

Commentary

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Multiculturalism, Inclusion, and Marginality in Marathi Language Textbooks

Abstract

Language textbooks are uniquely positioned to reflect cultural diversity within a region and foster social cohesion. The study reported in the paper aims to measure the inclusivity of secondary school (grades 8, 9 and 10) Marathi language textbooks prescribed for Marathi-medium schools by the Maharashtra State Bureau of Textbook Production & Curriculum Research during the academic year 2017–18. Drawing on Banks' theory of multiculturalism, the study defines inclusivity as the representation of narratives from diverse communities and regions, with the intent to reduce prejudice and bias. When portraying a community, diversity within its narratives is essential. Drawing from a multicultural perspective, the paper argues that such inclusivity can enhance social cohesion and improve academic performance, particularly among marginalised groups. To evaluate the inclusiveness of the textbooks, the study employed content analysis alongside the deconstruction method. While the content analysis method measures the frequency and nature of the appearances, deconstruction uncovers what the textbooks marginalise, render supplemental, exclude, and eliminate. The study concludes that the textbooks not only lack diverse literary voices but also perpetuate stereotypes through limited and marginal representations.

Keywords: Multiculturalism, Marathi textbooks, inclusivity, representation, critical textbook analysis

Introduction

A textbook is a guiding tool and a major and mandatory source for teaching. For teachers, it provides precision on what should be taught. For students, a textbook is a major tool for scoring good marks, and is therefore consumed by a large segment of students, albeit with varying intensity. Thus, it can bring uniformity across a large cohort spread over a region and provides “an extended

common experience” (Romanish, 1995, p. 17) to them. Further, while discussing the alternatives, the NCERT (2006, p. 24) claimed that despite all technological advances, the textbooks will remain the predominant pedagogic source for the ordinary child. Thus, as a necessary and universal source of “knowledge” acquisition, what textbooks disseminate and how such content is absorbed need to be examined on a regular basis.

The Content of Language Textbooks

There are different arguments on what textbooks should entail and their purpose beyond teaching and learning a language. The NCERT position paper (2006, p. 8) proposed that learners be equipped with “politeness strategies and powers of persuasion” and “being able to negotiate all communicative encounters with tolerance and dignity.” The paper also insisted on the material that “makes learners socially sensitive” and “should gradually shift from local cultures to neighbouring cultures and then to world culture” (NCERT, 2006, p. 25). It even recommended introducing students to the linguistic and cultural diversity of the nation. On the other hand, UNESCO (2017) envisioned the school as a vehicle to promote human rights by eliminating “subtle” and “inadvertent” stereotypes and inculcating the value of respect for all. In its publication on inclusive education, UNESCO argues that:

The challenge now is to ensure that schoolbooks endorsed by educational systems serve as a potent force for countering all biased, incomplete, and inaccurate representations of peoples and societies. This will help ensure learners develop into informed and culturally literate citizens who are able to contribute constructively to their societies. (p. 7)

Further, the UNESCO publication advised the avoidance of broad generic terms, the use of diverse and precise terminology to avoid generalisation, and a balance of characters types and numerical representation. It also insisted on a culturally relativistic understanding of faith and views of non-religious groups. While addressing the issue of stereotypes in textbooks, the publication highlighted that “not all clichés and stereotypes are wrong: they can portray a part of complex reality” (p. 18). Moreover, it recommended to “identify and analyse various sources of meaning and different sources to explore shades of meaning and differences of expression, including news articles, archives, poetry, religious reflections, and the like” (p. 18). Going a step further, Kumar (1978/2007) recommended that translated stories from foreign languages can also be made part of language textbooks.

Apart from philosophical debates on what textbooks should entail, others have explored what they actually do. Beni (2013) points out that the Marathi language, despite being very diverse, has been “normalised and homogenised” by the schools in general and textbooks in particular. In another significant study of Marathi and English textbooks for Standards I to VII (Bawane, 2002, p. 17) has identified seven biases in the textbooks: “national superiority, poor-rich, gender bias, religious and caste superiority, colour superiority, rural vs. urban and concrete vs. abstract.” Darak (2023) argued that there is limited representation of socio-culturally marginalised groups and also raised questions on how they are represented. He further adds that teachers are offering classroom practices that are more inclusive and culturally sensitive from the perspective of marginalised children, thus subverting their marginalisation as depicted in the textbook.

