

Winning Values

Secular Education Redefined

The National Curriculum Framework is not merely about curriculum renewal. It marks, and it has occasioned, a serious shift in educational policy and the process of formulating national programme of education through which the role of the states has been reduced to a minimum. The euphoric response of the central government to the Supreme Court verdict is an indication of the importance that it places on establishing this new process as well as the curriculum.

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The Supreme Court's verdict in the public interest case against the National Curriculum Framework has elicited three kinds of responses. The first set of responses are euphoric, the second critical, and the third are of a salvaging nature. It is not difficult to associate these sets of responses with political stances and roles. Indeed, the accuracy with which we can make these associations is a measure of the verdict's depth, and also a measure of the social ethos in which it has been delivered on what undoubtedly was a unique, and in a self-evident way, pioneering petition. There have been any number of cases in Indian courts about matters arising from educational policies, and some of these cases have concerned textbooks. This is the first occasion, however, that a case was fought against curriculum policy. The fact that this case is being cited in many quarters as the textbook case shows how endemic the tendency to consider textbooks the core issue of curriculum policy is. Of course it is true that textbooks form the de facto curriculum in millions of classrooms where the teacher never receives a copy of the syllabus, let alone any curriculum guide; and it is also true that the case against the National Curriculum Framework was triggered by the controversy over history textbooks. The fact, however, is that the petition filed by Aruna Roy, B G Verghese and Mina Radhakrishna Tyabji went far beyond the question of what history will be taught in NCERT textbooks.

Let us look at the three sets of responses the verdict has received. The euphoric response has come from the government and the NCERT. The fact that even the prime minister, who was abroad at the time the verdict was announced, commented on it in a congratulatory tone suggests how significant the case had become for the NDA government and especially for the BJP. Why this should be so has two long-term explanations, apart from the obvious one relating to the political circumstances by which the BJP-RSS-VHP combine finds itself surrounded following the Gujarat massacre. The story of Gujarat denudes the Hindu nationalist ideology to an extent that all customary categories and approaches for analysing politics in India seem inadequate. Hindu communalism has taken a giant step forward, but its political formations still need to cover the ground they have left behind, so to say, simply because a large middle-class vote-bank inhabits that ground. This is why the successful campaign to spread terror in Gujarat needed to be followed by the rescue and reinstatement of older, symbolic grounds, such as the educational ideals and goals of Hindu nationalism. The petition against the NCERT's curriculum document had, and especially the stay order issued on its basis by the Supreme Court in April 2002, threatened both the symbolic appeal and the practical applications of Hindu nationalism in education. The vindication of the National Curriculum by the Supreme Court, particularly the pronouncement that there is nothing anti-secular in it, is an achievement worthy of euphoria for this immediate reason.

But there are two long-term reasons as well, and we must not lose sight of them. The first of these is the significance the BJP and the organisations associated with it attach to children's education. This they have done since their inception, and what is more important is that they have sustained their interest in education through many decades. Indeed, unlike any other political party, the BJP has a curricular doctrine which the RSS and other organisations apply on a regular basis. The National Curriculum Framework, in this sense, was no simple government document; it was a test to find out whether the Hindu nationalist programme of education could muster a wide social appeal. The second long-term reason has to do with the battle against the NCERT's history textbooks that had formally begun in 1978 with the writing of a letter of protest by Nanaji Deshmukh to the then prime minister Morarji Desai. The two decades which had passed since the start of this battle were a period of political consolidation and social widening of the Hindu nationalist ideology. With the formation of a stable NDA government under BJP's leadership, this prolonged battle was naturally expected to arrive at a successful end in the shape of new history textbooks. The only major obstacle now was the sizeable resistance to the move that still remained in the academia, and more irksomely, in the media. The strategy chosen to overcome this obstacle was to institute a wholesale revamping of the curriculum and textbooks so as to submerge the replacement of history texts in a comprehensive process. There can be no better evidence of this than the sparse difference between the old and the new textbooks in subjects like English and science. The speed with which the new syllabi for all subjects and all stages were prepared and published told its own story.

The government's euphoric response to the court verdict not only vindicates the new curriculum, it also expresses the relief that the ministry of human resource development has been given from the blame that it did not consult the Central Advisory Board of Education (CABE), before accepting the 'National' curriculum as policy. One of the moot contentions made by the petitioners was that the government had bypassed a major and well-established

procedure in this respect, and for this reason the National Curriculum should be declared invalid. The court's response to this is somewhat technicist in nature, and confusing in import. The verdict says that CABE is not a statutory body, and therefore it was not mandatory for the government to consult it. In any case, the argument goes further that CABE has not been reconstituted since the mid-1990s.

