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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 to regulate 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 survival of 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, despite repeated attempts to run away!

This write up is my learning(s) from doing (often seeing others do) one of the lessons in school textbooks – Panchayat. There are two reasons why I thought of this recently, 1. the infamous khaps of Haryana and 2. the elections in Karnataka. But lets start the story from 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 have been often abused by introducing characters into the descriptions who rattle out the same set of information often in a condescending manner.²

Lesson 1

Days Before Buddha Smiled (Actually Wept!)

That was four 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 I remained unconvinced as in spite an extensive critical examination of the various functions of a Panchayat, the chapter ended 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 her colony. A radical departure of the Eklavya textbook was the fact that while normal textbooks described all the functions and powers of institutions, as is expected 'text-bookishly', 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 were then used to build critical thinking. This element was sorely missing in our Indian social science textbooks.

Further I sat in for discussions with Mehamood and Sudheer; the context was that Rajasthan considered itself 'progressive' as compared to Madhya Pradesh; the political scenario was very different, rules and regulations varied from one state to the other. Despite this context, 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 is generally highly emphasised, just as in my last assignment for the Kerala State's textbooks, none would have the courage to end the story of political institutions in a negative manner. Is it not clear that textbooks have the ability to "bring in" the real events in political world into the classroom? Is it not possible to have some faith that the child can unravel the mystery of unexpected positive twist which makes the story of Panchayat ending in very positive manner? How do we critically evaluate the impact of space given to critical thinking into school textbooks?

But then one day the Indian Government decided to conduct Pokharan II, and slowly Lok Jumbish³ wound up. The current textbooks of Rajasthan do not even vaguely reflect there were 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?" Familiar with many Ladakhi's asking us question, we fumbled some answer. Then Namgyal began explaining the travel plan to Sujatha, Vineetha, Sumathi 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 stay in their house. 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 are only few houses? How big an area the Panchayats will cover? My images of Panchayat's were strongly built around the idea that villages have populations in 1000s or at least hundreds! And so it demanded I unlearn some of my wisdom.

You notice that the new sets of 4 & 5 textbooks that were brought out by SECMOL in 2003 which were supposed to be used in Ladakh region had certain unique ways of organising their social relationship. The textbooks brought to children the story of the Panchayat through traditional roles of goba, lorpa, churpon etc. Lorpa made sure that animals which entered into the fields of other people were confiscated; Churpon decided which field would get water on which day, how many times; Goba used to be a village head etc. Well in the language that the modern state structure uses the Ladakhi words do not find a place in labelling of representatives and heads of Panchayat. They have imported words like 'sarpanch' 'panchayat' from the "neeche". In the margins one cannot stop noting down 'aren't these the long hands of cultural colonialism, happening through textbooks?

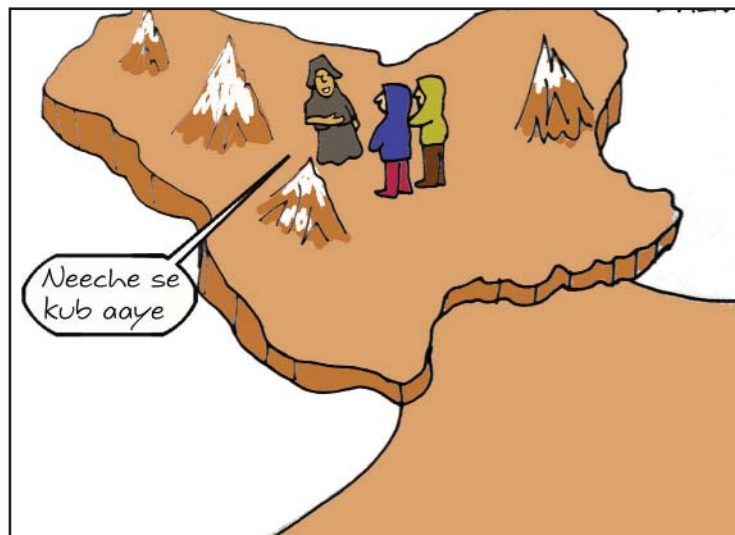
However there are two questions that remain unresolved. Why should panchayat be an institution that is shown as having an important role to play in local governance

for children of Ladakh? Ladakh is governed under an Autonomous Council, so are many different districts in the state of North East. Hence it stands out that the syllabus and curriculum are largely defined by "neeche ke log" who are unfamiliar with institutions like Autonomous Council that govern predominantly tribal dominated districts in the country. In the textbooks that belong to 'neeche ke log' one does not even hear the existence of Autonomous Councils. Are Autonomous Councils a mere anomaly when one thinks of 3 tiers of government? Or does it reflect an attitude of the state system that only visualises 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 choose

to keep them in the margins? Ironically why does even a state that wants to perpetuate itself through textbook knowledge sidestep and ignore the existences of such institutions?

