

# Gender and Curriculum

*Despite its reiterations on equality, fundamental rights and quality education for all, the emphasis of the National Curriculum Framework on Indian tradition and the collapsing of value education and religious education puts on hold the possibility of education emerging as an enabling tool for women's empowerment. The article revisits, briefly, the vision and policy framework of the New Education Policy of 1986 with regard to women's education, analysing the effect of progressive policy rhetoric on the actual writing of school textbooks, particularly those relating to language teaching.*

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The National Curriculum Framework (NCF) introduced by the government on November 14, 2000 has raised considerable debate and controversy regarding the content of social science textbooks. More specifically, the NCF has been accused of adopting a communal and brahmanical view of history and of seriously undermining the historical method of inquiry through bureaucratic and political interference. While the primary focus has been on the question of history and the deletions that have been mandated by the NCERT, what has not been put under scrutiny is how the NCF jeopardises the governments' own commitment to providing gender-just education. Despite its reiterations regarding equality, fundamental rights and quality education for all, a closer reading of the document points to a move towards ensuring that women learn to play out their "traditional" social roles as good mothers, wives and daughters within the family and the nation.

This article is divided into two sections. The first one looks at how the core thrust of the NCF might impact on the likely content of future education. It argues that the emphasis on Indian tradition and the collapsing of value education with religious education puts on hold the possibility of education emerging as an enabling tool for women's empowerment. Comparing the NCF with 19th century debates in colonial India about women's education reveals that the new discourse is, in a substantial measure, no more than a re-statement of old anxieties and equally antiquated solutions. As a counter point to these debates, the second section revisits, albeit briefly, the vision and policy framework of the New Education Policy of 1986 with regard to women's education. More concretely, it will analyse the 'trickle-down' effect of progressive policy rhetoric

on the actual writing of school textbooks, particularly those relating to language teaching. As the review points out, the decade following the 1986 policy refinements did not yield any significant positive yield in the manner in which gender was dealt with in the texts. The uptake of this analysis is clear: even as one must critique the NCF for its regressive views on women, there is no reason to believe that progressive rhetoric alone can change the entrenched gender stereotypes in school curricula. Unless the policy framework can deal with issues of actualisation of alternative images and representation for women, no real progress can be made.

## I Burden of Tradition

As is well known, the 19th century saw the emergence of women's education as a significant issue in colonial India. It witnessed the setting up of institutions of learning for women and girls by social reformers and the British government. Throughout the century, but particularly in the latter half, questions regarding the nature and content of women's education became a subject of heated debate – within the broad parameters of a nationalist consciousness – between the so-called liberal-progressive elements on the one hand and conservative-revivalists on the other. Transcending the differences between the two camps were some common points of agreement. First, both sides concurred that the contemporary absence of education amongst women – regardless of what might have historically contributed to such a situation – was a sign of India's lack of civilisation, an indicator of its low position in the evolutionary spiral that was history. The corollary was straightforward: If India had to catch up with the west in terms of

its material achievements, then the nation's women had to be urgently educated. At the same time, this education could not be left to the alien colonial state or the missionaries. Because, if in the process of being educated, the native woman did no more than refashion herself in the image of her white, western counterpart, then it could create a new crisis of identity for native society or the incipient Indian nation. In formulaic terms, the debate is easily summed up: a resounding yes to women's education but an equally emphatic no to unregulated, western education.

The anxiety about the content of education was not just in terms of threat to native identity. It was also powered by fears of a modernist onslaught, based on the rationalist-humanist message of Enlightenment, on the existing social order, overturning hierarchies of power – relating to caste, ethnicity or gender – and leading to a state of anomie. Not surprisingly, there was an increasing preoccupation with defining the kind of education that would be suitable for Indian women.

