

National Curriculum Framework and Its Values

A Parent's Perspective

In spite of the NCERT's proposed claims that its new curriculum framework with its far-reaching changes has incorporated the suggestions of academicians and teachers, it is unlikely that parents, who along with teachers form the silent and invisible stakeholders in the education process, have been consulted. This essay by a parent makes a forceful argument that education must continue to uphold those values that serve as a prerequisite for society's progress and the inherent conflict these values have with the proposed new framework.

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The National Curriculum Framework for School Education (NCFSE) is unlike the NCERT's curriculum frameworks in the past. It recommends a number of far-reaching changes and reads more like a policy document. The media, and one of the SC judges hearing the case, have referred to it as the National Education Policy 2022, which it definitely is not. The framework has been finalised without reference to a consultative institution like the Central Advisory Board on Education (CABE); though NCERT claims to have held extensive consultations on its own, a number of educationists and experts said to have been consulted have questioned the veracity of this claim. While NCERT may have consulted teachers before finalising the framework, it is unlikely that parents have been consulted. Parents and teachers have always been silent

and invisible stakeholders in the education process.

Some of us, as parents, have been shocked to hear that important matters concerning the education of our children were being decided by lawyers and judges in the Supreme Court. Some of us were also wondering about the wave of communal madness that swept Gujarat, where individuals seemed to lose all sense of reason and compassion. We saw, to our horror, that in the existing school textbooks for the Gujarat Board, history had a large proportion of Hindu mythology and a distinct communal slant. We saw a clear link between the content of the textbooks, and the loss of objectivity and reason that has characterised much of Gujarat since February. We questioned ourselves, and our own apathy as parents, which allowed such situations to develop.

In a statement that we issued from the Forum of Parents and Teachers after

studying the National Curriculum Framework (NCF), we said, "School education should inculcate a quest for truth, a logical bent of mind and the faculty of scientific reasoning. It must foster a secular and democratic approach to life and to society, enabling the student to rise above communal, linguistic and other parochial prejudices. It must develop social awareness, a sense of obligation to society, a sense of dignity of labour, and strength of character to fight against exploitation and injustice."

We realise that these objectives of education that we have framed reflect a set of values. We need these values, we strongly believe in the notion of 'progress', and we believe that at any point of time, a society contains within it one set of progressive values that takes it forward, and a set of reactionary values that takes society backwards. The NCF also sets much store by values and value-education. But when we closely examine the values inherent in the NCF, we see an unfortunate conflict between its values and ours.

The NCF introduces the subject of value education by saying, "School education in the country seems to have developed some kind of neutrality towards basic values, and the community in general has little time or inclination to know about religions in the right spirit". It then makes amends for this presumed lacuna by saying that education about religions would be judiciously integrated with all subjects of study and in all co-curricular activities, so that the objective can be achieved in classrooms, playgrounds, school assembly places and cultural centres. The NCF then goes on to say that this must be done in a spirit of 'Sarva Dharma Samabhava', an idea supported by Gandhiji, which has also found favour with the SC.

Values Inherent in a Scientific Approach

The thrust towards integrating education about religions into all parts of the curriculum as a part of value-education must be read together with the NCF's proposals for the teaching of science, mathematics and history. Science and mathematics have certain inherent values that are particularly important for all of use to inculcate today. The old NCERT textbooks on science frame some of these values on the front page:

- Be inquisitive about things and events around you
- Have the courage to question beliefs and practices
- Ask 'what', 'how' and 'why' and find

your answers by critically observing, experimenting, consulting, discussing and reasoning

– Be guided by facts, reasons and logic. Do not be biased in one way or the other

In our opinion, this should be the main thrust of value-education in schools. The NCF, however, has changed the emphasis in the science curriculum from ‘science’ to ‘science and technology’. This and other changes are premised on an explicit assumption in the NCF that the majority of students will dropout after Class X. The NCF therefore talks of the need to include “rural and tribal-oriented technology” and also says; “Science must cut across traditional subject boundaries and open itself to issues such as gender, culture, language, poverty, impairment, future occupation, environment and observance of small family norm”. For mathematics, the NCF emphasises the teaching of mathematics which is used in day-to-day applications; the use of data tables, charts and diagrams; and problems illustrating contemporary problems like overpopulation. There is a lot to be said for the teaching and learning of science through experiment and observation in one’s own environment and context – urban, rural or tribal. But in our

opinion, the NCF’s proposals for science and mathematics will lead to an unacceptable dilution of the content of science, especially the values of science, and will add to information overload about technology. Scientific outlook and basic scientific concepts provide the fundamentals. Technology is an evolving process building on basic science and can easily be learnt at higher levels if students have a strong school-level foundation in science.

