

Impact of Narratives on Migrant Students at the Primary Level: An Analysis of NCERT English Texts (Marigold Series) from Classes I–V

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Abstract

This paper focuses on migrant students and the impact of narratives contained in NCERT primary school textbooks on these children. Today, it is not uncommon for individuals, and even families and large groups to relocate to places away from their hometowns to find work. Therefore, migration and the challenges concomitant to it, are also inevitable. In this scenario, the education of children, especially in multi-ethnic and multi-cultural classrooms, calls for delicate handling. As the NCERT follows a uniform syllabus, it is important to look at the text from the angle of migrant students as well. Such an analysis will bring out how study material can also have learning implications for children from different communities. For this purpose, this study investigates the narratives in primary school textbooks Marigold Series, NCERT and talks about the impact on migrant students.

INTRODUCTION

The human race began its journey as nomads and has criss-crossed the entire face of the earth in search of better lives. The most recent form of this movement is fuelled by a politico-economic phenomenon hailed as globalisation. In the wake of the unimpeded movement of people,

goods, and services across borders, there has emerged a complex pattern of migrating individuals and consequently formation of migrant communities at both inter-national and inter-state levels. In the case of India, inter-state migration is increasing every year, and so, gaining significance in cultural-economic terms. The number of internal migrants in India was 450 million as

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per 2011 census. This is an increase of 45 per cent over the 309 million recorded in 2001. Internal migrants as a per centage of the population increased from 30 per cent in 2001 to 37 per cent in 2011. Therefore, the challenges posed by such an inter-mixture of cultures, ethnicities, religions, languages, value-systems, etc., call for especially accommodative inter-cultural frameworks so that the migrants and the host may live symbiotically and peacefully.

One challenge concomitant to such migratory patterns is the education of migrant children. The National Council of Educational Research and Training (NCERT) play a vital role in school education in the country. It develops the National Curriculum Framework, and syllabi for various subjects. The NCERT also develops textbooks which states/UTs may use as they are, or adapt to contextualise the history and heritage of the States/UTs. These, however, should be designed as not to put migrant students at a disadvantage.

This paper attempts to highlight the impact on migrant students of the narratives in NCERT textbooks for primary classes. As already highlighted, the movement of people within and outside the country has drastically increased in the last two decades. Over this period the intake of migrant students in schools has also increased. This has naturally resulted in the formation of diversified classrooms—students of diverse

ethnic groups with diverse mother tongues, diverse cultures, religions, etc. This paper investigates how the narratives in the NCERT primary school textbooks affect migrant students.

Impact of Narratives on Childhood

“Narrative imagining – story – is the fundamental instrument of thought. Rational capacities depend upon it. It is our chief means of looking into the future, or predicting, of planning, and of explaining.” - Mark Turner

Stories are what moulds a child’s mind. They frighten them, they make them wonder, they tell them of good and bad, right and wrong, what to love, what to hate, what to look up to, and what to look down upon. In a way, the kind of stories children hear largely form their character and their outlook on life. In the context of India, the tradition of narratives goes far back into the past; for instance, Somadeva’s *Kathasaritsagara* and Vishnu Sharma’s *Panchatantra*—among others—make up a long history of narration. One underlying principle of this long tradition is the belief that children learn best through illustration. Therefore, the kind of illustration given to them is of key importance. Even Plato, despite his distrust of poets, had allowed the use of panegyrics and hymns. This was a strong acknowledgement of the appeal of narratives and their impact on young, impressionable minds.

Migrant Students in India

India, as we all know, is a country of diversity. It is multi-religious, multi-lingual, multi-cultural. Even the states within India are so distinct that the different regional cultures are worlds in themselves. Migration is an important phenomenon within our country. People migrate in search of jobs and greener pastures. The pattern is usually marked by rural-to-urban and town-to-city migration. Increasing urbanisation of city centres has forced migrants to go there in search of better opportunities. Along with the migrants their children also get dislocated from their place of origin and face various challenges in the host society.

Challenges Faced by Primary School Migrant Students in Learning NCERT Texts

Adjusting to a new society is always a challenge. It involves finding one's bearings in a new world altogether. The difference may range from food habits and clothes to value systems and the very outlook on life. Therefore migrant children become especially vulnerable as far as educational practices are concerned, and teaching material acquires an added importance. Migrant children are disadvantaged in terms of enrolling and attending school and are at a lower grade for their age with the disparity deepening with age progression. Hence, the selection of prescribed material needs to be done carefully.

