

# The Stronger Text of Indian Classrooms

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The National Curriculum Framework, 2005 advocated ideas of ‘constructivism’ and emphasized on relating the content of the books with the childrens’ lives. Based on the NCF 2005 recommendations, new textbooks were designed for all subjects. In this paper, I will focus on the new language textbooks *Rimjhim*, and their present status in Indian classrooms.

As a teacher-educator, I was really excited when I first read the ‘*Rimjhim*’ textbooks. However that excitement soon turned to despondency when I observed how it was being used in primary school classrooms. Instead of textbooks, both teachers as well as students were relying mostly on guidebooks. My present paper is the outcome of my observations. The paper is divided into three parts: in the first part I will focus on an analysis of the *Rimjhim* textbooks, the second part is based on a study of the corresponding guidebooks, and the last part reflects on the struggle of the textbooks against a ‘stronger text’.

## ***Rimjhim* Textbooks: An Analysis**

For the purpose of my study, I have selected two books from the *Rimjhim* series, *Rimjhim-2* and *Rimjhim-4*. From *Rimjhim-2*, I have looked at two chapters—‘Aadhik Balwaan Kaun’ (Chapter 4) and ‘Bahut Hua’ (Chapter 6). From *Rimjhim-4*, I have selected two chapters entitled ‘Naav Banao-Naav Banao’ (Chapter 6) and ‘Sunita ki Pahiya Kursi’ (Chapter 12). An analysis of these chapters revealed the following points that highlight the excellent quality of these textbooks:

### 1. Link between reading, writing and speaking.

One of the major strengths of the *Rimjhim* series is the integrated language exercises which have been designed so that there is a link between the different language skills. This is evident from the following examples:

- One day the clouds decided that they would not bring rain because everybody criticized them for raining hard. What will happen next? Extend the story. (*Rimjhim-2*, p. 37)
- Imagine if wind said to the sun, whosoever will remove this tent from the ground, that person will be stronger. How will the story proceed? Think and tell. (*Rimjhim-2*, p. 26)

### 2. Questions based on personal experiences

According to (Graves, 1983), ‘voice’ gets automatically reflected in the work when students are allowed to write about their personal experiences. In *Rimjhim*, one can find lots of exercises which ask the students to share their personal experiences with the class. Some examples of such exercises are:

- The character in the story took off his coat when he started feeling hot. What do you do when you feel hot in summers? (*Rimjhim-2*, p. 25).
- Generally water gets accumulated on the roads during rainy season. What happens near your house or in your neighbourhood during rainy season? Share with the class. (*Rimjhim-4*, p. 49)

### 3. Questions based on imagination

The textbook offers a lot of imagination-based questions to students. Interesting situations are

given to the students and they are expected to imagine and write about them. For example:

- There must be a lot of questions and ideas that come to your mind after reading this chapter on Sunita. Write down all the ideas in a letter to Sunita. (*Rimjhim-4*, p. 104)
- Read the poem once again. The story of a boat and its journey is hidden in the poem. Imagine that you are that boat. Now tell your story to everyone. (*Rimjhim-4*, p. 46)

#### 4. Questions based on creative ideas

There is an effort to present the students with some real problems and ask them to find the solution to the problems. These questions require creative thinking and innovative ideas. Some examples of such questions are:

There are many children like Sunita. Some cannot see, while there are others who cannot speak or hear. Some have problems with their hands and some cannot walk. Think about one such child. If you have some physical problem, think about the challenges you would have to face. In order to face that challenge, what would you like to invent? Think about it and tell:

- How will you make it?
- What things will be required to make that?
- What would be the task performed by that thing?
- Make a picture of that thing.

These examples clearly reflect how *Rimjhim* provides ample scope for language development. It has questions that are well-drafted and have a clear sense of audience, purpose and space for 'voice'.

### The Culture of Guide books

The aim of the *Rimjhim* series can only be fulfilled if it is used in the class in the same spirit in which it is designed. After reading such creative books, one might be inclined to believe that language classes will become highly creative and exciting. However, the reality appears

somehow different. As a teacher educator, whenever I visit schools, I always try to interact with the primary school teachers to find out their opinion about the *Rimjhim* series. Unfortunately, feelings of discontent have always dominated the teachers' responses. They question the utility of books that are loaded with stories, poems and dramas but do not include conventional exercises. Often, they also find it difficult to understand the usefulness of textbooks which do not start from the basics of Hindi—the 'Varnamala'. They prefer to teach the lesson using workbooks or guides published by private publishers because these are packed with conventional exercises. In this section, I will focus on how these workbooks or guides are defeating the very purpose of *Rimjhim*. To support my argument, I will give some examples from such workbooks and guides preferred by the teachers over *Rimjhim*. For clarification and consistency, I have selected the same chapters that have been discussed in the above section.

