

# India: Devaluation and Distortion of Human Rights in Textbooks

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As someone who stepped into the arena of public expression and action in spontaneous rebellion against deprivation and exploitation, I have instinctive difficulties in accepting the term “human rights” and its recent common, almost-casual usage. Although I invoke human rights instruments in my work, I invariably stumble when the expression lands in my path, as a question mark I am not ready to deal with yet. The gilding of coinage gives rise to anxieties that the glitter may hide the disturbing flaws of conceptualization, identification, and composition from the undiscerning eye and distract us into blind acceptance of this work of the United Nations (UN) General Assembly.

That the controversy over human rights conceptualization is deeply rooted in Western sociocultural and political systems is well known. Many activists must have found that the UN-codified human rights do not match our intuitive zeroing-in on violations and our perceptions of what the rights of wronged peoples should be. The tensions between rights of different groups are not easy to resolve. Juridical collages and amalgamations of different UN conventions, covenants, declarations, principles, and protocols do not always yield a perfect picture.<sup>1</sup>

The Constitution empowers the Supreme Court to interpret it and to review laws and judicial and executive decisions. The Constitution’s potential for developing and updating human rights is therefore great. However, the quality of judicial pronouncement is not assured; hence, the expositions of the Supreme Court may not project a great image of human rights.

Flaws and incompleteness are not bad news. Precepts cannot be magically pulled out of the Assembly Hall. Ideas dealing with complexities of human lives and civilizations need time

and space to develop. That human rights formatting is neither complete nor perfect leaves us with plenty of creative work to be done. The juxtaposition of human rights and school children provides one such exploration and formulation adventure.

## **Old, New, Newer Rights of Children**

For a right to be a beacon and enforceable, it must be specific, and all other semantics associated with it must be precise and transparent. Our focus is on schoolchildren, so we should be sure of the definitions of the words such as child, school, education, and human rights, surely, and their baggage. What is a school, for example? Is a building an essential component of the concept? Are printed textbooks the sum and substance of schooling? Is the expression a noun or a verb or both? Should we presume the UN instruments to be the last word on a subject? How are the rights to freedom and culture accommodated in a system? I am not a pedagogue and this paper is not a plea for a legal thesaurus. But the ferment of such questioning does bubble in the stream of thought in this paper.

The theme of this paper, split into clauses for convenience, is as follows:

- Children's mental and physical ability, and needs are relevant to evaluation of school textbooks.
- Ignoring this fact leads to erosion of child rights.
- Child rights vis-a-vis textbooks ought to be developed before introducing child rights and human rights in school curriculums.
- Some textbooks distort or devalue human rights and ideas about them.
- Deviance in the syllabus and textbooks must also be corrected before teaching and learning material on human rights are introduced into schools.

These propositions seek sustenance from UN instruments and the Constitution and extend to newer, needed formulations such as a specifically scripted fundamental right to childhood.

I would like to explore and expand a new charter of education rights around which this critique is built:

- *Right to childhood*, which has not been codified in so many words, but is implicit in the UN and the Constitution's articles on education, child labor, special care, etc.<sup>2</sup>
- *Right to learning experience*. This should be a foremost, primary right. It should include a right *not* to be targeted as a crowd or as consumers of packaged mixes to be mindlessly stored in memory and ladled out at tests and examinations. It is the right to participate in the process of learning, decisions about learning and, learning itself.
- *Right to education*, which the UN instruments and the Constitution recognize.<sup>3</sup>
- *Right to culture*, which is endorsed by many UN conventions and documents, and the Constitution.<sup>4</sup>

- *Right to information*, which is formalized by the UN General Assembly and the International Convention on the Rights of the Child, and is implicit in the Constitution.<sup>5</sup>
- *Right to creative* expression and activity as a development right.
- *Right to safe schools*, implicitly guaranteed in the Constitution.<sup>6</sup>
- *Right to equality* of access and opportunity.<sup>7</sup>
- *Right to peace*. Peace is not merely absence of war, but implies a positive construct and resolution of tensions and conflicts.

I feel great affinity with the International Convention on the Rights of the Child, Article 29:

- State Parties agree that the education of the child shall be directed to:
  - The development of the child's personality, talents and mental and physical abilities to their fullest potential;
  - The development of respect for human rights and fundamental freedoms, and for the principles enshrined in the Charter of the United Nations;
  - The development of respect for the child's parents, his or her cultural identity, language and values, for the national values of the country from which he or she may originate and for civilizations different from his or her own;
  - The preparation of the child for responsible life in a free society, in the spirit of understanding, peace, tolerance, equality of sexes, and friendship among all peoples, ethnic, national and religious groups and persons of indigenous origin;
  - The development of respect for the natural environment.
- No part of the present article or article 28 shall be construed so as to interfere with

the liberty of individuals or bodies to establish and direct educational institutions, subject always to the observance of the principles set forth in paragraph 1 of the present article and requirements that the education given in such institutions shall conform to such minimum standards as may be laid by the State.