Similarly, our social values crucially depend on the application of scientific outlook to society. The NCF takes the view that “in order to make the social sciences education meaningful, relevant and effective, the concerns and issues of the contemporary world need to be kept in the forefront”. While this is an acceptable proposition, the NCF creates an unnecessary conflict between the study of the past and of the present by proposing to reduce the quantum of history in the social sciences. Instead, it wants greater emphasis on globalisation and panchayati raj. History is one of the most important social sciences because unless we are informed by a correct sense of history, we would see the present state of our society, economy and polity (including globalisation and

panchayati raj), as a meaningless jumble of events, amenable to any arbitrary interpretation.

The NCF’s proposals for history imply that there will be no teaching of historical developments in chronological order, or of methods of historical analysis. For the upper primary stage, the NCF says, “The study of India’s past may be introduced through selected events/episodes and developments – social, cultural and scientific. This would render topics like the discovery of India or America by Europeans irrelevant for Indian students.” The question is – is the development of capitalism in western Europe and the consequent impact of European colonial expansion on India, of no historical consequence? Simultaneously, the NCF emphasises the cultural heritage of India, and the spread of Indian culture in other lands. In our opinion, to reduce and dilute the content of history, and thereafter to insist on enumerating the contribution of India to the world in every subject (science, social science or mathematics) would only result in a false and shallow picture of history. It is a historical fact that there was an assimilation of European scientific, economic and political thought, that this was an important

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contribution to the development of modern Indian national consciousness, and thereby an important contribution to the freedom struggle and the values that informed it. Education in modern values is impossible without a detailed, balanced and analytical study of history.

History as Seen by the NCF

But the NCF has its own notion of Indian history, which it explicitly states. It sees precolonial society in India as an ancient and changeless entity, free of social conflicts. It assumes that the context of precolonial education systems helped to rationalise the socio-economic structure of that period. It believes that precolonial education systems promoted a “religio-philosophic ethos centred on self-realisation” that enabled the individual to surrender himself or herself.

It believes that the harmonious hierarchies of the past were deeply disturbed with the arrival of the British, by their introduction of alien technology, and an inappropriate educational system that had no idea of Indian harmony.

The NCF deeply believes in this ancient ‘harmonious hierarchy’ and the role played by education in maintaining that hierarchy, in short, of education as a mode of ideological control.

There is a distortion of history in the NCF’s characterisation of the history of education in India. It completely overlooks the fact that the precolonial systems were local, and bound by caste, class and gender divisions, and were meant to serve local agriculture, trade and commerce, i.e., that precolonial systems were, understandably, neither modern nor national. The NCF completely overlooks the long-drawn debate within the colonial administration between the Orientalists and the Anglicists. While the Orientalists wanted to continue the existing system and content of education in India, the Anglicists wanted to introduce English and western education. The NCF also completely overlooks the important interventions in the debate made by Indian educational reformers like Rammohun Roy and Vidyasagar.

Vidyasagar (1820-93) was, in particular, an exemplar of secular humanism, who surpassed even Rammohun in his concept of secular education. In his approach to education, he placed the needs of humanity at the centre and sought to free education from religious tutelage. While principal of Sanskrit College, Vidyasagar wrote to the secretary of the Education Council, Dr Mouat, that Vedanta and Sankhya systems of philosophy, as well as Berkeley’s

philosophy, all of which he was an expert at, were false systems of philosophy. He pleaded for the teaching of English and John Stuart Mill’s ‘Logic’ so that the “harmful effects of these false philosophies may be counteracted” and students would have access to the best of western thought.

Educational reformers like Vidyasagar thus stood for the best of western thought to create a modern Indian character. This renaissance movement in our history laid the foundation for the economic and political critique of colonialism that developed later. The NCF appears to have forgotten this chapter of our history.

Revival of Inequality in Education Policy

The colonial policy of education that emerged from these prolonged debates between the Orientalists and Anglicists was finally a colonial policy, it was dual and unequal. It had:

- Secondary and higher education in English and with a western curriculum for a minority, from whom members of the colonial civil service would be selected

- For the rest – grants in aid to indigent schools for limited modernisation: limited curricular changes and introduction of an examination system.

