

Educating the National Imagination

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This essay seeks to examine the construction of nation by our educational system as reflected in the intentions and visions of policy-makers and in the nature and structure of ideas embedded in textbooks. By analysing the various contradictory and complementary discourses that inhabit the curriculum, the essay notes the process of essentialisation, mythification and romanticisation of Indian history, society and economy which denies interrogation by alternative paradigms of development and social justice.

I

In the beginning
we will rewrite
de history books
Put William (de Conqueror)
on de back page
Make Morgan (de pirate)
A footnote

We
Will recall with pride
Our own.
Grannies to come
Will know
Of de Arctic Ocean
But will know more
of de Caribbean sea
of the Atlantic Ocean.¹

IT is a truism today, that the structuring of knowledge is an exercise which is intimately linked to the structuring of power. In a colonised nation, this is played out on the political and economic terrain of the coloniser, but post-colonial nations seek to redefine and reinvent themselves via alternative definitions of what is worth knowing. In India the project of nation building has lain at the heart of educational policy since 1947. It has been however an uneasy and contestatory process. Between the conflicting claims of the English speaking intelligentsia and the proponents of Hindi, the secularists and the revisionist BJP governments of Madhya Pradesh and Uttar Pradesh, the urban middle class and the newly powerful rural elite, education has been the site of multiple definitions of the nation as various claimants to power have attempted to lay their imprint upon it.

What is the nature of the nation which emerges and who defines it? The question of defining the nation is more complex than is at first evident. For the nation, like any idea, is imagined into existence in different ways for different reasons at different times; it is not an objective entity which transcends time nor is it fixed in its nature.

The most powerful single element emerges because of the bureaucratic structure of post-colonial India. This has meant that at least overtly, the definition of the nation is overwhelmingly dictated by the imperatives of state policy. A number of recent studies

have highlighted the hegemonic nature of state-controlled education though they have tended to define the state as essentially middle class and as overwhelmingly powerful.² As we shall see however, what has emerged today is an elite and pervasive agenda but also one which is constituted of rival definitions which are only partially shaped by state policy. The multi-sided struggle among various status communities for domination, for economic advantage and for prestige is played out on the terrain of education.¹

There are two distinct if connected ways in which the education system seeks to construct the nation. One is through a conceptual definition and the constitution of a national-cultural imagery which locates the nation in the realm of loyalty, emotion and myth. The second is through a description of the nation in motion, its activity, social ordering and progress defining its parameters.

In this essay, I examine this process by considering first, the intentions and visions of policy-makers and second, the nature and structure of ideas embedded in government textbooks. I therefore look at various education reports commissioned since 1947 and the state produced English textbooks of UP, Kerala and the all-India NCERT. While some study has been done of the history textbooks in use in schools, little attention has been paid to the language books. Yet, precisely because the exact content of language books is less rigidly defined, it is possible to examine the assumptions and ideology which underlie the system of education at large. Through the stories and poems found in language textbooks it is possible to glean a discourse which is altogether less obvious and therefore more powerful than that found in the social science books.

II

To explore the articulations of state policy on education as well as its implementation in textbooks is to uncover a variety of discourses. On the one hand, there is the inevitable emphasis on defining and celebrating the nation; on the other, the silences and assertions reveal a profound unease with potential challenges to this over-arching

definition, an attempt to negotiate the conflicts.

This is evident in nearly every education report commissioned since 1947. Overwhelmingly, education is seen as the holy grail, the crucial element in shaping national culture. As early as 1952, this is spelt out in the Mudaliar commission report on secondary education:

The aim of secondary education is to train the youth of the country to be good citizens who will be competent to play their part effectively in the social reconstruction and economic development of their country.⁴

It is interesting to note that the notion of the nation in this report as well as elsewhere within the system is that of a single and undifferentiated entity. The Mudaliar commission report sets the tone for the next four decades: it sees the nation as a monolithic and unitary whole and is reluctant to conceive of an entity which is made up of fragmentary and diverse elements. In fact, the conflicting and contesting identities which inevitably exist are generally seen as divisive and dangerous:

There has been an accentuation in recent years of certain undesirable tendencies of provincialism, regionalism and other sectional differences. This situation is fraught with serious consequences and it is as much the duty of statesmen as educationalists to take steps to re-orient people's mind in the right direction. If education fails to play its part effectively in checking these tendencies, if it does not strengthen the forces of national cohesion and solidarity, we are afraid that our freedom, our national unity as well as our future progress will be seriously imperilled.⁸

