

# Making sense of the curriculum debate

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**CACOPHONY** Curriculum debate is a legitimate and much needed exercise in a democracy. However, the way we play curriculum politics and conduct curricular debates leaves much to be desired, says **Rohit Dhankar**

We have established a tradition of change in school curriculum with the change in the political regime at the national level since 2000. The National Democratic Alliance (NDA) led by Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP) came to power after re-elections in 1999, the NDA again formed the government which lasted a full term. The National Curriculum Framework for School Education (NCF for short) was revised for the first time in 2000, on the initiative of this government. It created a major controversy at that time; as some educationists thought that BJP has emphasized its own ideology over the secular traditions of the country. Two of the major points of controversy at that time were history textbooks and emphasis on linking moral development with religion in the NCF 2000.

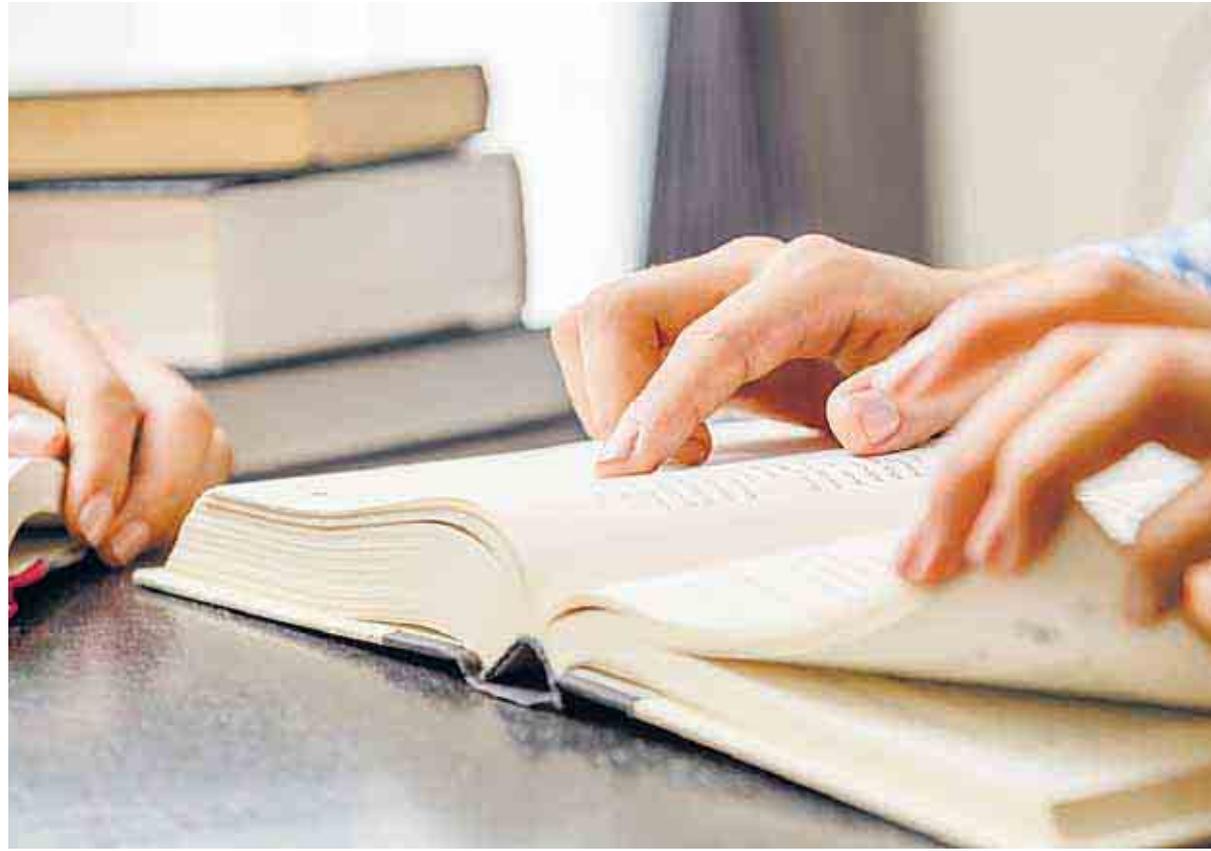
After general elections in 2004 the United Progressive Alliance (UPA) led by Indian National Congress (INC) came to power and the NCF was reviewed and revised, a new document generally referred to as NCF 2005 came into being. This again generated controversy, this time from both sides of the center. The NDA sympathizers who had been the main players in formulating NCF 2000 criticized it for not giving enough space to Indian culture and cultural values; and a strong left leaning group criticized it for not being bold enough to de-saffronise the school curriculum. This later group was also very unhappy about the emphasis on constructivist pedagogy and view of knowledge taken in the document.