Thundered the Mahratta in its comment on the Female High School in Bombay in 1887: "Nothing can be gained by anglicising our girls or teaching them to ape the ways of men." Schools must not create an "aversion to our domestic life". It was 'most reprehensible' that lessons inculcating the "high principles of ancient Aryan religious morality" were conspicuously absent from the girls' curriculum" and so was "advice to young women with regard to chaste wifely conduct."<sup>1</sup>

The seemingly 'reactionary' tone of the Mahratta was not exceptional. The most celebrated 'progressive' face of Indian nationalism in the late 19th century, Dadabhai Naoroji, voiced the same anxieties in a more sophisticated garb: "The time will come when natives generally will

see the benefit of female education as a great social necessity to rise in civilisation and to advance social happiness and progress; and will understand that women had as much right to exercise and enjoy all the rights, privileges, and duties of this world as man, each working towards the common good in her or his respective sphere. *But that time has not come yet... Good and educated mothers only will raise good and educated sons.*"

In 1916, K B V Krishna Rao, a zamindar of Cocanada, wrote, "The education of girls requires to be improved in various directions to suit the conditions of the various classes of girls and make them well equipped so as to enable them to become good housewives and good mothers...it would not be wise to impart such kind of education as would implant in them tastes which they would have no opportunity of gratifying in their after life (sic)."

The intent is unambiguous: women's education was not so much an end as it was a mean to an end – the betterment of the family and the nation. While Naoroji does mention that women have the right to enjoy all the rights available to men, there is no mistaking the familiar note of women raising sons for the nation. Nor can one ignore the fear about "anglicised" Indian women discarding their own culture and tradition and moving towards acquiring 'tastes' that Indian men will be unable to fulfil.

Intrinsic to this creation of a new nationalist patriarchy, was the intellectual labour which went into distinguishing oriental from western women. As Ram Mohan Roy's had put it nearly half a century earlier: Hindu women were "infinitely more self-sacrificing than men", and their "exemplifying wifely devotion and spiritual strength" was their distinguishing feature as oriental women.

The NCF harks back to the 19th century. Its overarching concern too is to locate the curriculum within a self-evident and unproblematised Indian tradition. In an embarrassingly faithful echo of the earlier debate, the refrain of "Indianising" the curriculum, so as to maintain the best qualities of Indian womanhood and prevent anglicisation in the face of technological modernity – runs through the framework document.

Predictably, there is a deep anxiety about contemporary Indian society distancing itself from its 'religio-philosophical ethos':

However a sizeable segment of the contemporary Indian society, seem to have dis-

tanced itself from the religio-philosophical ethos, the awareness of the social design and the understanding of the heritage of the past. Influenced by the alien technological ethos, the parents and the educational institutions emphasise the acquisition of high grade techno-informative knowledge alone. However, the impact of westernisation has been limited to only the elite members of society, leaving the masses unaware of these developments. This has brought into sharp focus the rural-urban, the agrarian-industrial, the affluent-destitute and the literate and the illiterate divides. In this way the structure of the authority of the Indian agrarian society has been disturbed. An individual in the formal work system could exercise authority over those who were otherwise his superiors in age and in societal structure. In the agrarian society, successive generations followed the occupation as well as the goal sets of the family or the caste at large (*Context and Concerns*, p 3).

In other words, the trope of tradition is invoked to contain the potentially destabilising influence of education. The NCF desires to relocate education where it traditionally belonged – in maintaining and reproducing power relations within traditional caste society. It views contact with western civilisation as a source of undesirable social conflict and turmoil and singles out westernisation, defined simply as a challenge to established authority, whether at the level of family or community, as a grave danger. This forms the crux of the fear that pervades the NCF – how to embrace the fruits of "an alien technological ethos" without abandoning the "high principles of ancient Aryan religious morality" as desired by the Mahratta.

Needless to say, forgotten in this anxiety is the definition of education as a force for change or liberation. Nowhere in the document does the NCF envision education as a tool for empowerment or as a means to achieving social mobility or an egalitarian society.

Interestingly, the section on 'Education of Girls' comes under the broad heading of Education for Social Cohesion (rather than, say, change or progress) in the framework document. The dilemma presented is remarkably similar to the one emphasised by Naoroji's statement on women's education. And so is the form; it begins with a large and abstract statement of gender equality and then quickly reduces itself to emphasizing gender specific roles.

