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RESEARCH ARTICLE

IS 'HISTORY' GENDERED? : A GLIMPSE FROM HISTORY TEXTBOOKS

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Abstract

While there is so much to discuss about the nature of history portrayed in the school textbooks and the implications it follows, the present paper focuses on the scope of gender neutrality in history textbooks at school level. The larger aim of the paper is to critically analyze the content of history textbook from the gender perspective: whether the history that we study today is gender neutral or is it biased against a particular gender? The paper aims to on to find out the presence of women in history textbooks at schools.

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Introduction:-

Some of the major challenges faced by a history teacher are the notions of boredom and irrelevance attached to the subject. While some students find it trivial to their present life, others see it as an exhaustive burden of textbooks exploding with dates and chronologies to be rote memorized. It takes a few years for a student to get a more liberal understanding of 'history' as an independent discipline within the cluster of Social Science.

The most simplistic definition of history as a discipline is the study of the past that is worth remembering. Past is documented, narrated and explained by the scholars who spend considerable time in exploring, analysing and studying the past based on available primary and secondary sources. So, the entire past is not documented as history. If we are recording or reproducing some ancient narrative as history content it must be 'worth' the time and resources invested! The question then arises as to who decides what is worth recording and what is to be rendered insignificant? This choice is influenced by various power groups that come into play, mostly in conflict with each other. The field of History has witnessed many such controversies. Raising the issue of objectivity in history, Little (2016) highlighted that the past cannot be represented objectively through historical knowledge as historical knowledge is always influenced by bias, selection, omission and interpretation of individual historians. Developing seminal approach in writing history (Ranke, 1830 in Viehaus, 2020) reminded that historians should deliver the factual account of the past while historians narrating the past.

History has the power to shape the present and the future. It can influence the decisions we make in the present and hence the future implications that follow. While some use it as a testimony to reinforce certain practises/beliefs others use it as a weapon to thrash the existing ones.

Objective of the paper:-

While there is so much to discuss about the nature of history portrayed in the school textbooks and the implications it follows, the present paper focuses on the scope of gender neutrality in history textbooks at school level. The larger aim of the paper is to critically analyze the content of history textbooks from the gender perspective: whether the

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history that we study today is gender neutral or is it biased against a particular gender? The paper aims to find out the presence of women in history textbooks at schools. The chapter on Indian Nationalism from grade X History textbook was reviewed and analyzed. The decision to choose grade 10 textbook was a conscious choice because students in grade X struggle with adolescent issues, gender identity and the issues of self-belief. They are in the constant process of deciding their future roles as an adult. The education experiences during this phase can go a long way to develop a positive and healthy gender identity. India is struggling hard to resolve the crimes against women such as rape, female feticides, domestic violence and to bring gender equality. Though there are stringent laws against such crimes but the situation cannot improve unless we can change the mindset of the people. School education can play a significant role in eliminating gender stereotypes and changing biases against women. It is in this context the present paper analyses the history textbook from the gender perspective.

Analysis and Discussion:-

Students' experience of history at school level is mostly through the textbooks and the teachers. Focus is more on the textbook because teaching is more or less guided by the textbooks. Textbooks thus lay the foundations of our understanding of various subjects. Textbooks should be thus tailored with utmost precaution and care. It needs to be inclusive in a way that it caters to the diverse nature of the society. It must provide space to develop critical understanding and an analytical bent of mind. History textbooks, just like textbooks of other subjects, look for topics best suited to the societal needs keeping in accordance to the cognitive abilities of learners of various age groups.

In history the process of reconstruction of the past is based on the various 'sources' we come across. These are segregated as primary and secondary sources. Primary sources are the ones which are the first hand evidence (manuscripts, inscriptions, coins, jewellery, pottery, travelogues, revenue records) while secondary sources are the ones which reproduce the primary sources (biographies, movies, magazines, journals, textbooks). In order to reach out to the truth of any historical narrative it is best to rely as much as we can on the primary sources because the scope of personal interpretations is minimal. In cases where reaching out to a primary source is not possible, we shall look for answers in the secondary sources. However, since secondary sources give scope for manipulation or personal interpretation, it is advisable not to rely on any one completely. Why then are the textbooks especially in social science classrooms considered the final authority which sets the boundaries for what is to be taught and how it is to be taught? This concept of 'authoritative textbook' becomes a major determinant of what will be taught to the learners and remembered by them.