Impact of Narratives on Migrant Students

Migration brings with it a host of challenges, even more so for children in migrant families. As a result, they stand exposed to all the external stimuli in a more obvious way. Therefore they need a very meticulously designed teaching material so that their outlook on life may be forged in a difference-friendly manner. In this process, the narratives served to them should necessarily be of the type that hail diversity, and promote love and respect for all, regardless of their differences.

An analysis of some of the stories from the Marigold series will make this point clear. A casual selection of narratives might unwittingly impact some children negatively. For instance, the narrative titled *Wonderful Waste* relates the story behind the curry dish *avial*. According to the story, the king of Travancore arranged a grand dinner, and so earlier in the day, the king visited the kitchen to survey the preparation. Noticing some vegetable scraps in the waste-basket, he ordered the cook not to waste anything. Complying with the orders, the cook then washed all the vegetable scraps and prepared a curry using all of them. And the story ends by saying that this newly invented dish became the favourite of the guests who arrived that night. The narrative goes:

Everyone was eager to know the name of the new dish. The cook thought and thought. Then a name came to his mind. He named it 'avial' (pronounced uh-vi-ul). Avial became famous all over Kerala and is now one of the dishes in a traditional Kerala feast. Just imagine, it all came from a basket of waste! (p. 11, Marigold, Class V)

Interestingly, *avial* is an Indian dish with origins in Kerala, although it is equally popular in Tamil Nadu and Karnataka. It is a mixture (in a thick gravy) of 13 vegetables commonly found in the Western ghats. *Avial* is considered an essential part of the main meal (*Oonu* in Malayalam) and is also served as a delicacy in South India. *Avial* is also a mandatory dish served on Onam. And vegetable scraps are never used in the preparation of *avial*. The word *avial* is also used to denote 'boiled' or 'cooked in water'—this sense is derived from the way the dish is made.

This dish, *avial*—has mythological connections also. One among such stories is that:

Avial was invented by Bheem during the Pandavas' exile. According to the legend, when Ballava (Bheem's name during this time) assumed his duties as a cook in the kitchen of King Viraata, he did not know how to cook. One of the first things he did was to chop up many different vegetables,

boil them together, and top the dish with grated coconut. There are mythological variations too. Bheem is said to have prepared *avial* when there were unexpected guests for king Viraata and he was asked to serve a meal to them. There weren't sufficient vegetables for a side dish, so Bheem used whatever was available in the kitchen to make a new dish, which came to be known as *avial*.

When this story (as in the textbook) is narrated to the students in general, the culture of Kerala gets misrepresented and it will create a misconception about Onam and also about Kerala. And to the migrant students from Kerala and other southern states, this narration will adversely affect their emotional well-being. It attributes to them a derogatory name of 'scrap eaters'. When students hear an entirely new story that too in an intriguing manner from their textbook, this will make them feel othered and they will get alienated from the classroom environment.

Either the story should avoid mentioning the names of the state and the curry, or it should be interpreted positively, emphasising the optimum use of resources. This story, other than its cultural aspect, is in itself a reminder of the fact that we humans face some challenges as a species—for instance, the scarcity of resources. The idea creates a sense of solidarity among children from different backgrounds. This

way it can be in sync with the idea of peaceful co-existence of different groups.

'Home consciousness' is the other factor that affects the existence of the migrant in the host society. For migrant students the feeling of homelessness can be traumatic; and so, stories that trigger such nostalgia and distress should be avoided. The introductory chapter of the Class I *Marigold* textbook introduces the idea of 'home' into the minds of students. Since the initial phase of school going is already fraught with discomfort, any trigger to their emotions might as well be avoided at this stage. For the migrant students, the intensity of this feeling and home-sickness might be much higher as they are experiencing a life amidst a group of new people (students and teachers) from another ethnicity, and cultures and with a different language for communication for the first time.

As an introduction to the world of narration, the story of the *Three Little Pigs* in Unit 1 of the Class 1 textbook is meant to be narrated to the students. This story is about three little pigs named *Sonu*, *Monu*, and *Gonu*, who live in houses made of straw, sticks, and bricks respectively. One day a big wolf comes to *Sonu*'s straw house and says, "I will huff and puff and will blow your house down." And so he does. *Sonu* runs to *Monu*'s house but the same thing happens with *Monu*'s house as well. Thus uprooted from their houses, both *Sonu* and *Monu*

run to *Gonu*'s brick house where they take refuge because the wolf was unable to blow down the strong brick house of *Gonu*'s.

