

World Literature in Iranian *Persian Literature* Textbooks

Babak Shamshiri¹, and Massih Zekavat²

¹ Shiraz University
Department of Foundations of Education, Shiraz University (Shiraz, Iran)

² nonaffiliated
(Shiraz, Iran)

ABSTRACT— *This article analyzes the inclusion/exclusion of works of world literature in the Iranian national curriculum. To investigate the status of world literature, five Adabīyyāt-i Fārsī, i.e. Persian Literature, textbooks are selected from Iranian high school curriculum. Content analysis is administered to explore the status of world literature in these textbooks. The results convey that the share of world literature is slim and its inclusion follows a systematic procedure in line with State ideological and doctrinal principles. This systematic procedure is further explained with recourse to its various causes and consequences. The books’ homogenizing, ethnocentric, androcentric and heterosexist attitudes; their national, religious, and linguistic chauvinism; their cultural traditionalism and conservatism; as well as the role of educational system as an Ideological State Apparatus are among factors that cause this curriculum blindness. But the neglect of world literature as an essential element in the curriculum of contemporary education or a selective approach toward it has its aftermath. Accordingly, different studies have treated Iranian textbooks as hanging threats against international peace.*

However, due to their powerful rivals which work against them and can resist and subvert their ideological intentions, Iranian textbooks are not thoroughly successful in interpellating all subjects in accordance with their intentions, although it might initially seem that they are promoting a monologic and totalitarian order which aims at the exclusion of others and expansionism. In the end, it is suggested that school curricula should dedicate a fairer part to the just representation of others through world literature.

Keywords— : world literature, content analysis, Iranian Curriculum, *Adabīyyāt-i Fārsī* (*Persian Literature*) textbooks.

Although the revival of interest in the notion of world literature is relatively recent and does not predate the 2000s (Moretti 2000, Damrosch 2003), the significance of its inclusion in curriculum has been discussed from various perspectives (Choo 2011). Choo (2011: 47) advocates a Cosmopolitan Literature¹ curriculum and insists that it can “adequately prepare students for global labour [*sic*] markets where they are expected to be mobile, to be able to shift among different communities, and to communicate with diverse groups by cultivating dispositions related to cosmopolitan curiosity, openness, and empathy towards others.” She goes on to “posit five essential aims of such a curriculum which are linked to the need to facilitate deparochializing education, global interconnectivity, narrative imagination, commitment to world ethics, and hermeneutic interventions” (Choo 2011: 60). Crocco (2005) also advocates the use of global fiction in social studies curriculum.

Yet, despite the urgency of addressing it, hardly has the status of world literature in Iranian curriculum attracted any attention. This article, therefore, undertakes to investigate the world literature content of *Adabīyyāt-i Fārsī* [Persian Literature] (henceforth *PL*) textbooks used in high-school education.² This is a significant issue because *PLs* are used as textbooks in a national curriculum which ensures their vast reach, supreme impact and authority.

Four different chapters are specifically dedicated to the study of world literature works in these five books: “World Literature,” “Persian Literature Written without the Borders of Iran,” “Comparative Literature,” and “Translation.” *PL1*, 2, and 3 each contain a chapter of “World Literature” and *PL3 Stream of Literature, Humanities and Islamic Theology (PL3h)* includes a single chapter on “Comparative Literature.” However, other instances of world literature occur in different chapters, especially in “Travelogue, Biography and Autobiography,” as well as “Literature of Resistance.” Aims of “World Literature” are said to be, ‘1. To learn about the mentality and emotions of world’s nations through [their] literary works; 2. To learn about the form and content of different nations’ literary works; 3. To be acquainted with some

examples of world literature; 4. To be acquainted with some examples of world's literary figures; 5. To be able to tackle the exercises' (Ahmadi 2010: 81, Dāvūdi 2010: 79, Tākī 2010: 76).

“An Introduction to World Literature” states the significance of world literature. ‘Reading world literature not only acquaints us with other nations’ mentality and emotions but also reveals differences, commonalities, and influences. [Through reading world literature,] we learn about great literary figures and their works. Besides, it expands the limits of our thought and feelings’ (Tākī 2010: 77). “World Literature” silently introduces comparative literature as well. ‘Studying the literature of other countries and societies both acquaints us with their thought, beliefs and cultural developments and provides an opportunity to compare valuable literary works. Moreover . . . comparing different nations’ literatures makes it possible to learn about their influence on each other’ (Ahmadi 2010: 82).

