

# Constructing Citizenship Through Textbooks

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Citizenship education, referred to differently as civics, citizenship education or education for active citizenship in different parts of the world, is usually aimed at inculcating in students certain knowledge, skills and dispositions that are considered important to prepare them to actively participate in a democratic society. This often translates into developing in young children awareness about their duties, responsibilities and rights so that they can effectively contribute towards national development and nation-building. In some NCERT civics textbooks (1975-2000), for instance, the learner is constantly reminded to develop appropriate qualities of a citizen - rational conduct, co-operation and concern for fellow beings – in order to fulfil his/her obligations towards his/her family, community and society at large.

But it is not enough for a person to be a mere citizen. Rather, he/she is encouraged to become a good citizen (NCERT 1988: 49) by imbibing certain other qualities: obeying the 'laws of the land' (*ibid*), keeping oneself 'well informed about the happenings and problems of the country' (NCERT 2003:186), and giving priority to the interest of the nation - in order to be of any value to the nation. While the learners are asked to be 'conscious of their rights and duties' (*ibid.*) the emphasis in these textbooks clearly is on the duties and responsibilities that they are expected to imbibe.

However, citizenship within a democracy is not just a *matter of duty*, but a question of *rights* guaranteed by the Constitution under which every citizen, irrespective of her class, gender, religion, caste and ethnicity has been granted legal status, is entitled to a range of rights and is supposed to develop a sense of identity and belonging (Jayal 2013:2). Can a textbook that is designed differently bring in some changes in the way ideas of the nation, citizenship and identity are imagined?

The National Curriculum Framework 2005 (NCF 2005)<sup>i</sup> has been critically acclaimed by scholars for having introduced radical shifts (Batra 2010:13). In the NCF, it has been argued the citizenship education has been situated within the perspectives of human

rights and critical pedagogy and issues of equality and social justice are included to bring in the perspectives of marginalised communities. Attempts have also been made towards 'multiple ways of imagining the Indian nation' and emphasising gender concerns.

This article briefly examines the Environmental Studies (EVS) and a few Social Science textbooks, namely the *Looking Around* (classes III-V) and *Social and Political Life* (classes VI-VIII) series to understand to what extent such new perspectives have been given a concrete shape.

The curricular changes reflected through textbooks, however, become meaningful only when they are able to effectively transform the classroom pedagogic process. This can happen with the active intervention of the teacher. The article also examines how the teacher can play a critical role in nurturing future citizens.

## Imagining the nation

The construction of citizenship in textbooks usually reflects how the nation is imagined. Who is included within this imagination as legitimate citizens and how? Who is left out? These questions demand a critical analysis. The National Curriculum Framework for School Education (NCFSE) 2000, and the English and Social Science textbooks that followed it were severely criticised for articulating a national identity that was majoritarian and patriarchal thereby undermining the pluralistic character of Indian society. The NCF 2005, in contrast, proposes an education system that would be capable of responding to 'cultural pluralism inherent in our society' (NCF 2005: 7) which in turn would 'sustain a robust democratic polity' (*ibid*). Thus, it reiterates a national identity based on the ideals of secularism, egalitarianism, pluralism and social justice.

A closer examination of the series, *Looking Around (LA)*<sup>ii</sup> and *Social and Political Life (SPL)*<sup>ii</sup> reveals a society inhabited by people located in different regional, socio-economic and cultural contexts. The citizens hail from a range of regions and locales of the country, from metros like Mumbai (the storyboard of Shanti, SPL III: 67), peri-urban areas like Kurnool

in Andhra Pradesh (the story of Swapna, SPL II: 105) to the rural hinterland of Madhya Pradesh (the story of the Tawa Matsya Sangh, SPL II: 118) as also the tribal belts of Orissa (the storyboard of Dadu, SPL III: 81-82). Regional specificities related to food habits, clothing and architectural conventions of housing are also delineated. For instance, a lesson titled *Food We Eat* (LA I) talks about the diverse food habits of people living in different parts of India ranging from Kashmir to Kerala while another lesson, *A House Like This* in the same textbook has characters like Bhupen (Assam), Naseem (Srinagar), Chameli (Manali), Kanshiram (Rajasthan) and Mitali (Delhi) exchanging notes about how houses they live in are designed differently according to the local environmental requirements. In most cases, the written narrative is accompanied by relevant colourful visuals to enable children to visualise the textual information.

