

Textbooks and Governments

Umbilical connections

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The burden of being politically correct has shackled social science writing for schools, and children's literature too. When will we be able to recognize that the 'politically incorrect may be educationally correct'?

It is an unfortunate truth that in India, there has been no systematic approach to updating of syllabi or revising textbooks. A quick narrative of the progression of curriculum development bears us out.

The story begins in the late 1970s, around the time when India's first non-Congress government was in power. A section of the Janata Party, presumably Jan Sangh ideologues, urged the then prime minister Morarji Desai to revise certain history texts as these reflected a Marxist, communist bias—a leaning, they claimed, that was in rhythm with the earlier Congress government and its pro-socialist bent all through the first decades of post-independent India.

The books under fire included higher secondary history textbooks and a publication called *The Freedom Struggle* published by the National Book Trust that had been in circulation for some years. These allegations did not lead to a substantial debate: neither on these books in particular, nor in general, about how history, even as a subject for students, was written, and the processes that decide historical content.

Ironically, in a 1978 article in the *EPW* relating to the issue, the historian-writer Sumanta Banerjee pointed out that the Marxist and left liberal historians writing such books in general had devalued Marxism and ignored the interests of the basic classes of society.

While there was, Banerjee wrote, an occasional attempt at presenting workers' and peasants' struggles, it was never from a proletarian standpoint, i.e. it wasn't really any kind of people's history of India but an interpretation of Indian history in the light of western liberal ideals and not a history framed in a dialectical materialistic approach.

For almost 20 years after 1979, when the Janata government fell in disarray the textbook issue dulled probably because a Congress government remained in power. The 'curriculum wars'—

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especially in the social sciences (and how they are taught) broke out again only when another non-Congress party formed the government. It is thus an ineluctable and unfortunate fact that education in some vital spheres remains in some umbilical bond to governments then in power.

The NCERT, a body set up in 1960, is the apex body focused on setting directions in school curriculum, textbook development and revision, and issues of pedagogy. It was rooted in the ideals of the Nehruvian state that would foster modernisation. Education—the subjects that comprise it—was linked to nation building, to the task of creating a modern citizenry. The creation of a standard educational apparatus, and the provision of cheap, uniform quality textbooks were paramount objectives for creating an equal opportunity environment.

Only in 1975 was a serious attempt made towards school curriculum reform. The first National Policy of Education (NPE) was framed in 1968. The NPE's guidelines were more oriented towards *what* education was expected to achieve. On the social sciences, the NPE's focus (and thus on what curriculum efforts were expected to achieve) was on the development of nationhood, within the overarching Constitutional principles.

In 1976, education, until then on the Union List, was brought on the Concurrent List, giving state governments the right to frame their own syllabi. The NCERT's directives always exercised an overarching influence, even though, by a rough estimate, NCERT textbooks are only used or influence around 10 per cent of schools. Since its inception in 1960, the NCERT has produced three series of textbooks (1970s, 2002-2005 and 2005 again).

In the second National Policy on Education of 1986, the focus related to language—some states adopted the three-language formula, and others favoured the introduction of Sanskrit. Once again, overall, there was no engagement with the content of subjects, why and how knowledge was shaped and used, that is, in sum, the episteme of knowledge. Subject knowledge had more teleological ends towards the creation of an ideal nation, and less for knowledge's own sake. Social sciences in particular finds itself placed at a piquant place in such an intersection.

In 2002, the new textbooks especially in subjects like the social sciences led expectedly to a furore. For instance, it was pointed out that with the focus on promoting achievements in Indian history and its glorious periods, medieval India had correspondingly been given considerable short shrift. There was criticism that portions from the earlier social science textbooks had been deleted without the consultation of the authors. And new authors appointed without proper notice. The National Human Rights Commission intervening in the matter, pointed out that these new textbooks based on a new curriculum had been implemented without consulting the Central Advisory Board of Education (CABE), last formed in 1994. CABE is a statutory body comprising stakeholders across society holding office for three years. A PIL led to the Supreme Court's decision that stayed the books. (The apex court later lifted the stay, which however remained on books relating to history and Hindi.)

Predictably, when the UPA came to power in 2004, these textbooks and the curriculum were again revised with HRD minister Arjun Singh labelling the exercise a ‘detoxification’ after the ‘Talibanizing’ efforts of the last government. The NCE 2005 had laudable aims. It sought to actively bring in the ‘nai taleem’ concept as propounded by Gandhi that believed in making knowledge integral to work and daily life. In the social sciences, it followed an approach made popular by the efforts of educationists associated with ‘Eklavya’ –a programme of publishing social science and science textbooks for middle grade students, first introduced in 1983, across government schools in Madhya Pradesh. The approach was refreshingly different, focusing on a child-centred perspective on the processes of knowledge acquisition.

But this too came in for brickbats. The political science textbooks, for instance evoked controversy on the inclusion of certain events such as the Anti-Sikh riots of 1984. A recent article (cited above) on the middle-grade economics textbooks in the *EPW* has also pointed out how the word ‘capitalism’ hadn’t figured even once. Clearly the endeavour to be politically correct and also much more importantly, politically careful, carries with it the pitfall of obfuscation.

The National Policy of Education was amended in part as per the Common Minimum Programme of the UPA in 2004, but with little deliberated or discussion delinked from the politics of the day. The CABE too was reconstituted that year, after a 10-year hiatus. It is now being reconstituted again and inevitably, there are allegations of the inclusion of members perceived as being ‘friendly’ to the new dispensation.

School syllabi and arguments relating to it should be a dynamic issue, with constant engagement from all stakeholders. Textbooks need to be framed more on the basis of the population data and surveys undertaken by a host of NGOs and also governmental institutes rather than be subject to the whims of political parties in power. Educational initiatives should flow and be grounded at the grassroots—such as the Eklavya textbooks aim to do—rather than being visionary statements flowing down from on high. Such a grassroots approach would no doubt foster the thinking approach, wherein knowledge is related to the learner’s immediate environment.

That this has not happened in India is related to how education, and the role of social sciences is perceived. The imperative to develop an ‘ideal’ nation and for committed citizenry as perceived by whatever political dispensation is in power, means that much that is politically incorrect is not taught; or if at all, is glossed over and then subject to constant revision. But as the late MSS Pandian argued in his dissent note on a panel constituted to review the use of cartoons and other visual material in a Class XI political science textbooks—that which is politically incorrect may not be educationally inappropriate.¹

¹ See <http://www.thehindu.com/news/national/whats-politically-incorrect-need-not-be-educationally-inappropriate-says-pandian/article3595578.ece>

Concomitantly this need to be ‘politically correct’ has led to a paucity of public debate and argument in the social sciences. Historical figures, for instance are read as heroes and villains and rarely judged in the context of their times—a failure in part that lies in not knowing the processes of knowledge creation. And it stretches not merely to social sciences but the entire spectrum of children’s literature. The focus is on the creation of ideal content as to what children should read, making passive, even ill-humoured, learners and readers of all of us. If children’s literature, including historical fiction were freed from this false prism, social sciences too that comprise in large part what children read, would be more dynamic. Perhaps one day a “Horrid History” series that has made history such fun for children in the UK, would one day be possible for our younger readers as well. On another level, it could make citizens more concerned about the immediate heritage, and less apathetic to how cities and towns are changing around them.