Thus, there is a considerable body of literature that has examined Marathi language textbooks from various perspectives. However, the present study undertakes an in-depth analysis of the Marathi language textbooks prescribed for Marathi-medium secondary schools (grades 8 to 10) from a multicultural perspective.

Methodology

The present study operationalises multiculturalism through two dimensions of Banks’ (2015) model: content integration and prejudice reduction. Content integration is examined by analysing the representation of narratives from diverse communities, regions, and social groups in Marathi textbooks. Indicators include the presence of varied cultural perspectives, a balance between dominant and marginalised voices, and diversity within community narratives to avoid stereotyping. Prejudice reduction is assessed through the portrayal of minority groups, focusing on whether narratives foster empathy, respect, and inclusivity, or whether they perpetuate bias, exclusion, or stereotyping. To deepen this analysis, the study employs the concept of marginality, operationalised through indicators such as exclusion, underrepresentation, stereotypical portrayals, and curricular silence regarding discrimination and struggles.

This inquiry involves an investigation of the Marathi Language Textbooks (henceforth MLTs) prescribed for grades 8, 9 and 10 by the Maharashtra State Bureau of Textbook Production & Curriculum Research, Pune (henceforth the Board). The Board also prescribes different Marathi

language textbooks for schools where the medium of instruction is Hindi or English; however, the present study is limited to textbooks used in the Marathi medium.

The study employed content analysis as a technique for data collection. The *Oxford Dictionary of Sociology* defines content analysis as a technique for acquiring “summary or representation of meanings” (Scott, 2014, p. 121). Further, the deconstruction method was used, as it helps in understanding what a text stresses, promotes, ignores, rejects, and marginalises (Pavlich, 2007, p. 987). The study particularly used textual deconstruction to understand contradictions, silences, hidden assumptions, implicit hierarchies, and stereotypes embedded in narratives.

Both methods were operationalised in the research. While employing content analysis, lessons were coded into specific social categories based on their themes and cultural representations in order to understand content integration. This was complemented by textual deconstruction, which interrogates the silences and ideological framings within the texts. Together, these methods enable both a descriptive mapping of inclusivity and a critical reading that reveals hidden biases and curricular exclusions.

Furthermore, images and excerpts not included in the examination assessments, but forming part of the textbooks, were also analysed. The analysis of the textbooks revealed social categories such as religious content, minorities, and Adivasis. The following section discusses these categories individually.

Religionism and Favouritism

The *Concise Oxford English Dictionary* defines religionism as “excessive religious zeal” (Soanes & Stevenson, 2010, p. 1215). While discussing the concept, Hull (1999, p. 109) emphasises its solidarity function, noting that it operates “through fostering negative attitudes towards other religions.” For the purposes of the present study, religionism is understood as the presence of a significant number of lessons devoted to religious content. In certain cases, even non-religious, contemporary phenomena are interpreted through a religious lens. Furthermore, all of these lessons and poems represent a regional Maharashtrian variety of Hinduism. One may welcome this as an acknowledgement of the diversity within Hinduism, however, the absence of non-Hindu religious content prompts one to label it as favouritism. Thus, in this context, favouritism refers to the

preferential inclusion of literature from the Hindu religion, thereby compromising curricular inclusivity.

This study finds that poetic works by saints from the Hindu-Maharashtrian Varkari sect are frequently given prominent and immediate space in the textbooks. For instance, the 8th Standard Marathi Language Textbook (henceforth 8SMLT) includes an Abhang (hymn) by Saint Janabai (p. 119), which states: “Like a mother works but her attention is on her children; like a bird goes to collect but the nest is on her mind; similarly, Lord Vitthal looks after us from time to time.” Another Abhang by Janabai in the 9th Standard Marathi Language Textbook (9SMLT, p. 6) expresses devotion to Lord Vitthal with phrases such as “I made my heart a prison; inside it, I imprisoned Lord Vitthal.”

Similarly, the 10th Standard Marathi Language Textbook (10SMLT) features Saint Namdev’s Abhang praising Lord Bal-Krishna (p. 64), and Saint Bahinabai Pathak’s hymn (p. 75), which conveys intense devotion to Lord Vitthal through vivid metaphors: a fish writhing without water, the mythical *Chatak* bird longing for rain, and a faithful wife grieving her separation from her husband. Devotion is equated with ultimate liberation (*Nirvana*), and the poet emphasises the depth of spiritual yearning through metaphors such as a bumblebee dying without a flower.

