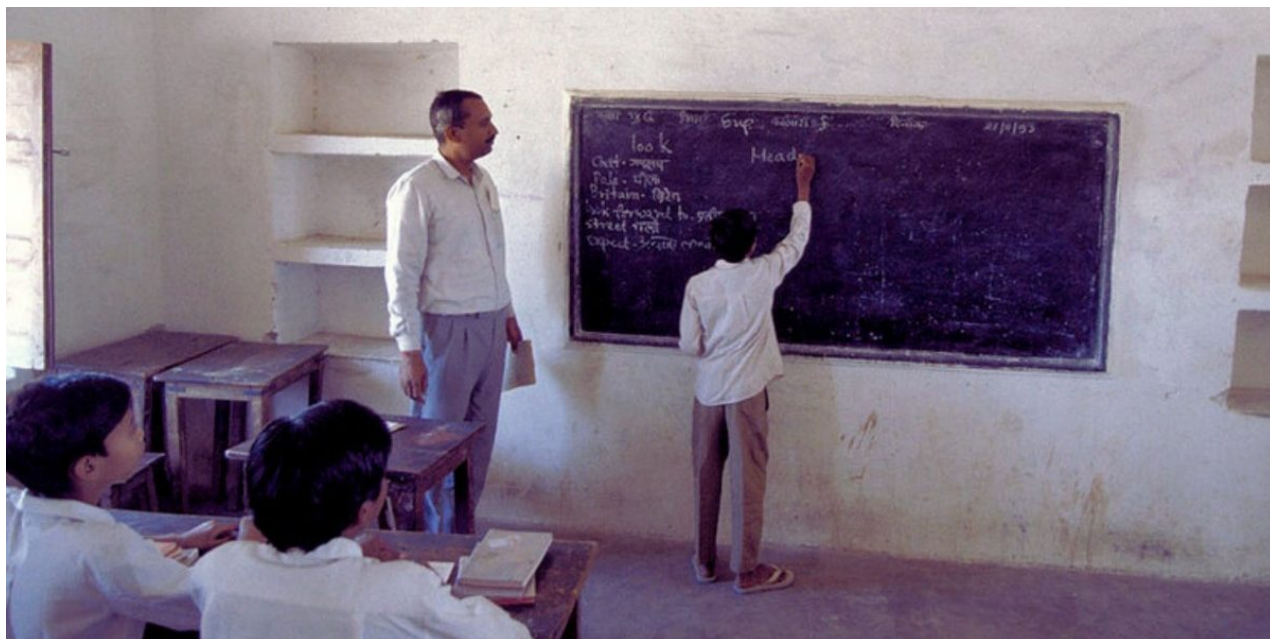


Textbook Controversies and the Missing Voice of the Teacher

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Textbooks by the National Council of Educational Research and Training are once again back in the news and this time, too, it is the arbitrary removal of specific chapters and sentences from the class 11 and 12 history and political science textbooks that is to blame.

While the NCERT has defended the deletions based on the Union education ministry's proposed plan to rationalise the curriculum since the pandemic and have called the non-disclosure of specific prunings an 'oversight', the 'rationalised' content have been published online and are soon going to be made available to students in the new academic session.

The steps, as expected, invited sharp criticism from a large section of academics, especially historians, and many members of the opposition. Social media meanwhile erupted with satirical and rather creative memes.

While it would be useful to understand why school textbooks are subjected to frequent and random changes and what makes them vulnerable to controversies, what is also striking is the complete silence of the key stakeholders – teachers, students, and parents – who are directly going to be affected by the alterations.

Unpacking the State-Curriculum Linkage

The centrality of textbooks within the teaching learning process in schools is undeniable.

Teachers consider it as the most important teaching tool, their primary responsibility being completion of the 'syllabus'. For the students too, it is often the only source of what is 'worthwhile' to learn – knowledge that they are supposed to memorise and regurgitate during examinations, based on which they are promoted to the next class.

Yet textbooks have a public life and often occupy the centerstage of political controversies. Prescribed by the state, they reflect the aspirations of the ruling regime as to how ideas of the nation and citizenship need to be imagined. Since the very existence of a modern nation state demands the creation of a citizenry imbued with a sense of national pride and loyalty towards the nation, schools often play the role of an 'Ideological State Apparatus' with their overt (textbooks) and hidden (daily rituals, disciplinary regime, celebrations) curricula playing a key role in transforming young children into 'ideal citizens' who can contribute towards nation building.

