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1.1 Role of a textbook
Textbooks play a major role in every syllabus. They serve as the basis for much of the language input learners receive and the language practice that occurs in the classroom. They also act as a supplement to the teacher’s instruction. The textbooks in general provide ideas on how to plan and teach lessons to the students so that they will be able to understand properly. Much of the language teaching that takes place around the world depends on the textbooks prescribed in the syllabus. For learners, they act as a source of contact that the learners have with the language apart from the input provided by the teacher. A textbook provides a plan that the teacher tries to cover within a particular span of time. It may be seen as a balanced, chronological presentation of information. Therefore, learning how to use a textbook in a classroom is a significant part of a teacher’s professional knowledge.

A textbook must be based on the latest research and training. It requires time to time revision. A textbook is good if the teacher uses it properly. It is an important tool but teachers should not depend entirely on it. They also need to be supplemented with other materials. These supplementary materials act as a source of extra information to the students. The advantages and disadvantages of using textbooks in teaching depend upon how they are being used by the teacher and also on the context of their use. They act as a core in most of the programs. In this way, students in different classes receive similar contents.

It is important to use well developed textbooks so that students get proper exposure in all areas. They should not be old or outdated otherwise students will be getting irrelevant information. But it is useful to keep in mind that textbooks represent a somewhat idealised view of the world. In order to make them acceptable in different contexts, controversial topics or socio-cultural issues need to be avoided. In case, if some negative consequences are found after using the prescribed textbooks, remedial actions should be taken by adapting or supplementing books or by providing proper guidance to the teachers on how to use such textbooks appropriately so that the learners may not receive a wrong message. One of the major drawbacks is that textbooks do not take into account students’ background knowledge. So the textbooks developed by the textbook designers which are prescribed for the students of various
social and cultural background, may sometimes become a problem for a teacher to use them.

Cunningsworth (1995) proposes four criteria for evaluating textbooks before prescribing for any language program or classroom:

1. They should have a clear role as a support for learning. They should also mediate between the target language and the learner, like a teacher.
2. They should match the aims and objectives of the language learning classroom. Therefore, these should correspond to learners’ needs.
3. They should take into account the needs of the learners without imposing on them a rigid method.
4. They should reflect the uses that the learners will make of. Textbooks should be chosen to help equip students to use language effectively in various situations or for various purposes.

Sometimes the language textbooks need to be adapted in order to suit the context in which they are to be used. Content also needs to be changed if it fails to suit the target learners because of learner’s age, gender, religion, social class, occupation or cultural background. Despite new technologies which may act as a better source of learning in a classroom, textbooks still play a crucial role. It should be therefore, regarded as one of the many resources that teachers can depend on for creating effective lessons but for this they require proper training and experience.

In a democratic society, as in India, one of the most worthwhile endeavours is providing education to all its citizens with equality. What textbook writers need to do is to promote the integration of people and to counter violence, superstition etc. Textbooks need to include or focus on issues such as protection of environment, democracy and socio-cultural problems like dowry, caste system, communalism, gender inequality, discrimination, poverty and unemployment. Most of the lessons in the English Textbooks (NCERT, 1971 b), are based on Indian stories and a few as a window to Western culture.

The National Council for Educational Research and Training (NCERT) recommends that “In order to make education a meaningful experience, it has to be related to the Indian context” (NCERT, 2000:37)
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Content to be used for teaching can be selected and created by interacting with the students about their locale, occupations and cultural preferences, ‘individual and social constraints and resources’ (Van Lier, 1996)

In today’s modern education system, textbooks still remain an instrument of extraordinary power. There is no reason to imagine an education system without textbooks. These textbooks will continue to play both constructive as well as destructive roles: constructive in the sense that if they are utilised professionally, they will act as a cement behind a fully literate society. When misused, they can be pernicious ideologies. They can also be used as an instrument to inflame sectarian passion and also a threat to a nation’s social cohesion. According to Johnsen (1993), a textbook is a book whose purpose is ‘instructional use’. As the style of teaching has changed, so have the professional methods of textbook designers. According to some critics, textbooks are often seen as an epitome of social control. These critics over-emphasize prescriptive and descriptive techniques of textbook design and they generally ignore the use of generalization while designing a textbook. In case, if textbooks include inflammatory texts, it may destabilise not only the country of origin but also the region may get affected at large. If texts serve as a tool for ethnic and racial hegemony, they threaten the security of the wider community as well. Textbooks should be accepted as an instrument of extraordinary power. This power lies in two separate characteristics. The one is the wisdom that a nation agrees to pass onto its youth. Thus, the first power lies in the content. The other is the symbolic power of the textbook. It represents more than content. Therefore, it acts as a window to a nation’s soul. (Johnsen, 1993)

The critical issue of selecting and prescribing textbooks needs special focus. Both the NCERT textbooks as well as the ones prepared and approved through well-established official mechanisms in the various Indian provinces have also been found not free of prejudice and pre-conceived ideas and notions. Syllabus requires open-ended textbooks that could encourage among students the creative processes of inquiry, dissent and debate. Such textbooks also help them develop and absorb the values of equality, integrity and diversity. The very inequality and diversity of Indian
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society is a major reason to address with urgency the questions of social equality, national identity and their presentation in educational materials.