This selective representation raises concerns about religious favouritism and the absence of pluralistic narratives, which are essential for fostering multicultural understanding and inclusive pedagogy.

Additional examples of Hindu religious content include Sant Tukaram’s Abhang on paternal sacrifice (10SMLT, p. 72) and another hymn advocating peace as a path to bliss and health. The final poem in the 8SMLT, *Pancharati* (p. 159), eulogizes prominent women from Maharashtra — Mahadamba, Janai, Laxmibai, Bahinabai, Ahilyadevi, and Jijai. At least three of these figures have been appropriated in contemporary identity politics. The poem is steeped in upper-caste Hindu symbolism, evident in its title (*Pancharati*, a sacred lamp with five flames), the accompanying image, and the deification of Ahilyadevi, who is shown holding a *pind* (an emblem of Lord Shiva) and referred to as *Punyashlok*.

Apart from the above regional Hindu examples, there are several general Hindu references that appear in the textbooks. In the 9SMLT, the first poem is religious-nationalist in tone. The following page elaborates on the poet, describing him as the “Modern Valmiki.” Just as Valmiki authored the *Ramayana*, Madgulkar is credited with composing the *Geet-Ramayana* (a musical version of the epic). One entire page is devoted to how Madgulkar conceived this work — an emphasis not afforded to other authors. Further in the same textbook, an example of advertisement writing appears under the section titled “Applied Marathi.” The sample advertisement promotes yoga classes with the tagline: “Learn *Asanas*, become healthy and stress-free, guidance on various *asanas*, *pranayama* (breathing exercises), and diet.” Students are then asked to respond to the prompt: “Objectives of learning yoga” (p. 104).

In contemporary discourse, yoga is widely perceived and portrayed as an intrinsic component of Hinduism. Therefore, the inclusion of a glorifying text on yoga — without critical engagement or pluralistic framing — can be interpreted as a subtle form of religious preference, reinforcing dominant cultural narratives while sidelining others.

Furthermore, the 9SMLT (p. 81) includes a striking paragraph that attempts to explain why humans worship stone as God.

During the Stone Age, stone was used in various ways to make life more convenient — from cooking implements like *chulhas* to tools, ploughs, ornaments, and even shelters carved from rock or constructed with stone walls. Once basic needs were met, humans turned to creativity and spiritual expression. In their leisure time, they carved caves and sculptures, adding artistic touches to their dwellings. The arts of sculpture and architecture are said to have originated from stone, alongside the emergence of scientific thought. As stone enabled both survival and creativity, humans began to worship it, deeming it divine.

This paragraph raises more questions than it answers. First, do all humans worship stones? While many historians and archaeologists agree that the Stone Age was a crucial stage in human development, the claim that it marks the origin of science is highly debatable. In the above excerpt, the reference to science appears abrupt and implausible. There are multiple scholarly contentions

regarding when and where science originated. Typically, the emergence of science is attributed to moments when learned individuals began to question commonly held beliefs using reason, evidence, and systematic explanations of natural phenomena. None of these elements are present in the paragraph under discussion, nor is any reference cited.

The practice of worshipping stones or sculptures can be interpreted through the lens of animism. However, the textbook passage does not employ qualifying phrases such as “might have deemed” or “one possible explanation.” Instead, it asserts definitively: “he worshipped stone by deeming it God” (9SMLT, p. 81). This lack of nuance and critical framing suggests a form of religious ethnocentrism; wherein sculpted stones are presented as divine without acknowledging alternative interpretations or cultural diversity.

Religious Harmony

Beyond the devotional and ethnocentric lessons, two exceptional religious references — though again drawn from Hinduism — offer students a window into relativistic thinking. In the 10SMLT (p. 126), a sample passage is provided for prose cognition. Its message is notably radical: rather than advocating for the elimination of enemies, it calls for the elimination of their vices. However, all examples cited are from Hinduism, including Saint Dnyaneshwar and Lord Shree Krishna.

A second example is the story of visually impaired individuals who attempt to describe an elephant by touching different parts of its body. Each person interprets the elephant based on the part they encounter, whether trunk, leg, and tail, and describes it as a pestle, a pole, or a broom, respectively. The introductory note explains that the lesson illustrates how “everybody thinks as per her/his experience.” The moral further elaborates: “Individuals regard the nature of God as they realise. But [...] without realising its complete nature, their fractional knowledge of God [as experienced] is not the true understanding of Him” (10SMLT, p. 1). Such lessons have the potential to counter ethnocentric thinking and encourage readers to accept diverse religious conceptions of divinity.