“Literature written in Persian produced without the borders of Iran,” or what I would simply call Persianate literature, also recurs in *PL1* and 2. *PL1* maintains that, ‘Persian language was once spoken over a wide area expanding from Mediterranean to Sind and from Mesopotamia to Syr Darya [a river in central Asia]. But its expansion shrank in time. As the result of political turmoil and British colonialism, the link between the Persian-speaking inhabitants of the Indian subcontinent and Iran was discontinued. . . . However, the spirit of Persian literature and language is still present there’ (Tākī 2010: 158). *PL2* also insists on the wide expansion of Persian language and the shrinking of its territories as the result of British colonialism while emphasizing the impact of Persian literary tradition.

Persian language and literature prevailed in distant lands like China, India, Mesopotamia and Mediterranean shores. But the developments during the last two centuries, especially English colonialism, led to drastic changes in its syntax, semantics, pronunciation and dialects in Pakistan, Tajikistan, India and Afghanistan. . . .

Afghanistan, with its brilliant literary history, witnesses the flourishing of poets and writers who create worthy works of literature in Afghanistan and in Iran [as Diaspora writers] [Some Afghan poets in Diaspora in Iran] have created noteworthy works under the influence of Iranian post-revolutionary poets [i.e. 1979 ‘Islamic Revolution’]. (Dāvūdi 2010: 172)

Besides world literature and Persianate literature, works of world literature also occur in a single chapter of “Comparative Literature” in *PL3h*. It provides an introduction to the discipline.

Comparative literature studies the influence between different national literatures and also between different literary figures. . . . Accordingly, we learn about both the cultural and intellectual transactions among different nations and their common interests and historical connections that lead to mutual understanding and solidarity.

. . . also it should teach the newly-established nations, regardless of their civilizations and technological advancements, to be humble and obliged to ancient nations who enjoy a rich literary tradition. Moreover, comparative literature opens a new vista and legitimacy for every nation to know and represent, whether directly or indirectly, those foreign themes which agree with its local literature in order to introduce their creativity and eternity in its own national tradition. (Sarābī 2010: 144)

This introductory remark represents a very reductive and partial portrait of comparative literature. Hints of chauvinism and provincialism are clearly obvious. It is as if the writers are trying to make up for Iranians’ technological, scientific, political and economic shortcomings by boasting of the richness of Iran’s historical and literary heritage.

Finally, translation is the last chapter specifically dedicated to the works of world literature. Of course, it only occurs in *PL1&2*. “An Introduction to Translation” maintains that, ‘To a large extent, cultural development depends on the influence of other cultures, and translation is one of the ways cultural properties are transformed between different cultures. Translation provides a link between people who do not speak a common language. It is an instrument for the transference of thought, needs, customs, stories, arts, knowledge, etc. from one language to others’ (Pārsā Nasab 2010: 156). It goes on to mention that the long history of translation begins during the pre-Islamic period with translations from Sanskrit and other languages. During the Islamic period, translations from Greek and Indian to Arabic, as well as from Arabic to Persian flourished. Later on, “Introduction” very briefly surveys the history of translation in Iran which concludes with the significance of translation in Iranian cultural heritage (Pārsā Nasab 2010: 156-9).

Content analysis was administered in order to determine the dynamics of the inclusion/exclusion of the works of world literature. For the purpose of this study, we assumed an arbitrary but practical definition of world literature as a ‘nonexhaustive taxonom[y], provisional system making’ to use Spivak’s terms (Spivak 2003: 6). In the Iranian contemporary context, a work has to cross at least two of the four boundaries—cultural, linguistic, temporal and national/political/geographical—to count as world literature (Zekavat 2013, also see Pizer 2013). The results of content analysis are illustrated in table 1.

