

Seeds of Change: School Texts for Teaching Gender Equality, Human Rights and Peace

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Conceived and initiated during the latter decades of the twentieth century in Pakistan, Simorgh's school text project was shaped by the state of education in the country – not with the view to enhancing official policies, but as an attempt to counter the culture of intolerance and violence that was being generated by officially produced school texts. Narrowly defined educational policies formulated since 1947, with the view to producing a homogenous majoritarian Muslim identity as a marker of difference from India, had combined over time with authoritarian ruling class interests emphasizing the official view of history and development. This was to culminate in General Zia ul Haq's use of educational institutions and school texts to propagate his Islamization agenda as a means of controlling discursive space and legitimizing his own illicit rule.

For historical reasons, schools in Pakistan have been divided on the basis of the language of instruction. English medium private sector schools cater to the needs of the economically privileged elite and Urdu medium schools, whether privately managed or financed by the government cater to low income and economically under privileged sections of society. In itself this system is a means to perpetuate class difference, the addition to this of an exclusive 'Islamic' agenda introduced and legitimized intolerance based on the demonization of difference on the basis of religion, gender, ethnicity and nationality and transformed Pakistan's educational institutions into sites of state-backed violence. Members of the Jamiat-e-Tulaba-Islam, the student wing of the Jamaat-i-Islami took on the role of monitoring 'morality' on university campuses, which included attempts to enforce segregation on campuses.

Among the rights most inimical to authoritarian regimes, perhaps the one ensuring freedom of thought and expression is the most critical. Dictatorships are recognizable by their use of censorship to silence dissent. One way of bringing about this eventuality is through the state control of educational institutions and educational material. Not surprisingly, education was to be one of the major casualties of the Zia era. In this regard, the Curriculum Wing, that lays down criteria for the Provincial Textbook Boards which have the monopoly on books for public schools in each province and enact the role of 'ideological gatekeepers'²¹ for the state, took on the task of propagating an authoritarian culture through texts that denigrated difference and further eroded the space for discussion.

The *Kaleidoscope Primers and Readers* were conceived as an attempt to counter the messages of hatred and intolerance propagated in

officially sanctioned textbooks and by so doing, not only to retrieve the lost culture of tolerance based on the recognition of life's richness and diversity, but also to introduce the children to their own rights as individuals and as members of the human community.

Kaleidoscope Primers and Readers

Conceptual Parameters

Based on the premise that value systems learned in childhood and early adolescence play a crucial role in forming the adult mind, Simorgh's *Kaleidoscope Primers and Readers* were conceived with the aim of countering the bigoted linearity of school texts produced by government Textbook Boards. They also aimed to awaken the curiosity of the child through written material and illustrations to which children and older students could relate both imaginatively and experientially and which would also encourage teachers to move away from the authoritarianism of the single point of view towards more participatory ways of teaching.

As stated in the introduction to the Teacher's Guide for primers 1 and 2, these primers have been produced in response to 'the increasing violence in our society, the growing intolerance towards those who think differently and a disregard for the rights of others,' in the hope that they will help 'shape the consciousness of our children along more humane and tolerant lines.' What is not mentioned in the introduction is that these texts were also a political statement about the forms of rule to which we were subjected in a society where the needs of a dictatorial and rightwing government had converged with and reinforced the patriarchal precedents of a traditional society caught between the conflicting demands of modernity, globalization and religious ideology. The following excerpt from the introduction is useful, as it not only elucidates the aims and objectives of the primers, it also points to the connections

between what we hoped to achieve and the wider socio-political context:

The aim of these texts is to capture the interest and imagination of the child so that she or he can understand the concept of rights and think independently about them. Therefore the mood of the texts is not didactic, but relies instead on games, exercises, quizzes and stories based on... folktales, fables, poems and incidents from history which are drawn from the child's familiar world. This decision was made on the basis of our own experience as teachers as well as discussions with students and teachers of selected schools, which confirmed our perception that learning is facilitated if the information links up with the child's own experience of its world and is not overtly didactic.

In keeping with this position, the suggested teaching methodology is participatory as opposed to the mainstream approach where, broadly speaking, the teacher explains the text and the children learn one set of given answers. This will entail discussions and group work with the children who will need to be encouraged to take an active part in the lesson rather than passively accepting what the teacher says.* (This also replicates the relationship between those in authority who pronounce acceptable or desired 'Truths' without leaving any margin for discussion and dissent)...

