

I Want My Freedom: Don't Give Me a Route Map

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Often one hears a challenge disguised as a query: what use is a National Curriculum Framework (NCF)? The challenges that emerge in the further dialogue depend on how reasonable, concerned or radical the challenger wants to pose himself/herself to be. Some of them are: Our country is so vast and varied in cultural and natural environment that no single scheme of education can ever hope to be suitable for all. A supposed to be fundamental principle is often quoted in this regard is 'one size does not fit all'. Or, that the curriculum binds the teacher and the learner both; their interests are ignored, their creativity stifled and their curiosity killed; the child should be left free. Or, that NCFs are so idealistic that they have no use in the practical business of education, everyone completely ignores them.

These people often sound to me like a sailor declaring 'I want my freedom, please don't foist a route map on me'. The sailor will, of course, be lost in his long sea voyage without a map and so are these innovative people in the choppy sea of education. To properly respond to these challenges let us have a brief look at the uses and abuses of NCFs.

National System of Education

Education was a state subject before 1976, when it was included in the concurrent list through 42nd amendment in the Constitution, which technically means that there could not have been any 'national' curriculum frameworks before that. NCF 2005 states that 'for the first time in 1986 the country as a whole had a uniform National Policy on Education.' (NCF 2005, p4). We did have a national policy on education adopted by the Parliament in 1968. The phrase 'first time' in NCF 2005 indicates the fact that, though we did have NPE 1968, it was approved by the Parliament at a time when education was a state subject which 'allowed the state governments to take decisions on all

matters pertaining to school education, including curriculum, within their jurisdiction.' (NCF 2005, p3) And the 'Centre could only provide guidance to the States on policy issues.' (ibid)

However, the ideal of national education is much older than that. There was a nationwide debate in the first two decades of the last century in which many people noted the ill effects of colonial education on the national consciousness of Indians and wanted to replace it with the national system of education. Aurobindo wanted education to be rooted in the Indian—largely based on Sankhya and Yoga—understanding of human mind¹. Lala Har Dayal criticized colonial education with fervent nationalism and advocated a national system based on Indian culture and love for the nation². Tagore argued that a university fit for a country could emerge only from the national cultural resources³; this argument for the university for him held for school education as well.

Lala Lajpat Rai⁴ systematically analysed many attempts at nationalizing education and rejected some of them as sectarian. Without mincing words he states that the 'Dayanand Anglo Vedic College, ... the Mohammedan College at Aligarh, the Arya College at Lahore, the Hindu College at Benares, all embodied the 'national' ideals of their founders, limited and sectarian as they were at the time.' He argues that none of this can be a model of national education. 'The only effort of this kind which was, in my judgment, truly national, was that made by the National Council of Education in Bengal, The scheme of the National Council was **free from the sectarian tinge** of the Upper India movements.' (p. 24, emphasis added) This formulates and argues for perhaps the most important principle for national education: it has to be non-sectarian.

This brief, and limited in more than one way, excursion into the history of idea of national education is aimed at capturing a few principles

¹Aurobindo Gosh, *A system of national education*, Tagore & CO., Madras, 1921.

²Har Dayal, *Our Educational Problem*, Tagore & Co., Madras, 1922.

³Rabindranath Tagore, *The Centre of Indian Culture*, a lecture delivered in Madras in 1919.

⁴Lajpat Rai, *The problem of national education in India*, Gorge Allen & Unwin, London, 1920.

that played a role in shaping the ideal of national education and, thereby, the national curriculum framework. One such principle in the minds of many Indians was non-sectarian education for all. Another one, is education that builds national consciousness, national spirit. A third ideal has been contribution to national cultural, political and economic life and the last but not the least has been development of an independent individual.

Coming back to the actual formulation of NCFs, we must note that all documents since NPE 1968 (perhaps since Radhakrishnan Commission in 1950) emphasize what they call National System of Education (NSE, for short).

Some key aspects of NSE in documents after the NPE 1968 are taking a clearer shape. It would be worthwhile to make an attempt to understand them.

Purposes and aims of education

To understand this aspect properly we should note: one, perhaps the issue of purposes and aims, unsurprisingly, is the oldest concern in the discourse of national system of education and figures very prominently in the debate mentioned above in the early years of 20th century. Two, we should make a conceptual distinction between ‘societal purposes of education’ and ‘aims of education’.

In this article I will refer to ‘societal purposes’ simply as ‘purposes’. Purpose of education then relate to the kind of society we want to build through education and the social changes we want to effect through it. For example, when Kothari Commission wants education to be ‘an instrument of social change’ or when NPE 1968 wants education to ‘play its vital role in promoting national progress, creating a sense of common citizenship and culture, and strengthening the national integration’ it is talking of purposes of education. They relate to the kind of society we want.