It is worth quoting this in some detail because it strikes a note which resounds till the present day.⁶ The anxiety for a strongly centralised identity is comprehensible in a newly fledged nation, five years after the partition. It is, however, echoed with equal vehemence, over three decades later in the 1986 National Policy for Education (the New Education Policy, as it is popularly termed), suggesting that years later, the anxiety to define a coherent and unified nation remains equally compelling. While stressing the need for education to teach the values of secularism and tolerance, the policy

recommends a national system of education with a core curriculum including the history of India's freedom movement, constitutional obligations and 'other content essential to nurture national identity'. It hopes that

these elements [of the core curriculum] will cut across subject areas and will be designed to promote values such as India's common cultural heritage, egalitarianism, democracy and secularism, equality of the sexes, protection of the environment, removal of social barriers, observance of the small family norm and inculcation of the scientific temper.⁷

There is a great deal here which is important for any society, and yet it is an odd list. As aspects of a common core curriculum, cultural nationalism (an emphasis on a common Indian heritage) nestles up to universal liberal values such as egalitarianism and democracy, which in turn is on par with specifically state policy such as family planning. More to the point, there is a clear conception of a flat national identity which it is possible to develop through a specific national culture which can be taught.

The nationally integrative aim of education is faithfully transmitted from policy to implementation. In 1984 the NCERT embarked on an exercise to put together a national curricular framework. The document entitled, *National Curriculum for Elementary and Secondary Education: A Framework*, was the result of the deliberations of an NCERT steering group, one national and four regional seminars. The final policy that emerged gave enormous weight to the role of education in the 'strengthening of national identity and unity'. It states:

At this point of our history, the most urgent need is to consciously develop national spirit and national identity. Education, as an instrument of social transformation, should ensure that its beneficiaries and products demonstrate a national consciousness, a national spirit and national identity which are considered essential for national unity.⁸

Apart from the tautology ('national' and its variants occur six times in two sentences), the document is significant because it provides a framework for the curriculum as it is implemented on the ground, going beyond a broad definition of general policy. Its aims are consistently visible in the construction of textbooks, as is apparent from the rationale for the readings included in a UP board English reader. First published in 1976, the book precedes the NCERT document, but its intentions are identical. The introduction spells out:

While selecting and adapting the themes, effort has been made to provide good reading material, so that the students imperceptibly imbibe higher human values such as devotion to duty, service before self, fidelity, a love of adventure and patriotism and thus help them to become ideal citizens of the motherland.⁹

III

Let us move now, to the textbooks themselves, to what is actually read and learnt within the classroom. It is important to see how exactly this sense of being a citizen is conceived of, who it empowers, who it silences and what use it makes of its myth and history. An examination of textbooks produced by the all-India textbook-writing body (the NCERT) and those of the different state bureaus (the SCERTs) produces surprisingly uniform answers to a large number of these questions. Three different groups of books - those produced by the UP board, the Kerala board and the all-India NCERT - suggest that certain themes recur in the definition and fleshing out of what India is, and what it means to be a citizen of it.

UNITY IN DIVERSITY

One of the strongest markers of post-colonial Indian identity is an apparently overt recognition of its cultural diversity and regional variance; the theme, however, is simultaneously emphasised and uneasily subverted. In emphasising this diversity, there is a clear attempt to outline the uniqueness which this bestows on India and to teach students the value of this. For all their emphasis on national unity, every education report since Independence also contains a section on opening up the minds of students to the variety and richness of India's cultural heritage: the English textbooks produced by Kerala's state board of education (SCERT) for instance, include the national pledge on the front page so that students learn to say early in their school lives: "I love my country and I am proud of its rich and varied heritage."

This construction of the nation is strongly reflected in a variety of textbooks. In a UP board textbook, for instance, three friends, Seema from Bengal. Shama from Punjab and Sonia from Madras share a room. Their friendship suggests the happiness achieved by national integration even as they are carefully and stereotypically differentiated: 'Seema is from Bengal. Her hair is long. Her eyes are big and black. Shama is from Punjab. She is very fair. Her hair and eyes are brown. Sonia is from Madras. Her hair is black and curly. Her eyes are black.'¹⁰

In attempting to conceive of a nation which defines itself by its cultural variance, the textbooks clearly intend to give space to a multitude of voices. Cultural nationalism, a concept with which these books flirt, sees the essence of a nation in its distinctive civilisation, demanding that the natural divisions within the nation - occupational, religious and regional - be respected in the belief that the impulse to differentiate is the dynamo of national creativity. In a country with such huge variation in regional, religious

and social culture it seems like a sensible inspiration for defining the nation."