### **Selection of Textbooks for this Paper**

In our multilingual, federal nation, syllabi, standards, and contents of prescribed textbooks are as naturally diverse as their sociocultural and political contexts. In the western state of Maharashtra, schooling is available in several languages. In Mumbai, the Maharashtra state capital, the spectrum of school management sectors is broad and varied. Some schools are set up and controlled by clerics—Muslim, Christian, Hindu, and Parsee. Some are run by trusts, and may be elitist and expensive or cater to slum dwellers. Some are run by the central government, the state government, the local (municipal) administration, and private bodies such as nongovernmental organizations that offer nonformal education on sidewalks, in buses, in open spaces, and in slums. The students and parents have a choice of the State Board for the Secondary School Certificate Examination, the national Central Board School Examination, and the Indian School Certificate Examination, which is supposed to meet Commonwealth standards. The municipal corporation of Mumbai offers primary school education in eight languages: the national language, Hindi; the state language, Marathi; the languages of the large communities in the city—Gujarathi, Kannada, Tamil, Telugu, and Malayalam; and English, the national language of administration.

Given this complexity, an exhaustive study is not possible unless multilingual talents are pooled together. I had to choose and circumscribe the focus of this study, taking into account the following:

- my proficiency in a language and the knowledge of its literature; and
- my concerns as a child rights campaigner.

So for this presentation I opted for the language readers of Hindi, Marathi, and English, and the textbooks of history and civics for grades V to X. They offer a reasonably broad panorama. It must be mentioned that all schoolbooks are not sold under one roof and some textbooks may be out of print. Thus not all the textbooks are available in the market.

State bodies, using the guidelines given by the National Council of Educational Research and Training (NCERT), select the textbook contents.

For the awesome task of writing and selecting texts, the state education councils have to rely on diverse talents. Therefore, no matter how great the effort invested in execution of this responsibility, there can be no assurance of an unblemished outcome. I certainly would not dwell on small spots and smudges.

The children have to study 3-4 languages—the medium of instruction, which may be an Indian language; Hindi; the state language, if it is different from the language of instruction; and, at the same stage, English, if it is not the medium of instruction. Thus, a Hindi-medium school student in Mumbai would have to study Marathi and English. A Marathi-medium student would have to study Hindi and English.

The language other than the medium of instruction is known as the second language. For a Hindi-medium school, for example, Marathi could be second language, and for an English-medium student, Hindi and Marathi.

I divide this analysis into broad theses:

- violence in school textbooks;
  - validation of physical and mental punishment;
  - use of violence for dispute settlement;
- the environment as a “natural” casualty;
- martyrdom and war; and
- gender discrimination.

### **Violence in School Textbooks: Validation of Physical and Mental Punishment**

Let me begin by clarifying some of my value positions and perspectives.

Children generally may not have problems with the cruelties and killings described or depicted in stories, and therefore adults should perhaps not be so protective unless the brutality is excessive or sadistic or is rationalized.

Classic creative works should not be censored out of children's lives simply because of their violent content. But when it is time to introduce students to great literature or films, care must be taken so that young minds do not view the violent works as parables or moral stories. In short, text should not be puritanical.

This affirmation does not help the Maharashtra state school education councils and the textbook production and curriculum research councils to counter my sharp criticism of violence ingrained in some of the Maharashtra school texts. The texts project abuse, assault, physical and mental punishment, degradation, torture, and maiming as good, useful, normal, acceptable aspects of human behavior and as dependable, effective, role-model-approved tools of correction.

In a Hindi (second language) textbook for 10-year-olds, an illustrated story tells how M. K. Gandhi as a child was caned by his teacher for coming late to school. The future Mahatma accepts the corporal punishment as deserved. The child, who was to become the most enduring symbol of nonviolence in the world, is presented to children as a person who legitimizes teachers' violence as a disciplinary tool. In the Marathi (second language) textbook for grade VI, the teacher canes pupils for littering the classroom. One of the boys—who grew up to be a legendary freedom fighter, the thinker and social reformer Bal Gangadhar Tilak—refuses to extend his palm to receive the beating because he insists he had not created the mess. Tilak is sent out of the class for

his protest, a punishment he accepts. The moral of the story is not a protest against corporal punishment. No one has any problem with it. The lesson is on honesty.

In a Marathi poem about rain for pupils 12 years old and above, a child pleasantly asks his mother, "Why has the sky been crying since yesterday morning? Do you think his mother must have beaten him the whole day? Does she also get very angry as you do?" The illustration depicts a bemused mother. Thus, an abusive mother is projected as pleasant a being as the poet's mother and associated with a universal phenomenon as rain.

In a story purporting to resolve the tension between classroom discipline and giving space to the pupil's creativity,<sup>8</sup> a teacher emotionally suffocates and mentally tortures a boy who has painted a natuescape from memory during the class assignment of geometrical scale drawing (of a cube). The teacher's priorities are obedience, discipline, and strict adherence to the teacher's schedule and scheme of teaching. The child's creativity, sensitivity, and instinctive exposition of talent are evils in the context of the teacher's agenda. Agitated and stressed, the boy tears up his painting and promises to do creative work only at home. This is projected as positive outcome of the degradation and the anguish suffered by the child, and proof that the teacher's brutality was a just method of bringing order into the student's life.

### **Use of Violence for Dispute Settlement**

How do you instruct errant citizens in social change? By resorting to threat of or real thrashing: that is the message in a textbook, which, according to its foreword, aims at "personality development, love of literature, realization and growth of esteem for mother tongue, society, and country, and enrichment of social and moral awareness" (translated from the Marathi). The introduction to the story<sup>9</sup>—

a parable of valor and compassion(!)—explains that it is a “personality sketch of the outlaw Sawla, who brings happiness to a family of women destroyed by dowry.”