The socio-cultural space in these textbooks is also multi-religious. This is evident from the presence of members from different minority communities, like Anwari, a Muslim washerwoman (LA III: 26), Melanie, a Christian domestic help (SPL II: 49), and Jaspreet, a Sikh upper-middle-class homemaker (SPL II: 47). The textbooks thus challenge the reduction of the Indian socio-cultural space as flattened and homogeneous. Rather they uphold the pluralist, heterogeneous, and multi-cultural character of the Indian nation.

#### *Cultural diversity and economic disparity*

Unlike some of the earlier NCERT textbooks (1975-2004), which portray cultural diversity exclusively as a source of strength, thereby overlooking the economic inequalities and socio-cultural disharmony, both the LA and SPL series problematise diversity. While pointing out its benefits, attention is drawn to how the diversity arising out of socio-economic differences often leads to inequalities and discrimination. For instance, a lesson *Food We Eat* (LA I:36-42) begins with a thought-provoking visual showing a group of children from diverse backgrounds discussing the food they ate on the previous night. As different children talk about relishing 'poori, kheer, omelette' or 'fish' or 'dal and rice', one child shares about enjoying leftover noodles brought from the house where her mother works as domestic help. Yet another child reveals how 'no food was cooked' in her house. The discussion not only highlights the cultural diversity but also draws attention to the harsh economic inequalities that exist in our society. The visual is followed by a series of thought-provoking questions, thus, creating space

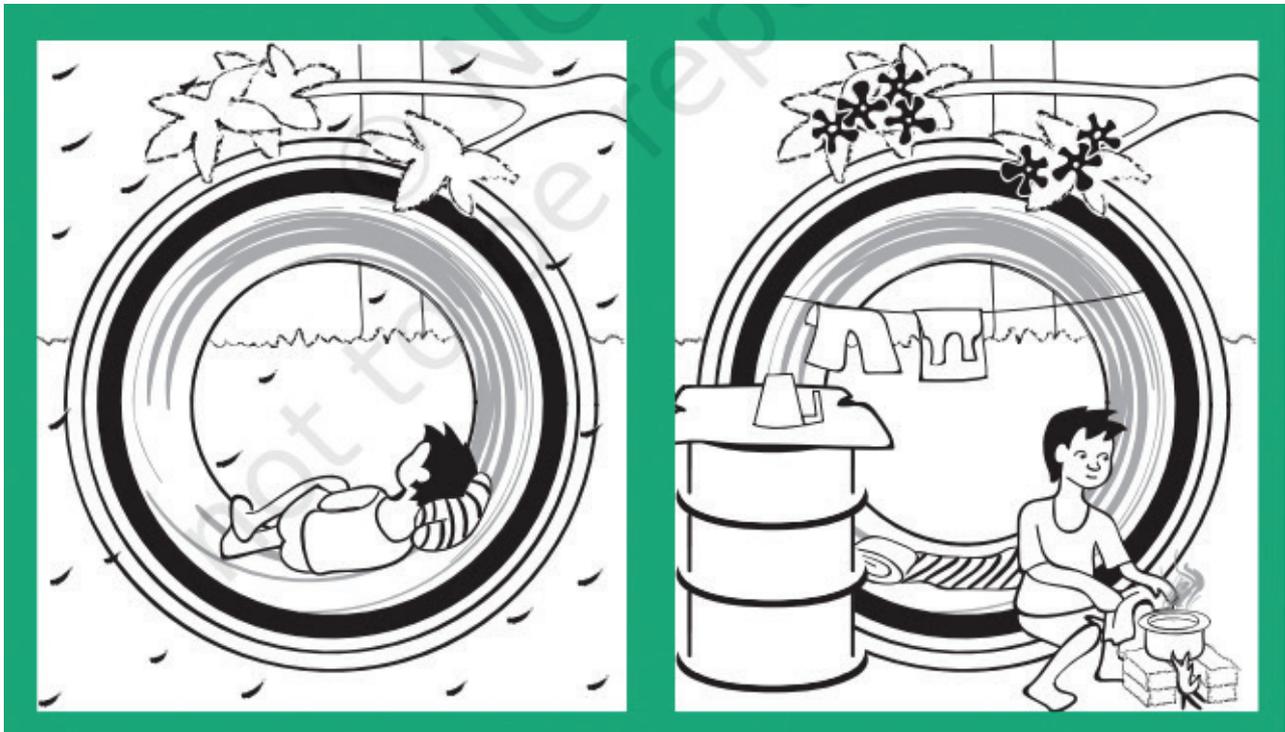
for a deeper engagement with the issue:

