

BOOK REVIEW

Texts and Contexts: Attitudes of Teachers in India and Pakistan

Zahid Shahab Ahmed and Michelle Baxter

Published by WISCOMP, New Delhi, 2007

REVIEWED by Rene Wadlow

Reviewer Profile

Dr. Rene Wadlow is the Representative to the United Nations, Geneva, of the Association of World Citizens and the Editor of the online journal of world politics, www.transnational-perspectives.org. Formerly, he was Professor and Director of Research of the Graduate Institute of Development Studies, University of Geneva. He served as the Founding Secretary of the European Association of Development Research and Training Institutes (EADI) and as Book Editor of the *International Development Review*.

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(New Delhi: WISCOMP, 2007, 102pp)

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This cooperative research carried out by a young Pakistani and a young Indian, both working for international non-governmental organizations, explores how textbooks help determine political and social attitudes, especially attitudes toward India and Pakistan. Through an in-depth analysis of history and social studies textbooks from India and Pakistan, the authors highlight how certain textbooks have been modified to serve political ends. The Bhartiya Janata Party (BJP) government in India (in power at the Center till 2004) wanted history texts to reflect their Hindutva agenda of a Hindu civilization, while the Islamization efforts of General Zia ul Haq in the 1970s-1980s eliminated the teaching of history at the secondary school level, and replaced history with social studies stressing the Islamic nature of the Pakistani State.

As the authors note "History has often been distorted to create an 'enemy' image in the school textbooks of India and Pakistan. These textbooks feed the minds and imagination of millions of children in both countries. They play a major role in generating hatred and animosity between the two countries. Indeed, history textbooks have become victims of the official ideologies and foreign policies of both countries." As the authors stress, "While Indian textbooks have a highly slanted and prejudiced view of minorities, particularly Muslims, Pakistani textbooks are no different. They are so designed as to promote hatred against Hindus and India. The powers that be, in both the countries, have vested interests in keeping the hatred between the communities alive so as to benefit politically from it. The textbooks are not simply written by prejudiced minds but with a particular purpose."

The dangers to the whole society of such an approach is well set out in the passage quoted from K.K. Aziz's *Pakistan Political Culture*: "The atrocious manner in which history is taught in our schools, colleges and universities is a guarantee that the nation will remain ignorant of its past, oblivious to its present, and unmindful of its future. To tell lies to the school students, to relate fairy tales to the undergraduates, and to present fabrications in the university lecture halls is to sow an ill wind which will one day rise to a storm, disrupt the society and endanger the state."

While it is often difficult to change the teaching of national history given the political use of such teaching, much can be done to encourage students to study the history and culture of the local town, segment of a city, or the village where they live. By looking at the history of local buildings, at the way farming is structured, by looking at what goods are sold in the market and how they got there, by looking at who is selling what, students can analyze the local society, its evolution over time, and the fact that many different groups and cultures have contributed to today's society. The study of local history with an enlightened teacher can facilitate cooperation with persons in the area, who have stories to tell of their own experience and skills. Thus, the study of local history can enrich the generalities which exist in textbooks concerning national history.

Of course, textbooks are not the only source of influence: family and friends, childhood experiences, literature, films, television, and other forms of mass media also play a role. Thus, the setting up of special clubs and reading rooms in schools that concentrate on peace news, social justice, and attitudes of respect and responsibility toward women are important. Films that promote values of justice and peace can be shown. Creative writing can be encouraged as well as arts and crafts. When a person is creative in one area of life, he/she is likely to be more open and creative in other areas as well.

However, textbooks present information in a structured way, and being able to repeat text book information is necessary to pass examinations. Thus, it may be possible to publish "alternative textbooks" – books which deal with the same subjects but in a more objective or conflict-reducing way. It would be useful to have a follow-up study on how textbooks are chosen by the Ministry of Education or whichever body does the selection, the relation between the publishers and the education authorities, and how those who write the textbooks are chosen. For "alternative textbooks", it would be important to discuss with publishers, the costs of production, the number of sales necessary to cover costs and the patterns of literature sales for children, secondary students etc.

As the authors point out "Beyond textbooks, teachers are also a crucial element in the system of education. So far, in India and Pakistan, there hasn't been any significant study on the role of teachers in shaping mindsets (enemy images, hatred of others etc.) of young generations, the way they want to or the way the national education system forces them to. However, the role of teachers in the nation-building process cannot be neglected because they are the artists of young minds."

In order to analyze the impact of textbooks and the attitudes of teachers, thirty teachers and thirty students were interviewed in three cities in each country: Delhi, Mumbai and Chennai in India; Islamabad, Rawalpindi and Peshawar in

Pakistan. These were teachers and students in the governmental school system in each country. In both India and Pakistan, there are religiously-inspired schools, the *madrassahs* of Pakistan and the RSS schools in India. In addition, both countries have elite private schools, originally inspired by the English system. A follow-up study of the attitudes of teachers and students at all three types of schools would be useful.

The conclusions of the research clearly indicate the difficulties faced in introducing an objective and balanced view of history. "According to this research study, the growth of intolerance, fundamentalism and extremism, while having many other sources, is strengthened by educational curricula and teaching systems operational in the large number of public schools in India and Pakistan."

Fortunately, there are efforts on the part of State education authorities to modify these negative practices. In India, the 2005 National Curriculum Framework for School Education has stressed that "peace education must be a concern that permeates the entire school life – curriculum, classroom environment, school management, teacher-pupil relationship, teaching-learning processes, and the entire range of school activities. Hence, it is important to examine the curriculum and examination systems from the point of view of how they may influence children's sense of inadequacy, frustration, impatience and insecurity."

In Pakistan, President Pervez Musharraf said in his 2002 Independence Day speech, "There are no quick fix solutions to the problem of sectarianism and extremism; they are to be tackled in a systematic and methodical manner." Certainly, a review and analysis of school textbooks and teaching methods is part of a systematic approach.

This study is a good example of what cooperative research between Indians and Pakistanis on sensitive subjects can achieve. It is the first of the WISCOMP Collaborative Research Studies – the first of what we hope will be a long and productive series.