Equality among sexes is a fundamental right under the Constitution of India. Besides making education accessible to

more and more girls especially rural girls, removing all gender-discrimination and gender-bias in school curriculum is absolutely necessary. Moreover it will be most appropriate thing to recognise and nurture the best features of each gender in the best Indian tradition

After all, India gave her women the right to vote without any prolonged battle for it, unlike in the west. There is a need to develop and implement gender inclusive and gender sensitive curricular strategies to nurture a generation of girls and boys who are equally competent and are sensitive to one another, and grow up in a caring and sharing mode as equals and not as adversaries. (*Context and Concerns*, pg 9)

Where it differs from Naoroji is in its acute awareness of the potential social conflict that education and notions of gender equality can engender. Hence, the conceptual positioning of education for girls under the rubric of social cohesion. And the idealised strategic roadmap which would ostensibly lead to women's equality, beginning with a massive negation of the relevance of agitational politics. Unlike the west where the demand for women's rights has resulted in the breakdown of the family, women in India need not protest for their rights because, as in the case of the right to vote, they would be granted their legitimate dues in the natural course by the ever-generous Indian patriarchs. The NCF resonates with facile dichotomies between western civilisation and the Indian tradition, mistaking secular social trends as a marker of essential cultural difference. Witness, for instance, the following lament: "In contrast to the joint family and the extended family, the society is now witnessing the phenomenon of nuclear families, single parents, unmarried relationships and so on..."

The irony is as pathetic as it is profound: Even as the Indian state proclaims its progressive credentials by legislating against domestic violence and sex-selection technologies, it shuts the door on any critique of the family as an institution – something that the women's movement in India has been fighting for long to legitimise.

### **Religious Instruction as Value Education**

In collapsing the distinction between value education and religious education, the document raises new questions regarding the objectives of educating women and girls in our society.

Value education and education about religions would not form a separate subject of study or examination at any stage. These would be so judiciously integrated with all the subjects of study in the scholastic areas and all the activities and the programmes in the co-scholastic areas, that the objectives thereof would be directly and indirectly achieved in the classroom, at the school assembly places, play grounds and other such places. (Chapter 2, p 35)

In a society where women have carried the exclusive historical burden of upholding tradition and religious identity, the NCF aims at accentuating the bias. It ignores the subordinate position that women occupy in different religions. Contrast this with the National Education Policy of 1986: "Education will neutralise the accumulated distortions of the past." In actual fact, the NCF does worse than going back on the bland promise of its policy predecessor: it expands the agenda of reaffirming religious identities from the confines of the class room to the very fabric of social interaction.

What's worse, it introduces a vague and ill-defined concept, that of spiritual quotient or SQ, as an indicator of educational achievement. Not surprisingly, the document remains unconcerned about how this new-fangled intellectual sophistry might be given practical shape. It remains silent on how SQ, even assuming it has a determinate, objective content, will be evaluated and by whom. Could it be that women would have to prove their selfless, sacrificing and devotional qualities in order to score high marks? Alternately, how will those who break with tradition be judged?

## II

The NCF is without doubt a huge step backwards from the National Education Policy (1986). The latter saw education as, "an agent of basic change in the status of women". "The National Education System", it argued, "will play a positive, interventionist role in the empowerment of women." But we need to assess the impact of its progressive policy rhetoric on the actual making of the textbooks. Did it really "neutralise the accumulated distortions of the past"? Did gender get portrayed in a manner that was significantly different from past representations of women and girls?

The following is a brief look at the NCERT's language textbooks for classes 3, 5 and 8, in the decade following the

formulation of NEP.<sup>2</sup> The rationale for focusing on language textbooks is that language is a key issue in feminist pedagogical practice. It is a powerful site for the construction and communication of gender identities and for reinforcing power relations.

Stories/narratives create meaning in all cultures. By ordering and describing our experiences, they enable us to make sense of the world. The power of language derives from its power to reify that which is constructed – precisely at the point where this construction is most questionable – into something that appears natural and self-evident. In one word, language serves to naturalise gendered inequalities.

In the preface to the language textbooks, it is claimed that the objective is to expand the horizons of the child, to increase her ability to think and to inculcate values within her. The values that are described in the preface are: determination, helping others, bravery, discipline, timeliness, the importance of hard work, social service and love for the nation.