#### 1) Information based questions

The workbook based on the stories carries extremely conventional and information based questions. Students are expected to read the text and answer questions such as:

- What did Sunita's mother ask her to bring? (*Abhyas Pustika Rimjhim-4*, p. 78)
- What is decided between the Sun and the Wind? (*Abhyas Pustika Rimjhim-2*, p. 22)

#### 2) Insensitive attitude

There are certain questions in the workbook which completely contradict the spirit of the stories in the textbook. As the workbooks are extensively used in the classes, it is worth reflecting about what our students are finally learning from the stories. For example the chapter 'Sunita ki Pahiyaa Kursi' (*Rimjhim-4*) has been included in the book to sensitize the students to physically challenged children. The chapter talks about the story of a girl, Sunita, who cannot walk. But she wants to do

everything on her own and feels irritated when people look at her with sympathy. Sunita finally meets a boy named Amit who is often teased by people for his short height. Later in the story, both of them become friends. This story has been included in the textbook so that the students can empathize with the lead characters and develop a sensitive attitude towards such children. In the workbook on this lesson, there is a question which is in complete contrast with the spirit of the chapter. The question is:

How do you make fun of your friends?  
Write the names of five of your friends along with the names by which you tease them.  
(*Abhyas Pustika Rimjhim-4*, p. 79).

The tone of this question makes one feel that it is okay to tease children with respect to their disabilities. What will a student of class IV learn from this story and such exercises, is a question worth thinking about.

### 3) Conventional exercises

The workbooks published by private publishers comprise typical writing exercises such as fill in the blanks, word meanings, synonyms and antonyms, correct or incorrect sentences, and make sentences. Thus, the attempt of the creators of *Rimjhim* textbooks to encourage aesthetic reading among students is nullified by the exercises that encourage efferent reading. These exercises solely focus on extracting information from the text without providing space for experiencing the literature.

### 4) No scope for reflection

An analysis of the guidebooks reveals the real condition of our primary school teaching. The guidebook contains answers for all the questions of *Rimjhim* ranging from information, analysis, reflection, experiences and personal views. The attempts made through *Rimjhim* to sensitize the students and make them reflect are suppressed by the typical answers of these guidebooks. This issue becomes even more important when we realize that a lot of teachers are only using these guidebooks for routine teaching in the class.

In the chapter, 'Sunita ki Pahiya Kursi' from *Rimjhim-4*, there is a question: Do you know any child who cannot hear or talk? How do you communicate with that child? This question is important because it is meant to make students sensitive and empathic towards such children. It is only when the students reflect on their environment, that they will find children like Sunita and will be able to establish a connection with them. For this question, the guidebook provides a straight answer: I know a child who cannot hear or talk. His name is Vishal. I communicate with him using signs. (*CP Guide*, p. 80).

These guides and workbooks have left no space or scope for our children to think and reflect and write. The unfortunate reality however is that these guidebooks are popularly used in various schools.

## Discussion and Reflection

The basic reason behind the struggle with implementing books such as *Rimjhim* is the ideology on which our education system is founded. Our education system is based on two 'B's—Behaviorism and the Banking Concept. Students are constantly drilled and given practice in producing required approved structures. Deviations from set standards are rejected and the use of reinforcement is done to mould students in the required structure. An 'exact' copy is rewarded with comments such as 'good' and 'excellent', while deviations are met with disapproval and punishment. Any thoughts or reflections are clearly discouraged since they pose a threat in achieving the objective of this education structure, which is creating passive learners.

Freire's 'Banking Concept' presents a clear reflection of our education system. He states,

Education thus becomes an act of depositing, in which the students are the depositories and the teacher is the depositor. Instead of communicating, the teacher

issues communiqués and makes deposits which the students patiently receive, memorize and repeat (p. 53).

Hence, the ultimate aim of our classrooms is not to create 'reflective minds' but to create 'deposit boxes' which can store unquestioningly. Any attempt or innovation which is not in accordance to these approaches faces resistance by the system.

This explanation however does not imply that the entire blame rests on the teachers who are transacting the content of *Rimjhim*. We need to reflect whether we have empowered the teachers to teach such a creative text. Have we engaged them in critical and reflective thinking while training them as teachers. The manner in which we have trained our teachers during their pre-service or in-service sessions is reflected in the quality of teaching they practise in their classes. Teacher training unfortunately does not include courses on pedagogy of reading and writing. Teachers unequipped with the knowledge of literacy pedagogy transact the textbook exercises in a typical drill and practice framework. Since this is similar to the framework in which they have themselves studied, they are most comfortable with it. Hence, greater preference is given to guide books over *Rimjhim*.

### **Empowering Teachers and Rimjhim**

There is an urgent need for a change in the education system. We need to create a system where young minds can think and reflect. One of the main ways to achieve this is to equip our teachers with the required knowledge of pedagogy. Since teachers are the main interpreters of the curriculum, it is essential to empower them with the appropriate knowledge. Batra (2005) focuses on acknowledging the voice and agency of the teachers and declares it as a key component in bringing any change. According to her any initiative or policy reform is useless, if teachers are not empowered. She

questions the NCF 2005 saying, "How do you enable critical thinking and meaning making among children with a teacher who has not been through such a process herself?" (Batra 2005, p. 4350) This statement emphasizes that the teacher is the core component of a classroom and till the time her orientation is neglected, the guidebooks will continue to exist as 'The Stronger Text'.

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