

The Role of Educational Institutions in Enhancing India's Pluralistic Identity

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Abstract

The purpose of this paper is to analyse the effectiveness of educational institutions such as the National Council of Educational Research and Training (NCERT), when it comes to translating the values of India's Constitution to younger generations—preserving the values of religious harmony, equality, and pluralism as enshrined in our Constitution. India's educational institutions have a very important role to play in inculcating the right values among its young citizens, and they are a key player in driving India's ability to nurture and strengthen religious harmony among the multitude of faith that call India home.

INTRODUCTION

The Constitution of India, enacted on 26 January, 1950, was one of the most forward looking and progressive constitutions of its time. India's Constitution borrowed the best ideas from all corners of the world and applied them to an Indian context, enshrining the values of dignity, equality, and pluralism that

continue to give shape to India's kaleidoscopic identity.

The longest Constitution in the world — with 1,17,369 words, 123 amendments, and 444 Articles — not only served as an affirmation of India's then-value system, but also, as a bold declaration of the nation India wanted to be— a sovereign, socialist secular democratic republic that

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secures all citizens core vital rights, as seen starting from the Preamble.

Yet, just as there are forces that drive plurality and promote diversity within India, there are forces—exclusivist and monolithic in nature—that seek to suppress the true Indian identity, reducing it to a series of straightforward binaries. Religious tolerance and secularism, in particular, are key aspects of the Indian identity that suffer at the hands of such forces—that politicise religion in order to drive their agenda. In the process, they are able to erect high walls between different segments of the Indian society.

Education, across the world, is recognised as a fundamental pillar of any democratic state. According to Villegas-Reimers (2002), although ‘education by itself cannot directly change the political, or social structures of a country, education can contribute to democracy and democratic citizenship in two specific ways’. The first relates to providing equal opportunities to all—regardless of caste, socio-economic status, ethnicity, or heritage. The second, is to prepare a generation of democratic citizens, by imparting them with the values, knowledge and skill set necessary for functioning as active, contributing members of their democratic society.

METHODOLOGY

This investigation began with an in-depth analysis of the National Curriculum Frameworks of 1975,

1988, 2000 and 2005, and other relevant documents such as the National Policy on Education 1986. These documents were analysed with the purpose of understanding the varying pedagogical styles and priorities in each iteration of different educational policies, the values and skills each policy sought to develop through education, and the increasingly important relationship between a student, one’s teacher, one’s community, and the school.

After that, a study was conducted involving all of the NCERT social science textbooks from Classes VI to XII. I concentrated on identifying both explicit and implicit instances where the values of human dignity, equality, and pluralism in an Indian context were reinforced. The motive behind this component of the methodology was to develop an understanding of the manner in which the NCERT currently translates the aforementioned values through textbooks and to identify the kind of messages being articulated to students in secondary schools.

Additionally, 47 interviews—with individuals who were educational administrators (9), social activists (5), university professors (9), educationists (4), principals (8), teachers (7) and students (5)—were conducted. These interviews gave vital insights on how effectively is the policy vision translated to the on-ground execution, and the role of influences outside of the classroom, that shape the thinking of young Indians today.

INDIAN EDUCATION POLICY DOCUMENTS

Prior to the British rule, education in India had elitist tendencies—serving the needs of the wealthy, or high-caste families of India. It was only in the 1900s, that the National Congress pushed for nationwide education for all, albeit with limited success. Post-independence (that is, after 1947), the idea of nationwide education for all began gathering momentum. In 1964, the Kothari Commission was established to ‘evolve a general pattern of education and to advise guidelines and policies for the development of education in India’ (Nourbaksh, Hasan).

The Kothari Commission drew on Nehruvianism—an ideology built on secular and pluralist values—to develop a thorough education policy for India. The Commission discovered that education was intended to increase productivity, develop social and national unity, consolidate democracy, modernize the country and develop social, moral and spiritual values (Nourbaksh 2017).

