

## EDUCATION

# Noise and Design

*The NCERT's discussion document 'National Curriculum Framework for School Education' brings out the professional cost that the NCERT pays directly, and the rest of us pay indirectly, on account of indifference to historical awareness.*

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A discussion document called 'National Curriculum Framework for School Education' has been released by the NCERT. Its preface starts with a reference to Mahatma Gandhi who is said to have made the profound point in 1947 that "all education in a country has got to be demonstrably in promotion of the progress of the country in which it is given". Gandhi figures some nine times in the document – a count which, if taken seriously, might indicate a turning point in the history of NCERT. The organisation is now approaching 40. Never before has it evinced an interest in Gandhi, or for that matter in any philosopher of education, Indian or foreign. The perspective it has followed and promoted all along was largely shaped by behaviourist psychology and conventional practices. The currently dominant MLL approach – MLL standing for 'minimum levels of learning – is nothing but a brushed-up version of the old behaviourist model of educational objectives. The NCERT has been allergic to philosophical and socio-historical approaches to education. The present document also shows a total lack of historical sense. Considering that it is a 'national' document, it indicates the professional cost that the NCERT pays directly, and the rest of us pay indirectly, on account of indifference to historical awareness.

To take an example from language education, the document gives no clues pointing to the lessons that curriculum framers can learn from India's long struggle with language planning. A vast body of research and the specific experiences of several states might as well not exist. On a matter as widely debated as the medium of instruction, the document has little more to offer than a 1921 quotation from Gandhi and the injunction that "till the end of the primary stage, no other language except the pupil's first language should be per-

mitted as the medium of instruction". We are left to make hard guesses on who the 'permit' authority will be in the burgeoning market of education which the document acknowledges; which languages will count as 'first' languages; will children be pooled according to the designated 'first' language; and so on.

By ignoring such obvious specificities – and this happens in every area, not just language – the drafting team turns the opportunity this document offers into yet another exercise in educational rhetoric. The various components of this rhetoric are familiar enough, since they have been stable for quite some time now. These components include work education (this is supposed to evoke Gandhi), lifelong learning, open learning system, continuous evaluation, introduction of computers, value-orientation, and so on. It is highly likely that the hackneyed nature of this terminology will dissuade many from reading the text closely enough to glean deeper designs. Indeed, the designs may not all be of NCERT's own making, precariously poised as it is between its roles of serving an ideology-obsessed ministry and acting as a professional body in charge of educational change. Seen as a balancing act, the curriculum framework deserves some credit, for it manages to place under a cover of considerable thickness the general plan of action that the BJP-led government would quietly like to pursue. This plan is so general that sharp-shooters who are accustomed to hitting BJP for its game plan to wreck secular education may find themselves somewhat confused. The edifice of secular education has been in poor shape. Moreover, crude behaviourism has had its admirers on both sides of the ideological divide. Even in the limited context of history writing for schools, progressive voices have been remarkably unimaginative and smug. One should not be surprised if they are now confronted, not with objectionable distortions or in-

sertions, but with a holistic trivialisation of social studies, including history. Indeed, such a move has already begun with the attempt to extend the MLL approach to the senior elementary level.

The discussion document on curriculum framework suggests that the NCERT's new textbooks will carry an even thicker coating of didacticism than the present-day textbooks have. The NCERT (which usually means the ministry) would like to introduce a moralistic filter in the content of all subject areas, altering the fabric of each subject to suit the dominant ideology. The government may even succeed in carving out a separate subject called moral or value education. The idea was mooted as long back as the early 80s, as part of a revivalist plan; as a general demand, it has been around for much longer. How great a significance the NCERT is willing to attach to the need for moral education can be guessed from a statement made under 'educational objectives' which juxtaposes 'moral weakness' with 'ignorance' and 'poverty', the three being appropriate targets for educational planning. We can hardly expect a document as superficial as this to explain which sections of society are the victims and which ones the beneficiaries of 'moral weakness'. Superficial it may be, but the document will ably serve to make 'value clarification and inculcation' the new lexicon of euphemism for reactionary education. Terms like this, and references to Gandhi and others, have been recognised as an acceptable shorthand of indigenous fascism. Topics like 'India's contribution to world civilisation' barely hide the sprawling mood of the urban middle class. The rural child and youth simply don't matter; the document accords them what they are used to receiving – ritual remembrance and vague inclusion in vocationalisation dreams.

Why can't we expect a document with greater substance from India's apex professional body in education? The NCERT's own answer is that it was in a hurry. The preface clarifies: "This document has been prepared under rather compelling circumstances. It could not afford the luxury of taking a very long time in its preparation for the obvious reason that it would have further delayed the much needed renewal of syllabi and the new generation of textbooks". Hurry has long been known in folk wisdom as a cover of trickery. When a professional organisation uses hurry as a justification, one can hardly avoid noticing its political compulsions. ■■■