

Where Have the Mangoes Gone?

Mangoes have always been the most popular illustrations in primary school mathematics textbooks. But they have been replaced by apples, peaches, hazelnuts and cherries in the brand new NCERT textbook for class one. Worse still is the replacement of the Indian bullock cart with an American model. Serious note must be taken of these changes since illustrations play an important pedagogic role in school textbooks.

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The new NCERT textbook on mathematics for class 1 [NCERT 2002] is a visually pleasing document. The multicoloured and crisp illustrations make the book very appealing and I am sure most children have been very happy to possess the book. Many a parent and teacher must also have been happy with the fact that at last NCERT was waking up to the special needs of children and replaced the earlier drab book with such a pleasant surprise.

A second look at the book leaves one feeling a little uneasy, an uneasiness that grows as one turns the pages. After all what is the function of illustrations in a children's book? Surely they must be different from that of advertisement copy? And here we are talking of not just any children's book, but the first book of a child going to school. Anyone who has watched children in class one with their deep almost umbilical involvement with their bag and their books knows what this first book is. It is a cherished possession, perhaps making lasting impressions on their psyche. Here I am of course talking of the vast majority of our children for whom the books of class I are the first books they possess. So the question is, what should the illustrations of such a book be like? What should be their function?

Illustrations and words of the first books literally herald the birth of a new world of meaning. Meanings were configured in situations, in contexts full of affect and action. They were then formed into words, words spoken. And now yet another medium, that of drawings and written

words is born. And a child learns that there are other ways of signifying what was experienced. A five year old lives in, what one may call the 'Age of Representations'. New signifiers, new forms of signifiers, come to add extra dimensions to the construction of meanings and meaningful combinations. But somewhere behind all this is the feeding ground of experiential reality, a reality which you can touch, feel and act upon. If signifying that reality on paper is an important component of becoming literate, then these illustrations will have to be judged on those criteria and not by those of advertisement copy.¹ And perhaps the uneasy feeling on looking at the NCERT textbook emerges from the large gap that separates the illustrations of this book from the experiential reality of not just the average Indian child, but just any child living in India.

Even a cursory look at the book gives the impression that the illustrations were copied from some American comic/textbook, although there is no acknowledgement anywhere. The dependence on foreign illustrations is all pervasive and not restricted to any understandable small proportion. From the pink cherubic face of the anchoring child, to the faces of the comic-strip characters of Flintstones or the animals or the furniture or the dolls,

all are steeped in the social meanings of another culture.

There is no harm in learning of other cultures. After all we know that we all together inhabit this planet earth and we learn and grow by sharing from each other. But should that happen to the exclusion of all that is known in our own culture, in our own surroundings? And that too, at what age? For what purpose? In fact one will be hard put to find even one illustration which can be considered to have originated in our milieu. A possible exception is the woman in page 8 on whom a saree has been apparently grafted on.

Perhaps the biggest indictment of the orientation of the new NCERT textbook is the total absence of pictures of mangoes in the whole book. As far as one can remember, our book writers have always used mangoes to illustrate books, as pictorial support for learning addition, etc. The earlier edition of the NCERT did not have that many pictures but it had pictures of mangoes and to illustrate number seven there were seven luscious mangoes, some green and some ripe. But in this new addition, while there are six different illustrations on which the apple appears and another 19 illustrations of other fruits there is not a single picture of a mango! One can argue that apples have become more available today than earlier, but surely there is still some room for our good old mango.² The mango is still a very familiar fruit for children across the largest tracts of India. And let us remember that the NCERT books function as a paradigm for other textbook writers across the country. The question is not whether the mango is there or not and the point is not of quickly inserting a picture of a mango into the book. The illustrations in the book reflect a particular approach to education and a lack of seriousness in the task at hand. The issue is not that luscious peaches have replaced the mango, but the lack of concern with the kind of illustrations used and

Table 1: Page No of Illustrations of Fruits and Nuts

Apples	Grapes	Bananas	Pears	Peaches	Oranges	Hazelnuts	Cherries	Pineapples
9	23	32	35	27	53	22	99	147
10	24	39	53	36	147			
31	47	53	147					
53	81	54						
96	147	99						
147								