The Kothari Commission’s work played a vital role in shaping the first National Policy on Education (NPE) in 1968 (NPE-1968). The NPE of 1968, prioritised science and technology over the humanities, for the Kothari Commission believed that engineers and scientists were better suited to guide India towards her needs. This is evinced by the fact that in the third clause of the NPE, it is stated that the Indian education system must have ‘an emphasis on Science

and Technology’, and the seventh clause states ‘science education and research should receive high priority’ (Puri, Mohit). Clearly, the human and social sciences were seen as inferior to, and less important than the traditional STEM subjects. This is an important consideration going forward in the investigation.

In 1986, Rajiv Gandhi (the then Prime Minister of India) announced a new education policy, based on the belief that the 1968 policy had been successfully implemented. However, it was believed at the time that ‘India’s political and social life is passing through a phase which poses the danger of erosion to long accepted values. The goals of secularism, socialism, democracy and professional ethics are coming under increasing strain’ (Puri, Mohit).

Such sentiments were echoed across the nation as a result of events such as the anti-Sikh riots of 1984. As such, one of the many core principles of NPE 1986 was to emphasise, within the educational system, the values of secularism, socialism and democracy for a modern Indian state, as a response to incidents such as the anti-Sikh riots. However, protests arose when in 2001, the National Council of Educational Research and Training (NCERT) announced its new National Curriculum Framework (NCF). This framework operated under the slogan of ‘Indianise, nationalise and spiritualise’, as evinced by the discussion of India’s socio-cultural context, in section 1.1 of the

National Curriculum Framework. It oversaw massive revisions made to textbooks—especially in the field of Indian history (Ewing 2005). The new textbooks were accused of being anti-minority, and required the involvement of the Supreme Court to end a petition that argued that the new Framework promoted religious education.

After this, in 2005, yet another National Curriculum Framework was introduced—a framework that enshrines the values of the Indian Constitution and promotes open-minded and progressive values. The NCF of 2005 is built upon five basic principles.

- Connecting knowledge to life outside the school;
- Ensuring that learning shifts away from rote methods;
- Enriching the curriculum so that it goes beyond textbooks;
- Making examinations more flexible and integrating them with classroom life; and
- Nurturing an overriding identity informed by caring concerns within the democratic polity of the country.

The National Curriculum Framework 2005 recognised the importance of diversity, and introduced the concept of ‘Peace Education’. ‘The potential of peace education for socializing children into a democratic and just culture can be actualized through appropriate activities and a judicious choice of

topics in all subjects and at all stages. Peace education as an area of study is recommended for inclusion in the curriculum for teacher education’. Furthermore, it recognises India’s pluralistic roots in history, calling India ‘a free nation with a rich variegated history, an extraordinarily complex cultural diversity and a commitment to democratic values and well-being for all’ (*National Curriculum Framework 2005*). Clearly, The National Curriculum Framework 2005 demonstrates a clear intent to recognise and respect India’s diversity. Moreover, it pledges to promote a spirit of inquiry, equality, and in no way prioritises sciences over the humanities, or vice versa.

CONTENT OF TEXTBOOKS AND SYLLABUS

On reading all 18 books that form the NCERT syllabus for social sciences from Classes VI to XII, it has become clear to me that the progressive and pluralistic values promoted by the National Curriculum Framework 2005 have been successfully translated into the NCERT textbooks.

As a measure to assess the importance placed on building values of secularism and harmony into the syllabi, the specific references made to the themes driving secularism and harmony, across all the books studied, have been tabulated. Table 1 shows the number of chapters which include ‘a discussion directed at plurality or equality’, in every social science book from Class VI onwards. As is obvious from the data, the

syllabus designed by the NCERT places a strong emphasis on building values of secularism and respect for India's plural identity.

Table 1
NCERT Textbooks (Classes VI–XII) and a Chapter-wise Discussion Directed at Plurality or Equality

Class	Book Title	Total Number of Chapters/ Sections	Chapters which Include a Discussion Directed at Plurality or Equality
VI	<i>Our Pasts – I</i> (2017), Textbook in History	12	2
VII	<i>Social and Political Life – II</i> (2017)	10	5
VII	<i>Our Pasts – II</i> (2017), Textbook in History	10	2
VIII	<i>Our Pasts – III</i> (2017), Textbook in History	6	0
VIII	<i>Social and Political Life – III</i> (2017)	10	6
VIII	<i>Our Environment</i> (2017), Textbook in Geography	10	4
IX	<i>Contemporary India – I</i> (2017), Textbook in Geography	6	1
IX	<i>Democratic Politics – I</i> (2017), Textbook in Political Science	6	6
IX	<i>India and the Contemporary World – I</i> (2017), Textbook in History	8	1
X	<i>Contemporary India II</i> (2017), Textbook in Geography	7	0
X	<i>India and the Contemporary World – II</i> (2017), Textbook in History	8	2