And yet, ultimately the textbooks do not carry it through. They fail to impart a lived sense of cultural variation and difference, because of a fundamental and misrecognised discomfort with the very notion of a federated and diverse nation. The contradictory notions of what it is that constitutes India, are markers of a profound unease: post-colonial differentiated identity battles with the underpinnings of a Unitarian colonial and western definition which traditionally sees the nation as a monolingual and homogeneous culture. Thus, although at one level there is an acknowledgement and even a celebration of cultural diversity, there is a contradictory impetus to obscure and marginalise this difference.

Thus, regional and cultural variation is restricted to its external and most obvious manifestation. There is no attempt to create an awareness of cultural difference other than that which is reflected in skin colour and names. Rashid, Manjeet, Seema. Shama all seem to live identical lives, share identical recreational activities, worship an undifferentiated god to whom they pray together and feel proud of the India which is constructed for them by their teachers and other adults.

What is never represented are the signs and practices which give meaning and reality to cultural differentiation. Culture is visible in a system of symbols and for it to be communicated, what is required is detail, the thick description which enables it to be understood and shared by students. Within the immediate experience of school students, it is visible in eating habits, games, attitudes to family members, ceremonies and festivals and dress.

The confusion between a valorisation of both difference and sameness is largely located in colonial and orientalist assumptions. Orientalism sets the framework by which nationalism defines itself - national as opposed to regional, as a concrete and unmixed identity. Underlying the need to celebrate diversity there lurks a concept of a nation as possessing a homogeneous culture which shares common intellectual ground with a nationalist search for continuity and a uniform cultural identity.¹²

In many ways therefore, the confused message of the textbooks arises from a profound anxiety about the inability to define the nation, if it is not spelt out in specifically homogeneous and Unitarian terms.

THE SYMBOL AS THE NATION

Running parallel to the portrayal of a diverse cultural identity therefore, there exists an equally powerful rhetoric of the nation as a centralised and specific entity which can be synecdochally encapsulated. One means

of doing this is to use public buildings and monuments as a mark of the grandeur and glory of India. As Eric Hobsbawm argues, conceptions of the nation, nationalism and nation states rest on exercises in social engineering: modern nations 'invent' tradition to locate themselves in a community so 'natural' as to require no definition other than self assertion.¹³ This assertion of self is played out on the site of visible symbols of the nation: popular monuments, buildings and statuary.

School textbooks, since they cannot bring these into the classroom, do the next best thing - they describe them in carefully nationalistic terms. Thus, in a Kerala state board textbook, a chapter on the Taj Mahal juxtaposes its beauty to its unique status as a source of national pride: 'Its beauty attracts thousands of travellers to our country. They come every year from all parts of the world to visit Agra and see the Taj.'¹⁴

Similarly, a chapter entitled, 'Letter from Delhi' is enthusiastic about the capital's unique status as "It is one of the most ancient and historic cities in the world."¹⁵ It is significant that it is the only city in the country which is so valorised. For, Delhi is not of course, just a city: as the capital, it is India. Deriving symbolic value from both antiquity as well as its status as the hub of a modern democracy, the lesson draws upon a combination of factors to list the diverse elements of its glory - that it is mentioned in the *Mahabharat* as Indraprastha, that it contains the Qutub Minar, the Ashok Pillar, the Red Fort, the Juma Masjid, Chandini Chowk, the Rashtrapati Bhavan, the secretariat blocks, parliament house, India Gate and the Dolls Museum. Here, its implicit status is underscored not by its culture (which could arguably be specific to a region) but its transcendent national buildings which contain within them an encapsulation of history and tradition.

But the importance of symbolising India is visible in textbooks of other states as well. A UP textbook for instance, contains a lesson pointedly entitled, 'Know Your Country' in which various symbols of the nation are introduced. Here, a grandmother quizzes the children with near-fascist enthusiasm:

Do you know our national animal?...Did they tell you the name of our national bird?...Did they tell you the name of our national flower?¹⁶

The children only interrupting her to volunteer their own knowledge of the design of the national flag, the lesson ends with a litany of praise for 'our country':

Ours is a great country. It is a very, very old country. It is the country of Rama, Krishna, Buddha, Nanak and Mahatma Gandhi...Say with me 'Jai Hind'.¹⁷

The point of each of these symbols, whether they are buildings or birds, is to universalise

the nation into an entity which transcends regional distinction and time. The fact that from all over the world people visit the Indian Taj Mahal and that all over India the lotus is recognised as the national flower, implies that the essence of a single, united India can be recognised by everyone in any age. Any regional variation which exists is only minor in contrast to an over-arching central identity.