The preface suggests that the teacher tackle language teaching through methods that facilitate discussion and interaction in the class as a whole. By encouraging children to undertake role-plays, for instance, it is possible not just to elicit the active participation of the students but also to raise their confidence to communicate. However the content and the presentation of the lessons leaves one with serious doubt as to whether the teacher would be able to achieve these aims, particularly with regard to the girls in her class. Consider the following statistics based on a review of 75 lessons from the textbooks mentioned earlier:

- In as many as 34 lessons, that is nearly 50 per cent of the aggregate, men and boys were the only actors in the texts. There were no female characters in the narratives.
- In 10 lessons, the presence of women was either mentioned in passing or confined to traditional roles – i.e., as mothers, sisters, etc.
- No fewer than 23 lessons were in the category of information dissemination: didactic pieces on 'the exploding population', the virtues of healthy eating, and such like. In this category, were also lessons comprising 'dohas' (couplets) and other poetic forms which might be, *prima facie*, seen as having no gender bias.
- About one in ten lessons – eight to be precise – sought to represent women and

girls 'in a different light'. Among them, there is one chapter on swimming which includes references to women who have achieved excellence in that sport. In another such lesson, a girl writes to friend about her visit to the zoo. A third describes a sports day celebration which has girls as active participants. In addition, there are three others which make a genuine attempt to represent women in a different light – but even these scanty offerings are not without their own problems. Of the three, two are biographic accounts of Rani Laxmibai and Madame Curie while the third is an account featuring discrimination experienced by a girl in the village.

### *They Were Born Great Men!*

For the purposes of critique, it is important to look at how men of honour and achievement are represented in these narratives. The texts in question comprise biographical profiles, childhood experiences, letters or anecdotes from the lives of great men. They cover, largely, 'the usual suspects' – Mahatma Gandhi, Lal Bahadur Shastri, Rajendra Prasad, Ishwarchandra Vidyasagar, Edison, Chandrashekhar Azad, Vikram Sarabhai, Veer Abhimanyu, Jagdishchandra Basu, Baba Amte, Arjun

The narratives of their lives and achievements are very much in the public realm. No details are given of their family life or their homes. There is, in Baba Amte's life history, a mention of the impact that his mother had on him but this is an aspect of the customary supporting role that women have to play in the lives of great men.

Minor events in the lives of the men are imbued with great meaning – for example, in the case of Lal Bahadur Shastri, his stealing a rose from a garden and the consequent words of admonition from the 'Mali' are supposed to change his life, motivating him to become a great leader of the future. Apart from the careless myth-making of it, there is something of interest in what the Mali actually tells the little Lal Bahadur: "You don't have a father! Your behaviour ought to be unimpeachable. You should try and please everyone – just like this rose."

Not having the presence of a father in his life would no doubt have serious implications for the life of a boy. But does that mean that he has to please everyone? Only if the absence of a father is also understood as an absence of moral authority, not to mention the absence of a credible

figure who might protect the boy against the temptations of the world. Equally, the boy is also expected, in time, to take over the role that his father has prematurely given up. In other words, to assume the mantle of responsible male leadership in the family.

In the minutiae of men's everyday lives – preferably the early years, since the presumption seems to be that you are either born great or to achieve greatness first thing in the childhood – lie grand moments of revelation, of courage, strength, determination and struggle.

### *That's What Girls Are For!*

Contrast this seamless valorisation with the somewhat muted accounts of the two valiant women who are mentioned in the texts.

Rani of Jhansi is no doubt a great rider and fighter but she is vulnerable too – prone to depression (at the death of her son and husband) and doubt (the Rani often finds refuge in prayer and withdrawal from the world). Even when she comes back to fight the British, she has to take recourse to spiritual fortifications – she is said to pray every morning – before commencing on worldly matters. No such doubts plague great men in their lives, they face all challenges with calm assurance and self-certainty.

If it is not doubts that assail women, then there are other equally important 'distractions'. In the case of Madame Curie, for instance – even as she busies herself in the laboratory, surrounded by chemical fluids, test tubes and complicated experimental equipment not to mention her scientist-husband — we are informed, "Maria used to do all the housework herself. She would clean the house, wash clothes, cook food and wash dishes. After two years of marriage, Maria gave birth to a girl child. This increased the work load on her but did not affect the quality of her work." Fine words to describe the double burden of women! Apart from making a not-so-subtle case for how it is eminently possible for women, if they so choose, to both work at home and make a 'contribution' to the larger cause of humanity. Ultimately, however, these digressions into the domestic duties of eminent women has a different meaning and purpose. They are meant to be narrative devices which render these women 'normal' for the average reader. In other words, the idea is to 'tame' them, to contain the 'dangers' they pose

to the existing order as different women. This provides a stark counterpoint to the lives of great men, where the emphasis is on larger-than-life myth-making and deification, to render the subjects as distant and towering as possible.