X	<i>Democratic Politics – II</i> (2017), Textbook in Political Science	8	6
XI	<i>Indian Constitution at Work</i> (2017), Textbook in Political Science	10	6
XI	<i>Understanding Society</i> (2017), Textbook in Sociology	5	2
XI	<i>Political Theory</i> (2017), Textbook in Political Science	10	4
XII	<i>Understanding Society – II</i> (2017)	7	5
XII	<i>Social Change and Development in India</i> (2017), Textbook in Sociology	8	3
XII	<i>Themes in Indian History – I</i> (2017), Textbook in History	15	3
XII	<i>Themes in Indian History – II</i> (2017), Textbook in History	15	4
Total	19	171	62

Roughly, an impressive 36 per cent of all chapters in the social sciences curriculum contains a discussion revolving around plurality or equality. The social sciences textbooks above are also especially direct and honest in addressing issues regarding caste, oppression of minorities, secularism, and human rights. Some examples are given below.

‘When persons are treated unequally, their dignity is violated’ (*Social & Political Life Class VIII* 2017, p. 9).

‘Every person has a right to profess, practice and propagate

the religion he or she believes in. Every religious group or sect is free to manage its religious affairs’ (*Democratic Politics Class IX* 2017, p. 106).

‘These efforts to unify people were not without problems. When the past being glorified was Hindu, when the images celebrated were drawn from Hindu iconography, then people of other communities felt left out’ (*India & the Contemporary World Class X* 2017, p. 72).

The Constitution prohibits discrimination on grounds of religion, race, caste, sex or place of birth. Our Constitution also abolishes

the practice of untouchability. Most modern constitutions and democratic governments have formally accepted the principle of equality and incorporated it as identical treatment by law to all citizens without any regard to their caste, race, religion or gender' (*Political Theory Class XI 2017*, p. 9).

While the *Brahmanas* considered some people as being outside the system, they also developed a sharper social divide by classifying certain social categories as "untouchable" (*Themes in Indian History Class XII 2017*, p. 65)

Clearly, the NCF, and the NCERT promote a pluralistic Indian identity. The NCERT as an organisation has a clear vision with regard to the kind of messages it seeks to communicate to students, and NCERT textbooks effectively promote inclusivity, equality, and dignity for all. At the same time, though the NCERT recognises the importance and value of religion, yet, it is still able to have a very sensitive and carefully worded discussion on the need for secularism.

However, from the interviews conducted with students and teachers, implementation appears to be an area of concern for the NCERT. Often, students and teachers indicated that when it comes to classroom pedagogy and exam content, a student's in-class experience deviates significantly from the NCERT's intended in-class experience. While an NCERT textbook may place heavy weightage on certain concepts and question-types, the

final board exams may place heavy weightage on different concepts and question-types forcing teachers and students to prioritise their exam preparation.

At the same time, teachers were quoted mentioning that they find it difficult to teach the entire curriculum due to time constraints. Throughout the interviews conducted, a recurring sentiment was that there is a tremendous amount of content that teachers need to cover in a very short time which is compounded by the fact that students typically prioritise board and entrance exams over in-class content. This is a systemic problem which will require years of sustained effort to resolve.

Another recurring theme in the interviews conducted was that many of the influences for young students come from outside school—their home, social circle, seniors and friends. These sources frequently give shape to the manner in which a student perceives one's surroundings. Currently, the education system in India does not involve key community stakeholders as partners in the goals of the NCERT and Central Board of Secondary Education (CBSE). It has been implied that such stakeholders—in particular, parents and other family members of the student, should be further involved in sharing responsibility for a student's holistic development.