This explains why textbooks become the repository of 'official knowledge' – knowledge that is carefully selected by those in power along with dominant sections of the society. Research on textbooks and curricula both in the developed countries (the United Kingdom, the United States of America and Japan) and many of the developing countries including India bear testimony to this.

As political regimes change, textbooks get rewritten to suit their specific requirements, thereby throwing up contesting visions of the nation and citizenship. These changes are mostly visible in language and social science textbooks, especially civics, political science and history, which explains why they become mired in controversy.

Historically, the social sciences emerged as a school subject during the 19th century in the context of the rise of the modern nation state. While civics was introduced in schools to inculcate among the young citizens obedience and patriotism, history was taught to instil in them a sense of pride and oneness through the construction of a shared past. Hence the need to glorify the past, create heroes and uphold a common heritage that would act as a glue to unify a diverse populace and iron out differences. A close examination of the history of nation-states in Europe explains this.



Representative image of history books. Photo: Michael Cugley/Flickr (CC BY-SA 2.0)

In the context of changing political regimes within nation-states, with support bases from divergent social groups and communities, history then becomes a contested site, where differing ideologies with opposing agendas clash. This explains why from time to time the history curriculum and textbooks are subjected to controversies. This also helps to understand why they become the repository of selected knowledge and why certain historical figures and communities, events or processes capture the limelight during a particular regime while others are pushed to the margin, vilified, or totally obliterated.

The same holds true for political Science and civics. Whatever challenges the agenda of the party in power or is critical of it must be shelved. This explains the recent deletions in the NCERT textbooks.

Textbooks in the Indian Context

Historically the colonial experience firmly established the 'textbook culture' in the educational journey of Indian students. This colonial legacy continued even after 1947. As India was gradually emerging as an independent nation state in the post-colonial years it was confronted with the daunting challenge of nation-building. This necessitated the forging of a national identity robust enough to weld together the diverse cultural loyalties and reign in the discordant notes of narrow regional parochialism to create a citizenry that was responsible, loyal, and patriotic.

One way to achieve this was by introducing a national curriculum and making available inexpensive and uniform quality textbooks throughout the country. It was for this purpose that the NCERT was established in 1961. The social sciences, introduced as school subjects around the same period were part of this nation-building and modernisation project.

The first two national curriculum frameworks (introduced during two successive Congress regimes in 1975 and 1988) despite their many limitations, upheld an idea of India based on secular values and celebration of its syncretic culture. The memories of Partition and the bloody communal riots perhaps necessitated a construction of a past that upheld a history of harmonious co-existence and cultural amalgamation.

At its core was the Nehruvian idea of a pluralistic nation based on 'unity in diversity' and the principles of equality, social justice, and secularism.

The Nehruvian idea of India as a nation was and continues to be challenged by the Hindu right in the form of Hindutva, or 'cultural nationalism'. It envisions the creation of a 'Hindu Rashtra' that projects India as exclusively a Hindu country, thereby reducing the Muslims and Christians as 'cultural outsiders'.

This found reflection in the National Curriculum Framework for School Education 2000 introduced during the first stint of the National Democratic Alliance. It redefined the national identity by embedding it in a Hindu majoritarian, patriarchal, and upper-caste ethos. It was severely criticised for undermining the constitutional values of secularism and democracy, promoting cultural revivalism, and doing away with rational discourse. The social science textbooks which were published had to be withdrawn upon judicial intervention by the apex court.

NCF 2005 and the innovations introduced in social science textbooks

The NCF 2005, operationalised during the Congress-led United Progressive Alliance's first stint, aimed at purging the education system of the attempted 'saffronisation' and reiterating a national identity based on the ideals of secularism, egalitarianism, pluralism, and social justice.

Under the directorship of the renowned educationist Krishna Kumar, a large group of reputed academicians, well known civil society members, educationists, and activists as well as professionals working in diverse fields like law, environment and gender issues joined hands to work on school curriculum. It was critically acclaimed by scholars for having introduced radical shifts, both in terms of the nature and source of the knowledge as well as its pedagogic imagination.

For instance, to counter the homogenising tendencies inherent in the centralised nature of textbook production under NCERT, the NCF 2005 suggested reorienting the curriculum through 'multiple ways of imagining the Indian nation' and balancing the national perspective with the local. To achieve this, the NCF 2005 proposed a more decentralised mechanism of knowledge-generation in which teachers, students and the local

community would feel 'empowered to bring in their own realities to the content of social studies'. This, it was argued, would enable students from different parts of the country to relate to the textbooks.

The curriculum also proposed the inclusion of the perspectives of the Adivasi, Dalit and other marginalised communities in curriculum and textbooks as also that of women which it was suggested needed to be provided space in discussions related to any historical event or contemporary issues.