World literature content	PL1	PL2	PL3	PL3h	PLLI&2
Creative	11 (14.66%)	15 (21.42%)	6 (9.09%)	7 (11.86%)	7 (12.06%)
Critical and/or introductory	2 (2.66%)	1 (1.42%)	1 (1.51%)	1 (1.69%)	1 (1.72%)
Total number of figures	10	14	5	6	7
Female figures	1 (10%)	2 (14.28%)	0 (0%)	0 (0%)	0 (0%)
Pre-modern (pre-18th century) texts	1 (10%)	3 (21.42)	3 (60%)	2 (33.33%)	5 (71.42%)
Modern (post-18th century) texts	9 (90%)	11 (78.57%)	2 (40%)	4 (66.66%)	2 (28.57%)

Table 1. Results

In these five textbooks, 46 titles are devoted to works of world literature out of the total 328, that is to say, only 14.02%. Altogether, thirty six writers of world literature are introduced in these five books. Twelve (33.33%) are Persian speaking. Arabic has a share of six writers (16.66%). Moreover, fifteen (41.66%) writers are represented from Europe, among which the French are dominant (19.44%). There is one Francophone Belgian (2.77%), three Germans (8.33%), a British (2.77%), an Italian (2.77%); and a Russian (2.77%). US is represented by three (8.33%) and Chile by one writer (2.77%). Only three women (8.33%) are featured as writers of world literature two of which are American.

In these textbooks, literary works are classified according to their content into four categories: epic, lyric, dramatic, and didactic. Same set of taxonomies are used to categorize national literature and world literature. In other words, these textbooks reduce the framework of the study of world literature to an identical (non-exhaustive and inaccurate) framework proposed for the study of national Persian literature. For instance, didactic literature is not considered as a genre per se in some literary traditions, and poetry is never reduced merely to lyric. Fiction and prose as genres are altogether ignored, although these books contain essays, short stories and extracts from novels.

So, these textbooks are reluctant to represent what formally, structurally and conventionally does not agree with or smoothly fit into Persian literary tradition. For instance, Persian literary tradition is not primarily known for its dramatic creations; therefore, one expects that drama should be represented by supreme playwrights from other literary traditions. But, there is not even a single play in these books. Even Shakespeare is introduced by one of his sonnets rather than his drama. Interestingly enough, these textbooks do not feature drama at all, except for a single instance of a ritualistic dramatic public performance known as ta'ziyah exclusive to Persian literary tradition (Tākī 2010: 25-30). Meanwhile, extracts from a film script are included as dramatic literature (Dāvūdī 2010: 16-26). A more unfortunate instance of forcedly shoving western literary texts into an arbitrary and mystified categorization of Persian literary tradition occurs in *Persian Language and Literature 1&2 (PLLI&2)*. Persian romances are introduced to be the counterparts of European dramatic poetry (38); Milton's *Paradise Lost* and Dante's *Divine Comedy* are said to be instances of European didactic literature (72); and the distinction between realism and naturalism is neutralized (85).

Usually there is no background information offered by these textbooks to facilitate the understanding of the works of world literature in their own context. The emphasis of these books is not on understanding the literature of other cultures in their own terms and through grasping their culture and literary tradition but on understanding them through the students' knowledge of Persian literary tradition. The reigning attitude and the default pre-supposition, therefore, is that a text could be understood apart from the (broad) context in which it was produced. So, literary, historical, cultural, political, and/or social information are not normally provided as background knowledge. Such information, however, can be found in very rare instances like in the case of the short extract from H. B. Stowe's *Uncle Tom's Cabin*. The short note introducing this book insists on the dark side of antebellum America, slave trade and its cruelties. It insists on delineating one of the darkest aspects of American history. Although this knowledge is necessary to understand *Uncle Tom*, yet background information is needed elsewhere where it is never offered. And this might lead one to think that this is a deliberate attempt to sketch a dark picture of the Iranian regime's alleged enemy. As the result, this exception is more inclined toward ideological doctrines rather than informative illustration.

Other trends can also be spotted in the inclusion/exclusion of world literature in these textbooks. Ethnocentrism and chauvinism are apparent not only in the slim share of the works of world literature but also in their selection. Narrow-mindedness is clearly obvious in the choice of world literary works. The included works of world literature are either influenced by the Persian literary tradition, praise it or emphasize its superiority. The androcentric and heterosexist biases

are also demonstrated by the marginalization of women and gay/lesbian writers. Neither can other minorities find any instance of their literatures and cultures in these books at all. Races and ethnicities, for instance, are virtually disregarded. Interestingly enough, even religion is overlooked. Besides two instances of Muslim religious literature by ‘Ali and Sajjād, there are no more examples of eschatological writings even from *The Quran*.³ And this is despite the recognition of Islam, Judaism, Christianity as well as Zoroastrianism as four official religions in the Iranian Constitution.