The motivating idea behind the Kaleidoscope Primers... is to enable children to develop (i) a spirit of caring for others, (ii) the ability to understand points of view other than their own, (iii) the capacity to accept the right of others to think differently, and (iv) the ability to see that as members of the human family we all have the same rights and responsibilities.

The basic premise of these primers is that all human beings, regardless of differences based on sex, class, caste, race, religious belief, skin colour, physical disability or

ethnicity, have the right to develop their potential as human beings. To realize that other than the right to life, security, health, education and work, we do, as individuals and members of society, have different needs and beliefs and, that as long as we do not harm others or violate their rights, we have the right to choose the way we live.

As rights are never one sided the primers focus on certain basic ground rules. These emphasize the fact that rights are closely linked to responsibilities, which include tolerance and understanding of those who think differently as well as the ability to care for and look after others.

While these primers address issues faced by both women and men, given that children, women and minorities are among the more vulnerable people in society, the primers will especially focus on their rights.

That this perspective is radically different from the one followed by the Textbook Boards is evidenced in the kind of material they produce. Without exception school books produced by the different Textbook Boards in the country are dull and prescriptive. Preaching a narrow morality that focuses on ritual and literalist interpretations of religious texts and historical events, these texts rely on narratives built around the binary of 'good Muslim' and 'bad other' – the latter by some process of legerdemain also includes the economically under privileged and women, who are usually feckless and untrustworthy – unless they are loyal and subservient. Women are largely absent in these texts or represented in stereotypical terms of passive domesticity. Not surprisingly, 'good' women are recognizable through their capacity for self-sacrifice and irrationality. Members of minority religions suffer a more or less complete erasure in these texts as they are subsumed under the mores of a universalized 'Islam'. While failing to capture the children's interest, because what they say is dull and far removed from

the child's reality, what these books do succeed in teaching, through repetition and rote learning, is that (i) there is no synch between professed morality and the way in which people actually live and experience their lives, and (ii) that women, religious minorities and the poor are somehow lesser human beings. Thus while providing excellent lessons in hypocrisy and intolerance, they neither awaken the child's curiosity nor generate any pleasure in learning.

In direct opposition to this approach, our aim was to produce texts that would capture the child's imagination through stories, exercises and activities and awaken its curiosity by making it a participant in the learning process instead of its hapless victim. In keeping with this approach the school text project for teaching gender equality, human rights, peace and tolerance through folk tales, history and other stories, was developed in direct response to the political and cultural ethos of the last few decades in twentieth century Pakistan.

Project in Process

The point of departure of the Human Rights School Text Project from mainstream texts lay in a difference of approach both in terms of teaching methodology and in shift of focus, which placed the student at center stage. It was felt that if textual impact and student participation were to be ensured, it was necessary to produce schoolbooks that would engage the student interest as well as familiarize teachers with a more participatory approach to learning as opposed to the top down largely rote-learning or descriptive methods current in the majority of our schools in both private and public sectors. With this aim in mind, the project included a research component based on discussions with school administrative staff, teachers and students from different classes to observe current teaching methods and patterns of student-teacher interaction.

Looking for partners

As we hoped to produce books that would engage the children's interest, it was decided to select four schools each from the Urdu and English medium streams and to involve them in our work. We were especially keen to work with the former so that we could produce texts for use in government run and private sector Urdu medium schools as this would not only ensure wide outreach, but would also cater to the needs of students who have low access to any 'out of course' information. With this in mind, visits to five government-run schools in Santnagar, Lahore, were arranged through Society for the Advancement of Education (SAHE), which was already working in this area, and with six privately run Urdu medium schools in the Kot Lakhpat Industrial area through the Sanjan Nagar Public Education Trust Girl's High School, which is also located in the same area.