Figure 1

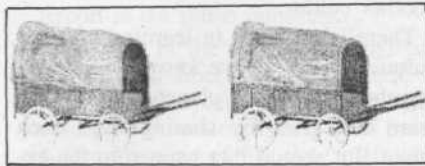


Figure 2

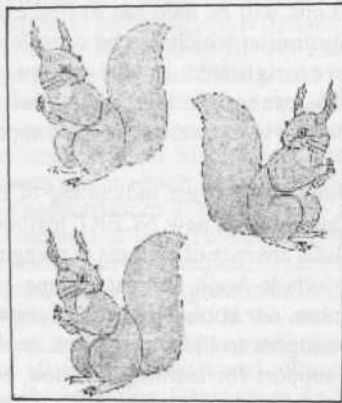
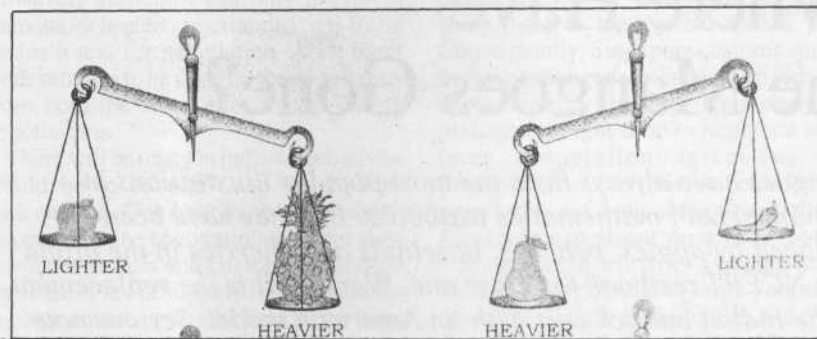
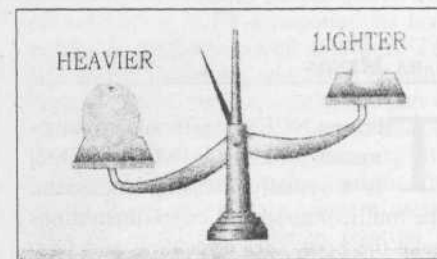
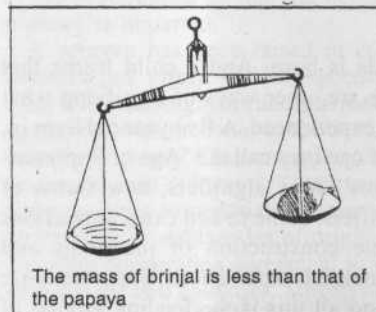


Figure 3



Source: NCERT, 2002, p 147.



Source: NCERT, 2002.

total rejection of local materials. Many a teacher would also be hard put to identify the hazelnuts on page 22. In fact one has a lurking suspicion that even the bananas and grapes were not chosen for their familiarity to Indian children but because they are imported from the Banana Republics into US or they are grown in California and are present in American children's books. Similarly the only dark faces in the book refer to the natives of Africa depicted in the manner of caricatures which were common in American books of a generation ago.

The alien inspiration of this NCERT textbook casts its shadow on practically every illustration. Even familiar objects seem different. Thus it would be difficult to recognise the bullock cart or the tonga in the carts shown on pages 21 and 31 (Figure 1). But anyone familiar with American history can recognise the cart of the American pioneers. Children cannot be blamed if they cannot recognise our familiar small squirrel in the picture of the tassel-eared squirrel of North America on page 25 (Figure 2). Similar is the case with the white pig tied to the wooden sty or the doll or umpteen other illustrations. Perhaps the cavalier attitude is reflected in the fact that the NCERT did not even bother to change the colouring in the pictures of the three brunettes and two blondes used

Source: NCERT (1988): K Ramchandran and V P Gupta *Let's Learn Mathematics-Book Two A Textbook for Class 2*, NCERT, June 1988, p 185.

to illustrate the number five on page 44! It is as if the NCERT is saying that things familiar and around us are not worth being depicted in books.

