Representation of Characters from an Intersectional Perspective in English Language Textbooks for Elementary Grades

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Abstract

Textbooks play a crucial role in guiding and conditioning young minds. They possess the power to impart new knowledge and ideas, but they also have the potential to reinforce prejudices. Language lessons in textbooks enable the depiction of various contexts through the use of words and tones, making it an easily relatable subject for children. However, conventional textbooks often fall short in representing diverse identities, often showcasing a single norm and applying it universally. This study specifically examined how characters were portrayed in school textbooks, focusing on NCERT CBSE English language textbooks for Grade I to VIII. The analysis tool used in the study explored the representation of gender, colour, religion, and disability. The findings were categorised into three sections concerning gender: portrayal within the publication team, within the visuals, and within the context of the chapters. For religion, colour, and disability, the findings were divided into two main segments: representation within the visuals and within the context of the chapters. Additionally, a comparison was made between the findings and the principles outlined in the New Education Policy of 2020.

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The introduction of the New Education Policy have aimed to make Indian education more equitable and inclusive by adopting various approaches. However, the analysis of elementary-grade textbooks reveals a biased representation that primarily focuses on a specific sector of society. The representation of women, individuals with darker skin tones, people from diverse religious backgrounds, and those with disabilities remains minimal. These results clearly highlight the significant gap between the vision outlined in the policy and its actual implementation.

INTRODUCTION

Textbooks hold immense importance as guiding tools, and therefore, the content and representation within them are crucial for their credibility. Language plays a significant role in conveying messages and lessons in textbooks, especially in the context of English language learning, which is prioritised in primary education due to its global significance for communication skills, language development, and academic purposes.

It is essential to acknowledge that education, textbooks, and language courses have a profound impact on children's knowledge and understanding. Hence, it becomes crucial to ensure that the information being imparted is inclusive of diverse identities present in our society. Every individual within a community contributes to shaping the society we live in, but how often do we provide equal representation to each member of this community? Textbooks have the power to shape young minds, either by teaching them new things or by reinforcing prejudices. Unfortunately, many books tend to focus on a single aspect of society, presenting a generalised outlook that does not accurately reflect the complexities and multifaceted nature of a functioning society.

Primary education in India has undergone significant changes due to increasing privatisation, institutionalisation, and decentralisation. However, the universalisation of primary education has led to the segregation of caste, class, and gender lines, as highlighted by scholars such as Manjrekar, 2005. Feminist scholars argue that the limited representation of men and women in textbooks offers poor role models, failing to showcase the diverse roles they play in real life (Taneja Johansson, 2014). The lack of awareness among teachers about the histories and experiences of students from different racial backgrounds hampers their ability to effectively engage with a diverse population in schools (Gay, 1993). Colourism, which is not adequately addressed in Indian policies, perpetuates oppression and must be understood and addressed (Sims and Hirudayaraj, 2016). Additionally, Zine (2001) argues that religious identities of students are often disregarded in schools, leading to the production of stereotypes due to a lack of understanding and dialogue.

The New Education Policy aims to bring about comprehensive changes in

school and higher education, focusing on accessibility, multi-disciplinarity, indigeneity, equity, and inclusivity. Drafted in 2019 and finalised in 2020, the policy envisions significant transformations in education by 2030. This study examines whether the 2021 edition of English language textbooks for elementary classes, recommended by the NCERT and followed by the CBSE board, aligns with the themes outlined in the New Education Policy. The research specifically focuses on the portrayal of women, representation of characters from diverse racial backgrounds, depiction of religion, and inclusion of people with special needs. By analysing these textbooks, the study aims to determine if they have progressed beyond perpetuating social stereotypes over the past five years.

OBJECTIVES OF THE STUDY

- To adopt an intersectional perspective when examining the English chapters.
- To assess the vocabulary and expressions used to portray characters in relation to reinforcing stereotypes.
- To identify potential areas for intervention.

METHODOLOGY

This research employed a combination of qualitative and quantitative methods for data collection and analysis. Qualitative data was analysed using content analysis to identify recurring themes and concepts, while quantitative data was analysed using an analysis tool developed by the Department of Gender Studies for their textbook evaluation project from 2013 to 2016.

SAMPLE AND SAMPLING TECHNIQUE

The sample for this study consisted of English textbooks for Classes I–VIII published by the National Council of Educational Research and Training (NCERT), widely used in schools following the Central Board of Secondary Education (CBSE) curriculum in India.

