

Ankur

Education for Peace and Justice

Activities till Oct. 2003

A Report

Caste and Religion - Children's viewpoint

A survey questionnaire to explore children's experience and perception of caste, religion and conflict was prepared, field tested and conducted during this period. The survey was used as a methodological tool before preparing the curriculum guideline on caste and religion.

About 250 children in the age group of 10-14 years, largely V to VIII graders from Dakshinpuri, Nanglamachi, Shashi Garden, LNJP, Khichripur communities participated in this survey. Out of these 150 children were members of the Bal club and Library programs of Ankur and 100 were those who are not engaged in any Ankur program.

This exercise will provide insight into children's minds, their modes of reasoning, the nature and depth of their perceptions, their queries and concerns. It will help us assess the influence of popular arguments, oral lore and propaganda on their thinking. It will help locate where their knowledge needs expansion, their attitudes need to be challenged or strengthened. It will help children gain confidence as partners in the learning process.

The questionnaire was prepared after intensive deliberation around the aspects to be covered, the formulation of questions and specific options of response, the classification of questions and the length of the form. The questionnaire was divided into three parts – Personal information, Caste and Religion. The parts related to caste and religion were divided into five sections – 'In your community', 'In your family', 'You-Yourself', 'In your school' and 'Country and society'. The questions on caste and religion covered issues related to the form, content, problems. There were two to three questions related to one aspect to help ascertain consistency and contradiction of responses; for each question there were multiple options of response. The idea was to push children towards taking a position rather than the convenient option of can't say. The option itself expanded the possibilities of response, or opened newer options of response.

A team of ten facilitators working with Bal clubs and libraries participated in the survey exercise. The caste profile of each community was prepared by the facilitators. The questionnaire was field tested with 13 children, girls and boys from the different areas by the facilitators and the program team, to identify the areas of confusion. A session was

held with a group of five children in which the facilitators observed each other to gain a better understanding of how to unfold the questions with children and the skills required in investigation.

The survey was conducted with 10 batches of children consisting of 20 to 30 children each. An orientation session was held with each batch of children before the survey exercise. The session explored caste and religion as they exist and operate in their respective community context. The aspects that were covered were – the different caste and religious groups in their community, the nature of interaction, the existence of conflict and tensions. The idea was to gauge their familiarity with the subjects covered in the survey.

A core team of five conducted all the surveys. Each batch was further divided in groups of five-six. This helped to communicate with children better and get a glimpse into their spontaneous reactions and patterns of thought. Each child filled the form him/herself. The children were encouraged to think before they chose their response.

The survey forms have been sent for tabulation and analyses, with the list of variables. The notes of the investigators are being compiled.

Textbook review

Social Studies Text book - classes VI, VII, VIII

Some key observations -

While the earlier ‘nationalist secular’ versions tried to project a conflict-free zone in terms of history and contemporary society, the new version of NCERT text books, represents a continuity but without a hint of tension. Earlier India was a secular haven, now it looks like a land, which has always been not only tolerant but also prescient. It is a narcissistic reading of India’s past and present and wishes to create a future in the image of this reading. It appears we are back to the 19th century history writing where all the examples of greatness in European pasts, whether in polity or science, are already there in Indian civilization. It obvious that Indian civilization is by and large a Hindu one. There are clever insertions in language, pictures, questions and text in old reading material takes. It is a seamless kind of history where faiths and knowledge systems known with definite denominations and proven historical trajectories (like Buddhism and Jainism) are shown to be emerging from the mainstream Hindu ‘Udgam’(which is of course always, already there: it has not evolved!). The pre-Vedic civilizations like Indus (now-rechristened ‘Sindhu-Sarswati’) valley are assumed to be the natural precursors to the Hindu Dharm, or even extensions of Gyan Marg(p. 96). Now, if this is crude, let us pick up an instance of clever sleight of hand: The page 87 of

the History for VI, exceptionally, has three images, with no attendant homework, at the end of the Exercise. All the three images conveniently denote concepts that can be connected with later belief systems particularly among 'Hindus', viz. the images of the Yogi, which becomes 'Shiv Pashupati', the Peepal Tree' and another unnamed person sitting in the yogic posture. Quite clearly the writers of the book want their readers to keep in mind these lasting images from the lesson on Harappa. Such is the desire for a continuous, ancient-therefore-authentic history. The sleight of hand works in certain portions of questions as well: what is presented with doubt in the main text becomes unquestionable, mere fill-in-the-blanks certainty in the exercises. Once again, the idea, it seems, is to capture the memory and not the imagination of the pupils. It may be noted in passing that the writers have used doubt-generating words like 'lagbhag' quite sparingly but strategically. All the same, there are definitive moral takes such as this one: [In Early Vedic India] Drinking Som and Sura was discouraged as it led to 'Ashobhaniya vyavhar'. Similarly the text tells us that people had a lot of freedom of mobility across caste and profession, but 'Durbhagya se ab aisa nahin hai(Alas, it is no more like this!). Our texts were bad , but they never taught all this.

