

Politics, Pedagogy and Curriculum

Sandip Bandyopadhyay

In the early years of the present decade, debate on education in India centred mainly round 'saffronisation' of school textbooks systematically being done under the direction of the BJP-led NDA government at the centre. In 2004 this government lost the election and the Congress-led UPA coalition came to power. The new Government took the issue seriously and decided to produce a fresh set of textbooks to undo the wrong committed by its predecessor. With this end in view, National Council for Educational Research and Training (NCERT) was reconstituted with Prof Krishna Kumar, a progressive minded educationist as its Director.

In 2005, NCERT drew up a National Curriculum Framework (NCF) to spell out the kind of change it aims to bring about not only in textbooks but in the entire educational practices at the school level. A well-written document, the NCF invoked all the current ideas of progressive or innovative pedagogy, as for example : connecting knowledge to life outside the school, freeing learning from rote methods and textbook-centric approach, making examinations more flexible, enriching the curriculum to provide for overall development of children and so on.

While the ideas are undoubtedly progressive change-oriented and learner-friendly, they do not sound radically new in the present-day context. These ideas have rather become catch-phrases in liberal pedagogic discourse. One may find similar phrases—scientific thought, creativity, participation in democratic process, all-round development etc—in the Unesco document *Learning to Be* published way back in 1972 (pp 146-58). Interestingly, *Primary Education in India*, a World Bank publication (1977, p 5) also stressed the need to relate education to life and create opportunity to learn through 'better teaching practices'.

It is too well known that Rabindranath Tagore, over a century ago and later Mahatma Gandhi envisaged and tried to implement this kind of educational practice during the colonial period. After independence, several education commissions, particularly the Kothari Commission (1964-66) and later the Rammurti Commission in the 1990s upheld ideas which were no less progressive than those found in the NCF (2005). One may also recall the writings of G P Naik and Krishna Kumar and even the suggestions of the much-debated National Policy on Education, (NPE, 1986). Krishna Kumar, the present Director of NCERT himself has admitted that they are trying to further 'the direction of a child centred system of education outlined' in the 1986 NPE. Ideas like life-centric education, context-based curriculum learning through experience are no longer the attributes of a radical pedagogy. People in this country have in fact, become tired of hearing the same platitudes which often remain as precious words on paper only. As the Yash Pal Committee report *Learning Without Burden* (1993) rightly observed in its introduction, these issues have been 'discussed extensively by several committees and groups' during the past two decades. It is to note, this committee was set up by the Congress Government with the same Arjun Singh as the HRD minister in the early 1990s.

To recall these earlier examples is however not to play down the value of the NCF, 2005. The present move is significant because NCERT has not only produced a

document or laid down a set of principles but has gone a step forward by publishing textbooks in line with the NCF. This has provided educationists with a scope to review the books in the light of the NCF which serves as a guideline.

It is better to concentrate on the social science text book for class VI published in March, 2006. Though this book includes parts of what is known as civics, it has been entitled *Social and Political Life* because, as the preface notes, 'the subject civics grew out of a certain colonial past' and 'focused only on government institutions and programmes'. Refusing to follow this approach, this book attaches greater importance to the 'various aspects of social political and economic life'. Divided into four units, the first two chapters of this book deal with a very important aspect of Indian social life : diversity and discrimination. While the civics part is covered by two subsequent units, the last one again brings back the focus on social life dwelling on people's ways of livelihood. The new outlook of the book therefore gets reflected in its very structure and mode of chapterisation.

The first chapter follows a narrative style to introduce children to the concept of diversity with special reference to Indian society. Some space has also been left for children to identify diversities in the religious and socio-cultural practices of the various people they see around them. One may however take exception to some statements which sound like adages. For example: 'India's diversity has always been recognised as a source of its strength' (p 11). Who recognised it? Did this diversity provide strength to Indian society or create various divisions and cleavages in it? Is it historically true that people from different cultural, religious and regional backgrounds 'came together to oppose' the British rule? To accept this statement as true is to ignore the strong anti-Brahmin movement in South India which ran almost parallel to the 'nationalist' movement. And how would one situate the position and role of the Muslim League in the saga of anti-colonial movement? Does India's independence accompanied by partition corroborate the statement that Indian people proved how they could be different and yet be united in their battle against the British' (p-11)? Glossing over the various religious or caste-based movements which sometimes challenged the so-called nationalist leadership and bypassing the issue of partition which fractured the glory of freedom, these statements, in fact, echo the official nationalist version of Indian freedom struggle.

One may argue that those delicate issues are not compatible with the cognitive level of the students, the book is meant for. The argument is not unfounded. But why did the authority find it imperative to drive home the message that despite differences all sections of people fought together against the foreign rule? Can one expect children in the 11-12 age-group to share with or understand the spirit of the said message?

The second chapter begins with this statement: 'There are many things that make us what we are, how we live...' (p-13). Wouldn't it have been better to expose the students to some provocative questions and then lead them to arrive at an understanding in the process of confronting those questions? Wouldn't that help develop in children a spirit of enquiry, a questioning mind—the kind of pedagogic approach that NCF seeks to encourage? Though the style is not always reader-friendly, the chapters are otherwise well-written. But the book is marked by a tendency to narrate an issue at length and then—in the name of activity, comprehension—raise some questions the answers to which children almost know for certain. On page 14 children are asked to tickmark the given statements that they consider true. One of the statements is: 'People in villages are backward and lazy.' Even if a child believes so, s/he will never mark it as true because

she knows too well that this should not be done. Similarly the question: 'Why do you think it is important for all people to be equal?' (p 24)—is tautological. Whatever they think, children are clever enough to know what they ought to write on answer scripts.