Ironically, the NCF’s own proposals resemble the colonial policy of a dual and unequal system. Humanist values related to education found voice in India’s freedom struggle, in Lala Lajpat Rai, for example, when he said, “The old idea that the state was only concerned with making provision for elementary education is also gone. All over the world it is recognised that the duty of the state does not end with elementary education – nor can the state ignore the necessity of higher education” (Lala Lajpat Rai’s *The Problem of National Education in India*). The humanist view is that humanity is always confronted by a host of natural and social problems. Progress requires the removal of all barriers to the spread of education, so that knowledge may be used to solve problems that societies face.

But the intention of the NCF to promote a dual and unequal system and thereby restrict the spread of education is seen in its proposal to introduce separate vocational and academic streams after class X. There is an unprecedented, explicitly stated assumption that for the majority of students, the higher secondary stage may be the end of their formal education leading to the world of work. There is an equally explicit assumption that future leadership

will emerge from the academic stream, from those who go to the tertiary stage of education. The NCF also talks of special identification and training of gifted and talented children on the basis of measures of Intelligence Quotient, Emotional Quotient and Spiritual Quotient – the first, a discredited concept, the last two, subjective and not accepted in science till date. The NCF wants to bring about the diversion of a large number of, perhaps the majority of, students to the vocational stream after class X through greater weightage for school-based evaluation and counselling. Instead of providing equality of opportunity through a uniform pattern of education, which is characteristic of a society functioning on democratic and humanist values, this scheme of the NCF will further introduce class divisions into education and further rigidify division of labour on the basis of caste, class and gender. The NCF is clear about who the vocational stream is for – “The socially disadvantaged groups such as women, scheduled castes, scheduled tribes and physically challenged persons”. This must be the first attempt of its kind in policy to deny the physically challenged the opportunity for normal academic education. The NCF very consciously gives a new definition of equality of opportunity – “Ensuring that every individual receives suitable education at a pace and through methods *suitable to his/her being*.” (emphasis ours)

False Arguments for Vocational Education

The vocational stream is begun on the premise that opportunities for formal employment in the organised sector are now decreasing. The NCF thinks that opportunities are increasing in the service sector. The objective of the vocational stream is to provide “skills necessary for self-employment and entrepreneurship”, the three thrust areas mentioned being IT, agriculture-based technology and traditional crafts. These are precisely the areas hardest hit by recession, with traditional weavers even committing suicide. Government statistics show a steady decline in self-employment due to recession and competition from organised industry. The truth is that employment is determined by the state of the market and of the economy, not by vocational qualifications. The best vocational qualifications do not get you jobs, unless the economy is generating them, and our economy no longer has a semblance of planning or of employment promotion policies. Further, good

vocational education requires large financial outlays on equipment and teachers. The NCF is clear that the government is unlikely to provide resources. The experience of Industrial Training Institutes (ITIs) all over the country is also one of under-provision of funds and equipment. Therefore the NCF promotes the idea of partnership between schools and organised/unorganised industry for 'semi-commercial' projects. Given the poor state of regulation and inspection of both schools and factories, this is a certain way of legitimising child labour in the name of vocational education.

Unlike vocational training to supplement education, which would equip children with both knowledge and vocational skills, the separate vocational education stream as proposed by the NCF is a dead end for millions of children who might otherwise like to study further. This proposal is simply a means of reducing the numbers of the educated unemployed, who are conscious of their rights and may become a conscious political force. In fact, people are aware of the limitation of vocational courses instinctively. But the NCF again uses false arguments about 'mental barriers' between mental and

physical work, and 'dignity of labour' to justify vocational education. In fact, the barriers are not just mental. The division of wealth in societies like ours is determined by the division of labour. Mental labour is valued higher than manual labour. This valuation is not just a mental process but is an objective one, which is an integral part of the socio-economic system itself. Without systemic changes, it is futile to expect 'dignity of labour' in the real sense. I might treat my domestic servant with utmost courtesy, but at the end of the month I would pay her the prevailing market wage. And even after systemic changes, as happened in socialist societies, the gap between remuneration for mental and manual labour narrows very slowly, through a prolonged process of education about the necessity of all forms of labour. The NCF uses the argument of 'dignity of labour' merely to push its scheme of vocational education.

