



Strengthening Subservience Gender Bias in West Bengal School Textbooks

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The West Bengal school textbooks, *'Itihash o Bhugol'* (History and Geography) Part I and II, published in 1993 and 1996 respectively, are in general use throughout the State in class three and four of Bangla medium schools. The *Shikshalaya Prakalpa*, a city-wide programme in Kolkatta to provide primary education for thousands of deprived urban children, will be teaching some children at the level of Class three or four within one or two years. There is an assumption that *'Itihash o Bhugol'* will form the basis of the EVS curriculum, taught in the *Shikshalaya*.

In my view, the gender bias against women found in the text and pictures of these books makes them unacceptable for use in the *Shikshalaya Prakalpa*, or indeed anywhere else. Also there are other features of the books – the content of the curriculum and the poor and outdated pedagogy – which make them unsuitable for use in the 21st century.

The introduction to Book One, titled *Aajker Kotha (About Nowadays)*, reads as follows:

“Gopal’s house is in Komolpur village. He studies in class three of the village school. In hot weather, the school opens during the morning. Gopal eats some food prepared by his mother and sets off for school. Just

as he is leaving, his friend, Rohim, calls for him. In the early morning, the air is filled with the fragrance of mango blossoms...

“Gopal’s father is a doctor. He is a member of the *panchayat* (elected village council). Rohim’s father is a big farmer. He owns a tractor. A tractor is a powered machine for ploughing. He uses a pump to bring water to his fields. In the evening the two men sit together to chat, listen to the radio and read the newspaper. Other men of the village gather there. Various matters connected with the *panchayat* are discussed. Gita, a girl, originally from the village, lives in Kolkatta. She is also in class three. She is woken up every morning by the sound of a factory siren. She gets up and washes her face with tap water. Her mother gives her some food she has prepared. Every day as she eats her breakfast, an aeroplane drones low over head. Her father says it is going to Delhi.

Gita has gone to see the airport. Her father listens to the radio while drinking tea. Then he puts Gita onto the tram which takes her to school and then goes to do a little shopping. At nine o’clock he sets off for his office. If he is going to be late home, he telephones to let them know.

“Gita, Rohim and Gopal do not know that there was a time when all these things did not exist. Villages, town, agriculture, offices, factories, radios, cars, telephones – people could not even imagine such things. At that time, people had not even learned how to cook or build houses. You are amazed to hear this, aren’t you? Thousands and thousands of years ago these things really did not exist. Little by little, over many ages, by trying out ideas, these things were developed. Human society’s present advanced condition, we call civilization. Even now, humans have not reached the same level of





development all over the earth. How was civilization created? What were humans like before that? You now have a burning desire to answer these questions. We will now explain everything to you!"

What messages do we receive from the above passages?

- That the function of women / mothers is only to prepare and serve food.
- That the affairs of the village *panchayat* are stitched up in private by two powerful men and their *chamchas* (sycophants).
- That only men listen to the radio, read newspapers and go to work in offices.
- That the many crores of Indian citizens still living in impoverished conditions, including those in Gopal and Rohim's village, are excluded from the school textbooks because the authors do not condescend to notice them.

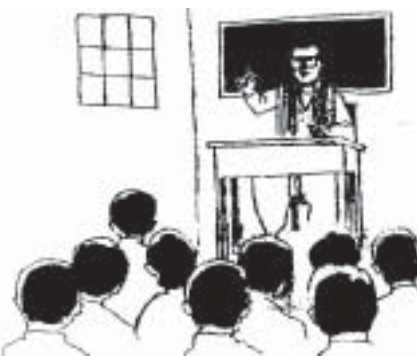
These passages may express accurately the reality experienced by many Indians. However, they do not describe an ideal situation, which should be presented to children as a model for their future behaviour.

Gender bias is found throughout the two books of '*Itihash o Bhugol*'. It is clearly seen in the pictures. The numbers of male and female persons appearing in pictures in Part I are 71 and 22 respectively. In Part II for 50 pictures of males, there are only two pictures of females.

In part II, in the chapter titled "*Prodhan Prodhan Jibika*" (Main

Ways of Earning a Living), men are shown in the roles of doctor, lawyer, teacher, students, farmer, *panchayat* secretary and visitors to the *panchayat*. No woman is present in those pictures. In chapter II, men are shown receiving *pattas* (titles) for land from a male officer in a government office. This is a false view of reality since in West Bengal, numerous households have women as their heads, who hold *pattas* in their own names.

In the whole of Part II, women are shown only twice. One is depicted



Teacher



Doctor

Lawyer

as picking tea. The other is carrying a pitcher of water from a pond! The history of great civilizations and great persons from the past, which fills half of Part II, is a history of men's activities in which the role of women is ignored. In Part I, in the sections on "*Adim Manush*" (Early Humans), most women are depicted in subservient roles.

All the girls enrolled in the *Shikshalaya Prakalpa* will need to



be economically active to support themselves and their families for most of their lives. To advance in life, they will have to constantly seek opportunities to enter new types of work, from which women have been previously excluded or restricted by male authority. It is the job of the *Shikshalaya Prakalpa* to encourage and prepare girls to fight for entry into jobs such as, train and bus driver and conductor, and for equality of access to government service and all professions. According to the West Bengal Government statistics, women constitute a mere 14 percent of all government employees.

Girls also need to be prepared for the roles of community leaders and elected representatives, where they are greatly under-represented at present.

Texts, pictures or workcards used by girls and boys in the *Shikshalaya* need to show positive images of girls and women engaged in all kinds of activities, including those where they are in positions of responsibility and authority.

The curriculum of '*Itihash o Bhugol*' is not supportive of the advancement of girls and women. It is therefore difficult to see how it can be useful in *Shikshalaya Prakalpa*. □

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All the pictures with this article are from text books used in West Bengal schools.