Moreover, what is introduced as world literature is selected from an extremely narrow canon. Oceanian and South-East Asian literatures are totally ignored. The case is not much better with African as well as South and North American literatures. US, Europe and even the Middle East are represented fallaciously and mostly for ideological, as in the case of literature of resistance, and/or chauvinistic, as in the case of Goethe and “Comparative Literature,” reasons. Besides all these, we should add ancient and contemporary works, non-native literary genres like drama, experimental and radical works, (multi)media, hypertext, and electronic resources to the list of exclusions. Furthermore, gender, sexual orientation, class, race, and religion of the authors are treated as if they are simply a common trait. In this way, diversity across these axes is naturalized.

Besides national, religious, and linguistic chauvinism, the mere fact that world literature and comparative literature are ignored as disciplines in Iranian academia can also explain these textbooks’ content. Moreover, teachers do not usually know foreign languages. Nor are they up-to-date and conscious of the latest developments in literary studies. This problem even extends to some authors in cases like *PLLI&2* where Voltaire’s *The Age of Louis XIV* and *The Age of Louis XV* are mistakenly attributed to Alexander Dumas as *Louis XIV and XV* (Pārsā Nasab 2010: 158). Nor are scholarly resources easily available mainly due to such restrictions as international sanctions against Iran. And even if they can be obtained from Internet or elsewhere, they are rarely translated, published and circulated in the Iranian market. But, as Damrosch (2003: 111) also confirms, ‘World literature may in some sense exist as an ideal order, a hypothetical mental construct, but in practice it is experienced as what is available to read, in classroom and on bookstore shelves, on course syllabi and in anthologies for students and general readers, and questions of scale and of coherence come to the fore in such practical contexts’. This can also account for the minor status of world literature in these textbooks.

Cultural traditionalism and conservatism are two more reasons behind the limited scope of these textbooks. Literature still denotes a fairly traditional phenomenon which does not admit the study and appreciation of the plethora of cultural products as witnessed in contemporary western cultural studies. The native and Islamic traditions of literary theory and criticism are hardly explored and foreign literary theory and criticism, which have been pioneers of radicalism and revisionism in the west, are little known. The underrepresentation of women writers also originates from this very reason. The startling fact that there is no woman among the editors of any of these five textbooks is rooted in traditional, patriarchal prejudices.

There is one exception, though, to this trend. French literature dominates the world literature content of these textbooks. This is mainly because modernism was first introduced to Iran through French influence. At the turn of the nineteenth century and The Constitutional Revolution, some scholars and students enrolled in French universities and colleges to pursue with their higher education. Later on, they returned during the twentieth century, importing a new culture and lifestyle.

But the role of educational system as an Ideological State Apparatus that interpellates social subjects is, of course, supreme as the main explanation for the content of these textbooks. Slaughter (1997) argues that curriculum development is ideologically informed. She demonstrates the impact of class, race, gender and political economy policies on curriculum. Likewise, in a national, textbook-orientated curriculum developed centrally by the Iranian Ministry of Education, the transgressive, resistive and subversive functions of literature must strictly be confined. This is true not only with regard to world literature but also with regard to Persian and Islamic traditions as well. Anything against the reigning ideology is tried to be purged from textbooks. On the one hand, the State yearns for absolute monologism and hegemony; on the other hand, dialogism and diversity are fiercely suppressed. Meanwhile, globalization and cultural negotiation are (deliberately) mistaken for cultural war (and manipulated for political ends). This is how the Other is depicted.⁴ As the result, China, Japan, Greek, Rome, Eastern Europe and Africa, among others, are ignored outright; Persian and Shiite Islam as State and official language and religion are underlined; and Middle East peace crisis is foregrounded.

All this, of course, comes at a price. After all, the neglect of world literature as an essential component in the curriculum of contemporary education or a selective approach to it has its aftermath. The immediate effect of such an attitude on its audience is xenophobia. As Crocco (2005: 561-2) argues, “Issues of identity, marginalization, and representation are at the heart of today’s educational enterprise, especially as US students, like ethnographers, encounter the rest of the world.” She goes on to warn against the uncritical use of fiction from other temporal and special contexts in the curriculum because a reductive and simplistic approach can lead to “stereotyping” or “part-whole fallacy” (562).