- *You must have noticed that in the picture there is one child in whose house no food was cooked. What could be the reason?*
- *Has it ever happened to you that on some day you were hungry but there was nothing to eat? If yes, why?*

Instead of depicting rural and urban spaces as binaries - either as idyllic locations or ridden with multiple problems, the textbooks represent them as contested spaces stratified by hierarchies of class and caste, where diverse interests negotiate and clash to get their due. Whether it is an urban or a rural context, the people in the LA and SPL series are also shown to belong to different social strata, having diverse modes of livelihood and living standards. The textbooks also highlight how in both spheres, ordinary citizens struggle for the fulfilment of their basic rights to live a life of dignity.

The agricultural community in the LA and SPL series, for example, is deeply fragmented consisting of rich land-owning farmers (Ramalingam, SPL I:71), small farmers (Sekar, SPL I:70), as well as landless agricultural labourers struggling to earn a living (Dhanu, LA II:200; Thulasi, SPL I:68). The rural economy is shown to depend on a variety of non-farm activities like fishing, weaving, animal husbandry and money-lending (chapter 22, LA II; chapter 8, SPL I). The difficulties that the rural citizens, like farmers, undergo (Sekar, SPL 1:70 crop failure, debt and suicide) are also get highlighted.

The urban landscape in the LA and SPL series is not only represented by skyscrapers, fast-paced vehicular traffic, plush hospitals and well laid-out shopping malls but is also characterised by unhygienic working-class neighbourhoods, overcrowded government hospitals and roadside open markets. People belonging to different socio-economic strata constitute a city's eco-system. Here, highly affluent industrialists, upper-middle and middle-class consultants and government servants are shown to co-exist with lower-middle and working-class people like factory workers, roadside vendors, domestic help, artisans, rickshaw-pullers, daily wage labourers and homeless, street children. Urban people are shown to struggle with their own set of problems namely unhygienic living conditions (the storyboard of Kanta, SPL II: 4-5), lack of access to basic amenities like water (Nandita Comes to Mumbai, LA, Class IV; the case-study of the citizens of Chennai, SPL III: 106-107) as well as homelessness ('Chhotu's House, LA, Class III).



*Chhotu's House, Looking Around, Textbook for Class III, NCERT 2006*

### *Addressing gender concerns*

Although both sexes are well represented in the earlier NCERT civics textbooks (2002-2004) the visuals reinforce certain social stereotypes regarding the division of labour. With the exception of iconic personalities, like Sarojini Naidu and Vijaylakshmi Pandit (NCERT 2003:176), the most prominent image of the women in the textbooks (NCERT 1987; NCERT 2002) emerges to be that of the nurturer and care-giver (homemakers, nurses).

In the LA and SPL, series one finds women sharing an equal platform with the male citizens. Although the contribution of iconic figures, like Pandita Ramabai and Rokeya Sakhawat Hossain are discussed, there is a distinct attempt to go beyond the achievements of a few successful women. The textbooks are replete with examples of ordinary women belonging to various social groups actively contributing to the family's income as also to the socio-economic development of the community and nation. They are depicted not only in their traditional care-giving roles of homemaker (Shabnam Bano, SPL II: 5), but also as earning members of the family, like manual scavengers (LA III: 147; SPL III:101), fisherfolk (Aruna, SPL I:73), domestic help (LA I:83; Melanie, SPL II:49 ), washerwomen (Anwari, LA I:27), bee-keepers (Anita, LA III:38) and factory workers (SPL II:109). They are found to be engaged in a range

of professions as teachers (Manjit Kaur, SPL II:4), government employees ( Yasmin, SPL I:57), business entrepreneurs (Vandana, SPL I:80-81) and lawyers ( Kamala Roy, SPL III:69-70).

The problems faced by working women are represented through several stories. Mention needs to be made of the stories of landless agricultural labourers, like Thulasi, suffering due to irregular source of income and less pay and the vulnerability of women factory workers, like Nirmala, employed on a casual basis.