Another significant insight from the interviews was that students in

our school systems are exposed to a culture which still does not fully allow debate, discussion and inquiry. This may be traced to cultural norms in some parts of our society where discussion and debate with seniors or respected elders could be seen as a sign of disrespect.

Finally, although there are several questions in many of the textbooks that provoke thought and discussion, there seems to be an absence of specific course(s) in senior secondary education which focuses primarily on developing critical thinking and analysis skills, allowing them to successfully navigate through the numerous sources of influence they may encounter on a daily basis, and formulate clear, coherent opinions of their own.

RECOMMENDATIONS

Maintain the current curriculum focus on promoting religious harmony, tolerance, and respect for the values of the institution—This is strong in the current syllabus and should be continued.

Make deliberate interventions to take these teachings beyond the classroom; engage parents, and the broader community in inculcating these values in children—This can be done via workshops, seminars, and community outreach programmes. Although students are taught about various religions and

even celebrate different festivals, there is a lack of awareness about blocking the influence of divisive forces which disrupt social unity; a lack of parent and community involvement in discussing forces which disrupt social unity. The roots of communal harmony and mutual respect can be introduced through education at a young, impressionable age. However, it requires consistent enforcement from a child's immediate community—parents, friends, and seniors.

In the past, the CBSE has engaged psychologists to design, train and conduct workshops in schools for parents and students on a range of topics, such as puberty and peer pressure. It would be of benefit to students if similar community outreach programmes could be conducted—targeted at the parents and families of the young, primary school children. The objective of such programmes would be to discuss how younger generations can be protected from prejudiced depictions of other communities, and create awareness about safeguarding national unity from an early stage.

These workshops could be conducted by psychological experts capable of dealing with such sensitive matters to have the desired impact on the young minds. Some subject experts can also work along with the psychologists. Together, they can contextualise the content according to the diverse Indian mindset.

Through these workshops, we can educate about the common wisdom and universality of various religions, and also about how we can remain united despite our cultural differences. It would play a role in destroying false notions, existing stereotypes and blind perceptions—promoting social awareness, alertness, communal harmony and positive communal attitude within the family for the greater good of all communities.

Strengthen training and monitoring framework to ensure consistent implementation across the 19,000+ NCERT/CBSE schools (CBSE):

Although the NCERT textbooks are extremely forward-looking and address social issues directly, fairly and without hesitation, the ground realities for teachers and schools may make it extremely challenging to talk about sensitive topics such as the negatives of the caste system and communalism. Teachers in conservative or traditional regions of India may feel hesitant to address such social issues with the same degree of truthfulness as the textbooks do; instead, teachers may decide to quickly skip over such topics. Providing consistent training across the Board, especially for teachers in such settings so that they too can promote the nature of discussion that the NCERT textbooks

support, is an opportunity area that can be further explored.

Introduce a subject at the senior secondary level which promotes deep critical thinking to enable our students' ability to take their critical thinking skills to the next level—Along with integrating critical thinking into every subject being taught, a special subject similar to essay, presentation and discussion-based 'Theory of Knowledge' course from the International Baccalaureate can be introduced. This would focus primarily on developing high-level critical thinking skills. In many ways, the concept of centering education around critical thinking, debate, and inquiry as key tools of learning is not alien to the Indian culture. Our ancient schools of Takshila and Nalanda are prime examples of this. In Theory of Knowledge (TOK), students are required to 'consider the role and nature of knowledge in their own culture, in the cultures of others, and the wider world'. Knowledge systems are broken down into 'areas of knowledge'—specific branches of knowledge such as human sciences, history, ethics, etc., and 'ways of knowing'—the methods in which we obtain knowledge, such as reason, language, intuition, etc. (IB Organisation). Students in TOK classes are asked questions as follows.

- How important is it to be consistent in our moral reasoning?
 - To what extent does religion shape moral beliefs?
 - In what situation may one way of knowing be more appropriate than another?
 - To what extent does emotion play a role in historical interpretation?
- Developing the high-level critical thinking required to tackle such intricate and challenging questions is of paramount importance to India's democracy. Only with such a strong skill set would an individual be capable of examining issues and evaluating another person's claims before formulating their own balanced opinion. This is yet another crucial component in building a society prepared to embrace social harmony, and defend itself from divisive forces.

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