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A Review of Gender Representation in Primary School Textbooks in India

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ABSTRACT

The curriculum is regulated by the sociocultural aspects, political ideologies, values and morals of the ecosystem it is created in. When the ecosystem is a South Asian country like India, especially post-colonisation, the hyper focus on nation building led to clearly differentiated gender roles to protect the moral and cultural integrity of the state. The purpose of this review is to critically explore the existing literature to understand how gender is represented in primary school textbooks in India. The review highlights the temporal and historical evolution of gender-based curriculum reforms in India while illuminating patterns in the literature through themes such as visibility, portrayal and intersectionalities of gender. This review is restricted to the last 25 years, following the National Education Policy of 1986. Subsequent to this policy introduction, textbook analysis became more commonplace. Additionally, the review addresses the potential impact caused by such textbooks and recommendations made by various Indian researchers are also highlighted in this review.

KEYWORDS

gender representation, curriculum, India, stereotypes, textbooks

South Asian countries like India, especially post-colonisation, have been so absorbed in nation building, that gender roles were clearly differentiated to protect the moral and cultural integrity of the state (Batra, 2020; Emerson & Levi, 2020). From a bird's eye view, such cultural contexts are what build the educational spaces. Dawar & Anand (2017) note that access to education and gender disparity in schools is still a burning crisis in India, and national and international bodies/ organisations are working to bridge these discrepancies. For instance, national initiatives were created to address access to education such as Sarva Shiksha Abhiyan (SSA) that worked towards enhancing universal access and retention, bridging gender and social category gaps in elementary education and improving the quality of learning. While admission rates and retention rates of girls have improved since the inception of such programs (Yadav, Sharma & Birua, 2018), is quality of education taking a back seat? I question whether this focus on filling up the seats is translating into outcomes where stereotypes that hindered access to education are being dismantled.

The curriculum is regulated by the sociocultural aspects, political ideologies, values and morals of the ecosystem it is created in. This regulation becomes much more significant in regards to the question of gender equality in the curriculum. The gender of an individual and the prescribed role assigned to that gender in society has always been the determinant in accessing education in the

Indian subcontinent (Pandey, 1996). Children imbibe societal values and norms through the process of socialisation which happens primarily at two levels: family and school. As Dawar & Anand (2017) note, gender socialisation is a subgroup of socialisation that highlights how society socialises girls and boys into gender-appropriate behaviours. Socialisation that occurs in schools can be instrumental in reinforcing or changing what has already been learned in families who usually interact with girls and boys differently (Dawar & Anand, 2017).

The UNESCO Global Education Monitoring (GEM) Report (2016) states that textbooks are significant tools in the teaching-learning process and are used 70-95% of the classroom time. Considering how much school work and homework happens with textbooks, the creation of gender-sensitive books is advised in the report. These books can push children to discuss stereotypes and promote equitable behaviour. If textbooks imply discriminatory gender norms and practices, children's engagement in classrooms may be lowered (Benavot, 2016). While it may not be a crisis yet, it still acts as an invisible roadblock to gender equality in education. Not only is this issue consistently universal, it may also play a contributing role in diminishing student's achievements in the long-term (Blumberg, 2008).

The purpose of this essay is to explore the existing literature to understand how gender is represented in primary school textbooks in India. I attempt to bring perspective to this topic by highlighting the gender-based curriculum reforms that have taken place in India thus far. I then use this essay to present patterns in the literature through themes such as visibility, portrayal and intersectionalities of gender. The potential impact caused by such textbooks and recommendations made by various Indian researchers are also highlighted in this essay.

