



INTERPRETATION OF SOCIAL SCIENCE TEXTS: TEACHER AND THE CLASSROOM

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Abstract

The given work is an attempt to analyze how social science textbooks based on NCF 2005 with the proposed epistemic shift in the approach of teaching of social sciences have been able to represent a scope for change. More specifically the given paper analyzes the interpretation of social science texts to bring in the importance of text book analyses with the purpose of exploring textbook as tool for change. It suggests how the interpretation of social science texts may provide a scope for understanding the changing role of textbooks in classroom teaching learning process. Keeping the proposed epistemic shift in mind, analysis of the concept of citizenship in the series of Social Political Life NCERT textbooks in comparison to colonial Civics, the given paper attempts to give new insights in the vision of pedagogy of Social Science.

Key Words: *Social Science, epistemic shift, citizenship, textbook analysis and pedagogy.*



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Introduction:

Contemporary debates in education at global level have focused on the need for democratic and critical practices in school. Facing the global world, Indian democracy comes across the gravest and the most complicated challenges wherein the nature of obstacles includes the allowance of the maximum expression of individual and group identities, space for political, philosophical, ideological, ethnic, religious and regional differences to coexist and find expression. In such circumstances, ideologies, opinions and arguments become crucial to be understood in a particular context as they play critical role in the generation of public thought, perspective building, hence shaping a democratic social order. In this context it becomes important to reiterate the role of

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education in building individual perspective and shaping public thought. One of the fundamental questions raised by educators focuses on how teachers might develop an orientation to curriculum development and implementation which acknowledges the important underlying ethical and normative dimensions that structure classroom decisions and experiences (Giroux, 1981). For such a purpose the discipline of social sciences becomes a crucial link in establishing a democratic social order. With a major shift in paradigm, the Position Paper based on NCF 2005 claimed to bring an epistemic shift in the approach of teaching of social sciences specifically in the middle school classroom. The given work focuses on bringing in perspectives on NCERT's initiative to introduce new Social Science textbooks, 'Social Political Life' replacing the subject of Civics. The National Focus Group on Teaching of Social Sciences (2006) suggests an 'epistemic shift' in the discourse of social sciences. Based on certain considerations of dominant perceptions as well as issues to be addressed the following recommendations provided the logic in the drafting of new syllabi:

- Shift from the textbook as the only source of information to the textbook as suggestive of a particular way of understanding issues.
- Shift from the 'mainstream' account of the past to one where more groups and more regions are taken into account.
- Shift from utilitarian to egalitarianism approach to study development.
- Shift from patriarchal nationalist frame, making the perspectives of women integral to the discussion on any historical and contemporary concern.

In context of the above stated epistemic shift, what was earlier taught as Civics came to be substituted with theme-based text books of 'Social and Political Life' in classes VI-VIII. Wherein Civics as a subject has been seen as sphere of universal values of an obedient citizenry, 'Social and Political Life' contrarily focuses on building informed, receptive, aware and active citizens. The concept of citizenship within the frame of new textbooks has undergone a shift from merely rote memorizing the list of fundamental rights and duties to being an active participant of a changing society. Within the changing contours of citizenship, fore-fronting women's struggles, celebrating plurality and appreciating local content became the major areas of study in the new texts. It can be seen working towards institutionalizing an alternative which is more decentralized

mechanism of knowledge generation, making the teachers, students and the local community feel empowered to bring in their own realities in the construction of social sciences.

Based on different perspectives and grounds of logic the textbooks based on the proposed epistemic shift got exposed to challenges, appreciation, as well as criticism. George & Madan (2009) has raised significant issues and concerns regarding the teaching and learning process with reference to the new set of NCERT social science textbooks. Addressing concerns from the perspective of teachers, parents, students, and educationists they attempt to explain the rationale for the new approach, illustrating how the new textbooks based on constructivist paradigm consider knowledge as a social activity rather than memorizing what is given. At the same time, their effort brings in front the desperate need to make better understanding of given textbooks by the concerned teachers in order to ensure its optimum utilization at classroom level. Bringing in the need of evaluating the content of teaching training programmes, Paliwal & Subramaniam (2006) further argue that teachers' readiness to give space to the experiences, questions, perceptions and views of children is promoted not only by textbook but also by the role model that teacher training sessions provide.

On the Issue of Citizenship

Civics as subject had appeared in the Indian school curriculum during the colonial period in the background of increasing 'disloyalty' among Indians towards Raj. In specific considerations to bring shift in nomenclature and the manner of teaching Social Political Life textbooks, Balgopal (2009), being part of a national initiative to rewrite Civics textbooks advocated that due to its explicit links to the colonial state's instrumental need to create good citizens as well as its narrow focus on the political machinery of the state, Civics should cease being taught as subject in the middle school. Contrarily, Social Political Life she claims to be the first textbook that lays an emphasis on the interrogation of gender issues in the everyday life of the family, society and polity, raising the issue particularly with an elementary school age group, of continuing caste inequalities and communal prejudices that persist in post-independence India. As claimed, the given textbooks do follow an epistemic shift from colonial civics, but despite these differences Balgopalan (2009), further contend that a deeper interrogation would make us realize that it is neither a particular phrase nor appropriate content that could make the life-worlds of the marginalized fit into teaching about diversity and social cohesion. Hence, critical engagement of teachers can be seen as a prerequisite along with required changes in the textbooks.