MYTHIFYING THE NATION

India is further elevated by collapsing the language of religion into a discourse of the nation. In the process, its entity is mythified, with an appeal which is altogether more powerful than that of territory. For instance in the poem 'Mother India', the nation is the divine goddess with 'Kanyakumari as her holy feet'¹⁸ Similarly in the poem 'My Land', to fight for the motherland has the resonance of a holy war:

No men than hers are braver/ Her women's hearts never waver/ I'd freely die to save her,/ And think my lot divine.¹⁹

In yet another poem, 'A Nation's Strength', the heroism and grandeur of nationhood are asserted.

Not gold, but only man can make/ A people great and strong/ Men who for truth and honour's sake/ Stand fast and suffer long.²⁰

It is interesting that so much of the poetry section is devoted to a celebration of the nation. Poetry is of course a singularly effective means of prompting such celebration: the strong metre and rhyme create a rousing and emotive appeal which is both irresistible and uncritical. A transcendent appeal, moreover, transposes the nation to a realm outside that of ordinary existence; implicitly not only is such a nation constructed as a powerfully unified entity, it is also outside the arena of moral critique.

IV

To locate the nation and its identity in the realm of myth and symbol is one form of definition. Another is to construct its people, its economy and its daily life in specific ways. The organisation of society as it is outlined in a school textbook is essentially mimetic in its intention. Suggesting the parameters of 'normal' society it delineates the structures of social order, the rightful ownership of power and the nature of the subject population.

SOCIAL ORDER

If we remember that the syllabus and textbooks are a reflection of the society in which they function,²¹ it is not unexpected to find that the ideology of bourgeois society runs through all texts, emphasising social order at all costs. All rulers, whether kings of the past or the officials of the modern

state, are constructed as benign, sympathetic and exalted - the power stratification of society seems inevitable and natural. A story in a Kerala textbook summarises this perfectly. The Monkeys and the Sadhu' suggests that social order and hierarchy is natural and universal, the author discovering that within a tribe of monkeys "there is a King and a Queen of the monkeys, a Prime Minister, and a Commander in Chief".²²

An overwhelming number of lessons being set in the past, the king and queen are recurring signifiers of a benign exercise of absolute power. Underlying the narratives is an ideology which celebrates this absolute power as the only reliable dispenser of justice. It is in fact, neither a coincidence nor an unthinking celebration of a bygone romantic age which sets so many stories in the past. The locus of power and authority in the past residing clearly and visibly in the king, it is a simple matter to demonstrate the disbursement of justice through the active intervention and verdict of the king : certainly easier than to track it through the tortuous and more diffuse corridors of contemporary government departments.²³ In the process it makes acceptable and even desirable, the exercise of an all-powerful state authority.

The lessons in the UP textbooks, for instance, abound with titles such as The Kind Prince', 'Solomon's Justice', or The King's Judgement'. It is the king as ruler who possesses an unerring ability to glean the truth and dispense justice. Similarly, it is the king who can galvanise action to save his people.²⁴

NCERT books repeat the pattern. In The Righteous King' for instance we are introduced to a king whose problem was that he had no fault.²⁵ Though he scoured his kingdom, even in disguise, he found nothing but praise for his virtue and wisdom. Similarly, in The King's Choice', the wise king has an uncanny ability to know when his courtiers are tricking him and unerringly depends on his loyal courtier alone.²⁶ Most assertively, in the oft-anthologised The Story of Shibi Rana', we have the ultimate just ruler who is willing to sacrifice his own life to uphold justice and mercy.

Even in stories which seem to interrogate notions of perfect rulers, existing structures of social order are re-enforced in subtle ways. Kerala books ostensibly produce an interesting contrast to the others. Here, no specific form of political control is reified. In the Kerala books, the wise ruler does not emerge as a dominant symbol as happens in the UP books. There are instead, stories of foolish kings like Midas and Lear, as well as tales about others like the cruel king Dionysius who is reformed by the faithful friendship of Damon and Pythias²⁷ or The Proud King²⁸ whose royal arrogance is

humbled. However, these inadequate kings are never dispossessed or deposed. Instead, foolish kings like Midas learn wisdom, cruel kings learn gentleness and proud kings learn humility. The basic fabric of society is thus never seriously questioned or restructured.

RURAL AND URBAN INDIA:
MODERNITY AND TIMELESSNESS

The inscription of geographical space in these books strongly reflects a specific construction of the social imagery. We see an India which is modern, technologically advanced and industrialised, but also one which is substantially rural. The rural world with its connotations of timeless and transcendental wisdom is valorised, but as we shall see, the picture is strangely unreal, the gaze strongly urban even when it is most celebratory.

