

NCERT textbooks can't create a secular student. If they did, BJP wouldn't be in power

Once we give up this myth of school textbooks as the fountain of truth and the child as an empty vessel, we can take a more sober view of what textbooks can and cannot do.

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There is an old Indian Railways joke about two passengers quarrelling over whether to open the glass window or not. One passenger found the open window freezing, while the other one found it suffocating when closed. A child who was watching this heated exchange intervened to point out: "lekin uncle is khidki me to kanch hi nahi hai" [but uncle, there is no windowpane here.

Sometimes I fear that our heated debates about school textbooks resemble that situation. We all assume that there is a windowpane out there, that what we write in or delete from the textbooks makes a difference to the way students think and act. ThePrint Opinion Editor Rama Lakshmi puts this sharply: "Textbook wars are outdated. They assume — wrongly — that school children sit in the classroom in a vacuum with no other portals available for knowledge construction." This has been accentuated by social media but was true even before that. Very often contestations around children's textbooks are by the adults and for the adults. But is that all there is to textbooks?

Writer's perspective

Last week I asked myself this question as I glanced over Professor Krishna Kumar's cryptic email that read like an obituary: "The Gr. XII political science textbook is front page news today. They have finally pounced upon it. It was a great piece of work, a monumental contribution to education." Addressed to Professor Suhas Palshikar and copied to me, this email brought the news of The Indian Express expose on NCERT textbooks. He was talking about the Class XII Political Science textbook Politics in India Since Independence, one of the six Class IX-XII Political Science textbooks for which Professor Palshikar and I were the Chief Editors, the chief culprits if you will.

Now, who would not like to hear such praise from Professor Krishna Kumar? For many of us, he is the last word on education, especially on the content of education. Beginning with his writings in Dinman — that extraordinary weekly magazine in Hindi — his writings in English and Hindi have extended the frontiers of public debate on education beyond the routine issues of budgetary allocations, school buildings and the teacher-student ratio. He has consistently drawn our attention to the content of school education — what exactly is worth teaching and how — drawing from educational theory, history of debates on education and comparative understanding of educational practices. His words also matter as he was the director of NCERT (2004-2010) when a new and progressive philosophy of education (National Curriculum

Framework) was adopted in 2005, leading to an overhaul of all the NCERT textbooks. Approbation from him means the world to me.

It is also true that it is hard for me to be objective about this book, my favourite among the six textbooks we wrote. Any discussion about it takes me back to those heady days of textbook writing. One day a historian might wonder how this first official textbook account of post-Independence India managed to say as much as it did about the Emergency, about conflict in Kashmir, about insurgency in Mizoram and Nagaland, the Sikh massacre in 1984 and the Muslim massacre in Gujarat in 2002. I have written about parts of this story earlier. Professor Kumar's mail validated two years of labour of love that went into the making of these textbooks. This was the much-needed solace after the repeated mutilation of these textbooks over the last few years.

Reader's perspective

Yet it did not take away the question: do textbooks really matter as much as we like to imagine? I remember my first visit to my village school after the Haryana government had adopted NCERT textbooks in 2008. How did he like the new Political Science books, I asked Guruji who taught social science to Class IX. His polite mumble made me suspect something. It turned out that Guruji had not seen the cover page of the new textbooks that he was supposed to be teaching, nor even the older ones that were discontinued. He was teaching from the guidebook, then and now. I realised that a textbook is only as good as the teacher who takes it to the students.

More shocks were to come my way when I realised how these textbooks were taught as and when the teachers actually used them in the classrooms. Examinations can maim the best of textbooks like no government can.

Yes, there were these exceptional schools (my children studied in one of those) that actually used the text, the illustrations and the spirit of these books. There were those lovely emails from readers, often UPSC aspirants, who were captivated by these textbooks. And then there were students who claimed to have opted for Political Science in graduation because of these textbooks. Deeply gratifying, but too small and self-selected a sample to disprove the harsh hypothesis that textbooks are harmless.

At any rate these anecdotal pieces of evidence simply cannot outweigh the mountain of counter evidence called the New India. The brute fact is that if secular textbooks were to shape the public mind, the BJP should never have come to power. The period when these textbooks have been in operation (2006 to 2023) are also the years when the BJP was on the rise and enjoyed above average vote share among the young and educated voters, presumably the readers of these textbooks. That surely makes for a poor advertisement of textbooks as trusted carriers of secular, constitutional values.

A third perspective

Once we give up this myth of textbooks as the fountain of truth and the child as an empty vessel, we can take a more sober view of what textbooks can and cannot do. A good textbook can be a big help to a tiny minority of good teachers and keen students. This tiny pool contributes a disproportionately large share to the opinion makers. For an average teacher and student, the textbook is a source of authentication of facts, should they wish to do fact-checking. A shoddy or mischievous textbook can do serious damage by legitimising falsity and prejudices. A good textbook presents the students and teachers with a model of critical reasoning that becomes a habit, at least for some of them. And yes, textbooks are official records for future generations, inscriptions for our times. Let's not forget that textbooks are often the only set of books in an ordinary Indian household.

All this does not necessarily mould the character or values of the students. Any attempt to preach values is more often than not counter-productive. Parental outlook, social mores and teachers' own conduct play a much greater role in shaping the values of a young citizen than the textbook. In order to shape public values, textbooks have to speak to the young minds through stories, examples, cartoons and illustrations. It has to catch their imagination and appeal to their deeper sensitivities, just as literature does.

This is exactly what our Political Science textbook attempted to do. We were determined to bury the boring, preachy and fact-heavy textbooks of what was called civics. The new political science books were filled with cartoons that spoke more than the text could. Comic characters Unni and Munni asked difficult questions. Every chapter of Politics in India Since Independence invited the students to watch a film by providing its synopsis. When Professor Palshikar and I accepted the responsibility of writing these textbooks, our ambition was to make it embarrassing for any future government to go back to the old style of civics textbooks. I am happy to say that for all the mindless chopping of these textbooks, they have not been able to change its form. As Professor Palshikar noted in his response to Professor Kumar: "It still is interesting that the regime is yet unable to write new textbooks". That is not a small achievement in these times.

Over the last 15 years I have come to terms with the fact that textbooks do not by themselves exercise cognitive and moral authority. Like any other book, textbooks too have to evince interest and earn respect from its potential readers. This discovery hurt my authorial ego. But of late I have come to see a silver lining here: textbooks sponsored by the current government would meet a worse fate. At least for textbooks on politics, it is not such a bad news. If political authorities that commission textbooks cannot shape the political opinion of the next generation of citizens, that is reason for hope rather than despair.