What is the greatness of Sawla, whose “huge body matches his giant deeds”? He slaps and threatens to kill with his “glittering” axe a man who, along with his young daughter Kashi, hides in the bushes on sighting Sawla. The man pleads for Kashi’s safety as he explains why he hid. He says that the bridegroom and his family had rejected Kashi for not paying the promised dowry. Sawla orders Kashi and her father to accompany him to the groom’s house. Under pain of death, he achieves reconciliation between the greedy, heartless groom and the victim bride. Among Kashi’s heartfelt wishes is a prayer that Sawla’s sword should always be sharp. What do children learn from this story about conflict resolution, about a woman’s ideal behavior as a daughter, a bride and a citizen, and about the rule of law?

One of the “just” acts of Shivaji, the seventh-century nationalist rebel king who is virtually deified in Maharashtra, was to order sadistic punishment for rape and murder.<sup>10</sup> The offender’s arms and legs were to be chopped off and the torso paraded around in public on the back of an ass.

I am quite sure that no historian or ballad singer has ever come across even a hint of such an event in the life of Shivaji. The textbook does not identify or authenticate the story, which is, in my opinion, also a bad piece of literature as it exceeds writer’s license. I have several problems with this wretched piece.

The failure to clarify whether the narrative is a piece of history or a rewritten legend or merely an inventive fiction is a derogation of children’s right to correct information and quality education. Worse, the textbook editors assert that Shivaji’s “love for justice” and appreciation of human qualities find expression in the lesson. What is appreciable in sadistic violence and public display as an interactive mode of contact between the ruler and the citizens?

Unbelievably, this savage, mawkishly sentimental and, I am sure, piece of sheer fancy is meant for students in Hindi- and English-medium schools. The avowed objective of the Education Council is “to inculcate among non-Marathi schoolchildren, the love of and affinity for Marathi.”

In one *samuj*<sup>11</sup>—literally, lesson—a husband publicly slaps and humiliates his wife in order to eliminate a dowry demand by the wife’s brother and father during the wife’s brother’s wedding. In this “lesson,” the “wisdom” of the author-husband flowers in his violent behavior and in his treatment of his wife as a subjugated nonentity. The story, so shockingly derogatory to women, will be discussed in the section on gender discrimination.

### Environment a “Natural” Casualty?

Of all the Anglo-Indian writings, the selection of Gieve Patel’s “On Killing a Tree”<sup>12</sup> most defies logic. The guide questions attempt to project the brutal descriptions of the tree and the savagery required to destroy it completely, as proof of life in a tree.

In the anecdote on Shivaji’s “majestic” behavior mentioned in the section on violence,<sup>13</sup> the ideal king’s strategy for curbing the menace of foxes is to reward the killing of the animals by “brave” citizens who must bring the foxtail as proof of their good deed.

The following poem<sup>14</sup> for Marathi-medium grade VIII adolescent pupils poses a destructive conflict between environment and triumphant science:

I shall crush under my feet  
the moon, the sun, the planets and the stars,  
banish the gods and demons from the heavens  
to the netherworld.  
I shall enslave air,  
tether rain at my gate.  
The goddess of wealth would feel ashamed  
if she saw my prosperity.

### Martyrdom and War

Is martyrdom noble? Is childhood the right time to assert and reiterate annihilation as an ideal? Is sociopolitical distress the right cause for *harakiri*? Do precaution, good planning and preparedness, dialogue, a commitment to philosophy of nonviolence devalue courage or sacrifice?

At what stage should textbooks move beyond flag flying and into the war zone? Is war wonderful if used to resolve conflict among nations? Does the student have the right to know of modes other than war to maintain national security and achieve peace? If not, does Indian education have a special obligation to inform the children of the ideas, worldviews, and behavior guidelines propounded by our revered protagonists of *ahimsa* (non-violence) and peace—Mahavir Jain, Gautam Buddha, Emperor Ashok, Mahatma Gandhi?

These are disturbing questions if the right to childhood, to innocence, to complete information, to opting for peace are accepted as human rights concerns.

It seems that in their enthusiasm for value education in patriotism, social responsibility, and selfless courage, as prescribed by the National Education Policy of 1986 and the National Council of Educational Research and Training, the text selectors rushed to meet the agenda without a pause for a thought to children's needs.

“Freedom Struggle” is a horrifying, sickening story in the textbook for 11-12-year-olds about the “glorious” death of six “spirited and radiant” 8-10-year-old schoolboys in a close-range police assault with guns and daggers.<sup>15</sup> The gory deaths are purported to be in endorsement of Mahatma Gandhi's 1942 “Quit India” call. The police of the British colonial government charge into a parade of schoolchildren agitating for India's freedom. As policemen attack the children with batons and gunfire, child-hero Shirish bares his chest, chal-

lenging them to shoot him, target him well, and try again if they fail in the first round. After he crumples to the ground, his friends face the police and die from bullet and stab wounds. A “cow” dies in the gunfire, but it is not clear whether she is an animal or meant to be a representation of women. Shirish dies begging for water. The children are not alone when they meet their gory deaths. Adults watch the children's protest and martyrdom from their homes. Lawyers witness the killings from the steps of the court building. The police threaten the few men who are “moved” by the dying child's cries, so no one brings him water. In glorifying the children's martyrdom, the authors ask, What is water? The children died in an attempt to attain for Mother India the immortal drink—*amrut*—of freedom!