After accepting this position, however, two of the three judges forming the bench say that CABE's opinion should be taken, and one of these two judges goes still further, to say that the government should expeditiously consult CABE, "in any case before the next academic session". It is difficult to say then, what the majority view of this bench is, and how one should decode the apparent gap between the view that CABE is worth consulting but non-consultation with it does not make the National Curriculum illegal. Given this confusion, it is unlikely the government will do much about reconstituting CABE or consulting it, even post-facto for what it is worth. The fact that it has pushed a major policy shift in curriculum through without showing it to a federal forum – more than 60 years old – establishes the practicality of this method. It also shows how little the states matter now in education. CABE has been the main forum providing them with a voice; and even though it had no statutory powers, it helped resolve matters as controversial as the three-language formula and the 10-plus-two system. The neglect of CABE by the Rao government – it should have reconstituted it in 1994 – and now the purposeful erasing of its role by the Vajpayee government suggests the closing of a long era. In the current circumstances when many states are on the verge of bankruptcy and pathetically dependent on the centre, both for the centre's own assistance and for the smooth inflow of foreign funds, it is unlikely that the demand for reinstating CABE will be forcefully made and pursued. The Congress has been making this demand in parliament and outside, but has failed to show any desperation for its fulfilment.

Religion as Value Education

In the absence of CABE, and in view of the court's willingness to let the new National Curriculum be implemented without CABE's approval, education can only become more vulnerable to arbitrary policy shifts mooted by the centre, often

under pressure from political, financial, and foreign lobbies. This is one of the main fears articulated by the critics of the court judgment, constituting the second set of responses. However, it is the second aspect of the judgment which has received greater attention from critics. This aspect concerns the use of religion as a resource for moral or value education. Interestingly, the euphoric respondents have not had much to say on this aspect of the verdict, except by way of making the general point that the court has upheld the perspective adopted in the National Curriculum Framework. The fact that the admirers of the verdict, including those representing the government or the NCERT have showed far less interest in this aspect of the verdict than the critics have, suggests one explanation: namely, that the verdict has gone beyond the proposed curriculum in the matter of displaying enthusiasm for the potential of religion as a resource for the so-called value-orientation of education. Making use of the 1999 report of the parliamentary committee chaired by S B Chavan for proposing value-orientation as a major thrust and the use of religion as a source of universal values, the national curriculum made a subtle move away from the 1986 national policy which made no mention of religion, except in the context of fanaticism and bigotry.

As in the case of many other features, in this one too, the NCERT's curricular discourse has been designed to serve as an enabling mechanism, rather than as a guideline. Its political value lies precisely in its cacophonous character and imprecision. Its functional value arises from this latter characteristic, in the sense that it permits the present and future governments to scratch out the secular-nationalistic discourse of curricular policy, and to replace it with a religio-nationalistic, Hindu discourse. A seasoned body like NCERT surely knew that curriculum and syllabus are but stages in a ritual; the real battle lay in changing textbooks. The rhetoric of values and the reference to religion in the context of value education are nothing but a means to seek valid grounds for changing textbooks, especially the textbooks in social sciences, including history, and the ones used for the teaching of Hindi. This latter domain presents an easier task because Hindi textbooks have been, for reasons inherent in the history of Hindi education, a covert agency for socialising children into a communal imagination. The game of value-orientation is also meant to cover ethos-building devices, such as the morning

assembly and other so-called co-curricular activities. The usefulness of religion as a source of values, thus, was cited by the National Curriculum Framework as a general point. It drew its validity from references to corruption in society, the threat presented by globalisation to India's culture and traditions, and the pace of change society was going through. The court verdict picks up these vague grounds and makes a full-blown case for the need to orient education towards the values that it claims are basic to all religions.

The verdict makes a distinction between 'religious education' and 'religious instruction', and suggests that the former can be seen as a means to promote tolerance and other values. Another distinction it makes is between religion and dharma. It translates the latter as 'duty' and then explains its origin and meaning in no uncertain terms:

The English word 'religion' does not fully convey the Indian concept of religion. Hindus believe in Vedas. The word 'Dharma' has a very wide meaning. One meaning of it is the 'moral values or ethics' on which the life is naturally regulated. Dharma or righteousness is eternal and fundamental in all nations, periods and times. For example truth, love, compassion are human values. This is what Hindu call *Sanatan Dharma* meaning religion which is immutable, constant, living, permanent and ever in existence. Religion in wide sense, therefore, is those fundamental principles which sustain life and without which the life will not survive. Rig Veda describes Dharma as Athodharmani Dharavan. In this concept of religion or Dharma, different faiths, sects and schools of thoughts merely are different ways of knowing truth which is one. The various sects/religious groups are understood as Panth or Sampradaya. (sic)

Evidently, the verdict prefers to perceive religion as dharma, and it sees no contradiction between the spirit of dharma and secularism. Elsewhere, the verdict shows dissatisfaction with the manner in which secularism has been pursued since independence: "the complete neutrality towards religion and apathy for all kinds of religious teaching in institutions of the state have not helped in removing mutual misunderstanding the intolerance inter se between sections of people of different religions, faiths and beliefs." This critique of the manner in which secularism has been applied is next used to reinterpret the concept:

'Secularism', therefore, is susceptible to a positive meaning that is developing

understanding and respect towards different religions... 'Secularism' can be practised by adopting a complete neutral approach or by a positive approach by making one section of religious people to understand and respect religion and faith of another section of people.