History of Gender-based Curriculum Reforms in India

The first documented education reform to question the status quo and enhance the quality of education dates back to the late 1930s. The Basic Education (BE) program was adopted as a state policy 'nai talim,' meaning 'new education'. The BE program incorporated manual work and hands-on learning as part of the core curriculum in primary schools, which is otherwise associated only with oppressed castes (Sadgopal, 2019). While it did question the caste hegemony, it did not attempt to address gender inequalities, which were prevalent in the form of segregated curricula for boys and girls. Almost two decades later, in 1948 in independent India, the Radhakrishnan Commission was set up to address these gendered gaps in the quality of education. The recommendations made by the commission pushed for the same curriculum for boys and girls. However, the National Committee for Women's Education (NCWE) in 1958 recommended a segregated curriculum for boys and girls at least at the secondary stage (e.g., home science, music and needlework were mandated for girls). In 1961, the Hansa Mehta Committee made seemingly contradictory recommendations. They emphasised the need for representation of more women in the textbook committees (Kumari, 2014) while also emphasising fine arts, music and home economics as vital subjects for girls' education (Sarkar, 2019).

The next critical point at which a step towards gender equality in the curriculum was taken was by the recommendations of the Kothari Commission (Pandey, 1996). They were strongly against the difference in curriculum between boys and girls. They postulated that subjects like home science could be an optional subject for girls, and cannot be made mandatory (Pandey, 1996). Eventually, curricula were reviewed in the National Conference on Women's Studies (NCWS) in 1981 from various disciplines and brought to light the glaring absence of women/girls in the materials (Dawar & Anand,

2017). This concern was addressed by including women's problems, experiences and their contributions in the curriculum. Despite these efforts - which I believe retained the patriarchy in many ways - the education system did not witness the change it needed. Rather, many institutions "helped to perpetuate the traditional prejudices through their curricula, classification of subjects on the basis of gender and the unwritten code of conduct enforced on the pupils" (Pandey, 1996, p. 354).

Eventually, to meet the needs of a potentially high-tech future, a need to restructure the existing system of education was felt during this time. This resulted in the National Policy on Education (1986) and its subsequent Programme of Action (POA) which was revised in 1991 (Sarkar, 2019). Pandey (1996) notes the most remarkable feature of this policy is "its emphasis on a positive interventionist role in the empowerment of women and its emphasis on the need to gear the entire system" (Pandey, 1996, p. 346). The POA has also specifically mentioned that this unit should aggressively work on eliminating 'sexist' bias and 'sexist' stereotypes from school textbooks (Pandey, 1996). After more than three decades (education policies in India tend to be revised every two to three decades), the Government of India released the new National Education Policy (NEP) in 2020. Similar to the Education Policy of 1986, the NEP (2020) also mentions that "any biases and stereotypes in the school curriculum will be removed, and more material will be included that is relevant and relatable to all communities" (NEP, 2020, p. 28). On the contrary, the NEP also states that 'equitable quality education' will be provided to 'female' and 'transgender' students. Sharma & Babbar (2020) noted that this was discussed to be highly disturbing as the NEP failed to understand the gender spectrum in essence and that issues pertaining to gender are not specific to female or transgender students.

The journey of gender-based curriculum reforms in India went from advocating 'feminine' subjects for girls in secondary schools, to advocating against making them mandatory, to successfully making them optional subjects, to then fighting for non-segregated curricula for girls and boys and to specifically advocating for the removal of 'sexist' material from textbooks from 1986 to 2020. While great strides were made (especially keeping the time period in mind), there is still scope for better understanding of gender by Indian policymakers.

Textbooks & Gender

UNESCO's latest GEM Report has shown that women and girls are under-represented in school textbooks and are mostly depicted in traditional roles in many countries. The report suggests that an overhaul of the education system is what is needed to make them more inclusive, diverse and accessible to all (Singh, 2020). As mentioned earlier, gender representation in textbooks holds much significance because schools are such a vital socialising agent (Gupta & Lin, 1989). The way learners view the world can strongly be influenced and manipulated by how gender is represented in the textbooks (Paneru, 2019).