Another lesson, projected as a real-life event, records how a youth, Bapu Gaidhani (literally, master of cows), ignores the presence of the fire brigade to rescue children from a two-story building and, half-burnt, re-enters the raging fires to rescue cattle, particularly a cow, and loses his life.<sup>16</sup> The youth glows with satisfaction during the fiery action. Mahatma Gandhi is said to have eulogized his parents for the spiritual richness they received through the son's sacrifice. No mention is made anywhere about the precautions he should have taken or the help the fire brigade could have given him.

Am I reading too much into the selections? You would not think so if you knew how the textbook editors completely distorted the intent of *chhayavadi* (romantic) litterateur Mahadevi Verma in her famous poem “Mitane Ka Adhikar.”<sup>17</sup> The poet romanticizes surrender to sorrow and self-effacement. She argues that pain-free immortals do not experience god's grace of compassion and therefore do not know the depths of melancholy and the generosity of yielding. She eulogizes the joy of merger with a greater universe by accepting agony. But our educator's introduction “informs” the 15-year-old students that the poet

believes “in extreme sacrifices for betterment of humanity” and “self-annihilation to light up the world.” Thus, a poem about pushing the borders of suffering to sublimate one’s existence is presented to the schoolchildren as an ode to the wondrous aspects of martyrdom.

There are countless stories about battles and belligerency. At least one should definitely be deleted from textbooks. In it a World War II veteran is in sickbed when Pakistan attacks India. The soldier is proud when his son, an air force officer, dies in action. He, too, wishes to be killed in action rather than succumb to illness in bed. He dies of a heart attack on learning of the end of the Indo-Pakistani war. The most disturbing aspect of the narrative is that it is replete with descriptions of the veteran’s intoxication at the thought of armed combat and euphoria over martyrdom. The introduction to the tragic tale is hyperbolic.

Wars are a reality and their depictions represent both the student’s right to know and the litterateurs’ right of free expression. But should wars be idealized? Should men be admired for their bloodlust?

Should children not be taught other ways of conflict resolution and their right to peace in the same book? Is peace not a powerful concept?

### **Gender Discrimination**

I have often taken positions opposed by feminists and women’s groups. It was I who persuaded the government to accord a distinct identity to girl-children and launch separate programs for them. But, unlike feminists, I believe that girls belong to the children’s, not the female, stream, although sex discrimination is an aspect of girls’ spectrum of rights.

I record this for a single reason: to appeal that, whatever the readers’ position on women’s issues, they examine my critique with an open mind.

### **Stereotypical Images of Girls**

Millions of Indian girls and women daily perform myriad tasks, from weeding fields to weaving cloth to doing assembly work in factories to nursing, trading, piloting planes, to leading socioeconomic, cultural, creative, and political activities. They are participants in artistic and intellectual fields.

But with rarest of rare exceptions, they are all invisible in the Maharashtra state school textbooks and the Indian School Certificate Examination (ICSE) books. The ICSE curriculums are also obsessed with the West, misinterpret Indian events, and marginalize the Indian elements. The ICSE biases are a damnable class by themselves, hence their derogation of females must be dealt with separately.

When a fraction of the 48 percent the nation’s citizens does surface in the prescribed school studies, the typical girl in both the Secondary School Certificate Examination (SSCE) and ICSE texts is most likely to be emotional, gossipy, nervous, clumsy, generally incapable of taking care of herself but good at caring for the family—a home helper. The women are mainly good or great mothers, rarely supportive of their husbands, and irredeemably minor or inconsequential players in family and public life. In the ICSE books, they are also difficult teachers or nondescript receptionists.

The female images in SSCE prose texts are tabulated below. The letter “L” identifies the girl/woman as a leading persona; “m,” as a minor/inconsequential character. Positive (+) images include realistic and literary portrayals of girls and women. The negative (-) list includes stereotypes of them as emotional and dependent.

<i>Language of text</i>	<i>School medium of instruction</i>	<i>Grade</i>	<i>Numbers of boys and men</i>	<i>Chapters with human cast</i>	<i>Male*</i>	<i>Male (-)</i>	<i>Female*</i>	<i>Female (-)</i>
Marathi	Marathi	VI	03 B 24 M	19/24	04	07/27	00	03/07
Marathi	Marathi	VII	02 B 30 M	18/21	02	07/32	00	05/06
Marathi	Marathi	VIII	01 B 21 M	19/22	04	05/22	02	04/09
Marathi	Non-Marathi	VI	02 B 23 M	19/25	04	06/25	00	04/06
Marathi	Non-Marathi	VII	00 B 13M	10/14	04	04/13	01	02/03
Marathi	Non-Marathi	VIII	01 B 18 M	12/19	08	01/19	01	01/03
Marathi	Non-Marathi	IX	02 B 09 M	11/12	04	02/11	01	¼
Marathi	Non-Marathi	X	01 B 17 M	10/12	04	05/18	01	02/06
Marathi	Non-Marathi	VI-X	12 B +	155 M	34	37	06	22/43