This approach to secularism places a great responsibility on education, and the judgment recognises both the significance and the risks involved in placing this responsibility upon education. The significance lies in the possibility that the next generations of Indians will show greater appreciation for different religions. The risk lies in the possibility that the study of religions may slip into ideologically motivated instruction or the teaching of religions as forms of worship and rituals. The verdict demands a constant vigil to be maintained to ensure that this does not happen. This cautionary note is what the third category of responses – the salvaging ones – have focused on. All editorial commentary made by the mainstream press fall in this category.

This brief description of the position taken by the court in the matter of treating religion as a source of values should suffice to indicate that the verdict proposes a significant departure from past practice, and also a shift in the theoretical basis of the policy followed so far. In the matter of education, and especially in curricular policies, secularism has been construed to mean apathy to religion. The school's domain in India has remained quite distinct from the domain of the family or home in this respect, even though there have been recommendations and pressures to bring them closer. The report of the Kothari Commission (1964-66), for instance, favoured the study of religion at school, following a line similar to the one used in the present verdict, but this recommendation did not sit well with the commission's general perspective, and was, in fact, rejected by parliament when objections to it were raised. Indeed, the debate on the appropriateness of religion for schools goes all the way back to the constituent assembly in which Ambedkar had pointed out the difficulties involved in allowing the introduction of religion in the process of schooling. Apart from the obvious difficulties relating to the norms for the use of public funds, and to the multiplicity of religions in India, Ambedkar had pointed out a third difficulty. This, according to him, lay in the fact that "the religions prevailing in this country are not merely unsocial; so far as their mutual

relations are concerned they are anti-social, one religion claiming that its teachings constitute the only right path for salvation, that all other religions are wrong". This argument given by Ambedkar underscores the necessity to interpret the term 'social' as a normative challenge, rather than merely as an adjective reflecting the quality of a historically constituted society. Such a distinction also reminds us that the Constitution was designed not merely as a document about the maintenance of society, but rather as a means to change it. This is why the instrumentality of education was so sensitive a matter in the context of the values to be promoted by it. Indeed, the debate can be traced further back – to Gandhi who did not include religious or any other form of moral instruction in his programme of basic education. When asked about it, he simply referred to the likelihood of conflict being encouraged by the teaching of religions and to the futility of teaching values with the help of books. This position taken by Gandhi in the late 1930s was quite different from the one he had articulated in 'Hind Swaraj' which the Supreme Court verdict quotes in support of its own position.

It is evident that the National Curriculum Framework is not merely about curriculum renewal. It marks, and it has occasioned, a serious shift in educational policy. For a long time, the proponents of value-education have been struggling to create a window in the wall of apathy towards religions as the principle of secular education. Time and again, they failed and their motives were contained or foiled by the political culture of the day. This is what happened to the recommendations made by the Sri Prakasa Committee under Nehru and the Joshi Committee under Indira Gandhi. The political climate of India under the NDA is greatly conducive to the task of not just carving out a window in the wall of secular educational policy, but also to letting the wall be demolished like a historical monument. What is left to be seen is whether the everyday realities of the school will allow the new interpretation of secularism to be practised. The distance maintained so far between the school and the family had the advantage of making the teacher's job of mediating religious plurality in the classroom somewhat easy by permitting a policy of indifference. If the future requires our teachers to negotiate the complex study of religions, the emerging climate of majoritarianism and upper caste Hindu

domination are likely to pose a serious challenge to the teacher's success. The fact that teacher training is extremely poor to begin with, and the teacher's professional status is also declining, both as a result of contractual work arrangements in the state system and the growth of privatisation may soon turn classrooms into battlegrounds of accentuated identities and community politics. During the debate held in parliament in August 2001 to discuss the National Curriculum Framework, nominated member Beatrix D'Souza had pointed out the problems that arise when a teacher is required to discuss a religion other than his or her own.

That long debate had shown that the so-named 'national' curriculum did not enjoy political consensus. This was also evident from the manner in which the NCERT got post-facto approval for it in the 38th meeting of its general body held in May 2002. As many as 14 state ministers of education walked out of this meeting and then issued a press statement specifying their objection to the curriculum framework. These facts apparently did not suffice to convince the court that the avoidance of CABE was not merely a matter of procedure, but also one of politics. Interestingly, the verdict has upheld the supremacy of the parliament in the matter of educational policy, thereby testifying to the political nature of educational decision-making. This facet of the verdict has been appreciated by those who took a salvaging position to overcome their disappointment. Since the announcement of the verdict in mid-September, several organisations have attempted to mobilise political support for opposing the national curriculum and the new history textbooks which have now appeared in the market. These textbooks are of outrageously poor quality, inviting criticism on matters as superficial as printing errors. By quickly agreeing to correct all errors, the government has deflected public attention away from the deeper ideological design embedded in the historiography of these textbooks. Even on a matter as weighty as the absence of any mention of Gandhi's assassination, the government and the NCERT have succeeded in getting off the hook in parliament by citing it as an error. The willingness of elected politicians to accept such a justification shows how unrealistic it may be to expect that they will now take a deep enough interest in education to recognise how its policy is undergoing politically significant transformation. **PNW**