

Official School Poetry in Indian Textbooks: A Critical View

Introduction [1]

A large number of children in India grow up disliking poetry because of the way it is 'taught' in school. There are two sets of problems; one pertaining to the selection of poems, and the other concerning the treatment of these poems as texts. The poems taught are usually the ones prescribed in textbooks, since few teachers go beyond these.

The Problem

Let us begin with the problems pertaining to the selection of poems. A substantial number of poems make it to textbooks only because they enjoy a canonical status within the tradition of English literature. William Wordsworth and Robert Frost are the staple of school-level English textbooks in India. At times, they also have John Keats, Alfred Tennyson and William Butler Yeats for company.

Of course, there is nothing wrong with exposing children to great poetry. In fact, some of the poems written by these poets are accessible to school children. The problem is with limiting children's exposure to poetry to what Thomas, in his essay "Child Poets and the Poetry of the Playground" calls "official school poetry" [2], which is "the dominant mode of children's poetry in the school, the kind of poetry written by adults and taught to children in the classroom" (2004, p. 152). This kind of poetry is distinct from playground poetry (a term Thomas borrows from Iona Opie), "a carnivalesque [3] tradition that signifies on adult culture," and refers to "what children often do with language while outside grown-up supervision" (p. 152). The problem is with official school poetry being children's only experience of poetry, for it fails to "regard children's culture *alongside* adult culture" (p. 154). This is poetry written by adults for adults in an adult voice, but prescribed for children because it serves as a model of 'good' literature.

On the other hand, there are poets like Shel Silverstein, Roger McGough, Kenn Nesbitt, and Bruce Lansky, among others, who write wonderful poetry for children, but their work is rarely included in school textbooks. Their poems are filled with what I would like to call 'the stuff of childhood'--mums and dads, friends and teachers, pets, picnics, pillow fights and chocolate ice cream, bullies and dog-eaten homework and such. They are packed with fun and humour, and are often critical of adult life. There is a familiarity and immediacy about them, which official school poetry simply cannot capture. It is almost perverse to keep children away from this kind of poetry. However,

many would strongly disagree with me, in keeping with conventional notions of what is appropriate for children, and what is not. Baxi (2006) quotes one such voice (Tom Henihan) in her article "Muse in Manacles: English Poetry in the Indian Classroom."

When student poets get up to read they almost always thank their teacher for making poetry fun. Poetry should be protected from fun. There is so much fun in the world it isn't funny anymore. Poetry is essentially a solemn and devotional form. Funny poetry is a contradiction in terms...it's the equivalent of kneeling in a church and saying funny prayers or chanting a funny ritual. I am not saying that there is no room for humour in poetry but I am saying that there is very little room. We need things that are serious. What could be more pessimistic than wanting everything to be funny? Like failed musicians and actors who become children's entertainers, I sometimes suspect that comedians that aren't that funny decide to be poets. (pp. 47-48)

Though textbook writers may not necessarily subscribe to such pedantic notions of poetry, they usually favour the serious variety, regardless of whether the child finds it conceptually difficult, linguistically complex, or just boring. The *New English Reader V for Class X* includes Emily Dickinson's "Because I Could Not Stop for Death," Rabindranath Tagore's "Where The Mind Is Without Fear," and Sarojini Naidu's "Bangle-Sellers." *Beehive Textbook in English for Class IX* includes Wordsworth's "A Slumber Did My Spirit Seal," and W.B. Yeats' "The Lake Isle of Innisfree." I am not taking issue with the selection of individual poems, but with the staid approach to selection. There are poets and poems that have, for generations, been part of school textbooks. Textbook writers ought to look for other poems by other poets.

