

Quality Constraints in Education

Fallout of the Cartoon Controversy

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It needs pensive reflection to understand how an organisation whose name is perhaps the most widely recognised public sector brand across the length and breadth of India could become the target of so much instant anger and contempt in the highest legislative forum of the republic.

The cyclone that hit Parliament on 11 and 14 May over the so-called cartoon controversy indicates, among other things, how vulnerable education and the institutions that impart it are to party politics – both *within* and between parties. This is not the first time the National Council of Educational Research and Training (NCERT) slipped into the eye of a cyclonic storm. A similar one had hit the Rajya Sabha in 2006 over the new Hindi textbooks. That time too, Members of Parliament (MPs) cutting across party lines – covering the full ideological spectrum – had sought an immediate deletion of certain portions of textbooks and punitive proceedings against those responsible for the inclusion of these portions. If we look back further, NCERT textbooks have served as a symbolic space for the exhibition of political virulence for a long time. Perhaps it is that history of controversies, and a memory lapse on NCERT's role as an apex 50-year old policy-making body in school education, that impelled a senior MP to demand that the institution be dissolved. It is a bit sad indeed that such a demand should have been raised in the golden jubilee year of the NCERT.

It needs pensive reflection to understand how an organisation whose name is perhaps the most widely recognised public sector brand across the length and breadth of India could become the target of so much instant anger and contempt in the highest legislative forum of the republic. We also need to search for reasons that might explain why the ruling party willingly joined the chorus of indignation against textbooks prepared during this very ruling coalition's first phase in office. Going a step further, we should ask how certain textbooks that were widely praised for their innovative and engaging pedagogic innovations, including the use of cartoons,

have now been singled out for bitter criticism. Apparently, the organisation that produced them commands little respect or trust among parliamentarians despite having served the nation for half a century.

The books that have come under fire were originally published in 2006, in the first round of textbooks prepared under the auspices of the National Curriculum Framework (NCF 2005). The implementation of NCF, in the shape of new syllabi and textbooks, had started immediately after its approval by the Central Advisory Board of Education (CABE).

CABE itself had suggested the setting up of a monitoring committee to oversee the NCF's follow-up activities. Following this suggestion, the Ministry of Human Resource Development (MHRD) appointed a National Monitoring Committee (NMC) with Professors Mrinal Miri and G P Deshpande serving as co-chairs. All textbooks, including the Class ix to xi textbooks of Political Science that are now facing bitter criticism, were examined in their draft versions by this NMC before they were granted approval for publication by the NCERT. They have been in use over these last six years, not merely in the 11,000 schools affiliated to the Central Board of Secondary Education (CBSE), but also in more than a dozen states which reprint them under copyright permission sought from the NCERT. The political parties ruling these states vary, but none of them have complained against the particular cartoon that came under fire on 11 May in Parliament or for any other reason.

For the time being, sale of the Class xi book, *Constitution at Work*, and the Class ix book, *Democratic Life*, has been stopped. The fact is that all CBSE schools reopen on 1 April, and therefore children have already bought these books and the first Formative Assessment is already over. It is also interesting that the CBSE was not asked why it chose to prescribe these books if they contained offensive cartoons. The NCERT is supposed to bring out innovative textbooks only as exemplars; it is the CBSE and other boards that choose to prescribe these books.

The question whether or not the specific cartoon depicting Nehru and Ambedkar

is offensive and inappropriate for use in a textbook calls for an understanding of NCERT's approach to learning and teaching. The wide-ranging debates mobilised by the NCERT over the drafting of NCF were focused on the role education can play in the promotion of basic constitutional values. The gist of these debates – in which more than 3,000 scholars, teachers, civil servants, activists, students and parents participated through various means – was that the knowledge imparted in schools fails to inspire children, hence any new educational initiative should first worry about reconceptualising the knowledge that different subjects comprise. The 21 national focus groups set up to assist the steering committee chaired by Prof Yash Pal recommended radical measures to draw the contours of knowledge in different subjects afresh and to devise new approaches for presenting this knowledge in textbooks. One of these measures was to drop the colonial construction of civics and enable children to learn about political life instead, so as to equip them to serve a participatory model of democracy. Classes IX and X textbooks of politics are, indeed, among the best examples of this approach. The XI and XII Political Science textbooks are meant for students who have opted to study that subject just as others study physics or chemistry.

A concern mentioned several times during the outburst against these books in Parliament was that the readers of these books were impressionable minds. Apparently, raw anger made the members forget that within a year of reading the Class XI book, the students were going to vote in parliamentary elections. Supposing the point about impressionable minds is granted, the question remains how such minds should be nurtured and prepared for democratic life. Conventional textbooks used facts and didactic prose to convey information. That is precisely the approach that the MHRD's various documents, including the 1986 National Education Policy, have pointed at as a reason of poor quality in education. New approaches, popularly labelled as child-centred pedagogy, attempt to encourage children to construct knowledge by drawing upon their own

experiences in life and a variety of resources available for analysing experience. Pictures, statistics, newspaper reports and websites are as much a part of the wider resource repertoire as cartoons are. Children see them daily in newspapers and it would be difficult to argue that newspapers should not be put into the hands of children. It is not the case that cartoons have been indiscriminately used in the political science textbooks in question. The Nehru-Ambedkar cartoon was drawn by Shankar whose lifetime contribution extends beyond cartoon-making to running the nation's first institutionalised attempt to impart aesthetic and literary stature to children's literature and art.

Damaging Institutions

No matter what comments or arguments are now put forward, the storm in Parliament and the government's response have given a blow to many institutions. The first of these is Parliament itself. The quick decision it took on 11 and 14 May left the vast majority of its members out of the decision-making process. Also, as an institution whose aim is to use deliberation for decision-making, the cartoon episode lends it no credit. Next comes the NCERT which has received a

rude shock in its golden jubilee year. Its programme budget severely slashed, its administrative hardships have grown over the years on account of shortage of staff, both academic and technical. As an organisation known to be unique in the world, its difficulties in mooted innovations – in a system riddled with colonial legacies and postcolonial politics – can only multiply now. Its relations with the MHRD have never been easy to define in a way that accommodates its mandate to serve as an academically vibrant advisory body with its role as a service institution. The national osmosis NCERT enabled over the NCF had attracted the best in Indian academia to join and enrich school reforms. Unless the MHRD takes some quick measures to redress the mid-May loss of memory and mistaken decision-making, the alienation of academia from the state will grow, making it hard for the government to push forward its own agenda of pursuing quality issues in education at all levels.

The biggest institutional damage caused by the cartoon episode is going to be suffered by school education as a whole. The controversy has conveyed to the millions of teachers, parents and officers across India that there is no policy guiding the system.

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