

Facts Are Not Enough

Writing History for School-children

By Krishna Kumar

It is a matter of some relief that the UPA government has taken the only appropriate decision it could have on the matter of NCERT's history textbooks. A committee of three historians has been appointed to review these books, and recommend what instructions can be given to teachers to moderate their perspective. This is an unusual task, which is relevant only for the current session. For future, a whole new perspective is needed on how school textbooks should be prepared.

As a school subject, history poses a unique challenge for textbook writing, and it is rather sad that despite recurring controversy, neither NCERT nor private publishers have acknowledged the challenge. This challenge lies in treating the child as an active constructor of knowledge, rather than as a mere recipient. In other subjects like science and mathematics, the need to shift the child's role from being a recipient to a constructor has been recognised, and a few textbooks reflect this shift.

But in history, the old idea of serving children a vast narrative, studded with dates and names, continues to prevail. When people say that school history should offer nothing but facts, they reveal their ignorance of how a child's mind works and develops. Facts acquire meaning for a child when they carry a perspective. The usual way textbook authors understand perspective is in terms of ideology. But there are other ways to define perspective.

If we take the child's perspective, our primary concern will be to explain how we know what we know about the past. Most textbook writers don't bother to tell children what the sources of historical knowledge are. They tell a grand story, with VIP characters and dramatic events. The historian becomes a magician who has an amazing stock of knowledge; the child is supposed to have faith that the magician will stick to the truth. I have seen just one Indian textbook which forms a clear exception to this familiar style. It is the Class VI textbook on ancient India written by a team led by Kumkum Roy. It is part of the recently published series by Delhi's SCERT.

What makes this an exception in the Indian market, and a world class textbook if you compare it to Japanese, German or some good American textbooks of history for schools, is the attitude it shows towards children.

Far from assuming that children cannot understand how historians construct their knowledge with the help of archeological and other sources, it introduces children to archeology. It lets children be aware when a variety of clues are assembled to find a solution, and it tells them with candour how

inadequate our knowledge is on certain matters. It is full of activities and discussion points. Its questions and exercises are a marked departure from all earlier textbooks, including not just the new but also the old NCERT textbooks.

This is the direction in which we must go if we want to avoid the jerky shifts in curriculum and textbooks we have witnessed over the last few years. India is not the only country in the world where a fundamental debate is raging about what kind of country it should become. Japan is a case in point where school textbooks have been a subject of major controversy.

But school life is not rocked from one April to the next, partly because the Japanese system does not insist on one official textbook, but also because the quality of writing and production is sophisticated enough to take care of the politics of perspective, even though to outsiders it looks like an ongoing earthquake. Similarly, in Germany, the teaching of history has been a matter of great national anxiety, specifically with reference to the treatment of the Nazi period. If you look at a German high school level textbook, you are

struck by the variety of sources it introduces to children and also by the imaginative treatment it offers to the subject matter. For instance, a Class IX textbook asks children to analyse and compare the perspectives reflected in the editorials written by three major dailies on the day America entered World War II. In their exam too, children are given such material and asked to make judgements within given parameters. By the scale of this intellectually stimulating approach, our teaching of history looks unforgivably backward.

We have been so obsessed with ideological issues in the teaching of history that we have just not bothered to look at pedagogy. What I find quite astonishing is that historians have not been disturbed by the common knowledge that children hate history. More disturbing is the fact that schools consider history and other subjects of the humanities stream fit only for the less bright. Indeed, some prestigious schools have scrapped the humanities sections altogether. If this becomes a trend, we will no longer need poorly written textbooks to create an unthinking public mind.

Our educational policy needs drastic reform, but curriculum and textbook-related policies deserve subtler attention than we are used to giving. The challenge of protecting the young from indoctrination can only be met by encouraging them to think. As of now, our system is geared to teaching words; only the exceptional student puts thought into them. And this, - alas, LS not confined to history.