There is a significant difference between what adults believe to be good for children, and what children actually enjoy. The appreciation of poetry hinges on children's enjoyment of it. They should be able to see it in relation to their own reality, their thoughts and feelings and imagination, and their life and experiences. This point can be illustrated using H.H. Munro's short story, "The Storyteller," set in a railway carriage occupied by three children, their aunt, and a bachelor who is travelling alone. In order to keep the children from making noise, the aunt tells them "an unenterprising and deplorably uninteresting story about a little girl who was good, and made friends with everyone on account of her goodness, and was finally saved from a mad bull by a number of rescuers who admired her moral character" (p. 407). One of the children suspects that the rescuers would have saved her even if she hadn't been good, to which the aunt only manages to say, "I don't think they would have run quite so fast to her help if they had not liked her so much" (p. 407). Predictably, the children are not convinced by this poorly constructed argument. One of them calls it "the stupidest story I've ever heard," while another admits to have stopped listening "after the first bit, it was so stupid," and the third makes no comment "but had long ago recommenced a murmured repetition of her favourite line [from Rudyard Kipling's poem "On the Road to Mandalay"]" (p. 407).

Taunted by the bachelor for her unsuccessful stint as a storyteller, the aunt challenges him to tell them a story. He begins with one about "a little girl called Bertha, who was extraordinarily good" (p. 408). At the very mention of goodness, the children begin to lose interest, for they suspect another variant of their aunt's tale, but there is "a wave of reaction" when he speaks of Bertha as "horribly good" (p. 408). The children have never heard these words in the vicinity of each other, and their combination is excitingly suggestive in its possibilities. "It seemed to introduce a ring of truth that was absent from the aunt's tales of infant life" (p. 408). The children are completely engaged now. One question follows another, and the bachelor is able to answer each, and improvise accordingly. Bertha is honoured with three medals--for obedience, punctuality, and good behaviour--and the privilege to walk in the Prince's park, which is out of bounds for other children. The park is full of pigs who have eaten up all the flowers. One day, a wolf comes "prowling into the park to see if it could catch a fat little pig for its supper" (p. 410). Bertha has to run for her life, and hide in a shrubbery of myrtle bushes. In her moment of fear, Bertha says, "If I had not been so extraordinarily good I should have been safe in the town at this moment" (p. 410). As she trembles, her medals clink against each other, at which point the wolf dashes into the bush, drags Bertha out and "devours her to the last morsel. All that was left of her were her shoes, bits of clothing, and the three medals for goodness" (p. 410).

At the end of the story, the children are not shocked, as might have been expected of them by their aunt. One of them wants to know if any of the pigs were killed. The children's responses to this story are different from their responses to their aunt's story. One of them says that "The story began badly but it had a beautiful ending," while another calls it "the most beautiful story that I ever heard," and the third child finds it "the only beautiful story I have ever heard" (p. 410). The aunt is least amused:

"A most improper story to tell to young children! You have undermined the effect of years of careful teaching."

"At any rate," said the bachelor, collecting his belongings preparatory to leaving the carriage, "I kept them quiet for ten minutes, which was more than you were able to do." (p. 410)

Munro's story makes it clear that there is many a gap between what adults consider valuable and what children find worthwhile. At times, textbook writers appear to include poems that might appeal to the child's sense of fun and freedom. Their attempts are not as well-intentioned as they seem. D. J. Enright's poem "The Rebel" in *Honeycomb Textbook in English for Class VII* [4] is a case in point. The poem is preceded by this note:

Do you know anyone who always disagrees with you or your friends, or likes to do the opposite of what everyone thinks they should do? Think of a word to describe such a person. Discuss with your partner some of the things such a person generally does. Now read the poem. (p. 33)

Then follows the poem, called "The Rebel" (the full text for this poem is found at: <http://www.ncert.nic.in/textbooks/testing/Index.htm>). This may look like an anti-establishment poem, but it is not. It trivializes the concept of rebellion. It takes the position that a non-conformist is an idiot and attention seeker. The textbook writer's introduction to the poem furthers this agenda. It reduces the rebel to a person who "likes to do the opposite of what everyone thinks they should do." It equates 'the rebel' with 'the rebel without a cause.' One might argue that children would find it difficult to understand the concept of a rebel, if not explained in simple language. However, this is nothing but an excuse. If one is not prepared to engage with a concept at a reasonably mature level (even with children), why introduce it in a simplistic (not simplified) and pretentious way? What do children stand to gain from this poem? At the most, they can look around in their classroom and try to spot peers who engage in such behaviour, and label them 'rebels.' The agenda behind this poem appears to be to create obedient, rule-abiding children, and to convince them not to be rebels.[5] The questions that appear in the 'Working with the Poem' section further this agenda.

