

## Education --a Child's Human Right

*Somen Chakraborty*

The National Human Rights Commission's (NHRC) resolution of 9 January, 2002 on a complaint (No. 3045/30/2001-2002) submitted by a group of educationists has added new dimensions to the on-going debate over textbooks and school education curriculum that the National Council of Educational Research and Training (NCERT) is all set to introduce from the next academic year beginning April 2002. The above notification reconfirms that school education is a human rights concern.

The resolution states, inter alia, that 'Education is the most effective tool and medium for human development. Right to education has been judicially construed to fall within the guarantee of right to life in Article 21 and now it is being expressly included in Part III of the Constitution as a fundamental right'. The NHRC maintains that it is an obligation on the part of the school to disseminate all necessary information to children required to facilitate them in making informed choices about their own lives. The school is the agent for transforming the child's right to development into informed action, the NHRC affirms. The right to education of every child is clearly a human right and its proper direction a human right issue. The revision of textbooks if not carried out in scientific manner is bound to adversely affect the development of children distorting their personality. Therefore, even though the formulation of policies remains within the domain of government, the NHRC states, when it is alleged that a policy or state action would adversely affect the development of children it becomes a human rights issue.

Children's right to education has close link to their right to development. India being a party to the Convention on the Rights of the Child

(1989) is committed to support development of children so as to promote their right to life under Article 21 of the Constitution of India. Education is a medium of exposure for a child to different points of view based on depiction of established facts. Education changes the mindset through a continuing process involving research, experiment and innovation. Without such practices a nation cannot expect the future citizens of this country to be informed and creative.

Specific identity and attitude that children develop in schools are the byproducts of plural and heterogeneous characteristics of a society. These characteristics stem from scientific findings and discoveries that take place from time to time. In a dialectical fashion one historical reality and facts brought into writing of history textbooks thus get replaced by new findings. Yet, on principle, before setting aside the scholarly inferences people at large should have opportunities to share views on them. Interestingly, neither the historians under controversy nor those who have expressed solidarity with them have even maintained that their interpretations of history should remain unchallenged. It is unfortunate that despite the fact, the work of modification and alteration of the contents of the textbooks has been commissioned by the NCERT without due academic debate on the aspects requiring change. This has given rise to suspicion over the real motive behind such actions.

The consequences of deletion of texts selectively from the history books written by eminent historians will have disastrous consequence on the development of children.

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The deletions are done especially, wherever there is any reference to beef eating by people in ancient India. More interestingly, while carrying out such editing the NCERT has even discarded the archeological findings, - a scientific method to look into historical realities and fact. To quote from one of the deleted portions from R.S Sharma's book on Ancient India for class XI, "The Puranic tradition could be used to date Rama of Ayodhya around 2000 B.C., but diggings and extensive explorations in Ayodhya do not show any settlement around that date. Similarly, although Krishna plays an important part in the Mahabharata, the earliest inscriptions and sculptural pieces found in Mathura between 200 B.C. and A.D. 300 do not attest his presence. Because of such difficulties the ideas of an epic age based on the Ramayana and Mahabharata has to be discarded".

Examples of countering hallows that have been constructed around mythological personalities are not unknown in Indian literary works. Bankim Chandra Chattopadhyaya and Raj Sekhar Basu made sarcastic comments about Krishna in their writings. And of course, the conservative Hindus of their time came down heavily on them. What is disheartening is that a sojety which has centuries old tradition to

accommodate different views, ethos, beliefs and practices, of late has started displaying intolerance to criticism and dissent. The deletions are indicative of the fact that it is not merely knowledge that is being affected, the scientific methodology is at stake.

R.S. Sharma's statement of facts has been viewed as detrimental to the tender mind of school children. Ironically, the latest National Curriculum Framework of the NCERT based on which the new school textbooks are being written is infested with derogatory remarks about social groups of India. The Document mentions that 'successive generations followed the occupation as well as the goal sets of the family or the caste at large'. Will any Dalit agree that they have ever voluntarily pursued a derogatory way of living?

The NHRC's resolution does not go into the details of the controversy that has been going on among the academia. Their resolution is aimed at protecting human rights of the child. It sends out the message that the current debate on school education cannot be concerns only of the Director of the NCERT and his colleagues; it must involve the larger civil society.