However, as warned against in CMIP’s report, there is even a more morbid threat which can arise from this attitude in an international scale. The Center for Monitoring the Impact of Peace has published the results of its study on Iranian textbooks in an extended report. As it maintains, this study was conducted according to the criteria put forth by UNESCO

and CMIP. The results are deeply alarming: ‘Iran’s is a war curriculum. Iran prepares its school students to fight the West—America in particular—as an indispensable complementary phase of the Islamic Revolution. In fact, Revolutionary Iran presents itself as the champion of all Third World nations, Muslim and non-Muslim, in a fateful global struggle against Western hegemony. It is a political conflict first and foremost, yet, it is Shiite Islam adapted to Ayatollah Khomeini’s teachings which provides the ideology for this eschatological-like struggle between good and evil, culminated by the reappearance of the Shiite Hidden Imam, and the final goal is Islam’s victory in this world’ (Groiss and Toobian 2006: 305). And in line with the State’s doctrines as well as the othering which consequently causes xenophobia,

. . . in the Iranian school textbooks the West is depicted as an entity with a multitude of sins. It occupied whole continents, annihilated or oppressed their indigenous inhabitants, plundered their wealth, impoverished and maltreated them. Western nations exploited the colonized countries for their own economic benefits, promoted opium and slave trade, and tried to impose their own cultures and erase the local ones. The West today is responsible for most of the cases of environment abuse all over the world; it uses its worldwide economic, cultural and political hegemony for further consolidation of its power at the expense of the Third World countries; and it has encouraged evil forces such as the racist regime in South Africa, Israel and the Serbs to perpetrate atrocities against innocent people as a means of strengthening its own control over parts of the world. The United States is further accused of maltreating its Afro-American citizens, while falsely using the issue of human rights against other governments—Iran, for example.

A special issue is the West’s apparent cultural offensive against the Muslim world. Westernization, which is often labeled ‘Westoxication’ [*Gharbzadegi*], is treated as an ominous danger targeting Islamic identity. Modern Western civilization is not rejected in principle, but its world hegemony is. In addition, its secular and materialistic character is sometimes depicted as inhuman, even un-Christian. (Groiss and Toobian 2006: 306)

These textbooks’ depiction of the other, the report concludes, is directed toward the provocation of Jihad. ‘Two main efforts are discernible within the overall mission of world Jihad against the West. One, a massive effort is made to portray the West, with America at its head, as the incarnation of evil, and thus make it the object of the school students’ hatred as a prerequisite for their spiritual mobilization for the global war with it. Two, much emphasis is put on the three issues of preparing for war, Jihad and martyrdom as Islamic ideals which should be followed at this time’ (Groiss and Toobian 2006: 305). Of course, CMIP surveys all textbooks not just *PLs* and the report’s impartiality could be questioned, but such a conclusion is nothing less than catastrophic anyway, because, accordingly, Iranian curriculum is a hanging threat against world peace.

Same concerns have been expressed by similar studies. Science Applications International Corporation (SAIC) has also reached similar conclusions in its report (2007). ‘Through textbooks,’ this report declares, ‘Iran hopes to transform school children into devout Muslim citizens with little regard for the world beyond Iran’ (2). Such little regard for the world beyond Iran is symbolized in the relative disregard of *PL* textbooks for world literature. The threatening ideological function of these textbooks is also warned against where the report maintains that ‘the goals of the regime of Iran are not simply nationalist, but expansionist’ (5). The list of conclusions culminates in the statement that, ‘These textbooks are a danger to world peace and security’ (10).

This, of course, conveys that all Iranian textbooks need to dedicate a fairer share to the world, and to the other. Such need translates into a more copious and heterogeneous proportion dedicated to works of world literature in *PL* textbooks. However, as close observers of Iranian society who have been living there and have actually been educated in the same educational system, we can report that the ideological and hegemonic aims of this system are not thoroughly achieved. In other words, despite the fact that all its biases are uttered with the authority of textbooks in a national, governmental curriculum, the system is not working effectively toward its ideological objectives at all, especially where it is most powerful, prevalent and well-funded, i.e. in urban spaces. Although learners are supposed to internalize textbooks’ implied values and attitudes, it seems that they encounter them only to dislike, oppose, or even reject them. Learners actually react against this value system: if the books are promoting religious extremism and fundamentalism, jihad and martyrdom, and all that the international community (does such a thing exist?) fear most, the students not only do not follow them but also digress from and defy such intentions. This resistance and subversion is so powerful that it can sometimes lead to a stance as opposed to what these books promote.

