

## EDUCATION

# NCERT Textbooks

The proposed textbook on political science for class XII, yet to be released by the National Council for Education Research and Training (NCERT), has predictably set off a storm. The textbook will cover entirely new ground by including events that have shaped post-independence Indian history and will be available for students from the academic year 2007-08. However, political parties across the spectrum, burdened by their “past”, have already termed the contents “objectionable”, and have now forced the UPA government into promising an inquiry. Many of the events that will be referred to – the Emergency, the anti-Sikh riots, the Babri masjid demolition and the Gujarat riots – make up the book’s last section entitled, ‘Recent Issues and Challenges’. This, in turn, follows other sections that seek to give a cogent, theme-based trajectory of how democracy in India has evolved in the post-independence period. Hence, the course appropriately begins with the Congress’ dominance of national level politics and the various issues involved with nation-building; it then moves on to the period of the 1970s, which saw a crisis of the constitutional order and the rise of regionalism. Events of the 1980s and later are also covered in the sections on social movements and the dawn of coalition politics.

The NCERT committee drafting the syllabus was guided by the greater pedagogical issue of “empowering” students, to foster a sense of inquiry, to enable them to analyse critically, so as to eventually become informed citizens in their own right. Political science for high school students has remained an abstract, moralising course on civics and this was the first time that contemporary history has found its due place in the syllabus. It was a necessary, much desired move, for students of politics appeared more familiar with the events of 1920s and 1930s than with the latter decades. Moreover, by availing of a wide variety of sources – court pronouncements, different inquiry reports, reports by the National Human Rights Commission, etc – the attempt was to give a generalised objective perspective rather than a personality-based orientation to the subject. This became all the more critical, for students in a computer literate age are already exposed to an uncritical, even chaotic mass of information from diverse sources.

The immediate fear by the opposition is that the orientation of events will reflect the partisan viewpoint of the party in

power. Education, especially the subject of history, and the role of the NCERT as the organisation largely responsible for shaping content and pedagogy, has served either as a political handmaiden for the party in power or as a “whipping boy” for the opposition.

The recent disruption in Parliament over the proposed political science textbook has been made murkier by attempts to discredit the NCERT’s efforts to evolve, for the first time, a “child-centric” syllabus. Thus, the old controversy over Bipan Chandra’s textbook for class XII, *Modern India* (a two-decade old textbook being phased out) has been raked up again, with the familiar outcry of nationalist leaders being labelled “terrorists” – a politically and historically contextualised term. The recently released Hindi textbook for class XI has also drawn ire for its allegedly derogatory references to dalits. But the stories by the celebrated Hindi novelists, Premchand and Om Prakash Valmiki, help familiarise students with aspects of the caste system itself and the book comments that the language of the time is no longer acceptable. Of similar nature is the accusation that the book encourages terrorism, simply because it includes a poem by the noted Punjabi poet-writer, Avtaar Singh, ‘Paash’, which instead decries the fear terror imposes on the ordinary individual.

For far too long, education has been ideologically divisive; with the government, of whatever hue, seeking to position itself as the shaper and repository of all information. But information flows are now too diverse, too varied and the NCERT, to its credit, attempts to merely give direction, its objectives being to guide the student to arrive at her own understanding. The new textbooks for political science for class IX and those for history in class VI now available online, offer an innovative approach, by moving from the student’s immediate and personal world to wider and more abstract issues. With an increasingly young population that is arguably more familiar with immediate historical events, a new approach towards education has become necessary. The NCERT’s recent moves, by recognising the changing base of learning and by empowering the student to become an active participant, are laudable and also timely. **EDW**