All textbooks devote a significant space to a description of a rural idyll, focusing on the invaluable role of the farmer in contributing to the wealth of the nation. UP textbooks for instance, devote 20 per cent of all lessons on life in the villages. Rural life is constantly constituted as a pastoral ideal: 'The Farmer' constructs a contented and harmonious life for Roopa and Kiran who 'have a small house in the village. They have a pair of bullocks, a cow and a dog... There are beautiful plants and flowers in the garden.'²⁹ In 'Town and Country Life' we are told:

Life in the village is quiet and peaceful and healthy. You can always get very good fresh vegetables and milk and eggs there.³⁰

Kerala textbooks may describe a different landscape from the UP books but they are identical in their idealisation of the contentment and natural beauty of rural existence. The chapter entitled, 'A Village',³¹ describes Neema's house in a rural idyll of hills, a river, a church, fruit trees and cows. Ammu's comment, "Neema! Your house is beautiful! The farm is beautiful too. The lime trees are lovely. The cows are also lovely" draws upon a traditionally romantic construction of landscape and natural beauty. The inclusion of poems such as Wordsworth's 'Solitary Reaper'³² and 'Daffodils'³³ heighten the construction of the 19th century romantic model of rural beauty.

Like the landscape rural people are also seen conventionally as superior to others. They possess a timeless and natural wisdom, frozen into a universal category of virtue. In 'The King and the Farmer' even the king learns from the generous wisdom of the farmer who plants fruit trees for the benefit of his children declaring, "I won't be selfish. I shall work for others too". The king ruminates, "We can learn a lesson from him. Our country needs many more selfless workers like him".³⁴ The farmer, who is

never individualised, becomes a generic model of instinctive wisdom and virtue.

Discernible beneath the celebration, however, is an anxious acknowledgement of the uneven spread of modernity.³⁵ The country is consistently described in opposition and relation to the city. It is an 'othering' gaze with the dominant vision remaining urban-centric. In the textbooks, the distinctions between the quality of life in urban and rural India are uneasily acknowledged, attempting resolution by positing rural life as superior to urban existence. 'Rules of the Road', for instance, contrasts the peace of rural life ('We don't have big crowds there') with Lucknow ("I see a lot of people everywhere. There is always a big crowd on the roads and in the streets."³⁶) This construction of the rural ideal serves to legitimise the partial modernisation of India: the bucolic world is posited as a manifestation of the uniqueness of India, one in which tradition and modernity march hand-in-hand. It is, in fact, this simultaneity which seeks to define the nation and the tension between the two worlds becomes a means of claiming a special place in the world order.

Juxtaposed to the idealisation of rural India, therefore, there is a concurrent celebration of the march of modern progress. In fact, the essential joy of rural existence is asserted even when there is a partial acknowledgement of hardship. 'Town and Country Life' which admits of a debate about the relative merits of each, is structured as a conversation between those children who prefer rural life and those who prefer urban existence; however, the absence of the authorial voice which is present in the other chapters on the same subject, offsets the critique of rural life which is tentatively offered. In the conversation, the dominant voice emerges in favour of rural existence. Thus the hard physical labour of villagers is counterpoised by the declaration that it is "a healthy life and they like it".³⁷

In fact, there is a carefully asserted suggestion that villages too, share in the march of modernity: the same lesson goes on to assert, "But there are cinema houses in some villages now"; the absence of shops is irrelevant because "they can get all their food in the villages". Even water and power are not really problems any more: "there won't be any problem of water in the future. There are many new tube-wells in the villages now. Electricity is coming to the villages too."

Similarly, in 'Ashok Replies', aboy writes to his pen-friend in Japan about the rural progress of modern India, asserting that electricity is now available to farmers for all-year cultivation and that ploughs have given way to tractors. He goes on to assert: 'In fact, the villages are becoming better with their electric lights and good roads...Some Indian

villages today have all the advantages of a city without many of its disadvantages.'³⁸

Textbooks which view modernity as the only paradigm of development, also inevitably construct a nation's evolution in terms of a post-facto justification of state economic policy. The most stark example of this is in a chapter which contrasts contemporary India with the India 50 years ago. In 'Ashok Replies' (to a Japanese pen-friend), there is a paean of praise to the progress and modernity of the new India. Ashok tells his friend that while in his grandfather's time there were no buses so that he had to walk 30 miles to school, today there is a school in every village. Now education is free and "every parent, rich or poor, is anxious to send his child to school". It is revealing that the site of backwardness and underdevelopment is automatically and invariably located in rural India. In contrast to this we are assured that:

No visitor to our country leaves without seeing and admiring at least a few of the dams we have built. Thanks to the 5-year plans, there are big steel plants and factories for manufacturing railway carriages.³⁹

For all their focus on rural India, therefore, the textbooks speak from an essentially external position. Ironically, in the anxiety to smooth over any possible perception of rural disadvantage, the text does not interrogate the basic assumption that shops, cinema halls and electricity are in themselves signifiers of contentment.