Chapters were selected as samples based on their potential to provide relevant findings for drawing conclusions. Specifically, chapters featuring human characters, animal characters depicted with human characteristics, and chapters using gendered pronouns for animal characters were chosen to highlight prevalent gender biases, stereotypes, and predefined gender roles in society. Conversely, chapters without human characters, those without gendered contexts for animals, chapters describing nature, ideas, moral values, and those written solely in the first person were excluded from the study. Additionally, Chapter 3 from the Class VIII textbook titled, *Glimpses of the Past* was omitted due to its format, which presented images of crowds where individual counts were not feasible.

TOOL

The research utilised an evaluation tool that conducted a comprehensive analysis of each chapter. The tool

assessed various aspects of the content, including:

- **Gender:** Identification of characters as male, female, or any other gender.
- **Religion:** Depiction of characters belonging to majority or minority religions.
- **Color:** Representation of characters with dark or light skin tones.
- **Disability:** Presence of characters with disabilities.

The evaluation considered the following elements to provide a detailed overview of the chapters:

- **Subject matter:** The main theme and how gender depiction contributes to conveying the intended message.
- **Class exercises:** How the exercises following the chapters either reinforce or discourage gender biases.
- **Visual representation:** How the gendered characters are visually portrayed through illustrations and images, and the portrayal's implications.

The evaluation tool covers various aspects, such as the use of adjectives, assigned roles, visual elements, and finer details, to capture the complete picture of character representation within the chapters.

FINDINGS

The study's results revealed an intriguing pattern of numbers that influenced the findings. The collected data indicated a substantial discrepancy. Despite the national education policy's emphasis on inclusivity for girls, individuals with disabilities, and other minorities, this study highlighted the stark reality of the lack of inclusive study materials for school children.

Portrayal of Gender

The analysis showed a significant gender divide when examining all aspects of the text, particularly in the comparison between male and female characters.

Gender Divide in Publication Team

The publication team responsible for creating and finalising the textbooks consisted of editors, advisors, production officers, and other members. There was a slight difference in the gender distribution within this team, suggesting that having more women involved in the process could lead to more inclusive materials due to their diverse perspectives. The data revealed that 58 per cent of women were part of the publication team, while the remaining 42 per cent were men. Although the difference is not substantial, it was the only area where women outnumbered men.
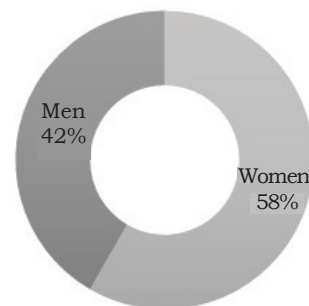

Fig. 1: Gender divide in publication team

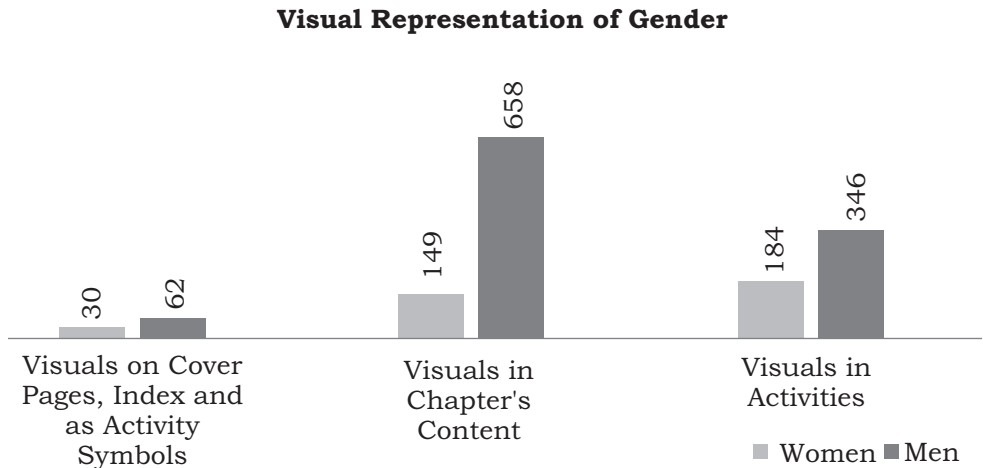**Visual Representation of Gender**

Fig. 2: Visual Representation of Gender

When examining the visuals of male and female characters, it becomes evident that this aspect can be divided into three categories: visuals on cover pages, index and activity symbols, visuals within the chapter content, and visuals in the activities. In all three segments, it is apparent that there is a significantly higher number of male visuals compared to female visuals. Even in chapters written in the first person, there was a greater representation of male characters in the visuals. Additionally, when groups of people were depicted in illustrations, the number of male characters consistently exceeded that of female characters, even if only by a single count. Another notable observation was the portrayal of gender-based characteristics in the illustrations. Most chapters adhered to stereotypical characteristics of men and women.