Such questions actually lead the students to give glib answers. On the other hand, questions like 'what does the Constitution say with regard to equality?' (p-24) force them to take to rote methods. This kind of exercise has nothing to do with learning through comprehension, reflection, interaction or through 'concrete experiences' which the preface to the book emphasises. The book, definitely marks a departure from the conventional textbooks students are familiar with. But at several places, it has not been able to make a real breakthrough and has rather followed the conventional way of making statements and observations and thus imposing 'knowledge' upon children. What is relevant, worth-knowing, what is important have been considered not from the child's perspective but from the author's standpoint.

Take, for example, this question : 'What do you think living in India with its rich heritage of diversity adds to your life' (p 12)? Is this not a too high-minded question? Is not the very language of the question enough to baffle a child? What does a student of class VI understand by the 'rich heritage of diversity'? On page 21 there is a sentence : 'When India became a nation in 1947...'. Was the use of the term 'nation' so unavoidable? Couldn't the sentence be written otherwise so that it might make sense to a child? The chapter on diversity and discrimination, written in a verbose and sometimes repetitive style, deals with so many issues that it may end up in confusing a child. She may find it too difficult to grapple with such questions as 'what is the difference between discrimination and stereotypes'? (p 19)

In connection with discrimination against *dalits*¹ there is a question : 'How do you think a person who is discriminated against might feel?' (p 19) The very question is discriminatory because it obviously aims at the non-dalits and does not consider the possibility of some children from dalit communities being among the students. For those children, this question will appear to be a question meant for others. The self-other divide will continue to remain even if the teacher remodels the question and asks the dalit children to express their feelings. This writer has the experience of teaching dalit children. And from his 'concrete' experience, he knows that a dalit child does not like to discuss questions relating to untouchability or caste-discrimination. For him/her it is too 'heavy' (read 'humiliating') to talk about.

While a normative approach informs the chapter on discrimination, those on government and administration have been dealt with from a legalistic framework—on approach that the NCF strongly criticised. These chapters describe in detail the various organs of the government at different levels in a manner not much different from the one found in a conventional text book. The new approach finds its expression in the attempt to relate the subject to real-life experience. As for instance, the chapter on *Panchyati Raj* begins with the description of a Gram Sabha meeting. A student may find this description a bit fictional because s/he may have a different experience of witnessing how such a meeting is actually conducted. Anyway, the attempt is laudable but unfortunately it has not been followed throughout. Taking it for granted that children understand the concept of panchyat, the chapter goes on to describe the function of its different parts or tiers and asks such purely textual questions as 'What is the difference between a Gram Sabha and a Gram Panchyat?' (p 48). A student can answer this question only by relying on *rote method*. Another question on the same page asks the

students to explain the importance of Gram Sabha and why all members should attend its meeting. While the second part of the question is redundant, the first part expects too much of a student of class VI. Such questions, at least, do not lead to conceptual understanding.

While dealing with the panchayat system no attempt has been made to trace its growth and evolution to the history of village formation and tribal council in ancient India. It could have easily been done by presenting the feature of a Santal or Munda village in the form of a story. This could have given the children an idea of community management strikingly different from the state-controlled governance. Instead, students are taught to remember that 'every country needs a government to make decisions and get things done' and the government does 'many important things' like running postal and railway services, protecting the boundaries of the country, providing relief to people affected by a disaster etc. (pp 27-28). The list, of course, includes the government's responsibility to ensure that 'all its citizens have enough to eat and have good health facilities.' The list then goes on and asks the students to add to it by mentioning the things that may have been omitted (p 28). Students are not asked to identify the areas in which the government has notoriously failed to keep its promise. It is not difficult for a student of class VI to point to a few such areas. She may at least recall her experience at the primary school that had no toilet for girls.

To pose such questions, however, is to invoke problem-posing pedagogy which no state can encourage and no state-sponsored institution like NCERT can afford to bring in. The textbook, under review, therefore raises many significant issues of public interest but carefully stays away from problematising them. Chapter 6 describes an incident in which a police officer refuses to register the complaint of a villager and later agrees to do it in the face of public pressure (p 50). Such a critical approach does not criticise the system but rather targets an errant individual and therefore receives official approval.

On page 31, a passage celebrates the supreme power of the state to 'make laws' and 'enforce its decisions' and in the following paragraph maintains that people can also take steps if they feel that a law has been violated. 'They may approach the court and... (the) court can then give orders about what should be done.' The passage conjures up the image of an ideal system and not of the way it actually works.

The chapters on livelihood (Unit IV) present different ways of living in the form of real-life stories. Chapter 8, for instance, describes a village where there are a few big farmers like Ramalingam, landless labourers like Thulasi and small farmers like Sekar. Students learnt about their living conditions narrated by themselves. The approach is interesting but its potential has not been properly utilised.

Students are asked to answer textual questions like 'what work does Sekar's family do?' (which requires information only) or a blunt question: 'Would you say that a majority of the country's farmers are quite poor?' (pp 71-72)—the answer to which is already given. Such questions do not stimulate children's critical faculty; nor do they help a child to relate the received knowledge (actually information) to his/her context. Students read the stories of 'others' and make expected observations from an external standpoint.

We appreciate the constraint under which an institution like NCERT has to work and it therefore cannot be blamed for not being sufficiently radical. One may, however, raise

one valid point of criticism. The book has not followed the principle outlined in the NCF. It has not been written from the perspective of the majority of Indian children; nor has it left enough scope for learning through 'concrete experiences'. Despite frequent references to public life, the book, written in a language couched in statist idioms, devotes greater space to the rote and function of different parts of the state apparatus. In that sense, though it apparently evinces a new approach, it is not radically different from a conventional civics textbook. ~~del del del~~