Textbooks and curricula used in schools which are run by the social and religious organisations do not allow the state agencies to intervene. They promote ideologies that often contradict the basic principles of the educational and organisational policies. Such organisations are responsible for the palpable lack of critical analysis of the materials used which dangerously undermine the aims of education. Communal bias is imprinted on school textbooks by weaving it in unsubstantial narratives and facts in a way that it undermines not only the scientific quality and academic standard of education but also damages the integrity of educational standards in India.

1.2 Textbook and culture

In India, students come from a wide variety of cultural backgrounds. To meet the needs of such a wide variety of students, course contents should be revised to incorporate native cultural legacy. Therefore, the basic requirement is a socio-cultural view of teaching and learning. It will not only help solve the problem of identity crisis but will also facilitate the process of learning in a congenial environment.

It was in the 1980s that scholars began to study the dynamics of culture and its vital contribution to ‘successful’ language learning. With the increasing multi-culturality of various societies, learners need to know about various cultural factors such as age, culture, social class etc., provided that learners have either little or no systematic knowledge about their membership in a given society and culture. Everyday language is full of cultural bits and pieces which usually get ignored by people. Social and cultural roles are so deeply entrenched in our minds or thought process that they cannot go unnoticed.

As stated by Peck (1998), culture should be our message to students and language our medium. But this is possible only if cultural awareness is viewed as something more than merely a compartmentalised subject within the language curriculum.

Language is a guide to social reality (Sapir, 1929). We should educate students to be reflective, moral, caring, and active citizens in a troubled world. (Banks, 2008)
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Inclusion of India’s diverse cultures and traditions may offer a practical understanding of human impact on the environment. Textbooks serve as a means to communicate national cultural values. According to several groups, textbook content is unfairly influenced by privileged groups within societies who want to provide a hegemonic view of power and control. Discussions among students through various tasks might help them recognize how inequalities of class and caste persist in our society. By adopting the perspective of classes or groups possessing power and privilege, the textbooks are reinforcing inequalities, the presentation of rural realities, the experience of women and Dalits can also be gleaned from these textbooks. But their proper presentation needs to be regulated. The above mentioned issues of content also bear upon pedagogy. Educationists should formulate certain creative ways of discussing complex issues related to society and culture such as communalism, gender inequality, caste system, economic inequality, Rural-Urban divide in India etc.

1.3 Textbook and socio-cultural issues

There is a need for students to acquire such knowledge, skills and values which will help them interact and communicate with people around them and also to make decisions. These people might be from different ethnic, cultural or racial groups. The schools need to teach about social issues in addition to basic skills. Such education that is narrowly defined as an academic achievement and testing will be unable to prepare students completely as they will lack the knowledge of dealing with the fellow citizens with regard to various social as well as cultural issues.

It is of great importance to teach things relevant to what is going on in the world. The classroom walls should not act as a barrier instead as a channel to the realities outside of them. Teachers can introduce various social as well as cultural issues present in different lessons by talking about them in general and not in relation to any particular caste, race, culture etc. Sometimes teacher may choose controversial topics and discuss them with the students. This will enhance the chances of better understanding of these issues by students. But this should not be taken as an opportunity for a teacher to impose his or her opinions on the students. Therefore, students should respond more positively to knowledge that will be presented in a humanized way. It is relevant to introduce such controversial topics by being
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pedagogically neutral as to support student’s own journey of learning and understanding and also of forming their own opinions. The teacher’s role here is to use questions that can help students in forming connections between the big ideas and the lesson content. If the content includes examples from diverse aspects of the society, including ethnicity, religion, caste, language, gender, socio-economic status then the teacher requires to deal with them in a non-stereotypical manner.

There are many socio-cultural contexts which have remained largely unspoken but understood by those who believe in diverse societal norms. To democratize the teaching-learning processes and practices it has become important to use these social, cultural, economic and political backgrounds of the students constructively. Many of the students in India come from socially disadvantaged backgrounds. Many of them live in extremely vulnerable conditions. The reason behind it is poverty which leads to many other problems as well. One is child labour. This is the worst form of abuse and exploitation. In turn it does not allow these children to go to school and study. The reason for this child labour is poverty which forces the parents to employ their children to earn some extra money for daily living. This poverty in turn affects not only their education but also their physical and mental health. The fundamental rights of children’s survival, education, protection and development are grossly violated by child labour. So it means they not only require education but also a stress free environment. There exists a gap between the children of marginalized and non-marginalized communities. These children from marginalized societies face discrimination and humiliation which severely affects their self confidence. Again here a teacher plays a crucial role. Students from lower castes have undergone violent experiences inflicted by both teachers as well as their classmates from dominant castes. The gap between the common perception about the learners’ identities and their social identity has become so wide that sometimes it becomes difficult for a teacher to hold discussion in the classroom. Within the classroom, this gap can be filled by the techniques used by the teacher.