Further, citizenship education was reimagined and situated within the perspectives of human rights and critical pedagogy. While this was aimed at providing the students with 'an opportunity to reflect critically on issues in terms of their political, social, economic, and moral aspects', the inclusion of the constructivist approach attempted to transform the classroom into a democratic space where students and teachers could be encouraged to engage in dialogue and thus learn to accept 'multiple views on social issues' through 'democratic forms of interaction'.

A perusal of the textbooks reveal that these innovations are mostly evident in the environmental and social sciences.

The history textbooks which were conceptualised and written by a team of reputed historians across the country and from diverse schools of thought, are imaginatively designed. With thematic presentation of concepts and ideas supported by colourful visuals and a range of primary sources, these are aimed at familiarising young readers with the nuances of the historian's craft, enabling them to master some of the key historical thinking skills – arranging events and processes in a chronological sequence, understanding cause and effect relationship, interpreting, and analysing sources and differentiating between fact and opinion.

The textbooks not only succeed in breaking the conventional style of writing history as a monotonous narrative of dynastic achievements in a didactic manner, but shifts the focus to social history, especially how ordinary people-women, men, and children lived their daily lives. Even the narration of major themes like the freedom movement and the emergence of national consciousness are presented in a layered manner, highlighting how different social groups responded differently to it with some even staying away from it for their own specific reasons.

The political science textbooks, both in the middle school (namely 'Social and Political Life') and at the secondary and higher secondary levels too marked a refreshing departure from their earlier lacklustre versions typically characterised by a mechanical representation of the state as a monolithic and paternalistic structure with little or no space highlighting its lapses and failures, features which were far removed from lived realities of students.

Through the inclusion of various creative expressions like storyboards, case-studies many of which expose the failures and gaps in the functioning of the state, along with colourful visuals, popular political cartoons, and government data ample space have been

created for the students to meaningfully engage with ideas like democracy, citizenship, and social justice.

Further they are encouraged to critically reflect on these key ideas with the help of different levels of questions (comprehension, reasoning, application, analysis, inference etc.) both within the chapter and at the end.

Filled with these innovative ideas, the post-NCF 2005 social science textbooks have thus laid down a template regarding how the subject can be creatively imagined and provide a critical lens to students to view the world around them.

Surely the rationalisation process must have reduced the pressure of curricular load for students, especially those appearing for the Class 12 board examinations in 2024.

Moreover, the curriculum and textbooks, having been in operation since more than two decades are in urgent need of a review. However, the way certain chapters have been deleted and sentences pruned appear arbitrary, deliberate, and politically motivated. While the NCERT has shared the names of the experts who were consulted none of the members of the original textbook writing committee were taken on board. The apex body also does not seem to have any plan to reinstate the deletions in future.

The he Possibilities for Future

Though not surprising, what remains conspicuous in the prevailing public discourse is the complete silence of the teachers. The reasons for this could be multiple. One could be the general apathy prevalent among the teaching community towards the subject owing to its perceived non-utilitarian and low status in comparison to the natural sciences and mathematics.

Moreover, it is largely true that while the NCF 2005 and the textbooks ushered in radical shifts both in the nature of the content and pedagogic imagination, the teachers were not adequately trained to implement the innovative ideas. Devoid of agency the teachers have continued to function as the perennial 'meek dictator' and have confined themselves to deliver their responsibility in a routinised manner following conventional pedagogic practices (chalk and talk and dictation of notes).

Further their mandatory engagement in numerous 'official duties' beyond their teaching responsibilities have left them with little or no interest to participate in larger discourses around textbooks and curriculum.



April 6, 1930: Gandhi being greeted by Sarojini Naidu at Dandi.

Classroom teaching will continue to be exam centric. And yet possibilities remain. Although textbooks can change with every changing political regime history cannot be wiped out. Rather, it will continue to thrive in libraries, archives, and reliable online platforms.

As teachers continue to teach, why can't they make the classroom experience truly meaningful and worthwhile for the students and themselves whenever the opportunity arises?

In times when textbooks are no longer the only source of information, nothing stops them from taking the initiative to access diverse sources – newspapers, library, television, and various online platforms – and sift through layers of misinformation. They can create space within the classroom and outside of it for deeper engagement with key issues through constructive debates and critical reflection. Their educational objective need not always be limited by the instrumentality of examinations.

Prompted by genuine interest and real quest for knowledge and truth, such an engagement has the potential to serve the purpose of nation building and actualisation of democratic citizenship as enshrined in the Indian constitution.

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