Dating back to the 80s and 90s in India, the textbooks in production have invariably shown gender bias at all levels (Pandey, 2006). The 'bias' that I point out here is for men and against women. For instance, this includes illustrating women only in domestic roles and men only in professional roles in the books. Over the last couple of decades, initiatives to eliminate this bias in textbooks have been implemented yet again by a very narrow understanding of gender and equality according to the National Focus Group on Gender Issues in Education (2016). Most of this review contains studies that have analysed the national/central syllabus textbooks of primary schools published by the National Council of Educational Research and Training (NCERT), the most prominent textbook-producing agency. Unfortunately, this review is based around gender binaries as the body of literature largely

views gender as boys/men and girls/women. The existing body of literature on gender representation throws light on two critical points: quantitative presence of women/girls in textbooks and the quality of their presence — or, essentially, whether they are shown, and if yes, how they are shown.

Methodology

The following review analyses research studies published from the year 1996 to 2020 as the research that took place on examining textbooks happened after the National Education Policy (1986) put a special focus on eliminating disparities in education. I have categorised the findings of the studies into three recurring themes: visibility, portrayal and intersectionality. In this review, I conceptualise ‘visibility’ in terms of the quantitative presence or occurrence of women/girls – how visible they are. ‘Portrayal’ – I view as the characterisation of people in the textbooks and what are the qualities associated with them and, finally, ‘intersectionalities’ – the presence of gender under the umbrella of various other social constructs like religion, disability or caste. The review also contains the potential impact of these textbooks on children and the solutions proposed by these researchers. The methodologies used by the researchers to analyse textbooks is by and large content or thematic analyses.

Findings

Visibility

Research conducted to analyse a Hindi textbook in 1986 revealed that the ratio of male-centred stories to female-centred stories was 21:1 (Kalia, 2014). Primary school textbooks (NCERT) were analysed that consisted of 75 lessons; the results showed that solely male illustrations were available in more than 50 of these lessons (Bhog, 2002). A study conducted to analyse an average primary school textbook found that, from an average of 80-100 illustrations, 52% depicted men and boys while only 6% depicted women and girls, while the rest of the illustrations were of objects and animals (Pandey, 2006). Another study that analysed a social science textbook observed that seven out of ten chapters were dominated by male illustrations (Parashar & Singh, 2020). One of the strategies used by NCERT was to attain quantitative equality by enhancing the visibility of women and girls in these textbooks. But research shows that even in cases where women were shown in a professional capacity, it would usually be in the role of a school teacher or, at times, as nurses (Nambissan, 2005). These depictions align with stereotypical ‘feminine’ qualities like being nurturing and caring, as also illustrated in Figure 1. In the above-mentioned studies, the earliest dates back to 1986 while the latest is from 2020, with unfortunately near-similar findings.

Figure 1

Professions in a Class 1 English Textbook (adapted from NCERT, 2006)



Portrayal

While visibility has clearly been an issue, the research that analyses the quality of portrayal has also yielded disappointing results. The Education Policy of 1986 and various commissions did bring about change by somewhat increasing the visibility of women and girls in textbooks, but whether this visibility goes beyond tokenism is debatable. The existing literature on gender portrayal focuses on two aspects: qualities and roles of the genders.

Gender Qualities. Female protagonists in children’s textbooks in India are often associated with qualities such as being loving, vulnerable, affectionate, nurturing and needing protection. Male protagonists, on the contrary, are associated with qualities like bravery, strength, determination and independence (Bhog, 2002), which align with larger societal perceptions of gender. A glaring difference between male and female illustrations with regards to intellectual qualities has been found in another study wherein less than 10% of female illustrations are shown to be portraying their cognitive abilities while more than 90% of the male illustrations are shown to do the same (Kumari, 2014). In a study of the books in various states, it was found that women are generally portrayed as passive, dutiful and confined to the home (Pandey, 2006). The study also observed that men are shown with powerful qualities, whereas women are shown mostly as powerless. Women and girls being shown as weak and malleable while men and boys being shown as heroic (Kalia, 2014) is a way to retain power with the dominant group in the larger cultural context (Manjekar, 1999).