Progress and development is thus narrowly conceived of; restricted solely to roads and lights, it offers no alternative pattern of rural development which suggests a paradigm of modernity which is distinct from industrialisation or access to a commodity culture. There is therefore, a profound chasm between rural and urban India: when it is celebrated, the village is transcendental in its beauty and timelessness; on the other hand its location in the present is a discourse upon the transformation of backwardness through modernisation. This dichotomy is an unacknowledged affirmation of and anxiety about the loss of the rural within the cultural universe of the increasingly hegemonic urban.⁴⁰

This is visible both in lessons which deal with development in modern India as well as with the types of knowledge and information which it is considered valuable for the modern Indian student to possess. The value attached to such knowledge, the ultimate prioritisation of modernity over tradition, universal truths over local knowledge are indicative of the cultural aspirations of a society.

The problem with such a chapter is that it suggests a single paradigm of modernity, so that the march of urban industrialisation is seen as an unproblematic virtue. It promotes an ideology which structures technological

progress as the defining mark of a self-respecting nation. For instance, the devastating demographic shift towards urban migration is treated unproblematically and is even celebrated as a mark of progress: "Many families are rapidly moving to cities and towns in order to find jobs in factories and industries".⁴¹ The stunning blindness of such a statement creates a world in which the problems of land dispossession, the crippling effects of a failed monsoon or the debilitation of migrant workers do not exist.

With this treatment of the subject of technological development, the child reading these texts fails to see the costs of this modernity: social, cultural or ecological. A celebration of this inferiorises alternative modes of development, alternative priorities. In the process, textbooks wilfully blind the middle-class students to whom they address themselves. The beneficiaries of the miracle of modernity and capitalist progress know nothing of its price: the dispossessed peasants, the children who labour in factories and the poor who have no access to the open markets thrown open to international capital. The victims of these systems become forever the unknowable 'other' of modern India, forgotten because they remain hidden from the view of those with the knowledge and power to effect change.

DISTRIBUTION OF CAPITAL

To forget and to ignore this other India is possible only through the construction of an ideology which appeals to different sentiments. The iniquities of the distribution of capital is dealt with through a devaluing of the very desire to acquire wealth. Drawing upon Gandhian asceticism, the other-worldly tenets of brahmanical Hindu scriptures and on a protestant celebration of the work ethic, this discourse seeks to abjure the pursuit of money. On the other hand, the concretely visible poverty and the remnants of an opposing socialist philosophy prompts a concomitant discomfort with existing patterns of economic distribution.

Consequently, school textbooks treat the issue of wealth, its acquisition and its importance with distinct unease. Uneasy with the acquisition of wealth as an ideal, they constantly suggest that it is synonymous with greed - even as they consistently and anxiously return to the theme. A single reader from Kerala for instance,⁴² includes the story of Midas, the story of 'Four Greedy Young Men' who treacherously kill each other because each covets the buried pot of gold they find and a story entitled, 'The Finest Thing in the World' in which two brothers achieve wealth and power but the third achieves contentment. The moral of all these stories can be encapsulated in one brother's admission, 'In spite of my wealth I am tired and unhappy' and the other's statement, "He

has after all found the finest thing in the world. He has found contentment." Similarly, another reader deals with the same attitude. 'The Imp and the Peasant's Bread' describes how the devil's disciple can ruin a once-generous peasant by ensuring that he has a surfeit of possessions. Conversely, 'Kindness Rewarded' tells of the great reward for two poor peasants who give what little they can, to the visiting gods.

There is here a curiously conflictual attitude to the questions of labour and profit. On the one hand, there is an exhortation towards hard work but on the other, approval for the fruits of labour is absent. Instead, there is an ascetic disapproval of the possession of plenty. Taken together, the stories suggest the value of maintaining an economic status quo. A sudden access of wealth leads to ruination as in the case of the four young men and the imp's peasant.

A straightforward warning against a hope for easy wealth is found in the story of the miller Whang⁴³ who is inspired by a neighbour who dreams of buried gold on his land and digs to find it. Whang stops working at his mill and finally one night dreams of gold under the walls of his mill. Inevitably he digs for it, does not find gold but as a result of his act, brings down the mill. Students are prompted to draw the conclusion that it is foolish and destructive to hope for sudden accessions of wealth. A miller's role in life is to produce flour not to search for wealth.