The achievements of Rani of Jhansi and Marie Curie need to be reined in, to be 'normalised' through their participation in cooking, washing, cleaning and praying. They are tamed into not being too out of this world, too different, too challenging. Madame Curie's account is strikingly different to the biographies of other male scientists like Vikram Sarabhai and Jagdish Chandra Basu. Here the men were not just clear about what they were doing or what they wanted to achieve – a momentous self-certainty which they share with other great men — but they were also serenely free of any domestic clutter, not to mention any doubt or depression about their chosen vocations in life. The concluding line from the Rani Jhansi story is instructive: "By her sacrifice the Rani proved that if called upon [in the rather extraordinary circumstances no doubt], Indian Woman too could give the enemy a tough time."

### *Of Boys and Men*

This raises questions about the role models that these texts place before the girl child. Her exclusion becomes all the more evident from the way young boys dominate other narratives. Boys are invariably shown as striving for the higher virtues of morality and character – of courage, hard work, grit and determination in the face of all odds (like being blind, parentless) and limitless intellectual inquiry. (But what is the meaning of learning for girls?)

Equally, boys in all three textbooks exhibit greater mobility, travel to various places on their own, and, crucially, possess the ability to comment on and describe new experiences. Where women feature in these travels, they are shown to lack in understanding or knowledge. For example in the lesson 'Tamil Nadu Ki Yatra', Dinesh is visiting Chennai for the first time. His friend goes to pick him up from the station. Even before they leave the station Dinesh begins to tell his friend about the geographical details of the state. His friend's wife, Maya, who has lived in Chennai all her life comments: "Bhai Sahab, I am hearing these special facts about my state for the first time. How do you know so much?"

We move on further in the travel and Dinesh's wife is shocked at the amount of fish the fishermen have caught in their nets. She exclaims: "Chi! Chi! O god, how heartless! These fishermen are killing all these fish. What wrong have these fish done to these fishermen!...These mean fishermen catch the fish (at night) while they are asleep." On hearing her comment, says the narrator, "We all collapsed with laughter, holding our stomachs".

The question is: Who gets to tell the narrative and to whom? How are women positioned within these narratives in relation to others?

Despite being a grown woman, Maya is not only lacking in information about a place where she has lived all her life, but her responses are typically naive and innocent – not to be taken seriously. Throughout the lesson the voice of the male narrator dominates to give us all the descriptions about what is worth knowing about Tamil Nadu.

### *Women as They Are?*

Women come in predominantly in their role as mothers – maternal love flows unquestioningly in her in the poem 'Kadamb ka Pedh'. At other places, they inspire their sons to grow up in the service of the nation, much like the idealised women of the freedom struggle, the mothers of the nation's current and future generations.

But what constitutes the feminine and the masculine emerges most significantly through stories and poems. The feminine is what is close to nature, a matter of habit, while the masculine is cultural, a matter of struggle and accomplishment. For instance, birds are the embodiment of the feminine, when they sing their sweet song and dance with the fairies and buzz around flowers that dance in the garden: soft, tender and vulnerable.

There is a story in the third standard language text – titled 'For the Sparrow' – that spells out for little children the attributes of masculinity and femininity.

His name was Balram. The name of his village, Pokhari. His work was farming. The difficulty was that he was not interested in farming. All his ancestral land was lying uncultivated. What ought he to do! He did feel hungry everyday. He would go to the forest and survive on the fruits. When fruits were not available he would collect dried pieces of wood and exchange them in the village for some bread. He

would somehow fill his stomach. At times he would consider tilling his ancestral land but farming was not his forte. One day Balram was in the forest collecting firewood. Suddenly his hand came in contact with something *very soft*. He could hear a faint sound. Balram looked with interest and found a small sparrow there. Balram picked up the sparrow. She was *weak and sick*. He felt that the bird was saying something to him.

He thought the bird must be thirsty and therefore he gave her a few drops of water. He gave her a fruit to eat. He kept the bird on his shoulder all day long.

In the evening he went to his neighbour and in exchange for the wood he bought back some grain. Balram gave the grain to the bird and said, "look dear bird, stay in my house. When you are better you can fly away."