In similar context, the need for building nuanced understanding of the interpretation of select social science text emerges to go beyond the text, and evaluate the construction of citizenship. The proposed epistemic shift recommended by Focus Group on Teaching of Social Sciences (2006) Position paper, while focusing on the theme of citizenship argues that colonial Civics as a subject emphasized on obedience and loyalty of the citizens and creation of civil society according to the universal values of progress. Exploring the historical and contemporary views on conceptualization of citizenship across the school textbooks, *'Text book regimes- A feminist critique of nation and identity'*, (2009), prepared as part of a larger study on school textbooks visualized and undertaken by Nirantar, critically analyses the concept of citizenship in the given textbooks. The analyses of primary environmental and social readers within the TNTC (Tamil Nadu Textbook Corporation) bring forth the emphasis on the good citizen and the high standards and personal morality that he or she is ought to observe as a citizen. The study of given Civics textbooks reveals no linkages to contextual everyday life experiences of children. Similarly, the struggles with multiple inequalities and negotiations with precious democratic inheritance are not given any space. Rather, its importance is understood in terms of abiding to civic institutions and laws wherein the role of government is seen as 'the ideal agency' leading to welfare of the society, where citizens are expected to become subservient. In similar context, Jain (2005) claims that discussions about significance of a disciplinary knowledge as school subject and objectives of teaching the subject need to be conscious of the social forces that brought a subject into the school curriculum. He further brings an analysis of the first textbook of Civics "the Citizen of India" authored by Lee Warner and elicits the embedded assumptions on obedience and loyalty of citizens, colonial ethos of order and projection of state as the agent of change, creation of civil society based on universal values of progress. Continuing role of post-colonial Civics, as one of informing and developing responsible citizens, he further claims NCERT textbooks (based on NCF 2000) to distort reality, sanctify the state and strengthen the process of hegemony, leading to socialization of young children to accept a subordinate position in the dominant order to deny them any agency and tools to refashion the world. Citing the importance of teaching learning processes at classroom level, Kumar (1989) further claims that the question, 'who learns and who fails to learn' becomes more significant than 'what is learnt by pupils', wherein the social background of the child tends to become one of the decisive factors. According to him neither curriculum policies nor teacher training practices takes the fact into cognizance; how the composition of a class in

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terms of students' social background, may impact the teacher pupil interaction and the meanings generated in the interaction.

Representation of the Text: Attempts to Bring in Criticality

Enabling people to move towards freedom to participate in creating harmony, socio-culturally just society with equal access to resources is considered as the basic task of democratic education. There can be little doubt that the Social Political Life series of textbooks has broken fresh ground in this direction. Moving beyond the state-centric civics to one where citizens are active agents, Balgopalan (2009) discusses how the SPL textbooks represent people's lives as being shaped by several kinds of economic relationships and structures. The state and the economic fabric of life are portrayed not as smooth, consensual entities, but as arenas of many conflicts and contradictions. The given Social Political Life textbook series comprises largely of case studies, narratives and examples from day-to-day life making it much easier and engaging for children of the middle school to read and understand. The text typically moves from specific situations that children are likely to experience themselves and go on to the situations more distant and unfamiliar. In similar context Position Paper, 2006, states "social science teaching should basically be aimed at investing in a child a moral and mental energy so as to provide her ability to think independently and deal with the social forces, threatening the ascribed human values. It can be achieved by promoting children's ability to take initiative to critically reflect on social issues". The proposed epistemic shift from colonial Civics to Social and Political Life, presents social problems as well as possible solutions in terms of structural changes inspiring learners to play active role in questioning society. Also, the possibility of seeking solutions is not portrayed as the sole responsibility of Government; rather it aims to make learners as aware citizens, capable of critical understanding of social and political issues.

Critical reflection pre-supposes a comprehensive curriculum which is capable of allowing learners to participate actively in the process of constructing knowledge. As per the needs of a comprehensive curriculum, the given textbooks are able to provide enough of such opportunities. Emphasis on contextualizing learning and what has been called 'local knowledge' perhaps is one of the most strongly debated elements of the NCF 2005 (Paliwal and Subramaniam, 2006). They argue that it seems to have shifted the onus of contextualization from the curricular materials to the teacher in the classroom. However, this may make the idea merely wishful thinking, if the new textbooks and examination processes do not provide the necessary support in terms of engaging

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teachers in construction of social sciences at classroom level. Another argument they raise is the conflict between the universal and egalitarian goals of modern education and the idea of contextualization. With a common textbook for the entire country the objective of contextualization comes in conflict. The texts taken from Eklavya textbooks of science and social sciences, showcases examples of drawing knowledge from multiple contexts. 'Eklavya books are unique in making the social world of the learner both an object of study and a process by constantly getting the learners to reflect upon their own social experiences. The texts in many ways resolve the dichotomy then posed between the child and the curriculum' (Batra, 2010). With the help of Eklavya textbooks, Paliwal & Subrhamaniam (2006) further illustrate the importance of providing multiple contexts and opportunities to engage in a meaningful, reflection-based learning. A curriculum should thus help children relate to different contexts- that of their own locality and also of other people and places, by providing a framework of reflection to build knowledge. Thus, they establish the need to enable teachers to understand the context, the learner, the larger framework. In similar context they further elaborate that the responsibility of contextualization can neither be based entirely on texts nor on the teachers, which brings textbooks as well as teacher education programmers into play. It has been argued that the NCF 2005 has the potential to enable education to become a critical catalyst in the process of social transformation. However, it fails to engage enough with the most crucial link – 'the agency of teachers' (Batra, 2006). Thus, ensuring proactive and critical engagement of teachers along with curricular reforms needs to be understood as the crucial link for success of any curriculum framework.

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