CONCLUSION

If we argue that the construction of the nation in these textbooks is a deliberate exercise in ideological structuring, we need to address ourselves to the question of whose and which ideology is reflected. It seems superfluous to say that these textbooks function as reflections of the dominant ideology of state policy: the more interesting questions are of how this is established and whose state is ultimately reflected in the process.

While no list of the complex power lobbies which seek to imagine a nation in their own image can be entirely complete, it is clear that there are significant conflicts of interest among them. The size, diversity and the particularly segmented nature of Indian society and economy splinter the articulations of these conflicts and this is reflected in the demonisations and celebrations which appear in the textbooks.

One manifestation of this tension is between the urban industrial and professional classes on the one hand, and the rural hegemonic class of rich farmers on the other.⁴⁴ A further tension is clearly visible between a centralised political class and regional groups which through a variety of caste alliances have sought to wrest the political

initiative from traditional high-caste and economically powerful groups.

A summarising glance at the configuration of the nation in these textbooks, reveals a variety of discourses which simultaneously contest and complement each other, thus both reflecting and shaping the discourse. India's diversity is acknowledged but only to be superimposed onto the larger trope of unity - via myth, symbols such as the flag and history such as the freedom struggle and nationalist leaders; the unitary images of flag, bird and anthem bolstering the legitimising claims of a centralised political elite. Similarly, the superiority of rural India is celebrated, but so is modern, industrialised India, the two aspects appearing in uneasy juxtaposition. Thus the farmer is important in the discourse of the nation, but it is only the rich, independent farmer and not the agricultural worker or the poor peasant who appears. Finally, the social order and strong state power, dear to the heart of the bourgeoisie are valorised and economic disparity is glossed over by the suggestion that wealth is irrelevant to true happiness.

The incorporation of diverse voices only serves to strengthen the dominant, rather than weaken it. The acknowledgement of the presence of different social groups does not bring the student any closer to the reality they inhabit, only deepening the gulf between the dominant and the subject worlds. Through a process of essentialisation, mythification and romanticisation, they make strange the very categories which they appear to celebrate. There is no serious subversion or even interrogation by alternative paradigms set by religious minorities, dalits or even by questions of gender. The fact that these textbooks are produced by state education councils specifically set up to do away with the most blatant forms of caste and religious underpinnings does not alter the privileging and problematic nature of their ideology.

Notes

- 1 'The Lesson' by the Grenadian poetess, Merle Collins in her anthology, *Because the Dawn Breaks*, Karia Press, 1985.
- 2 See for instance, Krishna Kumar, *Political Agenda of Education* (Sage, 1991) and *What Is Worth Teaching?* (Orient Longman, 1992); Timothy Scrase, *Image. Ideology and Inequality* (Sage, 1993); Myron Weiner, *The Child and the State in India* (OUP, 1991).
- 3 For a consideration of the impact of this on education, especially in the context of the teaching of English, see Raji Sunder Rajan, 'Fixing English: Nation, Language, Subject', and Gauri Viswanathan, 'English in a Literate Society' in Sunder Rajan (ed) *The Lie of the Land*, OUP, 1992.
- 4 *Report of the Secondary Education Commission, 1952-53* (Ministry of Education and Social Welfare, Government of India), New Delhi, 1972, p 5.
- 5 *Ibid*, p 6.

