

Books to make you weep



RACING THROUGH BOOKS... teachers have no time for practical work or explanations

THE response to my last article 'Teaching History — a Political Agenda' (NSE, July 21) has been overwhelming. I have received letters and phone calls from eminent historians, administrators, journalists and others from all over Southern and Eastern India. Most important, they are people known for their lack of bias, particularly the historians. Everybody agreed on two important issues — the need for unbiased writing and the sheer boredom of our history books. Mr Michael Danino from Kothagiri added that some students had told him that they called the history lesson 'the sleeping pill'. I can well believe it. I found it a bore and a chore to flip through even a few random pages.

Other subjects are as bad, or worse. The worst subject is Civics. The NCERT books are so badly written that they can only inspire the student to run away from India. Do you know the Directive Principles of State Policy? I don't. The book says there are sixteen, but eighteen are listed. Do you know who is a good citizen? None of our politicians would pass the test. Janardan Poojary's discredited loan melas are

described as "a great help to the weaker section (sic)". Do you know why we are poor, what are our social problems and what are our relations with foreign countries? You would never believe the newspapers after that.

We seem to have only friends, with a mild aberration in our relations with Pakistan. There are only three evil effects of the caste system: "1.) Divided Nation. 2.) Plight of the low castes. 3.) Obstacle to country's progress." The problems of the Scheduled Tribes (the books do not define a scheduled tribe) are even easier to sum up: "educational backwardness, isolation, old methods of agriculture and social and economic backwardness".

A few years ago, I remember reading a chapter on national integration in my cook's daughter's school textbook. It was about three boys — Ram, Rehman and Robert. I now quote the chapter, which remains imprinted in my memory: "Ram is a Hindu, Rehman is a Muslim and Robert is a Christian. Ram wears a turban, Rahim wears a cap (topi) and Robert wears a hat. But Ram, Rahim and Robert are friends". The chapter was illustrated with the three boys in their different headgear. Now do you



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wonder why communal harmony is so elusive? They should have shown three scruffy schoolboys dressed in dirty shorts and shirts. The only headgear I have ever seen on young boys is a cricket cap. We must emphasize the commonness, not the differences, but the textbook writer did not think so.

Do our children need to know details that even a lawyer or an IAS officer would have to look up in his

Constitution of India? If you read a Civics textbook, you would not wonder why India spent 50 years in backwardness. It makes India out to be one of the most boring and useless nations. The five-year plans, the various government schemes to alleviate poverty and the functioning of the parliament are so dull that civics makes history look like a whodunit!

Geography is a fascinating subject. Who does not like to travel to different nations, learn about different cultures and peoples? India's natural resources and wildlife are so varied and interesting, yet there is so much information and so little soul in our textbooks. They are full of details about climate, vegetation, physical features, minerals, population and any thing else that is not covered by the other subjects. The birth of our planet, the role of water and the development of life forms, the sustainability of life forms and their inter-dependence in a complex web, is much better subject matter.

The student learns about different types of rocks, but is unaware of a simple method of preventing landslides: growing grass and trees on hill slopes. Agriculture is a part of geography, but it does not teach the village school boy better farming

methods. And, in our rain-starved nation, our books do not teach methods of conserving water or increasing ground water infiltration. Geography should become a travelogue, whetting the child's appetite to succeed, make money and travel.

The science textbooks are a tragedy. They have to be "mugged" (learned by rote, for the uninitiated), for most schools do not have laboratories, good or bad. Scientific experiments are delineated in great detail, which the students have to learn and reproduce, as if they actually conducted each one themselves. So students 'mug' up complicated experiments in Physics and Chemistry with no comprehension. At the end of the day, they cannot test their water for e-coli or heavy metal contamination, nor do they know how long the water must be boiled to destroy bacterial infection. This information is surely more important in view of the many water-borne infections in our country.

Biology — botany and zoology — is the science of life. But, by the time the student finishes naming every part of a worm's body or describing the sex life of the cockroach or cutting up a rat, he becomes indifferent and insensitive to animals. He mugs up the process of photosynthesis, but is unable to appreciate the role of plants in sustaining life, and the importance of conserving forests and greenery.

When William Wordsworth described "Yon solitary Highland lass", I doubt whether he imagined that a little boy in a coastal village in India would be learning it, with no understanding of the meaning of yon or lass or the Highlands. To return to my cook's daughter, I once explained to her a lesson about Simonedes in ancient Greece. It took me quite a while to explain where Greece was, and that I did not know what Simonedes meant. She was unable to think beyond Tambaram to the south of Madras and Anna Nagar to the west. A world of nation-states was beyond her comprehension! Surely there are Indian writers whose references would be more comprehensible.

I do not blame the textbook writers — they are given a heavy syllabus and have to produce a book to suit it. But I fault them for introducing personal bias and boring presentations. The syllabus is designed by professors teaching in colleges and universities, who have the advantage of easy curricula that they barely complete, giving them time to write copious books. Our students are the guinea pigs. Further, a subject specialist need not be a good communicator and vice versa.

A combination of specialist, writer and illustrator is needed to produce good books for children. Writing school textbooks is far more difficult

than writing for adults. You have to hold the attention, convey new ideas and ensure their retention. Our schoolbooks would never pass this test. The vast syllabus and extensive information, coupled with the need to complete the portions, make teachers race through the books with no time for practical work or explanations, thus compounding the problem.

Private publishers produce very well written books for private schools whose parents are willing to pay good prices. Unfortunately, these reach very few children. The vast majority of our students must make do with poor quality books produced by indifferent authors on paper of such low quality that the print goes through one side of the page to the other, making reading a visual problem. In our country, we waste money on so many things. Can we not spend some well on good books, good schools, good equipment and good teachers? Investment in education is an investment for the future.

The Ministry of Human Resource Development initiated a programme to review and redo, if necessary, the syllabi and the textbooks.

Unfortunately, this got mired in a left versus right controversy. The two groups are still slugging it out, while children continue to carry, on bent backs, heavy school bags full of books. The erstwhile writers of these books are, naturally, reluctant to see them withdrawn, as they will lose their lucrative royalties. So they raise an irrelevant cry about saffronization. And sections of the press and the parliament echo this cry. Nobody cares for the education of our children.

Our new President, Dr A P J Abdul Kalam, has emphasized the importance of empowering the child to make him develop into a responsible citizen, and the importance of education in national development. The quality of that education is equally important. It is not enough to count the increasing number of literates. What are our children learning, how relevant is their education? How creative does it make them, can they become scientists or writers or thinkers of the future?

The clichéd description of the village school with one teacher for all classes is unfortunately true. Without subject specialists, laboratory equipment and good textbooks, can we expect our children to be better and brighter? Few children have the opportunity of studying in private schools, which are undoubtedly more committed to good education. This is where good textbooks can make a difference, by giving all children an equal opportunity.

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