Highlighting the gender perspectives in history textbooks, chapter 'Nationalism in India', chapter 2 of our Grade X NCERT textbook 'India and the contemporary world-II' was reviewed. This chapter is very relevant for students being more contemporary and relating more closely to independent India. The chapter focuses on civil disobedience movement and the famous dandi march which changed the destiny of the nationalist movement in India. The chapter highlighted significant contribution of Gandhiji as the father of the Indian national movement. Other freedom fighters mentioned in this entire discourse were Jawaharlal Nehru, Muhammad Ali and Shaukat Ali, Baba Ramchandra, C. R. Das and Motilal Nehru, Subhash Chandra Bose, Purshottamdas Thakurdas, Bhagat Singh, Jatin Das and Ajoy Ghosh. G. D. Birla, B. R. Ambedkar. The only mention of women's role and contribution in the entire movement was not in the main text but a brief photographic description.

It is so disheartening to see that in a country with almost 50% female population (48.4% to be precise) finds no mention of any 'female tales' of valour and pride in the long exhaustive freedom movement. Amongst the 78 trusted volunteers and right next to Gandhi was his wife Kasturba Gandhi but she unfortunately finds no acknowledgement in our history textbooks. Mostly seen as the 'wife' of the father of the nation, her individuality is brutally hampered in the historical narrative, though many writings on Kasturba Gandhi outside of school textbooks vividly describe her enthusiastic participation in various movements both in South Africa and India. She was no less a freedom fighter, only more because of her multiple roles and duties as a wife, a mother, a woman and an Indian.

Similarly, Abadi Bano Begum, popularly known as 'Bi Amma' was a role model for all women especially Muslim women as she shattered the stereotypes associated with a traditional 'orthodox' Muslim woman. She is also a lost figure in history textbooks who left no stone unturned in the nation's freedom struggle, contributed to ensure Hindu-Muslim unity, and participated in the Khilafat movement.

The entire chapter talks about various social groups and their grievances and contributions in the nationalist struggle. In this entire chronology females were the last one to be mentioned that too outside the main text.

Some more mention of the 'ideal' female is found towards the closure of the chapter with the image of Bharat Mata, one who is 'calm, composed, ideal and spiritual', one who had to be 'protected'. Not that the spirit in which it was propagated at that time was by any means inaccurate. Problem is when patriarchal elements in society use it as a defence to reinforce their dominance on females.

Conclusion:-

When we produce certain historical narratives in the textbooks we cannot alter the original character of events but we must tailor it according to the current needs of the society in a way that these historical narratives become a catalyst in achieving our future targets (like a gender neutral society) instead of becoming a barrier for the same. Such narratives can be used to make the learners appreciative of the long journey of females in our country and sensitize them further on what still needs to be done.

'History as it is' and 'history as we portray it' need to be seen in distinction. There is no denying that our past was highly gendered, the society was deeply entrenched in the shackles of female subjugation and patriarchy cut across all class and caste norms. However, what is also true is that we have progressed from that past, moved towards a more gender neutral society where we are constantly propagating female literacy, female rights and their participation in almost every sphere of the society. History is not just about the dead, it is about the journey of a constantly evolving society, its transition from the dark to the light (or vice-versa). Instead of seeing it through the lens of stagnation we should see it through the lens of growth and prosperity.

Only when we expose our learners to the brave, revolutionary females of the past will they be appreciative of those in their immediate environment. Only when they read about female freedom fighters will they be able to appreciate the fact that females can contribute as much to the national security and national integration as their male counterparts. And only when we achieve this can we aim for a gender neutral society. It is important that the teachers shall create a gender neutral classroom before aiming for a gender neutral society. When boys in the class will read about such brave female icons they will be appreciative of the girls in their class instead of seeing them as less efficient or incapable. When girls in the class will read about female leaders such as Abadi Bano Begum and Sucheta Kriplani it will strengthen their belief in themselves and encourage them to dream higher.

As far as history is concerned, we cannot alter the narrative as they are but we can aim at reducing its gendered nature by going back to those sources and looking for our hidden female treasures who have been neglected or hidden either voluntarily or involuntarily. Also, the way we portray it to our learners can make a great difference in how they perceive the past. Where textbooks don't prove sufficient we can supplement the text with reflective questions or classroom discussions and relevant examples.

The present discussion focused on one topic on Nationalism. In the history textbook, there are many such instances of female valour and glory across all ages be it ancient medieval or modern. Not finding them in the textbooks can be no excuse for not knowing about them and not exposing the learners to them. The beauty of every historical narrative is the many interpretations and counter interpretations which it brings along. It is up to the teachers how they can engage themselves with these sources and how they can replicate them in their classrooms. Teachers can change the discourse of history teaching from one that is selectively presented in the textbook to the one which celebrates womanhood and its journey so far.

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