The government schools proved to be a non-starter as the principals and staff of different schools showed a lukewarm interest in the project mainly because they needed permission from the Education Department to use additional texts, especially those not produced by the Punjab Textbook Board. Other than this they had their own list of grievances regarding low salaries, inhabitable classrooms, lack of furniture, fans, etc. and were inclined to be offended at the idea that they should be asked to undertake extra work. After much consideration, it was decided not to include government schools at this stage in the project, especially as the process of getting permission from the concerned authorities would involve miles of red tape and unnecessary bureaucratic interference in textual content. What we did not realize at that point was the resistance from the Textbook Board, which is a jealous guardian of its privileges. Having said that, it is necessary point out that this decision was taken with great reluctance as these are the schools that need the most input and not just at the

level of interesting teaching material. Underpaid and indifferent teachers combined with poor facilities have resulted in low enrolment rates, a high incidence of truancy as well as a high dropout rate.

There was a marked difference between government run schools and private Urdu medium schools. Located in a middle to low income upwardly mobile area, these schools were full to capacity. The administration – with one exception where the principal assumed we had come to check her academic credentials – owners who were often also principals – showed a willingness to discuss the project and let us sit in on their classes, but were uncertain about the feasibility of introducing texts that had not be prescribed by the Textbook Board and thus did not come within the ambit of the Matriculation Board exam.

Run commercially, the aim of these schools is to ensure results. As a result both the idea of 'education' as well as teaching methodology are geared to one end. As stated by the various school administrations in this sector, that without exception, parents see education solely as a means to upward mobility and their expectation from schools was high marks and the acquisition of the matriculation certificate, which would ensure jobs and/or admission to institutions for further education. Their concern, therefore, was with results and not with 'education' in any real sense of the word.

These arguments were verified during classroom observation visits. In jam-packed classrooms – most of them poorly lit and badly ventilated, teachers pounded students with facts. A heavy reliance on rote learning obviated the need for conceptual understanding and even subjects like mathematics and science were reduced to reproducing what had been learned 'by heart'. Discussions with students also proved abortive due largely to the proximity of the teachers, who insisted on hovering within earshot, and partly to the fact that they were not used to being asked to give their views or having them taken seriously.

Due to the resistance offered by the Urdu medium schools to the project on the one hand and the keenness of English medium schools to participate in it, it was decided to start by producing human rights texts in English and undertake Urdu texts at a later stage. It was felt that if we were to approach the Urdu medium schools with concrete evidence of our work as well as the credibility conferred on it by established schools, there would be a greater willingness on their part to participate in this project. This proved to be a correct assessment, as five years down the line, not only did we find that Canadian International Development Agency (CIDA) was willing to give funds for the Urdu texts, but that schools too were now more open to the idea of using them – but of that more later.

For strategic reasons the four schools selected are the most well-established and ‘trend-setting’ schools in the English medium sector in Lahore. Aitchison College and St. Anthony’s High School are large mainstream schools for boys, the former catering to high-income children and the latter to the more middle class income group. As such they cover a fairly wide spectrum in terms of outreach and influence. Convent of Jesus and Mary and Lahore Grammar School are large schools for girls, though the former tends to be a little more conservative in its approach to teaching than the latter which offers more in terms of extra-curricular and class activities dealing with social and community issues. Both schools cater to upper middle class and middle class children. Further, as both are part of school systems, access to one school ensures or at least held out the possibility of access to other branches of the same school both in Lahore and in other major cities of Pakistan.

This was only the first step that was eventually to lead up to the Kaleidoscope Primers, as we decided to call them. Our visits to schools spawned unexpected and unscheduled activities that made a nonsense of project deadlines and served as the first intimation of the mag-

nitude of the task that lay ahead of us. As we were soon to realize, the terms of the project could be met within the stipulated deadlines and the funds we had managed to access only at the cost of the project itself. If, however, we were to come anywhere near to meeting the aims of the human rights texts viz. to engage students in critical debate and awaken their curiosity in the world around them, then we would have to go down the byways and take the detours that were opening up even at this early stage of the project. But to return to the chronological narration of events – the partnership between the schools and Simorgh was followed by a series of visits to different schools involving sessions with students and teachers and classroom observation.

It was found that teaching methodology, though not entirely reliant on rote learning methods, did have a tendency to take recourse in them. For the most part, classroom discussions were kept to a minimum and teaching consisted largely of reading a given text with explanations by the teacher who then expected students to regurgitate the information thus provided. Independent thinking by students if not discouraged, was not actively encouraged. However, class discussions in the absence of teachers proved to be more interesting. Students opened up and discussed their likes and dislikes once they realized that they were being taken seriously and the opinions were not going to be reported to their respective principals or teachers. Their views included the kinds of stories or lessons they enjoyed as well as comments on teaching styles. The majority preferred lessons that provided space for class discussions especially with reference to their own observations and experiences.

