

Textbooks- Hear our Voice!

Abstract

The paper, written in first person, personifies textbooks and traces the history of both their form and current use in India. It explains the difference and inter-linkages between curriculum, syllabus and textbooks. It also argues that prevailing problems pertaining to textbooks is because of the manner in which they are conceptualised, written and used and if these concerns are suitably addressed, they can genuinely serve as a very valuable pedagogic resource in school education.

We are the most important educational resource in a school going child's life in India. We constitute the curriculum, we are also the syllabus and most importantly, we often decide the exact content to be memorised for school examinations. The more we are chewed in, gulped and reproduced on the answer sheets, the more marks we fetch for the students. It is interesting that while we contain errors and sometimes say terrible things about people from different communities, especially the disadvantaged; academics constantly challenge our worth, researchers bash us, teachers condemn us, students often burn and tear us apart after their exams get over, they still cannot do away with us and extensively depend on us.

When did we become Important?

Let us take you back in time a bit. In the ancient times, where the Guru was considered to be a repository of all knowledge, we neither existed in the form that we do now, nor was any value attached to us. It was only during the late Vedic period (around 400 B.C) that certain books that could be called textbooks saw the light of the day. However, even then we could not be produced on large scale due to non-existence of paper and absence

of printing technology. During the Buddhist period, our numbers were increased and we were used more by teachers and essentially as reference by students. During the medieval period, quite a few of us had our origins in Persia and we assumed a bigger role in the teaching-learning process. Our stress at that time was more on religious teachings and our organisational aspects were ignored. In fact, our production techniques were quite crude (Goel and Sharma, 1987). We began to enjoy the absolutely superior position that we do now during colonial times. In precolonial India, the teacher had complete control over the curriculum – i.e. what is to be taught, the form of pedagogy employed i.e. how it is to be taught, duration of the academic term, i.e. in how much time the student was supposed to know the content and assessment of the content transacted. (Kumar, 2005). However, with the introduction of British controlled/prescribed formal system of school education and more so, advent of a standardized, uniform and apparently impartial system of examination by the colonial power, things changed miraculously for us and we were elevated to a position of enormous power in the formal school system. This happened because there

emerged a significant difference of views around 'what was that knowledge that was worthy' of being transmitted to the next generation. There was a debate on both the content and medium of instruction to be used in schools, between the Orientalists and the Anglicists. Macaulay's Minutes of 1835 and Sir Charles Woods' Despatch of 1854 firmly established the superiority of knowledge of the western world and English as a language over indigenous knowledge system and vernacular languages. With a rigid, alien and distant curriculum far removed from the lives of ordinary Indian children, fixed/inflexible academic terms and a centralised examination system that tested all students uniformly and rewarded/penalised equally, there was a need to bring out a more or less standardized resource i.e. "us" which contained common content to be uniformly used across schools/children/social locations. We completed the requirements of a predetermined syllabus and also catered to the needs of impersonal examinations, where anonymity of both the examiner and examinee was not just maintained but celebrated. As the British in India acquired political and administrative stability, their interest in education gave a big fillip to our production.

With our introduction, there was a significant change in both the methodology of teaching-learning and increase in number of students taught. With our presence, a large number of students could be seated in different classes and taught simultaneously. The British quickly recognised our importance and used some of us, especially the social sciences for the whole country to inculcate ideas of loyalty towards the British government. Interestingly enough during the period 1905-47, we also began to be written by Indian authors reflecting the Indian

point of view. Our production was nationalised post Independence.

Relationship between Curriculum, Syllabus and Textbooks

While there are important differences between curriculum and syllabus, more often than not, they are used inter-changeably. One important view regarding them is that syllabus clearly indicates the precise information or amount of knowledge to be imparted by the teacher to his pupils, in each subject in the course of school year. Whereas the curriculum refers to the kind of educational activities the teacher needs to undertake to fulfil the requirements of the syllabus. While the syllabus prescribes the content of the teaching to be given, the curriculum prescribes the method to be used. A curriculum is more concerned with education the children should receive from the school and indicates the procedures, methods and activities by which such education is to be provided. The former is binding on the teacher whereas the latter imposes no such restrictions on the teacher who is free to use her autonomy (Dottrens, 1962). Curriculum is a broader term which encapsulates the larger meaning and purpose of education and the kind of society one envisions to have and the linkages between them. A curricular framework, we would imagine, is a bit more broad, pertaining to a set of guidelines by which a curriculum is to be prepared. However, it is also possible that these differences are merely at the level of semantics and practitioners rarely make such distinctions. A school system which is syllabus bound would depend more heavily on us where as system which recognises the legitimacy of a curriculum, would give far greater professional autonomy to its teachers and use us as only one of the multiple teaching-learning resources.