Even in chapters where females were the protagonists, their characteristics were depicted in alignment with generalised views of women. Illustrations of families, schools, and crowds also exhibited a higher number of male characters compared to female characters. However, there were a few exceptions, such as chapters like 'Anandi's Rainbow,' 'I Want' , 'Helen Keller,' and a few others that solely featured female characters, providing a representation solely focused on women. Turning to the activities for students, most activities incorporated animated characters purely for decorative purposes, but in a few instances, they contributed to shaping the context. In certain activities featuring animal illustrations, the accompanying text associated them with males using male pronouns. Overall, the portrayal of gender in the chapters and activities
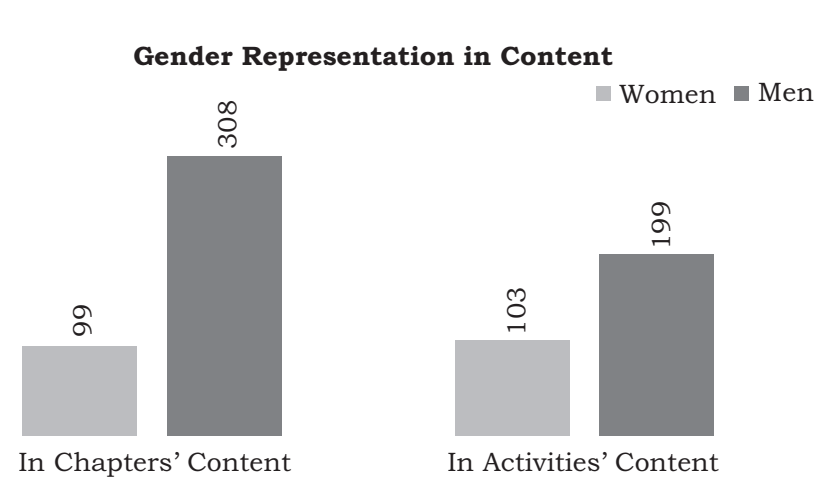
Gender Representation in Content

Fig. 3: Gender Representation in Content

exhibited a bias towards men over women. The activity symbols alongside each activity title also predominantly depicted male faces.

Upon examining the content of the chapters and activities, it became apparent that the disparity between male and female characters was also significant in these aspects. Chapters featuring animal characters predominantly portrayed them as males, as seen in examples like 'Three Little Pigs,' 'Mittu and the Yellow Mango,' and 'Puppy and I'. However, there were exceptions such as the chapter 'Malu Bhaalu' by Kamla Bhasin, which depicted a strong, brave and fearless female bear as the protagonist. From Grade V onwards, most chapters introduced human characters and storylines, and they exhibited a strong gender bias with a higher representation of male characters or exclusive focus on male characters.

Chapters like 'Mumbai Musicians,' 'Mr. Nobody,' and 'Bepin Choudhary's Lapse of Memory,' among others, solely featured male characters. Conversely, there were a few chapters that prominently showcased female characters, such as 'Circle,' 'Granny Granny Please Comb My Hair,' 'An Enormous Turnip,' and 'An Indian American Woman in Space: Kalpana Chawla.' Addressing the skewed gender representation in the chapters, some chapters reinforced stereotypes. For instance, 'Granny Granny Please Comb My Hair' depicted a conversation between a grandmother and granddaughter while the grandmother styled the little girl's hair. 'My Silly Sister' portrayed an elder brother becoming frustrated with his younger sister for being gullible, employing condescending and demeaning language towards her. In contrast, chapters like 'An Enormous Turnip' demonstrated that the girl's efforts

were instrumental in uprooting the vegetable, while 'Who Will be Ningthou' initially glorified the skills of men but later valued the girl's compassion and kindness. Although her role in the story was relatively minor compared to other characters, her ascension to becoming the ruler underscored her importance.

In terms of the activities accompanying the chapters, an assessment of grammar and reasoning activities was conducted to evaluate the gender portrayal within them. There was a conscious effort to include gender-neutral terms like 'child' and 'we,' and an almost equal use of both female and male pronouns. However, as the activities progressed, the use of male pronouns increased. While the difference between male and female representation is not significantly large, the overall trend favours a higher representation of men.