The bird was happy in Balram's house. Everyday she would perch herself on his shoulder and go to the jungle. On the way she would sing him sweet songs. In the evening she would come back with him. Balram would take a lot of care of the sparrow. Now he would go everyday to get wood and from selling this he would get food for himself and the sparrow everyday. Both would chat with each other. Slowly Balram started to love the bird. He found a companion.

As the bird recovered, the possibility of her leaving became real. Finally Balram started to work on his unproductive land. He worked very, very hard. The bird in all this kept flying around him.

In some time the crop was standing in the field. When the crop ripened then the house was overflowing with grain. Balram showed this to the sparrow and said, "this is all for you. Now you need not go anywhere. Now you stay with me always." On listening to Balram the sparrow started singing with joy! [emphasis added]

Is this just a sweet, innocent story about a young boy and a bird becoming friends or does this communicate something else? The sparrow made an honorable and responsible man out of Balram, while he made sure that she gave up her instinct to fly (away) forever. All she needed was the security of the grain to insure that she had a reason to stay. Just like a lot of women in their 'marriages', with men the breadwinners.

In another story involving a black deer being captured by a prince, his companion – the female deer – cries in front of the prince. The prince is so moved by the intensity of the female deer's love for the male deer that he takes the decision to leave the deer. The dramatic strength of

the story is parasitic on the supposedly natural love and affection (mamta) that is part of women's nature. Clearly, the women's entreaties to the prince are not in the nature of an achievement. It is in the female deer's nature to cry for her mate. What counts as achievement is something that involves struggle, detachment from conflicting emotions and, finally, perseverance. To wit, the prince, subsuming his desire to catch the deer and, proactively, taking the decision to free the deer, is the real hero. The female deer's emotional outburst pales in contrast to the difficult moral decision that the prince is required to make.

Both stories are indicative of how norms ascribed to men and women can be articulated through seemingly apolitical and innocent descriptions. Whether one is talking of nature or of human relationships with animals or simply about events that involve an interface between the two.

### Conclusion

It is quite clear from the analysis of the language texts that despite an explicit policy commitment from earlier governments to provide an empowering education for women and girls, the situation on the ground did not improve a great deal. Traditional meanings of the masculine and the feminine continued to persist along with the oppositional, dichotomous categories of active-passive, emotional-

rational, nature-culture and dependent-autonomous.

Clearly, gender-sensitive material at the primary and secondary levels require inputs from those who have struggled to bring women's voices, narratives, experiences and worldviews into the academic mainstream. Without this knowledge-base, those charged with rewriting texts will restrict themselves to superficial tinkering: either by increasing the number of times girls are visually or verbally represented in the books or by facile role-reversals.

The fact that those who have contributed to the creation of knowledge regarding women have had little to do with the writing of text books might be, in the end, an extremely important reason why we have not, despite a decade-and-a-half of rhetoric, moved beyond the stage of pious policy pronouncements.

Indeed, why instead of moving ahead, we might be in the midst of a severe regression. [44]

### Notes

- 1 Quoted in S Bhattacharya's 'Introduction' in S Bhattacharya, J Bara et al (eds), *Development of Women's Education in India: 1850-1920*. JNU, Kanishka Publication, 2001. The citations from Naoroji and Krishnarao that follow are also from the same source.
- 2 The text books in question are *Bal Bharati-Part III*. February 2000; *Bal Bharati-Part V*, 1994, Rpt 1999 and *Saras Bharati-Part 20*, 1998, Rpt 2001.

### Professor M. N. Srinivas Memorial Prize

The Indian Sociological Society and the Indian Council of Social Science Research have jointly set up Professor M. N. Srinivas Endowment Fund. This Fund has instituted a prize for young sociologists/social anthropologists for publishing the best sociological/social anthropological paper in any of the social science journals/edited volume, in English, in India. The prize will carry a sum of Rs. 1000

Papers published during 01 January 1999 - 31 December 2001 are eligible for consideration. The author must be 35 years or less in age on 31 December 2001. A reprint of the paper along with a photocopy of the title page of the journal/edited volume must reach the office of Indian Sociological Society (Institute of Social Sciences, 8 Nelson Mandela Road, Vasant Kunj, New Delhi 110 070) on or before 31 August 2002. Besides the authors, others are also welcome to bring suitable papers to the notice of the selection committee for consideration.