Interschool seminars

Interschool seminars were the first unscheduled activity resulting directly from our interaction with students. Based on a suggestion by class 9 students of St. Anthony’s High

School who had a host of questions regarding the conflicting demands of globalization, nationalism, religion and other issues, these seminars provided a space for students to express their views and at the same time provided us with insight into student's concerns and interests, thus helping us with the content of the school texts. Participation was not restricted to the four schools that had been selected for this project, as we felt this was a good opportunity to reach out to other schools thus expanding the outreach of the school texts project. The overarching theme of the seminars was 'Human Rights' with the students being asked to select the issue they wanted to speak about. Copies of the Universal Declaration of Human Rights, Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination against Women (CEDAW) and related information were sent to schools once they had shown their willingness to participate in the seminar. St. Anthony's High School lent us their school hall for the first seminar, which was for senior school students and the Convent of Jesus and Mary did the same for the second seminar, which was for middle school students. In order to ensure space for the students, teachers and parents were invited to attend the seminar only as observers. The most significant aspect of these seminars was the enthusiasm they generated among the students. Their presentations showed evidence of independent research and the discussions, which were refreshingly free of clichés and cant, bore witness not only to the need to allow students to think for themselves but also provided useful insights regarding the content and approach for the school texts.

Teacher's workshops

A rights-related art activity was planned for primary school students in lieu of a seminar. In this regard a workshop with twenty primary school teachers was organized with the view to familiarising them with basic human rights

concepts, participatory teaching and art as a medium of communication. The primary school art activity did not materialize for a variety of reasons, but the workshop paved the way for two unplanned workshops with school-teachers on human rights and participatory teaching.

The second three-day orientation workshop, organized on demand from the teachers who had taken part in the first workshop, took place a month later. The number of participants had increased as news of the first workshop had travelled, and more schools wanted their teachers to take part in this workshop, which also led to a third – and at this stage – last three-day workshop with teachers. Aitchison College offered us the use of their Junior School Library for the third workshop, as well as lunch and tea for one day. This was a welcome reprieve as the money allocated for school activities was running out by now. These workshops provided the project team with an opportunity to try out the material for the textbooks, that was being produced concurrently, and to get participant's comments. Other than discussions on fundamental rights, which had been incorporated into the training material and exercises, teachers were asked to identify problems faced by them in the classroom and with their respective administrations. This was a useful exercise as it not only helped break down their resistance to unfamiliar ideas and implied criticism, it also provided entry points for discussions on child abuse, student-teacher relationship, and related issues.

Both inter-school seminars and teacher's workshops were highly productive activities for the school texts project. Apart from introducing students and teachers to the concept of human rights, they generated an interest in the project and we began to receive orders for our books from schools other than those which had been initially selected by us. Further, the interaction with different age level students and teachers helped us in assessing textual material in terms of its appeal and interest to children.

The Kaleidoscope Primers

Beginning with the basic rights to life and safety and going on to cover issues like child labor, the right to education, democracy and political participation, the issue of development, environmental degradation and food security etc. the primers were planned in a way that would incorporate different rights in ways commensurate with the age group and academic levels of the students. Acknowledging the importance of enabling students to make connections between their own lives and the idea of human rights and gender equality, the material in the primers was designed to maintain constant interaction between the ‘personal and the political’ through stories, exercises and activities which consistently call upon the students to think for themselves and to question established norms. Further, most of the material used in the first six primers has either been originally produced by the Human Rights Team or been adapted from existing material. Student participation has been further ensured by the fact that many of the illustrations are by A Level school students or by students of the National College of Art, Lahore. Students were also encouraged to write stories for the primers. Both activities created an entry point for us to raise rights issues with students who were not directly involved with the project.