<i>Language of text</i>	<i>School medium of instruction</i>	<i>Grade</i>	<i>Numbers of girls and women</i>	<i>Chapters with human characters</i>	<i>Roles in which girls and women are sketched</i>	<i>Image</i>	<i>(+)</i>	<i>(-)</i>
Marathi	Marathi	VI	2 G 5 W	19/24	1. Child worker 2. Housewife 3. Housewife 4. Social worker 5. Grandmother 6. Mother 7. Daughter	L real L (-) m (-) L (+) L L (+) L emot	04	03
Marathi	Marathi	VII	1 G 5 W	18/21	1. Housewife 2. Sister 3. Mother-in-law 4. Daughter-in-law 5. Mother	L (-) L sacrf L (-) L (-) m emot		05
Marathi	Marathi	VIII	9W	19/22	1. Housewife 2. Bride 3. Maestro 4. Teacher 5. Grandma 6. Mother 7. Street artist 8. Social worker 9. Farm workers	m (-) m depn L* (+) L (+) L (+) L tough L real L* real L truble	05	04
Marathi	Non-Marathi	VI	2 G 2 S 3 W	19/24	1. Mother 2. Symbol 3. Grandmother 4. Milk woman 5. Dister 6. Symbol 7. Students	L (-) L (-) L (+) L (+) L sacrf L depn m depn	02	05



Continuation

Language of text	School medium of instruction	Grade	Numbers of girls and women	Chapters with human characters	Roles in which girls and women are sketched	Image	(+)	(-)
Marathi	Non-Marathi	VII	3 W	10/14	1. Wife 2. Social worker 3. Travelers	L depn L* (+) L (-)	01	01
Marathi		VIII	2 W	12/19	1. Freedom fighter 2. Grandmother	L* (+) L (+)	02	00
Marathi	Non-Marathi	IX	4 W	11/12	1. Pioneer 2. Mother 3. Mother 4. Wife			
Marathi	Non-Marathi	X	1 G 5 W	10/12	1. Housewife 2. Wife 3. Wife 4. Wife 5. Daughter 6. Wife	L lit. L (+) m (+) L* (+) m victim L victim	03	01
7 textbks		VI-IX	6G+2s+35W	116	7.	35 L 8 m	21	22
Child worker		01	Daughters		02			
Laborers		03	Sisters		02			
Teacher		01	Mothers		06			
Social workers		03	Grandmothers		04			
Pioneer		01	Mother-in-law		01			
Maestro		01	Daughter-in-law		01			
Freedom fighter		01	Wives/Housewives		12			
Students		01			<b>28</b>			
Travelers		01						
Symbols		02						
		<b>13</b>						

\* = well-known person or legend; B = boys; M = men; G = girls; W = women; L = leading character; m = minor character; (+) = positive; (-) = negative; trubl = in trouble; depen = dependent; sacrf = sacrifices for family; emot = emotional.

Symbolism indicative of gender roles is included in the tables but excluded from the final tally, which is restricted to human beings.

Total tally:

Girls and women at school or work or traveling	07
Well-known achievers	06
Housebound family members	28
Symbols of feminine characteristics	02

A comparison with the numbers of male characters (good, bad, heroic, or legendary) highlights the suppression of women's roles and their human qualities. Boys are heroic, compassionate, and responsible, while girls are vulnerable, dependent, victims, and willing to sacrifice themselves for their family's well-being or whims.

Of 35 women characters in eight textbooks, 27 are housebound. Only 3 out of the 12 wives/housewives are positive (essentially supportive of their husband); 3 out of 6 mothers are negative; of the 6 women achievers, 3 are social workers. Among the six girl characters, one is a child worker, one a victim, one in trouble, one emotional; one dependent; and one sacrifices herself.

There are 42 girls and women and 167 males, or a ratio of 25:75. Of 34 heroes, only 6 are women, or a ratio of 17.6: 82.4. Female symbols are negative, male symbols positive. Of 167 males, only 37 (22%) are repressive, cruel, greedy, nags, nuisances, sufferers, and victims. Women are depicted as strong and thoughtful only when they are mothers and grandmothers.

In a cast of 167 men, 130 are political executives, leaders, reformers, freedom fighters, litterateurs, industrialists, lawyers, judges, village craftsmen, farmers, honest, studious, and, as family men, supportive. But women are projected as problems half the time, and rarely as role models for achievers.

The ICSE books try to make up for the absence of stories with girls and women as lead characters by portraying females in illustrations. And what do girls do in the pictures? They are likely to get into trouble; they help in the kitchen; they sew; they baby-sit; they nag.

Women are mostly housewives, occasionally teachers and receptionists. Boys and men may be involved in a variety of outdoor activities when not relaxing.

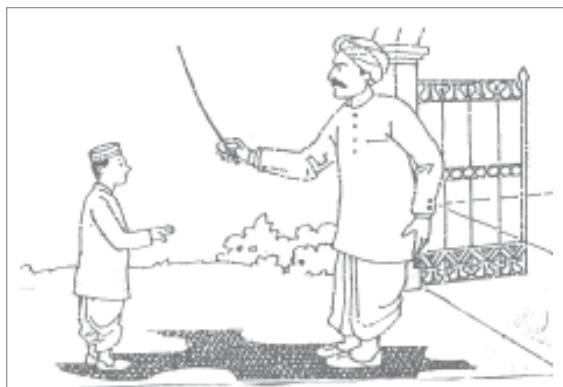
The illustration below is from *Advanced English Coursebook* for ICSE middle school. The year level is not specified.

