

## History Teaching & Textbooks

A book Review of 'Pride and Prejudice' by Krishna Kumar

Penguin Books India (2001)

"Long before children have the capacity and find the opportunities, to make sense of the past, they are socialized into its many legacies. Dispensed as history, knowledge of the past becomes a powerful factor of acculturation. Representations of the past, dispersed by schools and the state media, ultimately serve as mental maps which guide large multitudes of people in shaping their response to present-day situations. Assimilation of this knowledge during childhood takes place through socialization at home and formal learning at school. The first source contributes to the formation of tacit understanding; the other leads to the formation of socially articulated knowledge. Together they shape attitudes, beliefs and behaviour during later life." ( chapter 2)

A Valuable book

These lines are from "Prejudice and Pride" by Krishna Kumar and is in a sense its beginning point. This book is a timely and valuable book for a variety of reasons.

First, it is the first comparative, critical and analytical study of history textbooks in India and Pakistan.

Second, it explores history writing from a pedagogical view point and focuses on the fact that children are recipients and that there is a need to understand the pedagogical implications of the text on the child's acculturation into the social fabric.

Third, it defines historical understanding allowing therefore for a framework through which to study the texts. The criteria that the author evolves clarifies what history learning implies and what skills it demands. The author says that:

- historical understanding demands that the circumstance, values and choices of the people of the past can only be reconstructed, not re-enacted and so, only a limited degree of certitude is possible in its analysis or interpretation. This of course means understanding the job of a historian.
- a basic ability to make sense of a text is needed, particularly when ideas and concepts are drawn from other areas of social inquiry as well. There is also a need to keep in mind that any event would have occurred in times different from the present and that present day value judgements would be completely misplaced. So, the vocabulary used to describe or interpret needs to be understood within the frame of relevance of the period.
- a clear understanding of the timeframe and perspective "without being submerged in it" - which is examining events, without being guided by the outcome.

In stating these, the author makes a real difference to the task he has undertaken as he draws a baseline from which to read and understand what he has to say in the comparative study of school texts, a largely neglected entity of education in both countries.

Third, it places the study of history, of popular awareness of history, of school history teaching and learning through "frames". (Chapter 3)

A Frame of Reference

In my mind this is extremely relevant as it places the manner in which children on the subcontinent have grown aware of their national identity, of their past, particularly the freedom struggle. Krishna

Kumar says. "The history of the freedom struggle taught to schoolchildren in India and Pakistan is framed by a deep awareness of the 'other'. Pakistan was born as a result of Partition which accompanied the end of the freedom struggle. On the other hand, India's identity as a secular country has its foundation in the resistance shown by India's greatest freedom fighters to the idea of Partition. This difference may constitute a sufficient reason for the pedagogic narratives of freedom in both countries to be greatly influenced by perceptions of the 'other'." chapter 3 But he goes on to state that 'freedom' is an unfinished narrative in both countries, as in any once-colonised country.

Such an understanding stated so clearly is rarely available to the consciousness of the teacher/educator. For, the texts generated in the two countries are now placed in a context; a context of post-colonial dreams, of the need to build national identities:- for Pakistan, definitely a need to explain the Partition as an achievement and therefore, a realisation of a dream. For India, to understand the secular character of its constitution in the wake of the terrible excesses of the Partition and the two wars with the new neighbour. For instance, the question of how to relate to neighbours who were once part of the same structure? How to reconcile the frenzy of violence that beset the sub-continent prior to independence and immediately after it? -are all relevant still.

### The School History Text

Any thinking person who has studied school history would be perplexed many similar questions and yet would have received no answers from teachers and other adults. The history texts in school draw a veil over several issues. In the analysis that the author presents, he places the text under a very sensitive and sustained microscope for his analysis.

"Educational activity of any kind depends on a text, visible or invisible. .The texts used of the teaching of history are particularly sensitive to contemporary politics and culture, for the reason that the writing of history inevitably constitutes a response to the present." (Chapter 4).

What is of greatly value in Part II Rival Histories , and the chapters that find place within it are the three traits of writing of school history that is common to both countries:

- Politics of Mention,
- Pacing, and
- Conception of the End.

These three traits exist, have been recognised, and yet have been largely left unchallenged, simply because the system of exam-oriented education, the low priority allotted to humanities based subjects, especially history vis-à-vis the sciences and math., do not allow for serious questioning or examination of these subjects.

### A Timely Book:

The merit of the book is in the fact that the author leads the reader quite systematically through the study of the texts and through these, opens out questions on secularism Vs communalism, religion and its use in history, treatment of personalities in history, and interpretations of events.

The book is also timely in the face of the threats and the erosion of the secular structure of India in recent times and quick moves to crystallize into reactionary postures. For, it seeks to establish a human face to Pakistan. In fact, the author begins by stating that while the 'other' is always in one's consciousness, there is quite a lack of curiosity about each other in both countries. But there is a process of demonisation of the other that occurs quite neatly: one dismembered a country and are

quite willing to do so again (Indian notion); and one cheated the other and is depriving us of that which rightly belongs to us (the Pakistani version).