Keeping in mind the negative impact of prescriptive literature, which was brought home to us during our meetings with students from different age groups, the stories written or selected for the primers do not have an aggressively overt message. For instance, the Ali Baba stories, which are to be found in primers 3, 4 and 5, the message of religious tolerance and cross cultural friendship is implicit in the images and dress codes and names of Ali Baba’s friends. Names sharpen this emphasis without actually making any explicit statement of intent, viz. ‘Amna’ is a ‘Muslim’ name – she could be Pakistani or from any Muslim community

or family anywhere in the world, as could ‘Anjana’, who goes by what is predominantly though not exclusively, a ‘Hindu’ name, ‘Lee’ could be from China, Singapore, Korea etc., ‘Pappu’ and ‘Jojo’ are nicknames, the former being South Asian/Punjabi representing any of the religious groups within the region, while Jojo is post-colonial universal. Ali Baba and Marjana of course are familiar figures from the children’s repertoire of fairy tales and provide both a connecting link in the stories and grant the stories access to the possibilities of the fantasy world such as flying carpets, time travel and so on.

Part of a series consisting of the adventures of Ali Baba, Marjana and their friends, these stories were used to provide information and raise different rights issues. However, the issues are woven into the story and the ‘moral’ is neither overt nor explicit. Critical thinking is encouraged by the fact that the questions appended to the stories are open-ended and there is no one ‘correct’ answer and exercises enabling students to make the distinction between facts and opinions. At a time when globally, nationally and locally opinions dressed as facts are used to invent and marginalize peoples and individuals, these exercises are geared to encourage the children to think for themselves and also to release them from bondage to the unifocal world where a single point of view either subsumes and irons out the diversity and richness of the material world and its cultures or relegates difference to the margins of the licit. The stories are multifocal, thus in ‘Ali Baba Shares his Toys’ the issues raised include sharing and caring for others, the importance of teamwork and our responsibility towards special children, and in the ‘The Long Lane’ issues of development, political participation and democracy are raised.

Stories are not the only means of communication. Text related activities play an important part in enabling children to link ideas to practice. For instance a story related to the Mughal princess Zebunnisa, which challenges

stereotypes of ‘women’s role’ in society through narrative action that shows the princess planning her garden and adjudicating between religious scholars, is followed by (i) further information on Zebunnisa who among other things, was a poet and a scholar, and (ii) a multi-focal exercise ‘Look, Think, Write’, based on a miniature painting from a 16th century Mughal text, the *Akbar Nama*. They are geared to develop critical thinking regarding accepted norms, observation skills and art appreciation. Other than this the meanings of difficult words are appended to each lesson to facilitate comprehension. It is hoped that once students get used to checking out the meanings of words they will overcome their reluctance to use dictionaries.

The primers are supported by Teacher’s Guides, which explain the basic aims of these texts, provide supplementary material and additional exercises. On demand from teachers, answers to questions based on language-use etc. are also supplied. This was a reluctant concession made mainly to encourage teachers to use the Guides.

Feedback and revisions

Our work as teachers along with our meetings with students had given us some insights about the kind of material students would respond to, but having no experience of work of this kind, we were uncertain about how student would respond to the texts. To overcome this limitation the print ready ‘dummy’ of primer 1 was sent one of our partner schools to be tried out with primary level students, while individual stories from primers 3 and 4 were given to students from commensurate age groups for comment. On the whole, students responded positively to the texts, but the most encouraging was the collective response and comments from class 1 students and teachers. They had enjoyed the stories and exercises but perhaps evidence of student engagement was provided by their response to the story of

the hungry caterpillar, which incorporates the days of the week with the caterpillar’s eating schedule leading on to its transformation into a butterfly.

Adapted from the story of the same name by Jonathan Cole, we had replaced the foods listed in it with local foods consumed by the caterpillar on different days, but due to a typographical error had missed one day of the week. The children’s urgent query as to ‘what did the caterpillar eat on Thursday?’ was not only indicative of the engagement with the story but also gave us an idea for the text, in which we left it for the students to decide the caterpillar’s Thursday menu. While the loud chuckles and laughter with which, we were told, the children had greeted the names of familiar foods instead of the more ‘English’ strawberries etc., reaffirmed our belief that a mixture of the strange and the familiar is more likely to generate readerly interest of this age group than something that is either totally alien or so familiar that it no longer has the power to engage. Our position, regarding texts that would open up a world of wonder and enchantment through stories and illustrations, was vindicated when at a later stage, Class 1 and 2 teachers informed us that this was the first time that the children were coming to class already having attempted to ‘read’ the stories because they wanted to find out the story that lay hidden in the pictures.