#### Wife Beating Promoted in Lesson on Gender Rights

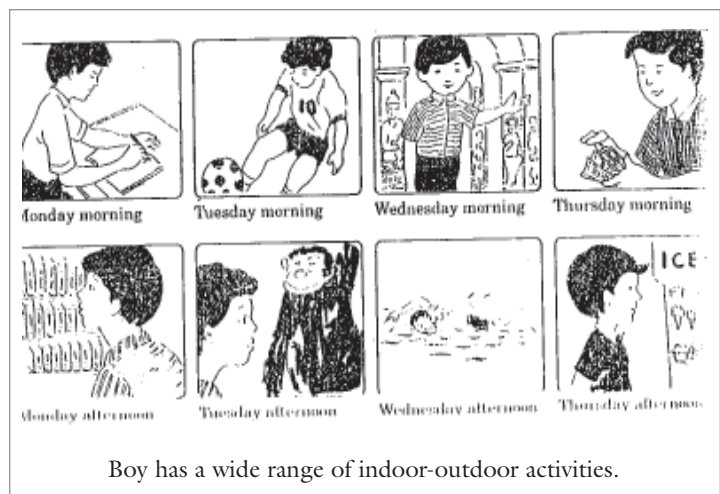
If all the textbooks were cleansed of all biases and the vacuum filled with affirmative material, but if one samuj<sup>18</sup> survived, it would be sufficient to demand accountability of the Textbook Board.

The author of the story is introduced as a writer whose forte is depiction of tensions within rural families and *their resolution*. In the samuj, the textbook editors inform the student, the lesson is given to the father-in-law. The wedding of Daji, brother of our “hero’s” wife Shyamala, is held up because the father-in-law wants dowry. Daji, too, succumbs to greed. Our “hero” has a solution.

He hollers for Shyamala, attracting the attention of all present in the crowded wedding hall. She “rushes in, all decked up, showing off, joyous with memories of their own wedding.” As the stunned guests watch, he slaps her hard on her cheek. As she turns away humiliated and tormented, he pulls her back, hits



The Future ‘Mahatma’ M.K. Gandhi Coolly to accepting caning as disciplinary punishment for being late to school.



Boy has a wide range of indoor-outdoor activities.



a. *If you do not get up, you will be late.*



b. *Unless you submit your work, you will be in trouble.*



c. ... you ask him, I am sure that he will help you.



d. *I shall not go ... you come too.*



e. ... you wait here, I will see if Mr Gupta is in his room.



f. ... you finish before I do, please wait for me.



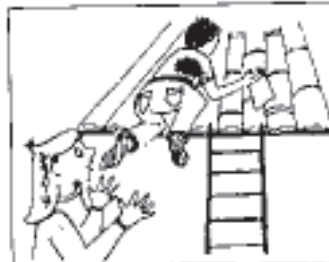
g. ... he replies soon, I shall write to him again.



h. *Bring the trousers back ... they do not fit.*



i. *You'll cut yourself ... you are not careful.*



a. *fall/hurt*



b. *drop/break*



c. *touch/get bitten*



d. *cut/be sick*



e. *fall/break*



f. *take off/get burned*

Girls nag, get into trouble, need help.

her hard again, and shouts out his demand for the dowry he never received when he married her. If his wish is not instantly fulfilled, he threatens, it is the end of their marriage. Chastened, the greedy father drops the dowry demand and orders his son's wedding to go ahead. The author concludes, "It took me some time to explain and soften her (*samjoot kadhayala*), but in the midst of it all, I had a full meal and burped."

The lessons of the story, as I understand them, are the following:

- A wife is a possession devoid of rights of dignity, integrity of her person, equal status, and can be the object of whimsical abuse and public humiliation.
- Wife-beating is great if the cause is right.
- Mental and physical violence is a wonderful, reliable tool for teaching relatives a lesson, and its use should not cause guilt or interfere with enjoyment of a feast.
- A man's sensibilities about and sensitivity to public causes justifies cruelty to family members.
- The hurts caused to wives do not last long. Women's emotions can be satisfactorily manipulated with some effort, but without taking away a macho man's glory and enjoyment of life.

### **Violation of Right to Culture, Dignity, and Correct Information**

#### Violation of Culture Rights

The right to culture surely includes correct and comprehensive information about one's culture. The Maharashtra text selectors seem to be unaware of India's myriad cultures and even the dominant cultures. For example, the scores of language and history textbooks make no reference to the northeastern region (known as a group of seven sister states), the home of distinctive ethnic streams, where women have major roles as managers of the village economy.

The Indian Union has 26 states and 6 centrally administered union territories. The names and the languages of the states are listed below to give the reader a sense of multiplicity of regions and cultures. The language identified in parentheses is only the main, official language.

- Andhra Pradesh (Telugu, tribal languages)
- Arunachal Pradesh (several tribal languages)
- Assam (Assamese and tribal languages)
- Bihar (Hindi, its dialects, tribal languages)
- Delhi (Hindi)
- Goa (Konkani)
- Gujerath (Gujerathi and Kacchi)
- Haryana (Haryanvi)
- Himachal Pradesh (Himachali, Pahadi)
- Jammu and Kashmir (Kashmiri, Dogra, Tibetan)
- Karnataka (Kannada and Konkani)
- Kerala (Malayalam)
- Madhya Pradesh (Hindi and tribal languages)
- Maharashtra (Marathi and several tribal languages)
- Manipur (Manipuri and tribal languages)
- Meghalaya (tribal languages)
- Mizoram (Mizo and other tribal languages)
- Nagaland (Naga and other tribal languages)
- Orissa (Oriya and tribal languages)
- Punjab (Punjabi)
- Rajasthan (Rajasthani, Marwari, tribal languages)
- Sikkim (Sikkimese and Tibetan)
- Tamil Nadu (Tamil)
- Tripura (tribal language and Bengali)
- Uttar Pradesh (Hindi, its dialects, Gadhwal, tribal languages)
- West Bengal (Bengali)

Eighteen languages (including the national language Hindi and the "heritage language" Sanskrit) are recognized by the Constitution for the purpose of public administration, edu-

cation, literary awards, etc. The tribal languages and other dialects number more than 250.