The Children:

Krishna Kumar makes an appeal to the school history writers to take into account the recipients of history in school: "the role of the school historian, a magician who conjures up images and faces without giving children a chance to ask for proof of their veracity."

With reference to some narratives in the textbooks of the Indian National Congress and the Muslim League, and the demand for separate electorates, he says, "The young readers who want to make sense need new conceptual tools. They must know what terms like 'elites' and 'parties' might mean in the context of the late nineteenth century, before they can grasp the idea of an 'electorate' and the demand for a 'separate electorate'. School textbooks of both India and Pakistan deny their readers any access to this kind of information. Even senior, seventeen year old students of class XII find no such background detail in their textbook. To say that thirteen or seventeen year olds cannot decipher a demographic table or a map would be quite remarkable indeed, considering the kind of problems they are expected to grasp in their mathematics or science class."

This speaks for itself in the expression of his concern for the impact of current history learning on the students. Especially as the reality is that most history classes still tend to be straight lectures, with emphasis on facts and memory. So, what children actually receive in the name of history is pre-digested LISTS, offering no scope to build perspective or analysis or even a way of building an independent perspective. In the book, Krishna Kumar does give an example of the questions which the student is confronted with. The exam simply requires him to spill out all the facts given in the prescribed text and the marks and time limit do not allow for any question to be taken through a process of deep or clear analysis either.

In fact, the manner in which history is corrected in Board exams leaves little or no room for deviation of view. Marks matter. So, students are taught to idolise personalities, demonise others (in India, it is usually Jinnah or Bose). Krishna Kumar points out that the texts rarely use other areas of humanities to support what is being said. For example, with the exception of Gandhi, who is clearly a hero, not many other leaders even merit a biographical mention (many of the Indian textbooks are NCERT books at various levels and textbooks from various State Boards, there is only one ICSE text in his list. Krishna Kumar cites this text as an exception in a few cases). He says that it would be sensible to use geography-through maps, biography to analyse a leader's background dispassionately, statistics to generate data.

Perhaps, the one suggestion, which he does not seem to have emphasised on, particularly, since his analysis of the texts is based on the Modern India period of History, is the wide use of source materials. This would, for instance, give students a feel of the pulse of the time they are studying, prevent leaders from assuming larger than life proportions with no tool to counter that process, to study dispassionately a period, about which they arrive in class with a lot of unprocessed perceptions fed to them by the strident voices of religiosity and patriotism fed by the media and the adults around them. For instance, The withdrawal of the Non-Co-operation Movt. Following the Chauri Chaura incident, is so easily understandable if only the teacher and student had access to newspaper reports, articles, letters, and telegrams of the time.

## Children's Writing Across Borders:

The most unique and revealing part of the book is the section that is at the end of the book, after the detailed analysis of the school texts. This is just when the reader wonders, "OK, you've made your point about the textbooks and why history is treated in India and Pakistan. What next?", Part III Future Prospects includes writings by children in both countries on the division of India and Pakistan. The author had 63 essays, some written by students of elite schools and state-run schools. In this he presents and analysis of what children thought and wrote, seeking to make sense of the inherited history and their reality.

In my mind, the book has clearly and carefully studied the problem of history textbooks and has articulated the discomfort I, as a teacher of school history, have always had, but have never been clear about the reasons so clearly. It also explains for the first time why, as a student of history, I had felt, College level history was marvellous and school history was not a patch on it. (I remember stating this quite emphatically to my mother).

Finally, traditional mores of history teaching will have to be abandoned. History teaching in schools, I feel, will have to wake up to current trends in polity and respond to that effectively. The school history teacher is, therefore, to be some one who can help children look at history, without thrusting personal views upon them. Often, a good text helps.

Finally, the author makes a plea to at least a handful of schools in India and Pakistan to come together and design and offer a shared course of the study of the modern period, including the freedom struggle; to create an opportunity for professional historians of India and Pakistan to examine school textbooks in joint sessions. As he puts it, "It will inaugurate the lifting of what is arguably the thickest iron curtains in the present-day world, so far as the flow of ideas and scholarships is concerned. Popular music and cinema have served as a tunnel under this curtain, but pleasant tunes and faces cannot by themselves establish the basis for a peaceful and mature relationship. Education has a vital role to play in helping India and Pakistan overcome .the unsettling effects of their interlocked frames of perception." (Any takers?)

In the context of all these, Professor Krishna Kumar's book, given his own connections with education, is vital, relevant and a necessary reading for all teachers.

### About the Author

Professor Krishna Kumar is Professor of Education a Delhi University and has been a National Lecturer of the UGC and a member of the Yashpal Committee.

He has written: Raj, Samaj, Aur Shiksha, What is Worth Teaching, Social Character of Learning, Learning From Conflict and other books.

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