Another prominent dilemma emerges from this nostalgia. It is very prevalent in the textbooks of the 'neeche ke log' when they 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 harp 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 things are put back in perspective: the un-representativeness and undemocratic nature of feudalism. Yet the question to think about is – what exactly does it mean for a 9 or 10 year old to relate either to the supposedly ancient institution or a modern one? Is it really possible to assume that, a 10 year old would differentiate between the different roles such as - your father is the village khap head and your neighbour is village panchayat member as having different implications?



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 come back to me. But even more curiously, I never thought the theme water could be a point of discussion near the banks of Brahmaputra, and my textbook knowledge about this State was limited to the fact it rains the most here! To me water 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 them were 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 was important to Assam. Hence, it was decided that the image/ 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 to point out another learning.



Similarly, social science is a subject which is burdened with making citizens and readers (children in this case) become future voters - mind you 'voters' and not 'strugglers' or 'fighter woman representatives'. Isn't this where the middle class values conflict and therefore allow the state to perpetuate?



You may have noticed that in the three episodes, Panchayat chapter is being discussed at class 4, class 5 and class 6. Have you ever wondered what the logic is for this? 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 unstated 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 them back in classes 6,7,8 and then again clubbed the local governments and state governments to class 9 and to class 10. But then since the schooling system in various States has had different definition of where the primary ends and upper/middle begins, the textbook content often gets manipulated. I realised that the psychological determinism - that a concept or theme could be taught only at a particular level - as fake jingoistic belief - truly we do not know how to practice I guess? In the name of spiralling aren't we merely asking children to recall information on how the Panchayats are formed 3 times during their school lives?

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 an even more difficult situation because textbook writers often want to talk about the so called participatory democracy that is supposed to have been practiced in the State of Kerala. And I trace my roots to one of 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 harped 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 the Panchayati Raj institution was a solution to the problems of education system. Within the whole discussion occasional recall to the memory of Gandhiji would make Panchayati raj

something that people of all political colours seemingly want to promote. Amongst these voices how does one choose relevant text? Why is it that adults often feel that every new idea they find fascinating is useful and should 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, social science is a subject which is burdened with making citizens and readers (children in this case) become future voters - mind you 'voters' and not 'strugglers' or 'fighter woman representatives'. Isn't this where the middle class values conflict and therefore allow 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 them¹. 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 meaningful discussion on participatory democracy. Discussions would 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 participated in some tweaking in many corners of the country I sat cosily on my newspaper chair, with a cup of coffee asking Ranjan about his vote during the previous month's election in a village in Dakshina Kannada. He said he had elected 5 members for his ward. There are some 14 panchayat members and 5 wards in his panchayat. This was unacceptable to me, I realise that the "new" NCERT class 6 textbook is all wrong. To me democracy as described in textbooks is that of one man/woman - one vote – one representative! Textbook descriptions of election to Panchayat says that I as a voter elect one representative to my Panchayat ward. But here is a state that has multiple member constituencies – more than one representative being responsible for an entire ward. I can't even argue he reminded me "but you have only seen textbooks and rule books of some States and I am the one who has voted". Ooh how much I hate looking at the inedible ink on his middle finger!

Footnotes

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>
3. Lok Jumbish was a movement that started in 1989 to mobilize "education for all" in the state of Rajasthan. It was involved in community mobilization, improving the quality of teaching learning process, in service training for teachers, emphasis on gender equity, etc. In the year 1992 it became a large scale project. In 1997 textbook revival for middle school classes was taken up
4. Refer to the EPW article on "Public Participation, Teacher Accountability and School Outcomes in Three States" Priyanka Pandey, Sangeeta Goyal, Venkatesh Sundararaman June 12, 2010 Vol XIV no 24 75

Alex has thankfully survived the NGO sector doing academics, without ever doing a managerial task. He now has a vague intention to move into "akkademiks" because metaphorically "he wants to teach everybody a lesson"! Anyways he is entering another phase of footloose years from September. He may be reached at alexmggeorge@gmail.com

