

History textbooks: the need to move forward

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THE MEASURES taken or being considered concerning school education are among the more promising of the initiatives of the United Progressive Alliance Government during its 13 months in office. The necessary weeding-out from key posts of academic nonentities, distinguished only by loyalty to the *Sangh Parivar*, is being followed up by moves towards far-reaching reform. Crucial here is the new National Curriculum Framework designed to replace the retrograde and undemocratically enforced Framework of 2000 and recently placed before the Central Advisory Board of Education with its State Government representatives. In sharp contrast to the BJP style, every step is being taken through wide and open academic discussion. The National Curriculum Framework is based on the work of 21 National Focus Groups, five regional seminars, and a national conference of rural teachers.

Predictably, the BJP is unhappy, and its Ministers recently staged a walkout from the CAGE, forcing a two-month delay in adoption of the NCF, to give more time to States. As always, history courses and textbooks are given central place in this attack. Given the total discrediting of the previous educational regime, this at present is not much cause for worry. But sadly, there are signs of a most unfortunate intra-secular rift. Two prominent secular historians have criticised plans for new middle and high school textbooks. They suggest instead a simple return to the old NCERT history texts ('old' meaning here 30-40 years or more), with at most the insertion of one or two new themes, gender for instance.

Demands for retention or restoration of the old books had been natural in the polemics over the BJP texts, for nothing better was possible under that regime. But in today's utterly changed situation, a simple restoration would be disastrous both academically and politically. It would feed into the sense, cynical but quite widespread even among many secular people, that each regime brings in its train its own entourage of academics, and so the labels of 'secular' and 'communal' become no more than the pursuit of factional interests. It is surely significant that the recent BJP walkout from the CAGE meeting was partly on the ground that old books were being restored, displaying a wilful ignorance about the ongoing discussions about new syllabi and texts: They no doubt realised that here was an argument with some appeal, pitting the 'new' against the old.

Actually the BJP books had been far more outdated, for the 1970s texts had tried to incorporate, for the first time in school education, something of the shifts in Indian historical thinking over the 1950s and 1960s. But today many more changes have been happening, and their part-inclusion cannot be purely additive. The dominant narratives would need to be modified to recognise complications and cross-currents. It is no longer helpful, for instance, to look upon modern Indian history simply in terms of colonial *versus* anti-colonial.

The biggest problem, however, concerns not political costs or the need to upgrade content, but questions of pedagogy, accessibility, appropriateness for young people.

Even when the secular books were very much in place, there was a growing disquiet, often particularly among teachers with secular sympathies, that humanities and social sciences, and history in particular, had become the least popular options, for the books were often excessively heavy and sometimes frankly dull. In that context, the most promising of the recent developments has been the new and sophisticated attention given to pedagogical methods throughout the New Curriculum Framework. Chapter 2, 'Learning and Knowledge,' calls for a "child-centred pedagogy," the fostering of the "active and creative capabilities" of children, moving away from insistence on acceptance of the teacher's words as authoritative knowledge towards more interactive and dialogic methods, a rejection of "rote methods" of teaching and assessment. At this level, secular and BJP textbooks had not really differed all that much.

Such problems have been most acute in history and the other social sciences and humanities. Unlike the natural sciences, where children in laboratories can test with their own hands the validity of many relationships or predictions, history-teaching perpetually runs the danger of forcing children to learn a mass of 'facts,' without explaining why and to what degree of certainty these are 'facts' worth remembering. At best, an initial listing of 'sources' is attempted, and maybe some discussion of different interpretations: detached from the rest of the narrative, these become just more things to memorise. And rote-learning has been vastly enhanced by the adoption of objective-type or short-answer formats at the two crucial rites of passage for aspirants to higher education or to jobs, the school-leaving CBSE examinations, and then the utterly ridiculous NET. For good marks in the CBSE, often not just the points but their precise order need to be reproduced. The method might just do for the less advanced levels of mathematics or natural sciences, but is disastrously inappropriate for subjects like literature or history, for what gets squeezed out is the awareness, indispensable here, of the need often for multi-sidedness and ambiguity, the understanding that simple yes/no, right/wrong answers are often not possible, as in life itself.

The biggest problem of all is the assumed obligation to be 'comprehensive,' to 'cover' as much as can be packed in, never mind the burden and the boredom. In history, particularly, many facts come to acquire a peculiar aura or mystique. Leaving any of them out opens one to charges of being insufficiently patriotic, maybe even 'anti-national.' The assumption is that the main 'purpose' of history in schools is to inculcate 'correct' values, stimulate national unity, integration, pride: a special burden imposed on no other subject.

Imaginative effort

We do have some examples already of the possibility of much more imaginative textbooks, once the logic of trying to be 'comprehensive' is abandoned. I am thinking of two sets of books: the Ekalavya ones, now unfortunately withdrawn, and the recent Delhi Government texts, both formulated after intense discussion with school-teachers. The Delhi Ancient India book (Class VI), for instance, begins with drawings of different kinds of stone tools, some of them on display at the National Museum. A class discussion would then be initiated about what could (or could not) be inferred from them, leading children up to more general formulations about the kind of society possible at that level of technology in a manner much more meaningful than any abstract definition of social formation. Its Modern India counterpart (Class VIII) does not begin with a definition of colonial modernity, but

foregrounds the theme of many-sided transformation by asking students to imagine what they think could have been the school experiences of children like them in 1720, and how a merchant's journey from Surat to Delhi would have been different then. At a later stage, they are asked to imagine themselves in Kashmiri Gate during the 1857 siege. Included also are some details about the coming of the numerous physical components of today's everyday life: not just railways, but print, newspapers, clocks, post offices, public hospitals, electric lights, underground water supply, gramophones, films, radio. Surely it is facts like these that can make history come alive for children, far more than musty masses of information about forgotten kings, wars, or even each and every detail of anti-British struggle.

Such books develop some new ways of making history come alive for children, and also introduce what to my mind is the most important potential of the subject. This is a sense that everything changes, nothing is eternal, sacred, or `natural' since the social world is made by human beings and therefore open to transformation. The past in many ways was a different country (the best answer, really, for countering the charge that `sentiments' are getting hurt, much heard in BJP times but not confined to them). Religious communities, nations, etc., do not have absolutely continuous histories, and so blaming the present generation for the misdeeds of some of their forefathers is no more than racism.

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