There was no formal category of curriculum which existed in pre-Independent India. What perhaps was prepared and reached the schools was the grade-appropriate syllabi for different classes. Curriculum was still an alien idea in the discourse on school education. Even if the term curriculum was used, it was used interchangeably with the word syllabus. The idea of curriculum is a relatively new entrant in the public and policy discourse on education. In India the planning and the organisation of school education has typically taken place around the construction of syllabi and textbooks. It was only in 1976, after education became a subject on the Concurrent list, that the National Council of Education Research and Training (NCERT) attempted a small exercise to construct a Curriculum Framework. This idea took more formal shape after the advent of New Education Policy 1986. In 1988 the first NCF was developed (Sarangapani, 2009). Following this, was NCF-2000 which underscored the significance of Indian culture and civilisation. The latest curriculum framework which was prepared in 2005 sought to make linkages between the child's experiences of schooling and their eventual drop out/retention in school. It emphasized a constructivist view of knowledge which underscored the importance of making linkages between child's experiences at home and knowledge acquired in school. It articulated the need to move beyond textbooks and break the unholy nexus between textbook content and questions asked in the examinations.

One would imagine that while the syllabus broadly indicated the nature of content to be covered, it did not either specify the resource to be used for transacting the same nor specify the exact content to be transacted. There could be several resources—print,

non-print and multiple experiences which could be harnessed to facilitate the transaction of the content thus prescribed. However, the examination system expected a more or less verbatim reproduction of the content in us since we were prescribed by senior bureaucratic authorities in these schools. Both teachers and students found it difficult to relate to us—our language, idioms, knowledge represented which was very different from the lives, cultures and languages of teachers and children who were forced to engage with us. Even though they found it difficult to comprehend us, they did not refer to/or use any other resource because the exams were almost entirely based on content written in us. In turn, the results of these examinations determined not only the position and job of teachers but also the grants-in-aid received by schools from the government. After India attained independence, we feared that our position and status may undergo change but surprisingly since the roots of the colonial education system had been dug so deep in the Indian soil, the nexus between curriculum, syllabus, examination system and us got further entrenched and strengthened. We continued to rule the roost, dictate the pedagogic discussions in the classroom, and occupy central place in the examination question papers. In fact, it would be more appropriate to say that we are essentially written to convey information or facts, rather than to make children think or explore, the larger aim being to help children pass the examination (MHRD, 1993). It was also said, that both the teachers and parents constantly reinforce the fear of examination and the need to prepare for it in the only manner, that seems practical, namely, by memorising a whole lot of information given in us and our close associates i.e. guidebooks

(ibid). We have been called the de-facto curriculum (Kumar, 2005) and our school pedagogy said to be guided by a textbook - culture. This essentially means- "teaching in the subjects is based on textbooks prescribed by state authorities, the teacher has no freedom to choose what to teach, resources other than the textbook are not available in the majority of schools, and where they are available they are seldom used and assessment during the year and year end - is based on the textbooks." (Kumar, 1988)

What we intend to highlight in this paper is our plight that despite playing such an important role in the school system, we are often criticized and condemned primarily for two reasons.

1. For the way in which we have been Conceptualised and Written

We perform function within a rigid format which includes the syllabus, our prescribed size and number of maximum pages. Different bodies—both private and government either individually or collectively try to write us. Since most often in the past we were written by experts and senior University Professors (engaged by Public bodies established for our preparation and production) who did not really have a sense of how children in school system learnt, their developmental needs and the social - economic - cultural backgrounds they came from and the time available for transacting a particular idea or concept in class, they often wrote and presented us in terse language, with little or no humor or examples from children's lives or the language they spoke at home. We were held centrally responsible for a system in which students face enormous burden in school, a system where there was no joy in learning and a system where, "a lot is taught but

little is learnt or understood". It was suggested that more school teachers should be involved in preparing us since they have a better understanding of how children learn (MHRD, 1993).