- (iv) Why is it good to have rebels?
- (v) Why is it not good to be a rebel oneself?
- (vi) Would you like to be a rebel? If yes, why? If not, why not? (p. 34)

We are already in the realm of problems concerning the treatment of poems as texts. The teaching of poetry in the classroom is largely built around stock question types like 'Paraphrase this poem,' 'Answer with reference to context,' or 'What is the central idea of this poem?' Students gain little from such exercises. They are able to engage with a given poem only at the level of its content. They do not have the opportunity to consider its multiple meanings, compare it with other poems they have read, or even explore its resonances with their own experience of life. It is a pity that poems are treated like prose texts, with the entire paraphernalia of multiple choice questions and short answer questions aimed at giving practice in skimming, scanning, and factual comprehension.

New! Learning to Communicate Coursebook 4 features C. E. Carryl's poem "The Complaint of the Camel," (2002, pp. 104-105) followed by a section called 'Let's Enjoy this Poem a Little More.' It is difficult to think of a child who would enjoy the poem a little more with a question like this:

What does each stanza talk about? Match the stanzas with the right descriptions.

- Stanza 1 What a camel carries
- Stanza 2 What a camel looks like
- Stanza 3 What a camel eats
- Stanza 4 What a camel's house looks like
- Stanza 5 Where a camel sleeps (p. 105)

A part of the problem with treatment of poems has to do with the way textbooks are structured. They are usually made up of units, each of which has to cover certain areas in grammar (structures and functions), vocabulary, and some amount of reading, writing, listening and speaking. Since textbook writers face this structure, they must look for strategies to make a poem 'teachable.' Take, for instance, *The New English Reader V for Class Ten* (1991), which features Shel Silverstein's poem "Jimmy Jet and his TV set." (The full text for the poem is found at <http://www.turnoffyourtv.com/poemsessays/jimmyjet.html>].)

Though the poem and the glossary are followed by a section called 'Appreciating the poem,' the exercises given largely focus on comprehension. The child can quickly look through the poem and answer them. One is a multiple-choice question which requires the child to pick one of three statements to best describe Jimmy; the alternatives are:

- (a) He sometimes watched TV.
- (b) He watched TV quite often.
- (c) He watched TV too much. (p. 57)

Another question reads: "Did Jim watch only some of the programmes on TV or all of them? What happened to him as a result?" (p. 57). None of these questions asks the child to use his or her imagination. The answers are all too obvious. One is not required to read between the lines or beyond the lines. There is no challenge to think and answer. These exercises are, at best, teacher-centric, for the teacher who is happy for having adopted a participatory mode of learning. In effect, however, the teacher has only been able to elicit some responses, which do not really excite the child's imagination.

There is another interesting question here. "Is there a 'moral' (or a practical lesson) that this poem is perhaps teaching?" (p. 57). This question is interesting for two reasons. Firstly, it represents the adult enthusiasm for teaching, meaning that some essential lesson for life has to be distilled from any given text that is read. There ought to be a justification for the reading. The enjoyment that comes from the reading is not considered valuable in itself. Secondly, Shel Silverstein is known for the funny poems he writes for children, and they are far from didactic. However, the way his poem is framed as a text represents his poetry in an altogether different light. It comes across as a reprimand for excessive television viewing. The next question asks the child, "Wouldn't it be an enjoyable experience for you to memorise and recite the poem?" It is surprising how such questions could find their way into a section called 'Appreciating the poem,' when there is no room here for the child's personal subjective responses to the experience of television viewing, the child in the poem, and to the poem itself.

In addition to this, the meaning of a poem is often fixed and pre-determined by the textbook writer. Before the poem is presented to children, they are told what it is about. In *Beehive Textbook in English for Class IX* (2006), Frost's poem "The Road Not Taken" is introduced: "This well-known poem is about making choices, and the

choices that shape us" (p. 15). The child is forced to accept this second-hand interpretation. There is little room to think differently. Even before reading the poem, a lens with which to view it is given. If the child thinks differently, there is hardly any opportunity to share it.