By copying these American illustrations the NCERT is going against what educationists everywhere in the world including in the US have to say about illustrations for children's books. In fact one wonders why the NCERT has not followed some of the US recommendations about the need for authentic portrayal in depicting other cultures and in writing about the experiences of one's own people.³ There has always been a bias in our textbooks in representing the diversity of our country and a tendency to use caricatures. In one sense, this is an unbiased book because it would be alien to all the children who are expected to use it.

I think it is very important not to dismiss illustrations as something purely peripheral. On the contrary it has a deep foundational function. I remember vividly the faces of the children when one day we brought a neem branch to the classroom and made a drawing of the leaves. There was a sense of adventure to the whole enterprise. To put on paper, that something which is till

then only out there and similarly to recognise on paper that something which one has only seen around oneself is the birth of a new dimension. When those wings are well in place it could also nest in unknown worlds. But what is the role of the alien at the birth of the new dimension?

Another very serious consequence of the illustrations was pointed out to me by my young colleague Rajni. This is seen in the illustrations used by the NCERT to show heavy and light objects.

The scales shown have the pointer moving below the beam. Such scales where the pointer is attached to the fulcrum might be common in North America, but they would be an unusual sight to children in India and would be confusing for a five-year old child. Indian children are familiar with the common balance used in vegetable shops, etc, in India where the pointer is attached to the beam and moves above the beam towards the heavier weight. Indeed these were the type of scales which were used for illustrations in earlier NCERT books. A comparison of the new pictures with those in the old Class II NCERT textbook is indicative of the shift

which has taken place. Along with the disappearance of the mango, coconut, pumpkin and watermelon, the familiar balance has also disappeared (Figure 3). Certainly the old line-drawings left much to be desired in terms of accuracy and attractiveness. But now along with the introduction of four-coloured pictures the situation which was being indicated has also disappeared with serious pedagogic consequences.

One has been critical of the many private book publishers who use copied pictures to illustrate children's books. But we knew also that the costs of original illustrations were high and at some level could understand them. But, surely the NCERT can afford to spend some money to create meaningful books for children? Cost considerations cannot be the criteria for a book which is to be used by lakhs of children. We also need to keep in mind that this approach to illustrations comes on top of the problems

due to the structuralist pedagogy used in the book.

It is remarkable that the director of NCERT did not find these illustrations worrisome when he added his foreword to the volume. Indeed the book does raise fundamental questions about what we understand by culture. Unfortunately today 'our culture' has become a sledgehammer to wage battles for narrow vested interests. Yet our real culture, the lived culture of people is an inexhaustible resource waiting to be used by educationists. That everyday culture of our people includes eating mangoes, eating on leaves and many more normal little things. It includes passing money for tickets in the blue line buses of Delhi and sharing food on long-distance trains. By learning to relate to this experiential reality of our people we can discover many valuable meanings closer to our collective interests. It appears that the NCERT has forgotten this first educational task. EPW

Notes

- 1 By this I do not mean to say that children's stories or illustrations have to follow the strict canons of some school of realism. We all know that ghost stories are some of the favourites of children, but then ghosts have a very real social presence!
- 2 In fact one could even add that these pictures only add to the inflated 'star value' of apples in our society, which is not commensurate with its comparative nutritive value.
- 3 Thus for example, Temple, Martinez, Yokota, and Naylor (1998) say "Illustrations should be accurate, true to the time period portrayed, and culturally authentic. They must not stereotype, homogenise, or ridicule any cultural group. Racial groups should be depicted with a variety of physical features that are not overemphasised. Illustrations play a major role in transmitting cultural images, especially in picture books", *Children's Books in Children's Hands*. Needham Heights, MA: Allyn and Bacon.

Reference

- NCERT (2002): Let's Learn Mathematics-Book One for Class 1 by V P Gupta and Ishwar Chandra, February.