Some of the oldest and richest literature of the world is in three Indian languages—Marathi (and its sister dialects), Kannada, and Malayalam. Orissa, Assam, Bihar, and other states have some of the richest art forms. But reading the SSCE and ICSE textbooks, the student would not know of their existence, let alone their wealth and magnificence.

India is home to hundreds of tribes (635 were recorded by a study group), some of whom are the earth's oldest inhabitants.<sup>19</sup> Their role as major protectors of the environment has been acknowledged in several studies.<sup>20</sup> The Europeans could not colonize some major ethnic groups.<sup>21</sup> But our children do not even know of their existence.

The rich heritage of folk arts, the continuity of designs and work methods, the extraordinary spectrums of world news and religious thoughts, the diversities of languages and daily life—everything that gives the Indian people their unique identity—are excluded from textbooks. Our textbook selectors seem to have never read the admonition in ancient Sanskrit texts to respect the tribal peoples for their special role in preserving the nation's riches.

Tribal peoples constitute only 8% of the Indian population. But they and even the rural people—80% of the population—appear in textbooks as oddities to be patronized.

### Denigrating Our Heritage

The colonists' disdain for Indian religious ideas and literary heritages seems to have survived not merely as an occasional or dying relic but as intellectual theories, themes, beliefs, measures. NCERT advice to use textbooks to promote communal harmony is an added pollutant.

Take, for example, the 12th-century saint-poet Dnyaneshwar. At age 16 he started writing a treatise on Vedic metaphysical ideas and the Bhagwad Geeta. On completion of the

tome at age 21, he took *samadhi*—a voluntary exit from life. An iconoclast, he defied the religious establishment and wrote his epic work in Marathi using a simple poetic meter—*owi*. He is a strong, revered presence in Maharashtra even today. Every year, thousands of devotees walk the route he used to take to a temple town, for 21 days, singing his *owi*. Among publishers and booksellers, *Dnyaneshwari* is a perennial. His *owi* are set to music and sung by some of the greatest classical singers of India, whose tapes are aired, broadcast, sold across counters daily. I consider *Dnyaneshwari* the greatest book in the world for its literary qualities, wisdom, iconoclasm, and pro-people orientation.

An ICSE textbook, however, disposes of Dnyaneshwar and his epic in just one sentence that states that he was a saint and wrote a great book. But pages are devoted to what is essentially a religion of the West, Christianity, with emphasis on the "Great Crusade." About 2.5% of Indians follow Christianity, which is one of the most respected religions of India. But what is the reason for ignoring Indian religious heritage?

In Marathi textbooks, Dnyaneshwar is converted into a protagonist of communal harmony although Islam, let alone the powerful bigoted rulers, had not arrived in his time. Similarly, the textbooks highlight Moghul and British architecture but ignore India's world heritage sites.

### History Texts Endorse Colonists' Perspectives

Several historians from different nations have asserted that the colonists wrote a distorted history to cover up their amorality, gild their sins, and project themselves as not only great races but also as saviors and educators of the people they enslaved and exploited. Just a few lines from the colonial texts will convince the reader that they are packed with misinformation. The historians, social scientists, authors, and their publications referred to are the following:

- David Birmingham, *A Concise History of Portugal* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1993).
- Veena Das, ed. *Mirrors of Violence* (Delhi: Oxford University Press, 1992).
- John Kenneth Galbraith, *The Age of Uncertainty* (London: British Broadcasting Corporation, 1977).
- Ranjit Guha, *Subaltern Studies* (Delhi: Oxford University Press, 1988).
- Edward Said, *Culture and Imperialism* (London: Vintage, 1994).
- Arnold Toynbee, *A Study of History* (London: Oxford University Press and Thames and Hudson, 1972).
- Stanley Wolpert, *A New History of India* (Delhi: Oxford University Press, 1993).

Schoolchildren should be given the correct information and analytical perspectives about both the intellectual streams and the moral, exploitative, often-racist politics of the ruling classes of some of these countries in the past. The students should learn to differentiate between the worlds of ideas and of political and economic hegemony.

*Imperialism and the Indian Freedom Struggle*, the history textbook for grade X (the final year of high school), is one of the most shameful examples of continued mental subjugation to the colonists in general and to the NATO alliance in particular. I do note that the book does not absolve Germany and Italy of their distasteful pre-World War II politics, probably in mimicry of the American versions of history.

It is distressing that the book makes no mention of the Western political ideas, analytical philosophies, and great literary works that had freed the minds of India's leaders and intellectuals.

Some of the best educators are supposed to have written and chosen the texts for the ICSE pupils. The Additional Director of the Maharashtra State Board of Secondary and

Higher Secondary Education, Vasant Patil, even claims to bring in “new ideas and concepts in history teaching” and is sure that the texts will make the students “aware of values” of the freedom movement and “create a sense of injustice... a will to fight it.”