Now the NDA has come to power again and this time with comfortable majority, with the BJP itself having majority on its own. The curriculum politics has already started. Professor JS Rajput, who was Director NCERT in 2000 and spearheaded the formulation of NCF 2000 has written an article on 9th June 14, posted on Vichar Manch portal, titled shiksha men sudhaarkasamay (Time for reform in education). This article reiterates some ideas of the NCF 2000 and demands revision of the NCF 2005, which according to him came out of a "political process" to "undo" the teaching about religions and emphasis on Indian culture.

## NCERT panel

The NCERT on its own has "set up 15 committees to examine the curricula and textbooks and suggest if any changes were required", even before the NDA government came to power. A Sangh veteran and founder of Shiksha Bachao Andolan Samiti (SBAS) calls it an exercise based on the NCERT "ideology"; and wants a curriculum based on ancient Indian culture and knowledge. According to him due emphasis should be given to Vedas, Upanishadas, Ramayana, Mahabharata and so on. The curriculum politics, then, has started in right unrest even if it be at a low key at the moment.

A curriculum is a plan to implement aims of education; and aims of education if effectively implemented and achieved, have a major impact on the life of all citizens in the country. Therefore, citizens' concern for aims of education and curriculum is legitimate and strong expression of this concern is good for a democ-



racy. In India the NCFs are the main vehicle to develop a national system of education and it should be frequently revised as per the National Policy on Education (NPE 1986). The frequency of revisions in curricula has been less than desirable in the country. The first NCF came right after the NPE 1986 in 1988. It was revised in 2000. The next revision was 2005, therefore, it is high time to again review the NCF.

Curriculum politics and debate in itself is neither something wrong, not bad for education. It is a legitimate and much needed exercise in a democracy. However, the way we play curriculum politics and conduct curricular debates leaves much to be desired.

The curriculum in a democracy is always a matter of socio-political negotiations and struggles. The socio-optical positions taken by different groups are guided by their interest and vision of the nation. Unfortunately the socio-political positions alone cannot form a consensus view if taken as supreme in themselves. Debates on curriculum and education can bear desirable fruits only if conducted in the guidance of some political and educational principles. Otherwise they become just expressions of vested interests and ideological biases. Two key concerns in this debate are issues that are being debated and the manner in which curricular revisions should be conducted.

## Key issues

One important issue in the present debate is emphasis that should be given to education for democratic citizenship and social justice. Most of the academics and educationists emphasize this aspect of education. According to this view education should primarily concern itself with developing critical democratic citizenship and democratic values. Every citizen, in

this view, should become capable of independent judgment and the curriculum should be geared to achieve this end first and foremost.

The people who see economic development as the key to better national life and well-being of all citizens emphasize skills for economic development. They want development of marketable skills to be the main focus of the education. Often simplistically assuming that the market if left free will automatically bring about social justice. This later assumption is not true in the view of those who emphasize critical citizenship; however, no one denies development of economically useful capabilities as an aim of education.

A third emphasis for curriculum emerges from the idea of national identity and Indian culture. Emphasis on Indian culture and pride in it is not something anyone objects to. The issue is how one perceives Indian culture and how much emphasis in the modern world should be placed on ancient Indian knowledge. Is Indian culture primarily Hindu culture or is it a composite culture encompassing many diverse elements which all together form a harmonious and beautiful tapestry? While no one denies the worth of ancient Indian literature, arts, philosophy and knowledge; an exclusive emphasis on them creates at the least two problems. As the oldest and most commonly known literature is mainly in the Hindu tradition it creates a one-sidedness. And all ancient knowledge necessary contains elements which are no more considered true; in addition there are plenty of retrograde and undemocratic values in the ancient repertoire of knowledge. Therefore, a critical evaluation and interpretation of values, ideas, ideals and knowledge in the ancient tradition is needed. An over-emphasis does not allow appropriate development of this critical perspective.

Another problem over emphasis on ancient culture creates is the problem of inclusiveness. Indian is country of many diversities of: religions, regional cultures, castes, ethnicities. To assume that there is common easily definable view of Indian culture is acceptable to all is a gross misunderstanding of the current social reality. If we want an inclusive education then the curriculum has to reflect that inclusion through due emphasis on all Indian traditions.

The curriculum politics is the politics of finding a balance between all these concerns. And has to listen to all voices however one may disagree with some of them.

The review exercise out of which the NCF 2005 created was a healthy and transparent process. A vision document was created which outlined the goals and process of the exercise. A committee was constituted which had many experts from various walks of life, and over saw the whole process. Committees for Position Papers were constructed which worked on specific areas of education. Information about all this process was disseminated through media and NCERT web site.

This process was healthy in a democracy because it was inclusive and transparent. As said above, aims of education and curriculum are public concerns, and therefore, it cannot be left to NCERT alone. In the present process of review this openness and transparency seems to be missing. The NCERT seems to be reverting back to its earlier style where the decisions were mainly taken internally. The curricular debates of 2000 and 2005 have raised the public awareness about importance of such exercises and documents. Making the review process mainly based on internal decisions will harm both the quality as well as legitimacy of the exercise.