

TO ACCOMMODATE THE CURIOUS MIND

To withdraw the national curriculum framework is to silence dissent against orthodoxies — both that of the left and the right, says **Nivedita Menon** The author is reader in political science, Delhi University

It seems that the dark years of NDA-rule have disabled some of our intellectuals permanently, rendering them incapable of understanding anything that is happening today, except through a rigid secular/communal grid.

That the Bharatiya Janata Party would go into a sulk over the draft National Curriculum Framework-2005 was to be expected, but the sharp attack on it by a group of left-wing scholars under the banner of Sahmat, terming it as “obscurantist”, would be laughably absurd if it did not have the dangerous potential of derailing one of the most creative initiatives in the field of pedagogy in independent India. Here I will address only two of the main grouses emerging in the seven essays in a booklet called “Debating Education” — first, that the NCF-2005 does not spend any time attacking the saffronization of text-books by the previous regime. This means that the NCF-2005 is “trying to accommodate the Sangh Parivar’s views”, according to the Sahmat spokesperson. Second, that NCF-2005’s stress on “local knowledges” and “local belief systems” promotes regressive values and is, in fact, communalism in a different guise.

It is important to remember that NCF-2005 evolved out of an uncommonly democratic process, involving about three hundred people all over the country — teachers, academics and educational activists — over a period of seven months. Also that scholars of impeccably secular credentials have participated in the process — educationist Krishna Kumar as director of NCERT, political scientist Gopal Guru, historians Narayani Gupta and Sumit Sarkar, to name but a few. However, for a certain kind of left-wing scholars, critical analysis of anything that cannot be directly attributed to “communal forces” is anathema.

Introspection and rethinking on given truths like secularism or the nation are promptly dismissed as communal. Political critique, for them, is exhausted by attacking something called globalization and of course, communalism.

To address their complaints then — that sufficient space and energy have not been expended on tearing apart the text-books produced under the NDA regime. Of course they were sub-standard and shoddy, full of hilarious factual errors, and thought little of spelling and grammar, because their one-point agenda was to push *Hindutva* politics and vilify the minorities. They have by now been thoroughly exposed — indeed, by some of the very scholars involved in producing the NCF-2005. Can we move on, please? Or is all that is required for perfect happiness the return of the pre-NDA text-books?

I cannot think of anything more criminally irresponsible than to lose this opportunity to rethink entirely what school education has meant in India, what have been our successes, and what our failures. Surely, communalism is not all that has ailed our system? Surely, in the 21st century, it’s not too much to ask that we should reassess what else has gone wrong? If the NCF-2005 wastes no time in reiterating well-known criticism of the previous regime, but takes the initiative to outline an alternative vision of education on the assumption that this is the moment to really “debate education” — then, rather than “accommodating the Sangh Parivar”, it is sending out the opposite message. That the *sangh parivar* will not be allowed to set our agenda any more, that it is no longer our reference point.

NCF-2005 states its commitment to secularism baldly and uncompromisingly on page 6 — “India is a secular democratic state, that means that all faiths are respected, but at the same time the Indian state has no preference for any particular faith...India is a multicultural society made up of numerous regional and local cultures...All the groups have equal rights to co-exist and flourish, and the education system needs to respond to the cultural pluralism inherent in our society.”

What NCF-2005 does not do is assume, as Irfan Habib does, that children are a mindless mass, full of “notions, irrational biases, superstitions, gender, caste and communal prejudices, scorn for the less privileged etc”. Given his opinion of children, it is not surprising that he thinks the “prime duty of school education is to eradicate such ‘native wisdom’”. The prime duty of education is to “eradicate” people’s beliefs? That’s nothing short of a fascist agenda. What was it that Marx said — “the educator himself needs educating”? A refresher course in Marxism might not be redundant for some of these “leftist” scholars.

So does the NCF-2005 valorize “local knowledge” in such a way that everything local is valuable, as Anil Sadgopal accuses it of doing in another essay, including “sati, caste, class and gender discrimination, Brahminism, superstition, fatalism, child labour, lack of scientific temperament etc.” (I love the “etc’s” with which Habib and Sadgopal end their long lists of the terrible faults “the people” have — as if the list would be endless if they didn’t, shuddering with horror, force themselves to bring it to a halt.)