Greatness of eternal Hindu India is asserted more specifically in political and scientific spheres. You will be surprised to know that *whole of India* was united twice in ancient times, first under Chandragupt Maurya and then under Samudragupt. The other area of pride is Indians' knowledge of Shunya and decimal(see pages 90-91) and their mathematical acumen in calculating large figures, something that Abul Fazl finds, in Ain-eAkbari astonishingly illogical. The text claims that Vedic Indians were well versed in all branches of Mathematics including Arithmetic, Geometry, Algebra, Astronomy and Astrology. The people with such developed sense of science and polity could hardly be called a 'tribe' so they are not. And desire for continuity, once again: "hamari aaj ki sansad ki bhanti us samay bhi sabha aur samiti mein vad-vivad ko sanchalit karne ke niyam bane hue the." That is, sabha and samiti not only were like today's parliament, they had a constitution, too!

A comment on language: consistent with the official Hindi, it is a sanitized text, completely devoid of any Urdu ancestry. It is a mere translation of something originally written in English as the sentences retain their weird syntactical structures, which is to say, it is incompetent.

Text book review – Language Classes VI, VII

It is important to underline the role of literature textbooks, especially in the context of 'education for peace and justice', in the formation of values and attitudes. The expectations could be summarized as familiarising students with the

diverse forms and heritage of creative literature, disseminating human values integrated in literature, making students aware of diversity and thus inculcate humility and developing faculties of critical appreciation and intellectual understanding. These should be enriched with the concepts of 'knowledge informed with compassion' and compassion informed with knowledge' - concepts through which we can understand the specific impact of literature. Good literature becomes part of our spiritual development. More than our information base, it expands the horizons of our experiences. That is why it has the potential of influencing our attitudes in a fundamental way.

And that is why there is the need to examine text books vis-à-vis the values that they are transmitting to children, the role they are playing in the development of their personalities, what are our priorities, and are we able to exploit the specific powers of literature in their realisation. Then alone we can be in the position to offer recommendations towards a change.

In general our text books keep away from issues of social conflict related to caste, religion, class, gender, etc. The logic given is that tender minds should not be shocked with cruel reality. But children come face to face with reality anyway, without the mediation of schooling and form opinions according to channels of information available. School education is thus unable to develop a healthy perspective towards social conflict.

Bal Bharati books for classes VI and VII have 44 lessons in all 16 poems, 10 essays, 5 lives of great men, 5 stories, 4 memories, 2 travelogues, 2 plays, 2 sketches, 1 satire, and 1 autobiography. Prose and in that 'essays' and 'lives' are given more space.

The low status given to stories is very inappropriate. Stories are a powerful medium which can be joyfully used for nurturing the experiential world, imagination, criticality and human values of the child. Instead the emphasis on informative and didactic essays and lives blunts the potentials of curriculum. Perhaps the creators of books felt that it is easier to communicate one's own line of thinking directly through essays etc. without any paraphernalia.

It is interesting that the preface to the books says at the very outset, that the lessons are such that would be interesting and joyful. In this sense stories should be given first priority and essays the last. But the choice of lessons and literary forms is perhaps dictated by other pressures.

Looking at the content and literary quality of these books one cannot say that their framework is narrow. However special attention has been paid to keep students in the dark regarding the reality of social tensions. Issues of patriotism freedom, moral conduct, environment, medical treatment in ancient India etc. have been

given prominence. 7½ lessons are on patriotism, 2 on medicine in ancient India. But not one which can give even a hint of the social conflict present in the immediate environment. The priorities are clearer logical. For instance, out of the rich literary world of Nirala the choice falls on a patriotic poem; why not on one of his socialist poems like 'Today's mansions of the rich will become schools for peasants'?

It is noteworthy that despite so much of nation and love for the nation, there is no space for the religio-cultural diversity of India. But for one (in the play 'Vapasi' by Vishnu Prabhakar) there isn't a single Muslim character in the two books. He is a Pakistani soldier who has come to attack the village of childhood; his love for his birthplace is aroused and he cannot commit the crime.

The travelogues on Tamil Nadu and North-East do not talk about the multiple cultures, the different identities of people living there. They are also very weak as literary pieces. More importantly they are replete with descriptions of Hindu temples, Hindu gods and Hindu pilgrimage centers. There is no information on the different tribes of their cultural specificities of the North-East for instance. There is no mention of symbols or places of worship of any other religion of culture.

And very cleverly the unity of India is conveyed through the Hinduness of all the symbols given.

It is a clear attempt to brainwash children into believing that unity means homogenization and majoritarianism. The opportunity to develop awareness of diversities and inculcate values of humility and respect through travelogues, is lost.

It is true that some of the lessons talk about forgiveness, compassion, honesty etc. They do not fall in line with militant nationalism either, and are at least saved from the trap of hating your imagined enemy. Poems like 'let's take care of our country (Part I)' talk about even eaulity and progress.

However individual lessons do not prove the overall rationality of choice. In literary quality there are wide gaps. For instance the content and style of a poem by Nagarjun is in sharp contrast to that of a chapter on Etiquette. The poem talks about fragrance of flowers and of dreams and self that nurture them.

The lesson on Etiquette forbids students from laughing and talking loudly in front of elders of walking in front of them, of continuing to eat even after they have finished etc. It is surprising that the two pieces belong to the same book on talking about freedom the other of slavery.

Looking at the exercises of questions, it is clear that they are not framed on the lessons but from within them. The job of students is to look at information to search for answers from within the lessons rather than get provoked into thinking and get involved in intellectual discourse.

In some cases questions do lead towards analysis (e.g. the questions “Is this story only of the wolf and goat?” Bharti II Pg. 8). But there is hardly any space for the student to disagree with another and engage in dialogue.