On the contrary, in rural areas, where the reach and grip of the educational system is simply feeble compared to cities,⁵ the ideology they promote is more prevalently internalized. To account for this seemingly contradictory situation, we shall remind ourselves of other forces that are working parallel to Iran’s educational system in the contemporary episteme. It is not merely schools that hail social subjects. The social arena includes other forces some of which are more pertinent compared to textbooks. Urban citizens have willingly and gratefully integrated foreign elements into their lifestyle: architecture, home appliances, fashion, television and cinema productions, PCs, and Internet. Cities enjoy many social services that towns and villages often lack: parks, shopping malls, museums, gyms, and luxurious residents. Even universities (whether private or State), language institutes, music academies, and kindergartens are jammed in cities.

Moreover, cities are economic and socio-political centers whereas villages and small towns usually do not have an autonomous economy. Consequently, even agricultural products need to be transacted in cities.

Therefore, though at first it might seem that Iranian textbooks are promoting a monologic and totalitarian order which aims at the exclusion of others, this does not mean that they are successful to interpellate all subjects in accordance with their intentions. They have their powerful rivals which work against them and can resist and subvert their ideological intentions. Nonetheless, the resulting split has a serious, negative consequence. As SAIC report quotes Saeed Paivandi, ‘The measures of the Islamic government for making the textbooks more Islamic has forced Iranian students to face a kind of identity crisis, because the Iranians are not actually cut off [from] the world [as the regime desires] and the global culture affects them in various ways. This has led to a generation that suffers from psychological problems’ (10).

The wider inclusion of world literature in school curriculum, alongside with a diverse variety of national literary and cultural heritage, can peacefully bring people closer together (Puchner 2011: 258). And Iran’s is immediately in need of such a reform, as the study of *PL* textbooks conveys. The doctrinal and ideological goals have impeded a fair politics of representation and depiction of the world beyond Iran and of others in *PL* textbooks. But such an attitude is harmful both nationally and internationally. Thus, a reform can both change the attitude of the international community toward Iran and at the same time contribute to the recognition of the variety of Iranians and to their peaceful co-existence.

While this paper focused on the world literature content of Iranian literature textbooks, the implications and aftermath of their attitude can be extended to other contexts. In other words, othering, marginalising, silencing and ignoring others can bring similar effects in different contexts. Studying Iranian curriculum, this article explicates how education works as an Ideological State Apparatus and also how the hegemony such a system attempts to promote could be defied and subverted.

Curriculum is a discursive space where the notion of other is developed. So if it aims at mutual understanding, tolerance, and peace, curriculum must respect and celebrate difference and variety. One way of achieving this objective is through the inclusion of others’ diverse cultural produce, including literature. Mere inclusion of world literature in curriculum, however, does not suffice. Teachers should also be trained so that they both understand the essence and significance of world literature and also sympathize with its cause. Such inclusiveness and diversity can give voice to different minorities and marginalized groups, and educate more tolerant generations.

Notes

1. Different thinkers promote various notions like world literature, area studies and planetarity (see Spivak 2003, Damrosch 2003, Moretti 2000, Leitch 2008, Kadir 2004, Kadir 2006, Zekavat 2013).

2. These textbooks can be freely accessed on the official website of The General Bureau for Textbooks Printing and Distribution at: <http://chap.sch.ir/index.asp?src=maghtalist.htm>

All subsequent quotations from these Persian textbooks are our own translations. It is tried to follow the original as closely as possible, even at the cost of smoothness of the translated text, in order to provide an accurate representation for the benefit of the non-Persian speaking audience.

3. Of course, students have to pass Theology as well as The Quran courses. But these courses have their own textbooks. The point is that religious writing, and *The Quran* as a case in point, is not considered as literature per se.

4. We shall not forget that, as Bhabha (2007: 17) affirms, “The study of world literature might be the study of the way in which cultures recognize themselves through their projections of ‘otherness’.”

5. Different reasons account for this fact: educational system is poorly funded in rural areas; schools lack even basic facilities; population of students is extremely small in some places; sometimes they do not complete even basic school education; and teachers are also reluctant to migrate to villages for employment.

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