NCF-2005 certainly has a lot to say about local knowledge. One example is the following on page 27 — “Unless learners can locate their individual standpoints in relation to the contexts represented in textbooks and relate this knowledge to their experiences...knowledge is reduced to...mere information ...Children bring to school their experiences of the world around — the trees they have climbed, the fruits they have eaten...Yet rarely do we heed the knowledge that they...bring into the classroom. Rarely do we ask the children to talk about or refer to the world outside the school during our teaching.” On page 28, a box titled “Local Knowledge Traditions” says: “Many communities in India also have their local knowledge traditions of naming and categorizing plants, or ways of harvesting and storing water, or of practising sustainable agriculture. Sometimes these may be different from the way in which school knowledge approaches the subject... In these situations, it could be possible that the teachers recognize and help children develop projects of study based on the local tradition, this may also involve comparing it with the school tradition. In some cases, as in the case of classifying plants, the two traditions may be simply parallel and based on different criteria considered significant. In other cases, for example the classification and diagnosis of illnesses, it may challenge and contradict local belief systems. It is also possible to consider that there are cases where the local belief system seems more ecologically valid than the textbook opinion.”

Is this such a shocking thing to say today, when 19th century arrogance about man’s control over nature has been widely acknowledged to have brought the earth to the brink of ecological disaster? (Habib is proud to confess that he has no idea what “ecologically valid” means — “how can a system or anything else, be ecologically valid or invalid?” he asks incredulously.) From the 18th century, education and schooling have played a central role in producing the kind of population and beliefs necessary for unbridled capitalist development. Are Habib and Sadgopal votaries of such development? Is it not time, however belatedly, we opened our ears to some of the ideas so mercilessly defeated by the relentless march of History?

As for local knowledge of the sort Sadgopal decries, NCF-2005, addressing it directly, says (page 29): “The social context also calls for a much greater critical awareness and critical engagement on the part of curriculum developers and teachers. Community-based identities of gender, caste, class and religion are primary identities but they can also be oppressive and reaffirm social inequalities and hierarchies. School knowledge can also provide a lens through which children can develop a critical understanding of their social reality. It could also provide them space to talk about their experiences and anxieties within their homes.”

However, unlike the writers in “Debating Education”, NCF-2005 does not consider beliefs contrary to our own as something that can simply be eradicated. “Communities may also have questions about the inclusion or exclusion of particular knowledge and experiences in the school curriculum. The school must then be prepared to listen to their concerns, and to persuade them to see the educational value of such decisions.” In other words, NCF-2005 believes the process of social transformation to be complex and multi-layered, involving the student not only in the classroom, but as located in her family and community. Most importantly, this process is understood to be uncompromisingly bound within democratic procedures — listening, persuading, mutually learning. Not eradicating.

In another instance of motivated reading, Habib alleges that in “post-modern” and “semi-Foucauldian” vein (these adjectives in his essay act as terms of abuse, and serve no explanatory purpose whatsoever. What, for example, would be a semi-Marxist?), the NCF-2005 is a “tirade against information.” Even a quick reading of NCF-2005, however, shows that it simply asserts that mere information is not knowledge. How can any serious educationist not understand or agree with the distinction? Information would be of the order of the fact that the earth goes around the sun. Knowledge construction involves understanding how this fact contradicts our everyday observation, why the otherwise valid maxim that “theory has to be proved by empirical observation” cannot apply here, what protocols are involved when we would nevertheless say that the statement, “The sun rises in the East”, is true, why the medieval Church tortured Galileo for asserting what is in our lives a commonsensical fact that no one would contradict, thinking about how myths of origin and about nature evolve. A vast interdisciplinary field of knowledge opens up out of a simple bit of “information”.

The most significant contribution of NCF-2005 is a radical rethinking of what teaching means. Currently, at every level of education, teachers are apt to think of their work as that of "imparting knowledge/information". In the NCF-2005, teaching is understood as a process of encouraging analytical thought, debate and engagement with the world in which learners live, with all its flaws and uncertainties. Students are to be led towards existing scholarship through a process of questioning and curiosity, and they should be able to engage with this scholarship not as established bodies of information but as fields of debate and discussion.

One point on which I find NCF-2005 to be silent is the teacher's own biases in dealing with uncomfortable issues like conflict and inequality. The complication here is that teachers will necessarily carry their prejudices, their class/ caste privileges into the classroom. We need to recognize that the best written, most imaginatively produced text-books and the most progressive curricula can be and are, subverted by conventional/conservative/right-wing teachers. Any curriculum would therefore have to be open-ended enough to enable the student to make her own decisions on issues. And the evaluation process would have to be such that the target of evaluation is not opinions expressed, but the analytical capacity of the student.

The most dangerous thing about "Debating Education" is that its aim is to end further debate, its critique apparently being the last word on the matter. The demand of the writers and Sahmat is nothing less than that the NCF-2005 be withdrawn, thus conclusively ending any further discussion. There can be nothing more disastrous for education than the silencing of dissent against orthodoxies, of the right or the left.