A space is created in the SPL series to engage the readers in understanding how gender stereotyping is a social construct. The fact that gender stereotypes and devaluation of women as homemakers and caregivers exist in different strata and communities in the society is further highlighted through the storyboard on Jaspreet, an upper-middle-class homemaker (SPL II:47-48) and the case-study of Melanie, a domestic help (SPL II:49). There is also an attempt to emphasise the dignity and value of housework. One of the EVS textbooks, for instance, includes a story about a young girl Deepali (Work We Do, LA I:83). Being the eldest child of a vegetable seller and domestic help, Deepali is entrusted with the responsibility of managing the household from cooking and cleaning to taking care of her younger siblings while her parents struggle to make ends

meet. The story, thus, subtly yet powerfully focuses on the harsh realities of life and how poverty often forces the girl child to forgo schooling and education. The textbooks further discuss how women, in contrast to men, are subjected to the double burden of housework and employment. In this case, a survey carried out in Haryana and Tamil Nadu (SPL II: 50) is referred to. Reference is also made to instances of gender-based discrimination like domestic violence (the storyboard on Kusum and Shazia, SPL III: 46-48) and dowry deaths (the case-study of Sudha Goel, SPL III: 58).

### **Constructing citizenship**

It has been mentioned above how in the earlier NCERT textbooks (1975- 2004) citizenship hinges on the notion of duties and underplays the question of rights. This is evident in the manner the learner is repeatedly reminded to develop *appropriate qualities* in order to contribute towards nation-building and thus, evolve into a responsible and dutiful citizen.

Moreover, in these textbooks, the State is always portrayed as a monolithic, paternalistic and benevolent structure, looking after citizens' well-being. There is little scope for any discussion on any lapse/malpractices that can occur in the functioning of the State machinery or how such gaps can be addressed by the government in a democratic manner.

### *Challenging societal inequality*

In the SPL series, citizenship is defined within the framework of the rights of the citizen. Here an attempt is made to go beyond defining citizenship merely in terms of political rights – rights that enable all adult citizens in a democracy, to vote as equals irrespective of their social location. Rather it questions the very basis of this equality by situating it within the socio-economic reality of the citizens' lives which are characterised by inequalities and differences of various dimensions. One of the textbooks, for instance, includes a storyboard that shows citizens from different socio-economic backgrounds (a teacher, a domestic help, a consultant, an industrialist) queuing up before a polling booth, thus representing their equal status as citizens. However, in the course of the day, Kanta, the domestic help, realises that although she could stand in the same queue along with her employer, Mr Jain, a rich industrialist, and cast her vote, a chasm of difference exists between them. In contrast

to the spacious apartment of her employers, Kanta is shown to live in a dingy slum in extremely unhygienic surroundings and is forced to go to work leaving her ailing minor daughter alone at home. It is only after completing the chores and borrowing some money from her employer that she is able to take her daughter to a doctor at the end of the day. This leaves her wondering, 'We may be standing in the same queue to vote but are we really equal?' (SPL II: 4-6).

It is against this background of existing inequalities that the textbooks draw attention to the importance of the civil, social and economic rights enshrined in the Constitution in the form of Fundamental Rights. Reference is specifically made in the textbooks to the Right to Equality (Article 15) and the Right to Life (Article 21). Through several case studies, the textbooks attempt to show how these rights, when accessed, can not only challenge the social inequalities but can ensure a life of dignity for all citizens. The textbooks further highlight that, although the rights are enshrined in the Constitution, it is not always possible for citizens to exercise their rights easily. Rather, these rights are repeatedly challenged, thwarted and infringed upon by individuals, groups, institutions and even the State. In a majority of the cases, the citizens are shown to be subjected to some form of societal discrimination which is either caste-based (the stories of BR Ambedkar, SPL I: 19-20 and Om Prakash Valmiki, SPL II: 7-8) or gender-based (the story of Jaspreet, SPL II: 47-48) or even religion-based (the story of the Ansaris, SPL II: 8). One also finds instances where the economic background of the citizen renders him/her vulnerable to exploitation by the more affluent and powerful sections of the society (the story of Om Prakash, a landless labourer, SPL I:44-45).

### *Holding the State accountable*

The SPL textbooks also include a number of instances that discuss the lapses in the working of various government departments resulting in depriving the citizens of their rightful entitlements. Some stories clearly reflect the deliberate and lackadaisical attitude of the State (as seen in the failure of the State in ensuring safety and security of factory workers and citizens, the photo-essay on Bhopal Gas Tragedy, SPL III:124-127). In certain cases, the State is also depicted as taking deliberate measures to encroach upon the rights of the citizens (as in the case of the forest dwellers, the story of the Tawa Matsya Sangh, SPL II: 117-119).