Besides this we have often been accused of being pedagogically barren, didactic, authoritarian in tone and more importantly, perpetually symbolic violence on members of certain disadvantaged communities. We are often found to be insensitive to women, members from dalit and tribal communities, poor and religious minorities. Apparently preparing us is a profitable venture therefore, several private publishers also who have little or no knowledge of the subject do not hesitate in writing us. This does not mean that those of us who are produced by the government are pedagogically sound, socially sensitive and conceptually strong. The states don't often have the resources which are at the disposal of bodies like NCERT and therefore struggle to make good books. Moreover, there is absolutely no centralised impartial authority which screens us and sets quality standards. Schools affiliated to Central Board of Secondary Education (CBSE) and state boards use us only when we are made by government bodies entrusted for this task. Some of them may even have the freedom to use our private counter parts. Schools affiliated to Indian Council of Secondary Education (ICSE) by and large use us when we are developed by private bodies. While it is possible that each of these bodies has some parameters laid down for our preparation and evaluation, it is important that we go through rigorous quality control mechanisms where any of us, if found violating constitutional norms or containing errors of the kind discussed above, may be banned and deemed unfit for use.

2. The way in which we are used in Classrooms

It's a known fact that no school in India can really do without using us in educating the children. It's possible that some schools may delay the process and evolve their own mechanisms and resources to teach and engage children. This flexibility in our use is more feasible at the primary classes or perhaps in schools which have a non conventional view of education. However, in most conventional schools we occupy a central position in both the child and teacher's life. Its possible that they may dislike us and consider us the bane of their lives, but they also know for sure that we are the only resource which helps them in getting better marks in conventional examinations. Moreover, as one approaches the senior classes where students have to prepare for Board exams we become their essential vitamins and nutrients without which their academic progress would be severally retarded. Several policy documents and reports in the past while recognizing our importance have also pointed out that we should be used as one of the several resources for teaching learning in schools and not as a singular resource. Suggestions have also been made about the fact that we should be prepared by diverse agencies including contributions from civil society at multiple levels so that we are close to that child's life who reads and engages with us. A singular, standardised resource like textbook in a huge heterogeneous society like ours will not represent all children's lives and a majority of them will always feel alienated and left out. Moreover, it will lead to only a particular kind of learning and hence jeopardise the entire meaning of learning. Similarly, while we have tremendous advantages, we cannot possibly encapsulate all that

the child needs to know and learn. Moreover, children learn in different ways and its important that they are provided with a range of resources that cater to their needs, learning styles and contexts.

Not only are we aware of the problems plaguing our form, content and use, but we are also aware of the numerous suggestions given by various committees set up for the task, including policy documents. The NCF-2005 suggested a list of foundational assumptions that can help in evaluating materials. These assumptions pertain to the nature of society one would like to live in, role of education in achieving that, assumption about learning and assumption about children and their context. Its strongly reiterates the need for preparing not just a variety of textbooks but also other materials because "No one textbook can cater the needs of different group of students" (NCERT, 2005).

In keeping with the spirit of this argument, the position paper of the National Focus Group on Curricular Syllabus and Textbooks reiterates that rather than trying to serve as a self sufficient fully adequate resource, any good textbook should leave the child to interact with the environment, peers and other people rather than transferring knowledge as a finished product (NCERT, 2006). More than focusing on the criteria for evaluating books, it thus gives a direction in which we should be used and a flavor of the way in which we should be written. It articulates that stress on students can be reduced if textbooks writers focus on elaboration of concepts, activities, spaces for wondering about problems, exercises encouraging reflective thinking and small group work leaving the definition of technical term to a subject dictionary (NCERT, 2005).

We have never claimed to be the only pedagogic resource in a school system. We are aware of our strengths and recognise our limitations. We are simply a tool, one of the several pedagogic mediums. How we are conceptualised, written and used depends on factors

beyond our control. It is therefore our request to all people/organisations responsible for writing us; setting question papers for examinations and teachers and even the policy makers and curriculum developers to not give us undue importance but to prepare and use us sensitively and sensibly.

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