbook constitutes a radical departure from the conventional modes of knowing. It emphasizes the heterogeneities and conflicts in our social existence, whereas the dominant interest thrives on presenting a conflict-free image.

Pedagogy in Traditional Texts

In the traditional history school text, the compulsion of saying everything in a hundred odd pages makes the textbook a mere compilation of points to remember. There is an implicit assumption that children cannot or need not understand things in any depth, and that they only need to know something -- the chosen 'important' points -- about everything that happened.

The NCERT books have remained faithful to this basic assumption, even though they were a great improvement on the earlier texts in some respects. They took care to weed out regional and communal biases, and made some effort to discuss key notions and concepts of history. There was also a greater emphasis on explanation and causation. However, the attempt remained half-hearted and was heavily restricted by the overwhelming compulsion to

provide a 'balanced' package of information.

A number of pedagogical concerns need to be worked out (which calls for going beyond the perceived duty of the academic historian) if history teaching is to be made relevant for children. Here, the responsibility lies in focusing not so much on the politics of history writing—though this is not without importance—but on what the discipline itself stands for, that is, the principal *approaches* and ways of thinking historically. It consists mainly in learning to see everything as transitional, as changing over time and place, as specific to a particular period and region, and to explain that specificity and change in the first place. Next, it would involve recognizing the interconnected nature of all phenomena within defined spatial and temporal limits.

The uniqueness of a particular historical situation has to be established through a comparison with other situations. But the comparative method is seldom used in our textbooks. There is no systematic attempt at pointing out the differences between different historical periods. NCERT books occasionally mention such differences, but they are seldom of a fundamental, qualitative nature. The manner in which they are discussed registers difference in degree only. For example, it is said that under the Mauryas the king had *greater* control/power than in the time of the Rajputs. But that the king's relationship with his subordinates was *fundamentally* different in these two contexts is never brought out through a multifaceted examination of the methods of recruitment and payment, the nature of the king's functions, the system of accountability, and the effect all this had on other aspects of society.

Even fundamental transformations, such as the urban revolution, the emergence of state societies, or the transition from pastoralism to agriculture are at best only mentioned. Even here, the changes are left unexplained. As a result, the child is not imparted any training to enable him to constantly look for patterns of differences and similarities between periods or regions, and to explain and understand these patterns.

In order to bring out the differences between various historical periods it is essential to structure the chapters in such a way that they are comparable. Not only is this not attempted, the textbooks, in their quest for

giving a balanced body of information, do not in the least seek to correlate one aspect of society with another. The sections on polity, economy, society, religion, art and culture stand on their own, without any logical connection with the other sections.

It is time such lifeless, schematic formats were abandoned and a living picture of a social formation were developed, where productive activity, social relations, political institutions, ideology and culture are seen as actively determining and influencing each other.

Charting An Alternative

In this context, it is necessary to recall Ashin Das Gupta's method of describing the merchants of Surat—where one gets a vivid picture of not just the life and work of the merchants but of the entire Mughal political system, its working and its collapse. The graphic descriptions are neither purposeless nor empiricist. His main focus remains on explaining the reasons for the decline of this prime port town, through an exposition of the everyday churning of life.

This method can be used in school texts as well, to avoid abstract and dense narrations and also to eliminate the use of too many 'terms' to be learnt by rote. Writing texts with a problem/theme as its focus makes it possible to have criteria for including or excluding a piece of information. Such criteria will be more meaningful than indiscriminately putting in everything that is generally known or is selectively considered very important by someone.

Being exposed to the concept of total history and to D. D. Kosambi's methods helped us a great deal. The latter wrote history by successfully integrating the methodologies of other disciplines, and made us realize that it is possible to combine special perspectives of different disciplines without fragmenting our understanding of society. We were able to handle the difficult question of writing an integrated textbook in the light of such examples.

Interaction with children helped us chart the rest of the course. We learnt that observing and recording facts about one's own environment could become inane and contribute little to children's understanding unless one went beyond the environment and explained things. Children have a very intimate knowledge of their environment. But they need to know about diverse situations in

order to understand their own better. They find the exercise of using knowledge about their own locale to explore other, similar and dissimilar, ones more fascinating than merely recounting the familiar.

At the same time, we discovered that middle school children were not equipped to handle abstract categories. They were more comfortable with situational thinking. They were also not ready to cope with a great deal of critical, interpretative delving into sources and opinions.

They seemed to need an exposure to a very rich range of real life experiences of people. The greater the variety of people from far and near, in the past as well as in the contemporary context—the rich and the poor, the ruling and the ruled, etc.—the greater the complexity, and the better their understanding. Getting to know different human situations and predicaments, to discuss them and compare them with each other, seemed to form the base on which children could depend to eventually look at issues critically and, in this way, build up an openminded and mature outlook on society.

Today, as we evaluate the effectiveness of our books for the majority of students, we realize all that 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.

When we reflect on the responsiveness of children to the problem-oriented and concretized texts, and on the emergence of their own idiom and expression, we are left with little doubt that people who are closer to real life situations could actually decode the processes discussed in the history texts with greater ease than we did/do. And that their perceptions would facilitate the historian's, and social scientist's, search for truth.

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