Despite several projects running for providing free and compulsory education to students up to the age of fourteen, a significant percentage of children belonging to rural areas do not complete school. As discussed earlier, one reason is poverty. The other is the caste system which is still prevailing in our society. Despite the rapid economic growth during the last twenty years, gender disparities remain deep and
persistent in India. It has been a major issue regarding India’s pursuit for achieving the goal of universal education. Gender differences on literacy measures are more pronounced in villages as compared to cities. This is a major challenge to India’s progress towards a literate society. Women education seems to have a strong correlation with other dimensions of human and social development. Low level of education affects the health and nutritional status of women. In India, gender based discrimination and exploitation includes dowry system, unequal wages for men and women, and a high level of female illiteracy. As a consequence of Indian women’s low status, education of daughters is generally given less importance as compared to son’s education. The reason behind such behaviour is that boys are perceived to be the future caretakers of parents in their old age. On the other hand, girls are treated as temporary members of the family. Education of girls and dowry system are also somehow related to each other. Parents are more worried about collecting money for their daughter’s marriage to give as a dowry instead of sending their daughters to school. Despite the evidence of high returns of female education, most communities still continue to under-invest in female education. Gender inequalities intensify with poverty, caste system and geographical location etc. Girls lag behind boys in access to and participation in education. Gender-specific ideologies are responsible for wide gaps in female higher education. Education has a power to contribute to socialization, challenging conventional gender ideologies and allowing women the use of knowledge to empower themselves in number of ways. In this era of economic liberation and globalization, new aspirations and opportunities have developed for education of women. This increasing demand has been noticed even in highly conservative societies. The greatest challenge faced by the Indian education system is the nation’s continuing rate of illiteracy. While there are improvements in access to education, there are fundamental systematic issues that come as an obstruction in the path of progress leading to gender equality in education. For example, gender stereotyping still exists in both textbooks and learning materials provided to the students. Men continue to be the main characters in textbooks and are also depicted in higher positions than women.

A sociological complexity of Indian life is the population’s consciousness about castes. It was in 1950 that the Indian government abolished untouchability (a kind of discrimination on the basis of caste). According to this, people of lower caste
are not allowed to use things belonging to the people of upper caste. For example, wells or hand pumps for water used by upper class are separate in villages. Lower caste people are not allowed to enter temples etc. Even children of lower caste are not allowed to sit with the upper caste children. Either these children from marginalized communities are not allowed to study in schools or if they get an opportunity, they are not treated properly.

Domestic violence is another issue affecting both women and children education. Those children who witness it can have lifelong effects on their cognitive, emotional and social development. Due to such issues prevailing in their homes they are unable to concentrate on their studies. In order to protect children who are the future of our society, high quality programs are needed to be run in schools. These children require special attention and support not only from their teachers but also from fellow classmates.

Physically challenged students also face several problems not only at home but also at school. Other students do not mix with them or treat them as useless or unwanted. Textbooks also need to discuss such issues in order to make students understand the problems faced by these physically challenged students and instead of discouraging them, help and motivate them to live their life peacefully and happily. In this way they will be able to study and achieve their goals in life which will lead them to success.

In the Indian sub-continent context, communalism is associated with tensions and clashes between different religious communities. It also presents the difference which is there among the people of various communities. It is these differences which somehow or somewhere act as hindrance in the growth and prosperity of our country. Communalism has been so far an ideology that various anti-communal forces have tried to address in the formal sectors of pedagogy. But its success depends on how much the citizens accept in their life as it is the citizens who form a society. Therefore, it has become a significant socio-economic and political issue in India.
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India is a country known for its diversity and pluralistic culture. It is a society that emphasizes family loyalty, integrity and unity. With the increasing modernization and globalization, transformation has taken place in almost all societies. The bond children used to share with their grandparents has weakened owing to the emergence of nuclear families. The kind of love they used to get and the things they managed to learn from their grandparents happens no more. Diminished value systems have done much harm to our society. Children no more respect either their elders or their teachers as they used to. They think and do as they wish, without realising consequences. They lack proper knowledge as well as experience which elders have but children are not willing to listen to or follow any advice.

To tackle to the above mentioned issues, students need to know about these issues in a right manner. It is important for them to understand how these are affecting them, their family as well as their society at large.

Textbooks help students introspect and reflect on individual, social and eternal values. Children often state that they believe more in what they read in their textbooks. They often refer to their textbooks for clarifying their doubts. They act as a support for the children in all dimensions of learning. The content as well as the presentation should be thoughtfully planned so that the essential information may reach students properly and it should stimulate the interest of the students. This stimulation is important as it helps the student to think and realise the values taught to them and how much it is affecting them in a positive manner. Textbooks containing inspiring stories and value based content may help in fostering values. Such textbooks provide a sense of security and self-confidence to the students. Providing the suitable pedagogic content is not enough, there is a need to describe values as well. Therefore, the material in a textbook should be graded and the sequence of presentation should be checked properly. It should provide opportunities for self-learning.

The solution to the above discussed socio-economic issues cannot be one or two steps taken by the government. The major responsibility is of the citizens
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themselves who require a broad outlook for dealing with such issues which cannot be avoided. Though it is a bit philosophical in nature but the sustainable changes can be brought by the effort of the citizens, the legislative support, administrative efficiency and alertness.

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