Only one lesson across the three textbooks explicitly attempts to instil the value of religious and racial harmony—and even then, only as a secondary theme. Pundit explains that the five circles in the Olympic flag represent the five continents and the unity among them. The author claims that

sports foster harmony, equality, friendship, fraternity, discipline, and unity. He asserts that there is no room for caste, religion, or race-based discrimination in sports, where everyone is given an equal opportunity. To support this, he cites examples of athletes who were celebrated for their performance regardless of race, nationality, or class. The author also describes a lamp placed near the five circles, symbolically intended to dispel the darkness of narrow-mindedness (9SMLT, p. 73).

Minorities: Stereotyped as Rare, Stubborn, and Unfriendly

When it comes to minority representation, only one Muslim author appears across the three textbooks —out of a total of 87 authors. There is not a single lesson featuring a Muslim protagonist. While there are occasional references to Muslims, these are often framed in stereotypical or sceptical ways: “Like me, my friend Sayed was extremely brilliant. After the seventh class, he left [Marathi medium school], probably for an Urdu–Persian school” (8SMLT, p. 6).

This sentence appears in a lesson that otherwise promotes multiculturalism, referencing students and teachers from diverse backgrounds. However, it risks reinforcing the stereotype that Muslims are only interested in learning Urdu and Persian, and are disinterested in the state language. While it is true that stereotypes “can portray a part of complex reality” (UNESCO, 2017, p. 18), the absence of counter-narratives allows this singular portrayal to stand in for the entire community.

Another reference to a Muslim character appears in the 9SMLT (p. 101), under the heading “Story Writing Example”:

Prakash and Anwar are two close friends who sit on the same bench and eat together. Diwali vacation begins, and Anwar goes to the village with his mother. The friends won’t meet for the entire vacation. Two days before school reopens, Prakash, excited to see Anwar, opens his bag to complete his vacation assignment. In the book, he finds a letter written by Anwar. He eagerly takes the letter to read and...

This is precisely where the sample ends. Students are instructed to complete the story using their own imagination. The final word — “and” — is problematic. In Marathi, *ani* (‘and’) is used in two ways: to add similar elements, or to signal a narrative shift, often toward contrast or surprise. In this context, the first usage is clearly inapplicable. The second — implying a negative twist — is

troubling, especially given the story's initial emphasis on interfaith friendship. It subtly primes students to imagine a rupture rather than continuity.

Christian characters, like Muslims, are also rarely represented. In the *8SMLT* (p. 5), Ms. Herriot appears as a teacher. In the same lesson (p. 6), a student named Enoch Daniels is mentioned as having become a great musician. While this aligns with the common stereotype of Christians pursuing modern or Westernised professions, another lesson offers a more nuanced portrayal.

“Shadow of Soil” (9SMLT, p. 46) is a lesson written by Stanley Gonsalves, the only Christian author featured across the three textbooks. This lesson stands out for its use of the *Malvani* dialect and its portrayal of a local Christian protagonist. The narrative centres on urbanisation, beginning with a conflict between rational, profit-oriented values and emotional attachment to land and farming, including intergenerational tensions. It also briefly explores the protagonist's loneliness in the city and his regret over his son selling of their ancestral land to build a bungalow.

The inclusion of this lesson challenges several stereotypes — notably, the assumption that Christians speak only English. Here, the story is not even in standard Marathi but in *Malvani*, a regional dialect. Moreover, the Christian protagonist resists urbanisation, which is often equated with Western or Christian modernity, and instead embraces a rural, nature-based lifestyle. Finally, the names of the two characters — Farasu and Manu — further subvert conventional expectations about Christian naming practices.

Adivasi: Hinduised, Marginal, and “Safe Inclusion”

There is evidence suggesting that the textbook attempts a subtle Hinduisation of Adivasi identity. Consider the inclusion of a poem written by a tribal author, titled “*Vanvasi*” (9SMLT, p. 71). *Vanvasi* means “forest dwellers.” The use of the term *Vanvasi* over *Adivasi* (which means “first inhabitant”) is seen as a Hinduisation project, as it does not create any binary between them and the Hindus (Sabrang, 2002).