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## NEWS IN BRIEF

### Fresh ICHR panel to review Towards Freedom volumes

The Indian Council of Historical Research (ICHR) has decided to set up a new committee to review the two volumes of the "Towards Freedom" project that had been "temporarily withheld from publication" in February 2000. A decision was taken by the Council's Research Projects Committee (RFC) on December 21 last, a day after the Oxford University Press (OUP) agreed to withdraw all their claims vis-a-vis the volumes and return the manuscripts after a two-year-long legal battle. Earlier, the OUP had demanded Rs. 74 lakhs as compensation for returning the manuscripts. The RPC has suggested the names of S. R. Mehrotra of H.P. University, Kapil Kumar of the Indira Gandhi National Open University and the former Vice-Chancellor of Kakatiya University, Y. Vaikuntham, for reviewing the volumes authored by the noted historians, K. N. Panikkar and Sumit Sarkar. However, a final decision is subject to the acceptance of the three historians. [Hindu, 13.1.02]

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### NCERT ready with a please-all History

Much maligned in advance for its "Hindutva" orientation, the National Council for Educational Research and Training (NCERT) has come out with a please-all History syllabus. The story of India's past is spread wide covering all communities and shades of political opinion. A copy of the detailed course content finalised in the last week of December, now available with the Hindustan Times, reveals that the NCERT has bowed to the heavy attack led against it by the Opposition on the charge that it was "rewriting" history to suit the RSS agenda. A positive aspect of the new syllabus is the vast reduction in the burden on students up to Class 10. [HT, 14.1.02]

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### Slum children demand right to education

In the presence of Prime Minister Atal Bihari Vajpayee, slum children on Saturday asked what sin they had committed not to get education. This was depicted in a play enacted by them, called *Akhir Kyon*, at the official residence of Mr Vajpayee on Saturday. The children, belonging to the DPS Shiksha Kendra meant for marginalised children from slum clusters of south Delhi, made a forceful portrayal of their dreams to fight deprivation by getting quality education. They also presented a memorandum in the form of a banner seeking the right to education. Mr Vajpayee said that his government, which had recently amended the constitution to make primary education compulsory, would encourage all efforts by institutions and NGOs to join hands with the government to fulfill this major task. Mr Vajpayee said his government would join hands with such organisations to launch a campaign to provide education to all children. [AA, 13.1.02]

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### NHRC issues notices on revision of textbooks

The National Human Rights Commission (NHRC) has issued notice to Ministry of Human Resource & Development (HRD) and NCERT in connection with revision of textbooks for children. Acting on a petition filed by some educationist alleging that the revision of textbooks for children's education was likely to adversely affect their development and their personality, the NHRC has issued notice to Ministry of HRD and the NCERT and asked them to file then-replies within eight weeks. The NHRC had received a complaint on January 8, from educationist asking the commission to look into printing of history textbooks which they felt were undemocratic, non-secular. The petitioner said that the old textbooks should be continued for 2002 till historical reality and facts were brought into rewriting of history textbooks. [Pioneer, 23.1.02]

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## **Books out on new syllabus**

Leading publishing houses in Delhi have begun printing new text books based on the new syllabus of the National Council of Educational Research and Training. Officially, NCERT has not released the syllabus yet and has reportedly only forwarded a copy to the Central Board of Secondary Education. The syllabus has been the focus of much controversy over the deletion of large chunks of history and officials have been tight-lipped over the content. But at least four publishers in Delhi - National Publishing House, New Light Publishers, S Chand and Company Limited, and Frank Brothers and Company (Publishers) Limited have reportedly begun publishing. Senior officials in all the companies refused to comment. [SM, 12.1.02]

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## **NCERT history guidelines include post-1947 period**

The new National Council of Educational Research and Training (NCERT) History syllabus proposes to teach the higher secondary students (Class XI-XII) among other things about the post-Independence path of progress and building of strong India.

The new History book, which is under preparation, will deal with economic developments under five years plan, upliftment of poor and the headway made in the field of primary and higher ' education. The NCERT director Prof JS Rajput on Monday released the new guidelines and syllabi for all school subjects. [Pioneer, 22.1.02]

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## **Marxist historians fear losing their monopoly: Joshi**

Union human resource development minister Murli Manohar Joshi has said that Marxist historians were opposing revision of NCERT textbooks apprehending that their days of monopolising history would be over. Asserting that the government is committed to correct

discrepancies in history textbooks, Mr Joshi said historians affiliated to Marxists think tank were opposing revision for their selfish means. "A handful of Marxists were monopolising history and perpetuating writing of text books from their exclusive perspective. The protests over some deletions and revision of the text books are manifestations of fear of losing it," Mr Joshi said addressing a group of teachers and students on Wednesday. Reminding that the NCERT curriculum had not been updated in the last ten years, he said the ministry wanted to modernise the curriculum and insert fresh ideas - inculcating modern education including information technology and bio-technology. [AA, 10.1.02]

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## **Stress on education for disabled children**

With the inclusion of disabled children into the mainstream of education still remaining a distant dream after the National Policy on Education advocated it in 1986, the HRD Minister. Murli Manohar Joshi, recently directed all Chief Ministers to take necessary steps to ensure greater enrollment of the affected children. Though Dr. Joshi has in the past also sought to remind State Governments of the need to integrate disabled children - and some States have indeed responded - his recent letter speaks volumes of the slow progress in this regard despite the Persons With Disabilities (Equal Opportunities, Protection of Rights and Full Participation) Act, 1995, stipulating such an integration. [Hindu, 22.1.01]