- 6 The only significant dissenting voice comes in the Ramamurti Report (1990) which displays a deep discomfort with the hegemonic control of dominant structures of knowledge. The report observes, "A common myth is created that the national wealth and the GNP is the work of a handful of states, of a few scientists and of industrial and business classes of people, leaving out the major contribution to the national economy by the common masses" (*Report of the Committee for Review of National Policy on Education, 1986, Department of Education, Ministry of Human Resource Development, New Delhi, 1990, p90*)
- 7 *National Policy on Education, 1986, Department of Education, Ministry of Human Resource Development, New Delhi, 1992, p 4.*
- 8 *National Curriculum for Elementary and Secondary Education: A Framework, NCERT, New Delhi, 1988, p 5.*
- 9 *High School Supplementary Reader, Government of Uttar Pradesh, Lucknow, 1992, p¹¹*
- 10 *Basic English Reader I, Shiksha Nideshalaya, Government of Uttar Pradesh, Lucknow, 1991, p 60.*
- 11 See John Hutchinson, *The Dynamics of Cultural Nationalism, Allen and Unwin, London, 1987, pp 30-36* for a fuller discussion of cultural nationalism.
- 12 For a discussion of this, see for instance, Ashish Nandy, *The Intimate Enemy, OUP, 1983*. For a critique of the essentialising arguments of Said's *Orientalism*, see the introduction to Carol Breckenridge and Peter van der Veer (ed), *Orientalism and the Post-Colonial Predicament*. University of Pennsylvania Press, Philadelphia, 1993, and Aijaz Ahmad's *In Theory*, (OUP).
- 13 Eric Hobsbawm and Terence Ranger, *The Invention of Tradition, OUP, Cambridge, 1983, pp 264-65*
- 14 *Kerala English Reader, Standard 6, Education Department, Government of Kerala, Thiruvananthapuram, 1994, p 62.*
- 15 *Ibid, p 39.*
- 16 *Basic English Reader I, Shiksha Nideshalaya, Uttar Pradesh, Lucknow, 1991, p 83.*
- 17 *Ibid.*
- 18 *Read for Pleasure, Book II, NCERT, New Delhi, 1980. p 76.*
- 19 *English Reader, Book IV, NCERT, New Delhi, 1993, p 117.*
- 20 *English Reader, Book V, NCERT, New Delhi, 1993, p 156.*
- 21 For a detailed exploration of this theme, see most notably, Bourdieu and Passeron, *Reproduction in Education. Society and Culture* (Sage, 1977); Michael Apple, *Ideology and Curriculum*, (Routledge and Kegan Paul, 1979); Geoff Whitty, *Sociology and School Knowledge* (Methuen, 1985).
- 22 *Kerala English Reader, Standards, Education Department, Government of Kerala, Thiruvananthapuram, 1994, p 23.*
- 23 Michel Foucault's point about the visibility of power in pre-modern Europe as opposed to its more subtle and diffuse exercise in modern society is relevant in this context. (Foucault, *Power/Knowledge*, The Harvester Press, 1980.)
- 24 See for instance, 'Unity Is Strength' in which the king of the pigeons instructs his flock to fly together to lift up the hunter's net. (*Basic English Reader 2, Basic Shiksha Pnrvhid Uttar Pradesh, 1993*).
- 25 *English Reader, Book III, NCERT, New Delhi, 1993, p 44.*
- 26 *Read for Pleasure, Book IV, NCERT, New Delhi, 1993, p 1.*
- 27 *Kerala English Reader, Standard VI, Education Department, Government of Kerala, Thiruvananthapuram, 1994, p 18.*
- 28 *Kerala English Reader, Standard VII, Education Department, Government of Kerala, Thiruvananthapuram, 1994, p 7*
- 29 *Basic English Reader, Book I, Shiksha Nideshalaya, Government of Uttar Pradesh, Lucknow. 1991, p 89.*
- 30 *Basic English Reader, Book 3, Shiksha Nideshalaya, Government of Uttar Pradesh, Lucknow. 1990, p 22.*
- 31 *Kerala English Reader, Standard V, Education Department, Government of Kerala, 1994, p84.*
- 32 *Kerala English Reader, Standard 9, Education Department, Government of Kerala, 1994, p65.*
- 33 *Kerala English Reader, Standard 10, Education Department, Government of Kerala, 1993, p 16.*
- 34 *Kerala English Reader, Standard VI, Education Department, Government of Kerala, 1994, p I.*
- 35 Ernest Gellner's phrase, Gellner sees the demand and ideology of nationalism as linked not so much with modernisation, as with its uneven distribution. (Gellner, 'Nationalism and Modernisation' in Hutchinson and Smith (eds) *Nationalism*, OUP, 1994, p 61.
- 36 *Basic English Reader, Book 2, Shiksha Nideshalaya, Government of Uttar Pradesh, 1993, p97.*
- 37 *Basic English Reader, Book 3, Shiksha Nideshalaya, Government of Uttar Pradesh, Lucknow, 1990, p 22.*
- 38 *English Reader, Book IV, Special Series, NCERT, 1993, p 63.*
- 39 *Ibid.*
- 40 In a recent article (The Village: Its Decline in the Imagination', *The Times of India*, March 18, 1996) Ashish Nandy traces the gradual obliteration of the village from the cultural image of India, arguing that the importance of the village in the ideas of Gandhi, of Ray's *Pather Panchali* and M N Srinivas's *The Remembered Village* has been replaced by a distanced conception of it as a demographical and statistical datum of population growth, health care or educational backwardness.
- 41 *Ibid.*
- 42 *Kerala English Reader, Standard VI, Government of Kerala, 1994.*
- 43 *Workbook for English Reader, Book II, NCERT, 1971, p 27.*
- 44 Sharad Joshi, a leading rural leader of Maharashtra in the 1980s, has described the principal cleavage in Indian society today as that of Bharat versus India, the countryside versus the city. Similarly, the persistent theme in the speeches of Charan Singh, the Jat leader and ex-prime minister, has been on the stranglehold of 'urban lobbies' and the 'parasitic intelligentsia'.

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