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# Killing the school curriculum

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THE Supreme Court will shortly take up a PIL filed against the implementation of the controversial new secondary school curriculum. The NCERT has been charged by the petitioners with seeking to saffronise education and the Court's last order restrained the NCERT from releasing its textbooks for History and Hindi. Following closely as this does the

notice to the NCERT on the distortion of education, we have a situation in which various institutions of the state are questioning the bonafides of the government to provide suitable education to all its citizens.

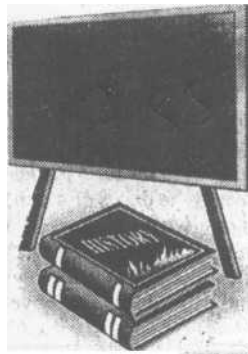
The issue of what should go into a curriculum has long confronted societies across the world. Conflicts over curriculum content are in fact conflicts over wider questions of power, since they involve ways of organising that vast universe of possible knowledge. India has had a tradition of selecting curricula to 'teach' nationalism to children. Nationalism was a consciously articulated aim when the NCERT was set up and a 1986 report specifically investigated textbooks for their success in promoting national integration.

It is this which is complacently being repeated by the present government's educationists. J.S. Rajput, head of NCERT has suggested that the earlier curriculum was simply a

product of the Congress era. Such an argument suggests that secular liberals who are objecting to the NCERT's moves are merely peeved at their version of truth being manoeuvred out. NCERT also cites irate Jats, Sikhs, Jains, all of whom ostensibly hail the amendments, as proof that Hindutva nationalism is more inclusive than before.

But even if all education is ultimately ideological, not all selection is the same. There is *politics* of selection which enables minds to become either open and questioning or suspicious and complacent. For all their didacticism, the old textbooks emphasised an inclusive nation. The nationalism being introduced today seeks not to unite but to divide. It plays upon our anxiety over the social, political and economic changes taking place by evoking a glorious lost past of Hindu supremacy.

It is a dreadful irony that a government that seeks to 'modernise' India by celebrating IT advances, globalisation and nuclear weapons



as essentials of modern life, uses education not to help our children shape a new world but to regret our fall from a mythical old one. The National Curriculum Framework states that we have "discontinuities in the living process" because "influenced by the *alien*

(my emphasis) technological ethos, the parents and the educational institutions emphasise the acquisition of high grade techno-informative knowledge alone." It is a fear of modernity and the social problems it brings that is sought to be addressed by emphasising Sanskrit or introducing "value education".

That the Hindutva agenda to construct a new national identity is destructive hardly needs to be restated — Gujarat is only the most visible example of it. But the fact that this newness quite lacks any modern educational practice, any contemporary pedagogic ideas to equip children for a swiftly changing world, is sometimes lost. The new curriculum does not introduce a new approach to Maths, long seen as a bogey, does not make English

textbooks any livelier for those who have no background in it but wish to learn it desperately. It retains a dry approach to the sciences. There are no cross-curricular approaches to subjects.

Although it is well-established that teacher input is essential for restructuring syllabi, there was no trialling and only a very limited discussion on the new textbooks. There was no consensus building on how education can balance equity with quality, no measures to reduce the class division which our education systematises. Nationwide, although the failure rate of all students who take the 10th board examination is an incredible 50 per cent, there is no radical solution offered to set this right. There is, however, a detailed plan to enhance the study of Vedic India!

The truth is that education should be in the forefront of the government's reform agenda, but not like this. What is required is a national commitment to raise basic educational standards. A saffronised curriculum cannot obscure the fact that a government that makes its ideology the lynchpin of its education reform is both irresponsible and tragically out of date.

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