The facts show the absolute opposite. Every history text is steeped in colonial bias. The textbooks describe the Europeans as mere import-and-export business people who carried on trade with the cooperation of local kings. However, the unprofessional behavior of the small-time rulers pushed them to subjugate Asia and Africa. The European nations were drawn into power feuds among themselves by their positive quality of competitiveness. Unfortunately, the conflict spilled over to Asia and Africa, spurring, to quote from the very first page of the first chapter of the grade X history textbook, a “race...to acquire rich territories... England and France were in the forefront of this competition. Germany, however, entered this competition rather late. In Africa and Asia, England and France had acquired strategic and rich territories, and therefore they were envied by other nations.”

Not a word about the loss of freedom, wealth, or right to self-determination of the colonized!

The freedom struggle led by some of India's great leaders—B. G. Tilak, Lala Lajpat Rai, and B. P. Pal—is described in chapter 9, “Period of Extremist Politics.” Extremism is “an agitation form” of the freedom movement; the extremists “demand (freedom) more aggressively”; their “methods” and “attitudes” were “aggressive.” Tilak's declaration, “Freedom is my birth right and I shall have it,” is an example of “aggressiveness.”

The marketing of European rulers as the preferred “Platonic Guardians” (to use apologist Charles Trevelyan's coinage) to the local whimsical, feudal lords, is an astounding success ad infinitum.

## Conclusion

Teaching of human rights is not merely a matter of narrating or learning by rote the provisions of various human rights instruments. The international codifications themselves should be studied with a questioning mind. The process of introducing the study of human rights in school should begin with the educators. The textbooks should be meticulously examined for their flaws and rewritten.

## Notes

1. For example, my public interest litigation for the rights of the mentally ill in the Supreme Court of India (1988) and for the children of indigenous peoples in the Supreme Court and the High Court of Bombay, Nagpur Bench (1993), I sought supportive material from the UN Center for Human Rights (UNCHR) and the International Commission of Jurists, Geneva. UNCHR informed me that the UN had not pursued the issues. Its document on indigenous peoples was old and unsatisfactory. A draft of principles on mental health was lying on the shelves. UNCHR formalized the principles by 1992, which was in time for the first major ruling of the court in my public interest litigation. But I cannot say the final script covered all the concerns of the mentally ill and their protagonists.

2. The International Convention on the Rights of the Child (1990); International Covenant on Economic, Social and Cultural Rights (1976), Article 10 (1 and 3); International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights (1966), Article 24; and the Constitution, Articles 15 (3), 24, 39 (e and f), 45, and 47.

3. International Covenant on Economic, Social and Cultural Rights, Articles 13 and 14; International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights, Article 26; International Convention on the Rights of the Child, Articles 28 and 29; and the Constitution, Articles 30, 41, 45, and 46.

4. International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights, Article 27; International Covenant on Economic, Social and Cultural Rights, Articles 6 (2), 15, and 25; International Convention on the Rights of the Child,

Article 30; and the Constitution, Articles 25, 29, 30, and 350A.

5. Convention on International Right of Correction (1952); International Convention on the Rights of the Child, Articles 13 and 17; and the Constitution, Article 19.

6. The Constitution, Article 21 (right to life).

7. The Constitution, Articles 14, 15, and 29.

8. "Thoklyache Chitra" by Y. G. Joshi; Chapter 2, Marathi Bal Bharati for Marathi-medium grade VI.

9. "Maze Maher Vaghdara" by Anna Bhau Sathe; Chapter 7, Marathi Balbharati, for Marathi-medium grade VIII.

10. "Shivaji 'Raje' Shobhale" by Ranjit Desai; Chapter 10, Marathi Vachanpath for grade X non-Marathi-medium students. Translates as "Shivaji beautifully personifies regency." In the same story, Shivaji rewards the killing of foxes.

11. See notes on gender-discriminatory texts.

12. "On Killing a Tree" by Gieve Patel; Chapter 6, English Balbharati for English-medium grade VIII.

13. Ibid.

14. "Manus," (literally, Man) by Ram More; Chapter 12, Marathi Balbharati for Marathi-medium standard VIII.

15. "Shrishkumar" by Sanegurujji; Chapter 21, Marathi Sulabhbharati for Hindi- and English-medium grade VI. The author of this "account of a historic fact" was the respected Teacher Sane, patriot and writer. His sentimental, nationalist writings appealed to Maharashtrians then in the midst of the freedom struggle. Sanegurujji may deserve his place in history and as litterateur of the state, but that is no reason to include this story in books for young schoolchildren.

16. "Veer Bapu Gaidhani," an extract from a memorial volume; Chapter 2, Marathi Balbharati for Marathi-medium grade VIII.

17. Mahadevi Verma, Chapter 8, *Hindi LOKABHARATI* for Grade X in language mediums other than Hindi.

18. "Samuj" by Mukund Krishna Gaikwad; Chapter 12, Marathi Vachanpath as second-language reading for grade X.

19. Singh, S.K., *The Scheduled Tribes—People of India National Series*, Vol. III (Delhi: Oxford University Press, 1994).

20. Guha Ramchandra, *The Unquiet Woods* (Delhi: Oxford University Press, 1989); Gadgil Madhav and Guha Ramchandra, *The Fissured Land—An Ecological History of India* (India: Oxford University Press, 1993); Barse Sheela, *Our Children Are Gone* (Mumbai: Neergaurav Foundation, 1997).

21. B. Shiva Rao, Editorial Committee Chairperson, “The Framing of India’s Constitution—Select Documents.” (Delhi: The Indian Institute of Public Administration, 1968).