The story can be interpreted in different ways. The diasporic consciousness of homelessness, uprooting, asylum seeking, past trauma, etc., can be traced from the experience faced by *Sonu* and *Monu*. For every migration, there are 'push' and 'pull' factors associated with it. A push factor is the reason that relates to the region the person comes from—something that is pushing them out of their home state. Examples of push factors include lack of economic opportunity and jobs, escape from religious or cultural persecution, natural disasters, war, prevalence of diseases, and political insecurity. And the pull factor is a reason that is related to the destination—something that is attracting them to another state or region. Job opportunities, economic security, freedom, and education, are examples of pull factors. The wolf in the story can be seen as a symbolic representation of the push factor, in the migrant child's point of view the factor that forced them to migrate or to leave their home is represented as the wolf. The narration of the story will remind them of the insecurity they faced in their homes and it will act as a catalyst that triggers their traumatic past. *Sonu* and *Monu*, by the same logic, become the representations of migrant people,

and *Gonu* and his brick house turn out to be the host society where the migrants eventually land. And again the difference between being a guest and being a refugee will be felt towards the end of the story.

The Marxist perspective of this story will create a negative image in the young minds of the young students. Through this story, the class difference is unwittingly brought to the fore. Those who live in straw and stick houses seem to be depicted as the weaker classes and those living in the brick house as belonging to the upper classes —and both may be seen as part of a hierarchy. Hence, it also gives the message that poor people are the vulnerable section and so, forced to live under the wings of the bourgeoisie. They don't have a voice until and unless they build a stronger house than the upper class. Into the pure minds of primary class students, particularly in Class I, this story creates class consciousness and feelings of inferiority based on wealth and the strength of their houses. So the inclusion of this story in the syllabus may be reconsidered in the light of the above argument.

There are other stories that can disturb the minds of migrant students and affect the attitude of the host students toward them. One such story is *Mittu and the Yellow Mango*. *Mittu* is a parrot and he loves to eat mangoes. One day he sees a mango on a mango tree and wants to eat that. He flies down towards

the tree, but a crow living in that tree stops him by saying, "This is my tree." *Mittu* is deterred and flies away. On the way back, he sees a red balloon lying under a tree. He picks up the balloon and again flies to the mango tree. *Mittu* approaches the tree and pecks the balloon with his beak. "Pop!" on hearing the loud noise the crow gets scared and flies away from the tree. Thinking that someone with a big gun is after him, he never comes back to the tree. In this way, *Mittu* can eat the yellow mango.

The attitude of a 'host' considering migrants as a threat to their existence can be read into this narrative. The crow in the mango tree is the host and their society, the yellow mango is the pull factor that attracts the 'migrant', represented through *Mittu* the parrot. *Mittu's* urge to get the yellow mango creates competition for better opportunities. And with the tricks of *Mittu* (migrant), the crow (host) gets outwitted and loses the yellow mango for ever. The parasitic approach of migrants is exposed through the story. This will create tension among the host and migrant students. One will start considering the other as a threat. We have witnessed in India the fight between hosts and migrants on sharing the resources. Again, stories with such hermeneutic potential had better be avoided.

Mother, your baby is silly! She is so very childish!

She does not know the difference between the lights in the streets and the bright stars (pp. 81, Marigold, Class III).

Yet another issue is the perception of naivety among children. The story *My Silly Sister* belittles naivety and ignorance. Many studies on diasporic lives point out that, for a migrant in the new society the initial stage of their life will be filled with ignorance and naïveté. This type of narration may result in negative labelling of the migrant students for their lack of comprehension of the host language and cultural beliefs.

Birbal answered, "In times of difficulty, a person speaks only in his mother tongue."

(pp.103, Marigold, Class VI)

Another issue is that of the mother tongue. In the 'note for the teacher' of Class I, Unit 1 it is mentioned that the emphasis in this book is on developing language skills by using the mother tongue in the initial stages. Under this condition, the learning process of migrant students becomes more complex. They don't even have a common tongue to connect with their teacher and fellow students.

This will force them into silence and mere nodding of their heads even when comprehension might not have happened. The language barrier of the migrant students calls for the special attention of syllabus designers, for in a country like India it is hard to find a common mother tongue.

CONCLUSION

The main objective of the researcher is to analyse the impact of narratives based on NCERT primary class texts from the point of view of a migrant student. In this endeavour, it is observed that many narratives in the selected texts carry elements that could disturb the mind of a migrant student. While the story *Wonderful Waste* may present as a cultural misrepresentation, the story *Three Little Pigs* can put ideas of high and low, class differences, etc., into children's minds. In the same way the questioning of ignorance and naivety in *My Silly Sister*, and finally the problem related to choosing the mother tongue as the medium of communication in the initial stage of learning. All these narratives require a review as to their impact on children.

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