

When a Poem Opened Doors for Discussion

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While working with primary school children, we often use the *Khushi-Khushi* textbooks from *Eklavya's* Primary Education Programme. We also use Teaching-Learning Materials (TLMs), such as word cards, picture-word cards, poetry posters, etc. Generally, we use poetry posters in classes I, II and III to help children overcome their hesitation in speaking, identifying words and sentences and in helping them to make sense of the text they read. We have seen that children are able to do various activities based on poetry posters with ease. These activities include colouring, identifying words, encircling the identified word, writing sentences in the notebook and taking the poem forward on their own.

I am sharing my experience related to a poetry poster that I used in a primary school in Khedla, a village in Hoshangabad. This experience not only paved the way for discussions on human and constitutional values, like gender discrimination or equality in the classroom but also drew my attention towards the potential of using poetry posters in the primary classes.

Ms Kala Meena and Ms Pragya Sharma are two teachers of this village who under the '*Hamara Ghar-Hamara Vidyalaya*' scheme, teach a few children at home because of the COVID-19 pandemic. One day, when I reached Khedla village, as usual, the teachers had divided the children into two groups. The teacher, Kaka Meena, was taking mathematics with the children of classes I and II and the teacher, Pragya Sharma, was about to begin her class on language with five children from classes III to V. I sat down with this group.

The teacher had a poster based on the poem *Lalaji Laddu Do* (Give us laddus, *Lalaji*). She sat with the children in a circle and made sure that all children could see it properly. Since two children from class III were not able to read, the teacher was paying more attention to them. She read the title of the poem, *Lalaji Laddu Do* aloud. Then she instructed the children to colour the pictures on the poetry poster so that the poster would look beautiful and it would be more interesting to read. She kept

crayons in front of the children.

The children were watching the pictures on the poetry poster carefully and also talking to each other. One said to another, 'You colour the *laddu*, I will colour *Lalaji*'. The teacher, who was listening to the conversation of the children, interrupted and said, 'Look, all of you take turns to colour, one of you can colour *laddus*, somebody else can paint *Lalaji's* face, the third child can colour his kurta, the fourth, his hair, and the next child his moustache.' The children laughed loudly when they heard the word 'moustache'.

A girl quickly picked up a black crayon and started colouring *Lalaji's* hair. When she was done, the second child started to paint the kurta red, while the third one painted the *laddus* yellow. Now came the turn of *Lalaji's* moustache, which was also painted black. In a short time, all the pictures in the poster were painted.

The teacher asked a child to stand up and hold the poster straight. Then, she recited the poem by keeping a finger on each word. Next, all the children were given a chance to read the poem by keeping their finger on each word. It appeared that the teacher wanted the children of class III to recognise the words because these children were not able to read. After a while, the teacher asked the children some questions.

Teacher: 'How many *laddus* did the child ask *Lalaji* to give?

Students: 'Four.'

Students: 'No, one.'

They got the correct answer by looking at the poetry poster once again.

Teacher: 'Who do we call *Lalaji* in our village?'

Student: 'My brother-in-law.'

The teacher repeated her answer saying, 'Yes, brother-in-law or son-in-law is also called *Lalaji*. But here the *Sethji*, who sells sweets, is being called *Lalaji*.'

Teacher: 'How was the child praising *Lalaji*? Do you also praise someone when you want something from them?'

Students: 'Yes, we praise our mother; we praise grandmother, and we praise father.'

Teacher: 'How do you praise your mother?'

Students: 'Mummy, you make very good gulab jamuns.'

Teacher: 'How do you praise grandmother?'

Students: 'Grandmother, you sing bhajans very well, we enjoy listening to you.'

Teacher: 'Who makes *laddus* and *gulab jamuns* in your house?'

Students: 'Mummy.'

Teacher: 'So who would have made *laddus* in *Lalaji's* house?'

Students: 'Probably his wife.'

Teacher: 'How did the child praise *Lalaji*?'

Students: 'He praised his moustache.'

Teacher: 'By the way, who has a moustache?'

Students: 'Men have.'

Teacher: 'Have you seen anyone else having a moustache other than men?'

Students: 'Yes, lion, cat and mouse have moustaches.'

Then a soft voice was heard, 'Some women also have.' This answer was given by the child who was shyly colouring *Lalaji's* moustache sometime back.

All the children laughed loudly.

The teacher asked, 'Have you seen a woman who has a moustache?'

The children kept quiet for a while. Then a couple of children said hesitatingly that they have seen women having a slight moustache and not a thick one.

The teacher told the children that hair growth on the body is due to the hormone and this can happen to anyone, man or woman.

It appeared that we were going deeper into this discussion. But that day's class got over. We were able to do some language-learning activities with the children of classes III and V. But I could not understand what else could be gained from the poetry poster. I felt that we had missed out on achieving something that day but could not put my finger on what it was.