Portrayal of Religion, Colour and Disability

In 1989, Kimberlé Crenshaw introduced the concept of intersectionality, describing it as a lens through which we can understand how different forms of inequality intersect and compound one another. It recognises that individuals can possess multiple social identities that overlap, leading to unique and interconnected experiences. This study also aims to explore how these various identities are considered and interconnected in the creation of educational materials for young students. Specifically, it examines the portrayal of religion, colour, and disability, which are divided into three sub-sections: the representation of religion in chapters and activities, the depiction of colour in chapters and activities, and the portrayal of disability in chapters and activities. By examining these aspects, we gain insights into how multiple dimensions of identity are addressed within the study material.

Upon analysing the chapters, it was evident that religion was rarely addressed. The majority of chapters either made no mention of religion or, in the few instances where it was mentioned, did not delve into the topic of religious differences. Consequently, there was a lack of explicit data or content that could be considered divisive in terms of religion. The majority of chapters maintained a neutral narrative when it came to religion, which, while preventing the portrayal of any specific religious bias, also missed an opportunity to provide a more inclusive representation of different faiths. The neutral approach left the religious identities of characters open to interpretation by readers, allowing for a potential bias towards majority religions and potentially overlooking minority religious identities.
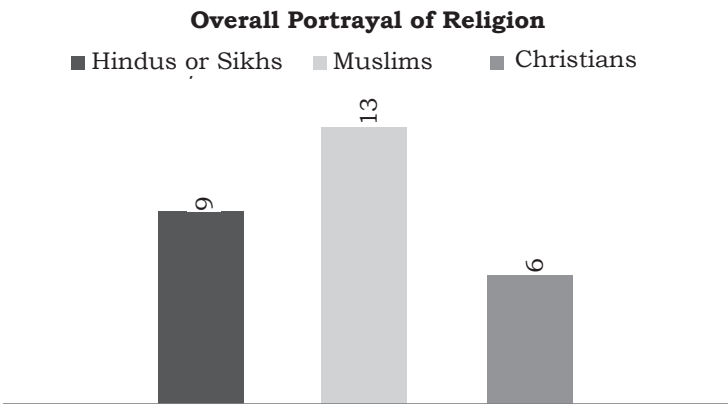
Overall Portrayal of Religion

■ Hindus or Sikhs   ■ Muslims   ■ Christians

Fig. 4: Overall Portrayal of Religion

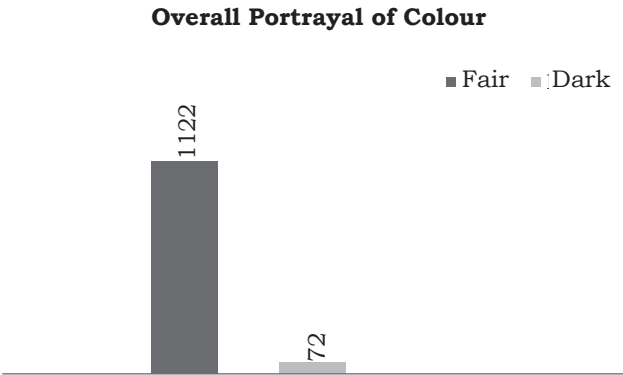## Overall Portrayal of Colour

■ Fair   ■ Dark

Fig. 5: Overall Portrayal of Colour

The findings regarding the aspect of skin colour were starkly contrasting in both the chapter content and activities. Although there was no explicit mention of colour in the context, the illustrations depicted significant disparities in the skin tones of characters. Whether in the chapters or activities, the representation of characters with fair skin tone far outnumbered those with darker skin tone, with 1122 fair characters compared to only 72 characters with a darker complexion. From the perspective of colour, these textbooks exhibited a lack of inclusivity and equal representation for people of colour.

Image 1: Unit 9, Grade III Textbook

Image 2: Chapter 6, Grade VII Textbook

The images presented are from textbooks used in the third and seventh grades. Although there is no explicit mention of colour bias in the chapter content, the majority of characters depicted in the images have a light skin tone. Characters with darker skin tones are scarcely represented in the analysed textbooks. In total, only 72 individual characters across eight textbooks could be identified as having a darker skin tone.