Further evidence of reference to tribal communities are found under the heading “Applied Writings,” where a subsection titled “Introduction to Dialects” is presented (9SMLT, pp. 96–98). It features a

passage in the *Pawari* dialect, accompanied by a translation in standard Marathi. The narrative roughly unfolds as follows: Children are playing in the schoolyard, but Rajesh sits alone near the flagpole, upset because his mother left him at the Ashram School. His mother tries to reassure him, explaining that he must study to become a *sahib*. Rajesh asks who will feed him at the school. She responds that he must learn to be independent and leave his mother behind. She also tells him he is not alone — there are hundreds of students at the school. Rajesh eventually realizes his mistake and joins the other children in play.

Another excerpt in the Katkari tribal language is given. It is presented as follows: Nagya could no longer bear the starvation, but he had no choice. Despite his willingness to work, there was none available. First the war, then the recession, and the absence of guidance under British rule had worsened the situation. In such circumstances, what meaning could fasting or worship possibly hold? “Those who live in the village have schools and temples,” he thought. “But we work like animals — we eat if there is food, or else we sleep on a half-filled stomach.” Still, he held on to hope. “These days will pass, and better days will come,” he reminded himself, recalling the words of the leader spoken at the meeting near the temple: “Let’s arise, let’s wake up!” (9SMLT, p. 98).

A few important points need to be highlighted here. First, although Adivasis constitute 9.35%¹ of the state's population, they are represented in only one poem out of 87. Quite strikingly, the 8SMLT and the 10SMLT do not include a single lesson or poem written by or about Adivasis. Moreover, the two excerpts reproduced here are not part of the mandatory curriculum. This marginal representation not only risks alienating Adivasi students from the textbooks, but also deprives mainstream students of the opportunity to develop a holistic and empathetic understanding of Adivasi communities.

Second, the content of the poem and the two excerpts warrant thorough deliberation. The *Vanvasi* poem portrays Adivasi children as cheerful despite being half-naked, proud of their lifestyle, and celebratory of their physical skills such as running and climbing. The poem is accompanied by an illustration of four children wearing a *dhoti* and going shirtless — two wandering and two eating. One might argue that this reflects how Adivasis lived within their “own” cultural system.

¹ Author’s calculation based on the 2011 census data obtained from <https://censusindia.gov.in/census.website/data/census-tables>

Of the two excerpts, the first depicts an Adivasi boy's reluctance to attend school, while the second addresses starvation during the British colonial period. While the inclusion of Adivasi dialects in the textbook is a welcome step, the content itself remains questionable. To what extent is this material relevant today? Why are all the narratives situated in the distant past — including the boy's unwillingness to attend school?

Contemporary issues such as the condition of Ashram Schools, tribal agitations against land acquisition, and frequent news reports of malnourishment among tribal children are conspicuously absent. This selective representation reflects what Krug (1960, p. 464) refers to as a “safe textbook”—one that fails “to provide students with opportunities for critical thinking.”

Concluding Remarks

This study has certain limitations, particularly in not accounting for the possibility that teachers may relate textbook content to students' lived experiences and local contexts, as noted by Darak (2023). There is also a limited possibility that teachers might supplement lessons with relevant newspaper reports, articles, or books, and interpret the material through critical lenses, thus providing the students with different meanings than what the present study has conceived of here. Consequently, the present study does not examine how these textbooks are actually received or interpreted by students.

Acknowledging these limitations, the paper has focused on evaluating the inclusivity of Marathi language textbooks prescribed for secondary schools in Maharashtra. It was observed that while these textbooks include several lessons rooted in Hinduism, they do so without any vilifying tendency. However, the textbooks lack curricular representation from other religious traditions, indicating a lack of broad cultural engagement. Such curricular disparity may have a different impact on students from majority and minority communities. Students from the majority community are likely to be deprived of broader curricular exposure beyond their own worldview. In turn, they miss the opportunity to reduce biases against minority groups. The impact on students from minority communities can vary. On the one hand, they might feel alienated from the textbooks, since they are unable to relate the lessons to their own lives. On the other hand, they gain exposure to the majority community's narratives, which can broaden their understanding.

In an era of extreme polarisation, education remains one of the last bastions capable of upholding

social cohesion. Although there is no direct communal vilification in the textbooks, they lack broader social engagement and subtly portray religious stereotypes. Such exclusion not only alienates the communities whose narratives are omitted or distorted, but also deprives mainstream students of the opportunity to cultivate empathy and sensitivity toward other cultures, dialects, practices, and values. In the end, textbook editors and contributors, though burdened by multiple concerns, must ensure that the inclusivity of textbooks is broadened, as they serve as a vital instrument for fostering communal harmony.

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