Gender Roles. Along with qualities associated with men and women, research has also inspected the role difference between these two in textbooks. Through these studies, language textbooks were found to abide by traditional roles of both these genders: while women were portrayed as wives and mothers confined to their homes, men were depicted in professional roles who were shown to be rarely at home (Nambissan, 2005; Majumdar & Mooji, 2012). Similarly, in another analysis of primary school textbooks, while most illustrations were of men, the few where women were visible illustrated them in domestic roles (Bhog, 2002). Parashar & Singh (2020) divide these roles into active and passive roles. An active role means the character takes up a position of dominance, whereas a passive role implies a more subordinate role, usually in the margins or the background. Their analysis of textbooks has shown that men take up significantly more space in active roles than women do. Additionally, when men are shown in passive roles, it is usually in relation to another man in an active role and never a woman (Parashar & Singh, 2020). An analysis done by Kumari in 2014 concluded that more than 80% of professional activities illustrated were carried out by male characters, as also seen in Figure 1, and around 50% of family roles were carried out by male characters. Traditional roles were still carried out by women while their proportion in professional activities was significantly less as compared to that of men’s (Kumari, 2014). When it comes to roles in sports and activities, not surprisingly, male characters are portrayed more prominently. Boys are often illustrated as playing outdoor games like cricket and hockey, while girls are typically shown as playing indoor games like drawing and playing with pebbles (Dawar & Anand, 2017). Any activities that did not require much physical strength, like hopscotch and skipping, were shown with female characters. Only few games like carroms, clay modelling and chess were illustrated with both girls and boys (Amruthraj, 2012).

One of the strategies used by NCERT in order to depict equality between men and women was to employ ‘role reversals’ in textbooks. The production of new textbooks justified the changes with the ‘If men can do it, so can women’ logic. These changes came in the form of showing men in the kitchen, while women were being shown to read the newspaper. The few cases where the achievements of women were written, there was seemingly no thought given to how the very concept of writing

accounts of great men's lives needed rethinking, according to the National Focus Group on Gender Issues in Education (2016). For instance, when women like Rani Jhansi and Madam Curie were written about as role models for children, they were still predominantly defined by their domestic roles. The authors of these textbooks were careful in highlighting that, despite their professional achievements, these women continued to perform their domestic roles (Pandey, 2006). In another analysis, it was observed that more than 80% of the role models shown were men (Kumari, 2014). The new publications of these textbooks with cosmetic revisions portray women with little to no aspiration for independence. Despite the achievements of women in India thus far, they are seldom portrayed to have a desire for achievement. When a State Project Director was questioned on such passive portrayals of women, he responded that it would be "too progressive to be socially acceptable" to portray them otherwise (Majumdar & Mooji, 2012, p. 135). As such, textbooks are riddled with stereotypes that ultimately prejudice young minds (Kalia, 2014).

The way in which the school curriculum presents gender relations is more often than not a mirroring of society. Based on majoritarian assumptions or ideas pushed by dominant groups, the curriculum usually results in the male as the normative epistemic subject, according to the National Focus Group on Gender Issues in Education (2016). It is also important to note that most of the author/publication teams of these textbooks are mostly male writers and publishers (Kumari, 2014; Desai, 2019). Hence, I believe that it is not surprising that the textbooks rarely take into consideration the contributions, opinions and perspectives of women.

Gender Intersectionalities

It is impossible for gender analysis and gender as a construct to operate in a vacuum. It is always associated with class, caste, religion, ability, ethnicity, sexuality and other such constructs in reality. Hence, gender cannot be looked at as a homogenous entity, as it fails to capture the web of complex relations that decide one's location in the society. Desai (2019), in studying the representation of gender, disability and religion in Indian textbooks, identified the absence of pronoun usage apart from she/her and he/him in Grade 1 textbooks in India. She also identified that the female characters would often bear a North/West-Indian name but very rarely a South/East-Indian name. Judging by the names and clothes worn by these women/girl characters, it can be said that they were of Hindu backgrounds (no religious markers were observed). She also observed that none of the illustrations had any apparent disability. While Desai's research brought forth a much-needed analysis on gender intersectionalities, there is a severe dearth and a very significant gap in gender research in this area.