An Alternative Approach

Now that I've articulated a critique of poetry in school textbooks in India, it is important to acknowledge that inspired and enterprising teachers can make the best of a bad situation. They can help students gain exposure to a variety of poetry besides what is found in their textbooks. The Internet is a valuable resource for this purpose. They can also have them listen to audio books, which are recorded versions of poetry readings. Not many Indian teachers had access to audio books in the past, but Karadi Tales has now brought out a set of CDs with a compilation of poetry readings based on the syllabi for Classes IX-XII prescribed by National Council of Educational Research and Training (NCERT) and Central Board of Secondary Education (CBSE). Teachers can also have children read parodies [6] of well-known poems, in order to infuse an element of fun and adventure in the learning process.

Another way to involve children in the appreciation of poetry is through poetry writing [7] workshops. Sircar, in her article "Poetry Writing in the Classroom," speaks of poetry writing as a liberating experience that helps them get in touch with their "imagination and creativity." She writes:

Poetry is one aspect of language use where rules, system and structure can be flouted and not condemned. Let us see what rules poetry can flout? Capital letters can be thrown out. Words can be used, coined and made (as long as they are understandable). Line breaks can be given wherever the poet wants them. One thought need not strictly follow the other. Everything is acceptable and correct as long as some idea or thought is communicated, or where there is a fresh way of looking at things... Poetry is creativity, unleashed imagination at work and this articulation of imagination is not only a learning experience but reassures in the child the feeling of being important and creative. (2005, p. 59)

Patel (2007) has further suggestions to add. His introduction to Poetry with Young People, a book that emerged from several decades of poetry workshops with children at Rishi Valley School, has some beautiful insights to offer. Patel tries to diagnose what ails the teaching of poetry writing in classrooms[8].

Young people are particularly beset by instructors who want them to express such [noble, heroic, elevated] sentiments in poetry, irrespective of the many other qualities that good poetry calls for. Or they want to be given something cute, dainty, quaint, a false adult notion of what goes on in young minds. No wonder many student readers and writers tend to find

poetry uncongenial, and think of it as something at one remove from the specificities of their own lives and experiences. (pp. xix-xx)

He prefers that children write about things that are familiar to them, things they feel or care about, and emotions they have personally gone through. This is more rewarding than intelligent imitations of established greats, for poems born of this process are "authentic little documents of the concerns of various individual lives."

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Notes

[1] A version of this paper was presented at the Seminar on 'Reality and Fantasy in Children's Literature' organised by St. Andrew's College, Mumbai and Children's Literature Association of India, September 16, 2008.

[2] Thomas Jr. has an interesting point to make. He writes, "Poems selected for classroom use are principally the least politically and formally vexing; they appear easily thematizable and interpretable, and thus are classroom friendly. Their politics is often difficult to excavate, even as they implicitly privilege the adult poetic tradition" (p. 153).

[3] Thomas Jr. borrows this concept from Mikhail Bakhtin's *Rabelais and His World*.

[4] I was unable to acquire a hard copy of this book even after repeated attempts. It can be accessed online: [<http://www.ncert.nic.in/textbooks/>].

[5] I am grateful to Swathi Rajan for this point.

[6] Refer to: Creech, S., *Love That Dog*. New York: Scholastic Inc., 2002 for ideas. This verse novel features parodies of Frost's "Stopping by Woods on a Snowy Evening," William Blake's "Tyger Tyger Burning Bright," William Carlos Williams's "The Red Wheelbarrow", and other poems.

[7] Refer to: Maley, A. and Moulding, S., *Poem into Poem: Reading and writing poems with students of English*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1985. The authors offer wonderful ideas to try out in the classroom. They believe that "the process of composing poems" encourages "real discussion," helps learners "try out different ways of saying the same thing," involves them in "playing with language," and gives them "a purpose in writing, and allows [them] to bring in [their] personal feeling and ideas" (p. 1).

[8] I am not in support of two of the decisions made by Patel for his poetry workshops--to "keep [children] away from the reams of poetry written specifically 'for

young people'," and to "discourage [children] from writing about witches and fairies, stock subjects in the horrid writings of junior school" (2007, p. xx).

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