This process of vetting the texts has continued through direct interaction with teachers through schools and teacher’s workshops and through questionnaires. As a result we have almost completely revised the material and format in primers 1 and 2. The size of the font has been increased, some exercises have been dropped, either because the children found them boring or because they were too difficult for this age group; new stories and poems have been added and some of the stories have been moved from primer 1 to 2, and both text and illustrations have been revised in accordance with student needs.

Problems

Project related problems, fall into two areas, viz. inadequate funding and user resistance.

The school texts project has been strapped for funds right from the start for the following reasons: initial under budgeting by Simorgh. This was the first venture of its kind to be undertaken by an NGO in Pakistan and lack of experience and understanding in terms of time and the production of material etc. resulted in a budget that was inadequate to meet full project needs. The situation was further aggravated by the reluctance of funding agencies to pick up projects where results are not immediately quantifiable. Thus not only was the money slow in coming, when it did, even the combined funds of four donors fell far short of actual project requirements. As a result, we had to shed our team of researchers etc., early on in the project and while we continued to draw upon a floating resource pool of artists and storywriters from among the student community, the bulk of the work, after the initial conceptualization and school visits, etc., including research, story writing, designing exercises, activities, illustrations and layout and design was handled by two people. This necessarily slowed down the work. The plus side of this was that the time lag between the production, use and subsequent feedback from teachers and students enabled us to make appropriate adjustments in the coming texts.

User resistance is not a major problem, but we do need time to convince school administrations and teachers of the efficacy and relevance of our texts. It has been interesting to note that where school administrations are keen to introduce the texts in their schools, teachers sometimes tend to be less than enthusiastic. We discovered in the course of teacher training workshops, that the latter's reluctance to use these texts was largely to do with the extra work and a break with familiar teaching patterns that these books entailed.

Outreach and self-sustainability

Initial outreach and sales were ensured by our partnership with schools that had also given tentative commitment to try out the *Kaleidoscope Primers* in their schools. This has been expanded since then and there are now approximately 28 English medium private sector schools in the major cities of the country where our books are being used. Print runs are based on the number of books ordered by the schools. These are supplied directly to the schools at a minimal profit, thus cutting out the 'middleman', keeping the cost of books within agreed limits and ensuring earnings, which go back into the project. This has not only allowed us to meet with the shortfalls in the initial funding received from donors, but also to keep the project running on its own steam. The downside of course is that while we earn enough money to produce the primers, there is nothing left for salaries. As a result, the project is now operating with a staff of two fitted in within the interstices of other projects and a floating resource pool of artists, story writers and so on. Layout and design are the responsibility of the publications unit in tandem with the project staff.

Internationally the primers have met with a positive response. The primers have been displayed in different international forums including the Frankfurt Book Fair in 2001, and have met with a positive response. Activists and academics in the field of education in Fiji, India and Sri Lanka have requested copies for possible use or adaptation to local conditions. Recently we have been approached by an international publisher who is interested in printing and distributing the primers with 'some modifications.' If we can work this out without sacrificing or diluting the human rights message and the basic philosophy of our texts, it would solve our financial and distribution problems.

Conclusion

As things are, the *Kaleidoscope Primers* seem to have made a place for themselves in private sector institutions as well as acquiring a degree of credibility among other schools and funding agencies. Evidence for this lies in (i) the fact that CIDA provided us with funds for Urdu versions of the primers which are now in the process of being supplied to Urdu medium private sector schools, and (ii) the fact that a number of schools that are using the primers, have approached us with the request to produce alternative history texts. This would be an exciting venture as we aim to produce books that not only restore women and marginalized groups to history, we hope to locate local/national events in a global context. For example,

a text on the history of the Indus Valley civilization would be depicted in interaction with other concurrent civilizations. This we feel, would be another route to a more peaceful and equitable world as not only would such texts give students a sense of their rich heritage, they would also enable them to see that they have a stake in a world that is full of possibilities, not only for the privileged but also for those who today are among its marginalized and forgotten children.

Endnote

1. *The Subtle Subversion: The State of Curricula and Textbooks in Pakistan*, eds. A.H.Nayyar and Ahmad Salim. SDPI. (undated)