Most of the pre-NCF 2005 books depicted gender-based discrimination. Very deep prejudices were seen in the textual exercises. For example, textbooks were dominated by male writers. The content was also male-centric. Most of the descriptions found in the books depicted the woman as mother,

sister, or housewife, while men were shown as breadwinners, or in other responsible roles.

While pondering deeply over these thoughts, I called a friend and shared this experience with her. She told me that while talking to the children on *Lalaji's* poem, she had asked children to assume that *Lalaji* is having a stomach-ache and hence, *Lalaji's* wife is managing the shop. So, keeping *Lalaji's* wife in mind, change the poem and recite it. Some children immediately changed *Lalaji* to *Lalain*, but then stopped not knowing how to praise her. Some children said that if *Lalaji* is ill, then his son should be managing the shop. I am stopping here without telling the details about the changed poetry poster. Actually, I got a new direction from this conversation.

I understood that the role of the teacher is very important in eliminating discriminations based on gender. The National Teacher Education Curriculum 2009 (NCFTE 2009) also states that:

'As teachers develop curriculum materials and learning experiences, informed by the perspectives enunciated above (Gender, Peace, Sustainable development), they will also learn, through actual participation, the skills to identify and process the specifics for the purposes of meaningful curriculum transaction.'

- NCFTE 2009, Pg 14, National Council for Teacher Education. New Delhi.

A few days later, I went to Khedla village again and was once again in front of the children of the primary school with the poetry poster of *Lalaji*. Last time, we had done some activities related to colouring and words. We decided to carry on with the discussion. Both the teachers were also with me.

What if *Lalaji* is ill, and his wife is managing the shop? We started the discussion from this point. The children were not ready to accept this change easily.

Teacher: 'How many grocery shops are there in our village?'

Students: 'There are three shops.'

Teacher: 'Who manages those shops?'

Students: 'So-and-so uncles manage (that is, men manage these shops).'

Teacher: 'Do women also manage these shops?'

Students: 'No.'

One girl said, 'We have a grocery store. When our father goes to the farm or to have his food, our mother manages the shop for some time.'

This means that the role of the woman here is like that of a reliever. All she is required to do is safeguard the goods of the shop and manage sales in the absence of the shopkeeper for about an hour or so.

The teacher asked: 'Which are the shops run by men and which by women?'

The students answered – men run the shops like a grocery store, barber shop, shoe-shop, manure-seed shop, clothes shop, etc. Some children believed that most of the shops are run by men only. The women usually run shops that sell items related to makeup, vegetable shops, beauty parlour and flower-*bael-patra*-coconut shops (common on the banks of river Narmada).

The teacher then asked, 'Would it be okay if all the shops are run by women?'

Some children said that if there are women in all the shops, then they would not be comfortable going to the market. Only women will be seen everywhere.

We felt that the children did not understand the question properly. So, it was asked again saying that we would go to the market just as we go now with mother, father, uncle, aunt, etc. but the shopkeepers would be women and not men. That would be the only difference.

Two children agreed that they would have no problem with it. One of them said, 'Like if we have to only buy a shirt in the market, it would not matter whether the shopkeeper is a woman or a man.'

But one child was still uncomfortable with the idea of all-female shopkeepers. But he could not openly say what was bothering him. After a long time, he said, 'What will fathers do if mothers run the shop?'

Teacher: 'Fathers will work in the field, do household chores, cook.'

Students: 'Fathers do not know how to cook.'

Teacher: 'They will learn cooking. Is there any man known to you who sweeps, cooks, etc.?'

The children gave two examples, but these were men who had lost their wives.

Teacher: 'Why is the work done by women and men different?'

One student (hesitatingly): 'Certain type of work requires a lot of strength.'

At this point, the teachers told that it is our misconception that a woman's body is weak. Even women can drive a tractor, truck, train or plane. Just as five lady teachers are running their school. Everyone should get opportunities to do all kinds of work.

At this juncture, we looked at the poster of *Lalaji*. It appeared as if *Lalaji* would reach out to us and give *laddus* to all the three of us.

That day we were able to touch on the issue of women's employment through *Lalaji's* poster. We were able to understand the stereotypes that were created in the minds of children. Children have become so used to seeing men as shopkeepers that they are uncomfortable with the very idea of a woman shopkeeper managing a shop. They are not ready to imagine this situation even for ten minutes. They start thinking about what the father would do if the mother starts managing the shop.

Even after this, there are many more possibilities of discussions based on this poster. Artisans, waiters working in *Lalaji's* shop, their work, their salary, *Lalaji's* treatment of employees, etc. can all be discussed. These are various areas through which one can explore the experiences of *Lalaji* from giving *laddus* on praising his moustaches to *Lalaji* getting children to work for him. Therefore, poetry posters are not limited to just language teaching, but they also give the opportunity to examine many social issues.

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