### Reclaiming rights

What is striking about the textbooks is that the representation of citizenship here is not limited to a discussion about citizens' rights or how such rights are denied to individuals and groups. Rather the discussion shows the possibilities as to how such rights can be realised and reclaimed. Irrespective of their social class, many of the citizens are seen to exercise their agency. Women, for instance, are shown to reclaim their rights in different ways – challenging the prevalent social norms and prejudices (Ramabai, SPL II: 59) or pursuing their aspirations through sheer willpower (Laxmi Lakra, SPL II: 57). In several instances, citizens are shown to resort to legal assistance and ask for intervention by various State institutions, like the police (the story of Mohan who lodged an FIR in the local police station against his neighbour for encroaching on his land, SPL I: 49-50). They also approach the judiciary when their rights are thwarted. Here attention needs to be drawn to the case-study of Hakim Sheikh, an agricultural labourer who after meeting with a serious accident filed a case in the court against government hospitals when they refused to treat him (SPL II: 21).

### Collective action

Collective action, like forming cooperatives and organising social movements, is also upheld by the

textbooks as another rightful way for reclaiming fundamental rights by the citizens. The textbooks refer to the struggles put up by the educated middle or upper-middle sections of the society against social discrimination (e.g. the storyboard on the contribution made by the Lawyers' Collective and the National Commission for Women to pass the Domestic Violence Act, SPL III:46-48). But very often, attention is drawn to the collective front put up by ordinary citizens, especially those living on the margins, who are shown participating in public rallies and protest marches, holding public hearings, sitting on *dharnas* and expressing their dissent through innovative tools like theatre, song and creative writing. Some important examples provided in the textbooks are the struggle put up by the Tawa Matsya Sangh (SPL II: 118) to reclaim the right to livelihood for the displaced forest dwellers in Madhya Pradesh and the women's movement to reclaim equal citizenship rights (SPL II:63-67).

The citizens however are not shown to emerge victorious always. Rather the textbooks invest the citizens with a spirit to fight and highlight that rising against any form of injustice and inequality is legitimate and in the very spirit of democracy. This definitely marks a shift in perspective in the way citizenship and citizenship education has been conceptualised in these textbooks.



Women Change the World, SPL II, NCERT, 2007

## Role of the teacher

While the textbooks can outline the nature of citizenship in the national imagination, the role of the teacher in translating that vision for the students in the classroom is crucial. To begin with, it is extremely important that teachers create a space within the classroom where students feel free to share their thoughts and ideas on a range of issues unhesitatingly. The idea is to create a democratic culture where diverse and multiple perspectives can be exchanged by children without the fear of being judged or silenced.

Teachers should be able to encourage students to bring relevant local examples based on their lived experiences related to the topic that is being studied. This would necessarily require the teacher to take the students beyond the textbook. Such a practice would not only enrich the class discussion but by discouraging memorisation of facts, strengthen student learning in the long run.

It is important that the teacher understands that children acquire knowledge not only from the textbook but from multiple sources including media, both print and electronic. It, therefore, becomes important that the teacher remains aware of relevant local and national issues and is able to

critically engage the students through discussions on these issues whenever necessary.

It has been pointed out in one of the SPL textbooks (Introductory Note to Teachers, SPL III) that the series, specifically dwells upon specific forms of inequality based on caste, gender, class and religion and there is every possibility that the classroom would be characterised by such distinctions. Keeping this context in mind, it becomes all the more critical for teachers to show the required sensitivity while discussing such issues.

## Conclusion

Textbooks are cultural tools that shape the collective imagination of the nation. The *Looking Around* series and the *Social and Political Life* textbooks that followed the introduction of NCF 2005 have successfully laid out the template as to how citizenship education needs to be imagined in tune with the values enshrined in the Indian Constitution. This is evident, as the above analysis reveals, in the manner that the nation has been imagined, the way gender concerns have been addressed and citizenship has been constructed within the framework of human rights. It remains to be seen how, through the mediation of the teacher, these ideas get translated within the classroom.

- i The NCF 2005 was operationalized during the Congress-led United Progressive Alliance regime (2004-2014) or UPA I and has continued beyond 2014 (which witnessed another regime change).
- ii The textbooks 'Looking Around' and 'Social and Political Life' would be henceforth referred to as LA and SPL respectively

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