When examining the representation of disability, the findings were starkly different. Firstly, it was evident that there were no specific guidelines or activities provided for teachers to support the inclusion of children with disabilities in the classroom. Among the sampled chapters, only four instances depicted aspects of disability, while in the activities, there were merely three references observed. Overall, the portrayal of disability was minimal across all the textbooks analysed. This highlights the significance of the mandate set by the National Education Policy (NEP) to ensure inclusive study materials that adequately represent individuals with disabilities and special needs. The lack of representation in these textbooks underscores the need for greater attention and effort to create inclusive educational resources for all learners, including those with disabilities.
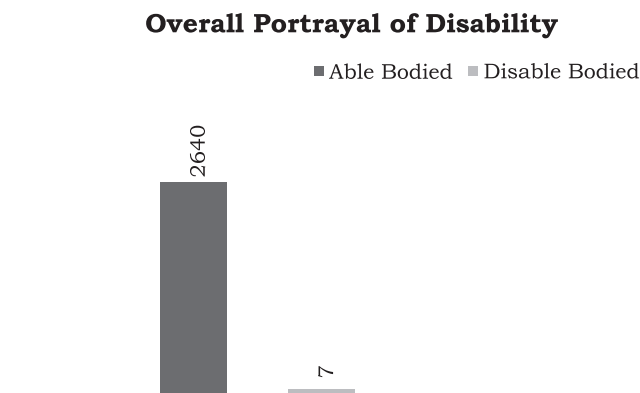
Overall Portrayal of Disability

■ Able Bodied   ■ Disable Bodied

2640

7

Fig. 6: Overall Portrayal of Disability

With Regard to the National Education Policy

The National Education Policy, originally formulated in 1986 and revised in 1992, underwent a major update in 2019 and was finalised in 2020. The government aims to fully implement this policy across India by 2030, bringing about substantial changes in the school and higher education systems. The policy encompasses more than eighteen principles, emphasising flexibility in education, foundational literacy and numeracy, continuous progress review, fostering pride in Indian culture, eliminating hierarchies in learning, promoting access for students with disabilities, and more.

This study specifically examines the recommendations of the national education policy pertaining to school education. However, the findings indicate that significant work is required to align textbook materials with the policy's vision. The policy advocates for inclusive education, regardless of gender, ability, colour, religion, caste, class, or other identities. Nevertheless, the analysis reveals that the content of the textbooks in the latest revision, conducted in 2021, lacks inclusivity as intended by the policy. There is a notable disparity in the representation of male and female characters, as well as the limited depiction of people of different colours, religions, and disabilities across all eight textbooks.

To fulfill the requirements outlined in the policy, several steps can be taken. Firstly, assembling a diverse team of creators who represent different segments of society would contribute to the development of more inclusive materials. Incorporating perspectives and experiences from various communities would provide an authentic and fresh outlook. Secondly, it is crucial to avoid generalising

stereotypical characteristics of all characters and instead introduce strong characters who break stereotypes, thereby making a powerful impact on the chapters. Furthermore, specifying the identities of these characters would ensure equal representation and prevent subjective interpretation, which can inadvertently perpetuate the representation of majority groups. Lastly, conducting regular reviews and edits of educational materials would allow for the incorporation of new content that aligns with the evolving and diverse nature of society.

By implementing these steps, the creation of educational resources that align with the national education policy's vision of inclusivity can be realised. It is essential to continually assess and improve educational materials to ensure they reflect the values of an inclusive society and cater to the diverse needs of learners.

Conclusion

Education plays a pivotal role in societal development and the creation of a more equitable society. Therefore, it is crucial to ensure inclusivity in the dissemination of knowledge. Textbooks serve as essential resources for storing and conveying information, shaping the understanding and perspectives of individuals. This study highlights the gaps in these materials that contribute to the perpetuation of bias in society. Before conducting the analysis, there was a suspicion that gender representation would favour men, and the findings confirmed this assumption. Despite the expectation that having more female representation in the publication team would lead to more inclusive content, the textbooks predominantly showcased male characters, side-lining women. Although, it was observed that in every textbook there were some chapters with female protagonists and mentions of people with disability. However, such chapters were few and far between, this shows the existence of positive change at an initial stage. There surely is a misalignment with the national education policy, which emphasises inclusivity, and is evident in the 2019 and 2021 editions of NCERT textbooks.

Efforts must be made to consciously create inclusive study materials for students. These efforts may include extensive research to find relatable chapters and writings that specifically cater to inclusive materials by people of colour, different religions and disabilities, along with higher number of stories and poems with strong female characters. The implementation of the national education policy by the 2023–24 academic year provides an opportunity to address these shortcomings. It is imperative to prioritise inclusivity and ensure that textbooks reflect the diversity of perspectives and experiences. By doing so, we can foster a more inclusive society and fulfill the promise of the education policy.

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