Potential Impact of Biased Textbooks

As established earlier in the essay, textbooks are critical in disseminating gender socialisation (Islam & Asadullah 2018; Jabeen & Iliyas, 2012; Foroutan, 2012). Some researchers argue that the content in the textbooks manipulates children to mimic in the same manner. This essay focused specifically on primary school textbooks as the age at which children are exposed to these ideas is a very malleable age. These young learners also go on to internalise the idea of gender as the absolute truth rather than as a subjective view of gender (Paneru, 2019). Textbooks directly and indirectly affect and influence a child's upbringing by illustrating gender in a way that they grow up to consider acceptable and appropriate (UNESCO, 2009). These concepts are more prone to develop during the formative years of a child's life and have a tendency to influence children's ways of thinking (Bhattacharya, 2017).

Research has often suggested that the curriculum in schools reinforces instead of challenges the gender-based subject choices that children make as they move ahead in life (Nambissan, 2005). With the

representation of girls and women being almost marginal in maths and science textbooks, the subjects are considered more ‘masculine’, leading to an absence of role models for young girls to identify with. Research carried out by Nambissan (2005) to push for a gender perspective to inform policy change shows that a large majority of girls opt out of science and are not inclined towards mathematics as compared to boys. As such, one could argue that the subject choices made for the future are a reflection of gender representation in textbooks. Despite 4000 years of contributions to science and technology, most children, as well as adults, do not know about most pioneering women in science and technology. At a more subtle level, these textbooks are positively instrumental in preparing boys for the future while they prepare girls to take on more submissive roles.

Proposed Solutions in the Literature

While producing new textbooks might be an expensive and time-taking feat, it is still possible to engage children in critical gender discourses with the existing material. Majumdar & Mooji (2012) highlight the method through which Digantar, an NGO, deals with this issue. For example, if there is an illustration of a woman cooking in the kitchen, the guide then asks the student to write about their own family with a set of prompts like ‘What chores do your parents do at home?’ In this way, not only is the child made aware of the reality in most families, but is also prompted to engage in critical thinking about how it could be.

Apart from suggesting the elimination of gender stereotypical visual images from texts, some interesting recommendations made from existing literature are as follows: (a) Eliminating gender ‘firstness’ from textbooks by replacing ‘he/she’ or ‘his/her’ with gender neutral pronouns like ‘they/them’ (Dawar & Anand, 2012), (b) Paneru (2019) also emphasises the inclusion of all gender identities in illustrations, (c) Pandey (2006) highlights the need for textbooks committees with diverse members of different hierarchies and gender identities and (d) Majumdar & Mooij (2012) encourage creatively solving the issue of gender bias by discussing the case study of an alternative education centre in Kolkata that allows children to write their thoughts on existing textbooks making these texts a collection of unique narratives which are then read by other children as well. According to the National Curriculum Framework (2005), textbooks need to remain one of the most important instruments for equality, since for most of the children and also teachers, it is the only accessible and affordable resource for education. Hence, it is necessary to take creative and proactive steps to restructure the curriculum through a gendered perspective.

Conclusion

For generations textbooks have been created and published within urban settings of privilege and power. The lived realities of those who write and produce these textbooks are far removed from the lives of marginalised groups that they are failing to represent in these textbooks. Essentially, this might be why India has consistently seen the production of biased and stereotyped material despite decades of strong policy guides. Through this review, it is clear that while the visibility of women may have increased over time, the way in which they have been portrayed has not been a reflection of the progress women have made in Indian society, despite systemic and societal barriers. In the little that we know, women are usually shown as able-bodied and from a majoritarian religion. While research shows that there is a ‘dearth in representation of women’, does it mean there is a right amount of representation? Is there over-representation? Or should the percentage of women in textbooks correspond with the ratio of women in the country’s population? Researchers do not quantify this, perhaps, to not encourage tokenism and cosmetic edits and rightly so. Considering the limited literature, there is scope for national research on gender representation in textbooks, inclusive of all gender

minorities. Interviews with textbook authors should be conducted to understand factors that enable and disable the inclusion of diversity in textbook-creation and how their positionality affects this process. Student and teacher perceptions of the content of these textbooks need to be explored to understand the depth of impact of such representation on the main stakeholders of the teaching-learning process.

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