Vocationalisation and Education Values

Again, the whole thrust of education in the NCF, whether the academic or the vocational stream, is vocationalisation,

i.e., to orient education towards the market. The NCF keeps stressing on the need for 'flexibility' in the face of 'globalisation' and 'competition'. This is reflected in its recommendations for flexibility in subject groupings, and for subject modules in a semester format, that students may mix and match according to what the job-market requires at the moment.

There are two concerns about such vocationalisation of education – one related to the educational process, and the other to the values of education. Rather than providing school children with an all-round knowledge base with strong disciplinary grounding that they can build on at a higher stage, vocationalisation introduces narrow and technical specialisation at a very early stage. This is likely to hamper the development of disciplined and coordinated thinking in children. The thrust towards vocationalisation is also going to counteract any attempt at value education, because orienting education narrowly to the job-market is going to commercialise education further, and further convert education into a commodity. The mindset that will be promoted among students and their parents when they are ready for higher

education will be to invest in education and obtain financial returns as fast as possible. This will negate the value-base of education, by destroying any potential that education has as an instrument of social change.

Education about Religions

The NCF believes that religion is an important source of values and that therefore education about religion should be integrated into all subjects and extra-curricular activities. The honourable judges of the Supreme Court too have concurred with this view referring both to legal precedent and quotation from the Vedas, Upanishads and J Krishnamurti. Our regret is that they did not take an equally detailed look at the values underlying the scientific approach to nature and history. While there is no doubt about the importance of values, it is equally important to appreciate that there are no eternal or unchanging values. When we closely examine the supposedly absolute and eternal values, we find that they too are in fact rooted to history. The emergence of a particular value or ideal at a given time or place is explained by historical conditions. Likewise, modern science tells us that there is no abstract or general truth, that truth is always relative and concrete. When historical conditions change, new values have to emerge, as the older values become outmoded, ossified and reactionary. Religions have often established norms of conduct in historical periods past. But religions also have their own history and sociology. Apart from philosophies, they acquire customs, rituals and practices, which are the prominent identification marks of religious communities. Some customs, rituals and practices are oppressive and exploitative, but which their proponents claim have religious sanction. For example, a certain Shankaracharya does not allow women to recite the Vedas; there are major theological debates about the position of women and their rights in various religions, with every participant claiming that their interpretation is the true one. We are already witnessing conflicts between scientific investigation into history and religious sentiments about history. How will it be possible to identify and authenticate 'pure' strands of religions, which are also compatible with democratic and scientific values? The contradiction between the religious outlook that is based on faith and belief, and the scientific outlook that is based on enquiry and reasoning, cannot easily be brushed away. It is well known that Charles Darwin agonised

for years whether to publish his work on the 'Origin of Species' as it contradicted his religious beliefs. When our children learn about the origin of life and the evolution of species, can we present them simultaneously with the ideas expressed in the texts of various religions, along with Darwin's theories on the subject? The integration of education about religions with all subjects would necessitate this.

The distinction between 'education about religions' and 'religious instruction', referred to by the NCF and the Supreme Court judges, is therefore non-existent and artificial. Teaching about religion in schools is therefore going to be endlessly controversial and confusing for students. It must also be remembered that religion today has its very conservative and divisive side in society, and schoolteachers too are not immune from prejudices. This was clearly seen when Saraswati Vandana was introduced in schools in UP, with teachers forcing even unwilling students to sing it. There is no way in which personal preferences and prejudices of teachers can be kept out the classroom when a subject as sensitive as religion is taught.

The correct concept of secularism in education therefore, and we respectfully disagree with both the NCF and the honourable judges, is not 'Sarva Dharma Samabhava', but the complete separation of religion from education. This was the way shown to us by our own renaissance leaders like Vidyasagar. This is not an anti-religious position. Individuals are still free to follow religious teachings if they feel that these teachings give them the faith and strength to cope with physically and morally difficult situations in daily life. Religious establishments will continue to preach their interpretation of religion, and individuals should be free to accept or not accept them. For children of school-going age, let religion be a private matter between parent and child. Let the value-base of the curriculum be strengthened by teaching the values of scientific approach, so that our children learn how to think. Value education can be further supplemented by daily experiences and reflecting on them under the guidance of teachers. Value education in the abstract, and involving religion, would be ineffective and divisive. **EPW**