Aims of education on the other hand directly recommend the kind of understanding, abilities, values, skills, etc. that are to be developed in the individual members of the society. Taking an example from the same document (NPE 1968), when it states ‘The educational system must produce young- men and women of character and ability committed to national service and development’ it is talking of aims of education. The qualities mentioned here to be developed in individuals are **aims of education which in turn will serve to fulfil**

the societal purposes of education. Of course, they are closely related. Also, they have significant overlap: therefore, in a discussion continuously flow into each other without distinction.

Right from the nationalistic debates on education some purposes have been constant in education: building a politically strong, cohesive, economically prosperous, and democratic nation. With minor variations these purposes are visible in all documents right to the NCF 2005. As we came closer to independence, democracy became an even more important national goal and therefore educational purpose too.

Educational aims, in terms of qualities of individuals are derived from these purposes: the logic being ‘if this is the kind of society and nation we want, what capabilities its citizens need to create and sustain such a society?’ Educational aims, as a result, have some capabilities of individuals which remain persistent now for over a century. Among them capability to think independently and clearly, being rooted in Indian culture, commitment to justice and equality, being secular in attitude and capacity to contribute to economic productivity are quite prominent.

Actually, the need for a NSE is justified on the basis of these purposes and aims of education only. Therefore, one important aspect of NSE is **the purposes and aims of education** which are supposed to be guiding education throughout the country.

It so happens that the challenges—misguided to my mind—posed to the need of NCF criticise the purposes and aims of education most vociferously. It is often declared that aims of education are patently useless and impotent in guiding education and purposes of education are decided by the parents under economic and social aspirations. In this short article I cannot go into a detailed refutation of these claims. However, I would like to quote two philosophers of education as food for thought, and not to be taken on authority, for those who consider aims of education as useless.

Dewey in his famous book *Democracy and Education* states: *‘The net conclusion is that acting with an aim is all one with acting intelligently. To foresee a terminus of an act is to have a basis upon which to observe, to select, and to order objects and our own capacities. To do these things means to have a mind if it is really a mind to do the thing and*

not a vague aspiration—it is to have a plan which takes account of resources and difficulties. Mind its capacity to refer present conditions to future results, and future consequences to present conditions. **And these traits are just what is meant by having an aim or a purpose. A man is stupid or blind or unintelligent—lacking in mind—just in the degree in which in any activity he does not know what he is about, namely, the probable consequences of his acts.**⁵ (p.120-21, emphasis added)

Professor Christopher Winch while discussing aims of education states '[W]hen the major aims of education are not clearly agreed upon, there is a danger that covert aims may become the most influential in determining the operation of a public education system. It is likely that these aims will be set by the most influential groups operating both within and outside the system. **Because there will have been little or no public debate about aims, it is likely that the interests of some will receive scant attention and may even be harmed. If a society does not have clear and agreed aims for its education system, there will be a danger that not only will it fail to have a healthy system that is respected and functions well, but there will also be widespread and damaging discontent among those groups whose interests are not well served.**'⁶ (p. 33, emphasis added)

Structure of National System of Education

The suggestion regarding the common structure of education across the country seems to have been made first time by the Kothari Commission Report. On its basis NPE 1986 recommends 'It will be advantageous to have a broadly uniform educational structure in all parts of the country. The ultimate objective should be to adopt the 10+2+3 pattern, the higher secondary stage of two years being located in schools, colleges or both according to local conditions.'⁷ (p. 44)

The clearly suggestive nature of the recommendation seems to be related to education being a state subject. The NPE '86 is not tentative regarding the structure and further wants to have a uniform division of elementary education as 5+3 and acceptance of +2 in the school education throughout the country (p 5).

All NCFs (including The Curriculum for Ten-Year School, 1975) emphasise a common structure of NSE across the country. Further, these documents often specifically state it as an important goal of the NCF.

NSE and language policy

Another important aspect of the NSE is emphasis on development of languages. NPE '68 recognises the importance of development of Indian languages and comes to the conclusion that without this the 'creative energies of the people will not be released, standards of education will not improve, knowledge will not spread to the people and the gulf between the intelligentsia and masses will remain if not widen further.' (p39) The suggested three language formula is seen as a way of finding balance between the aims of development of regional languages, development of a link language and knowledge of English.

This is the accepted language policy in education and every policy document and NCF after NPE '68 reiterates it, even if governments and schools often flout or adhere to it only in the letter devoid of its spirit.

Common Scheme of Studies

The National Education System also envisages the common scheme of studies at school level. National Curriculum for Elementary and Secondary Education—A framework 1988 (NCF 1988, for short) lays down a common scheme of studies from pre-primary to secondary education. At the primary level it prizes one language (mother tongue/ regional language), mathematics, environmental studies, work experience, art education and health and physical education. At upper primary and secondary level the children have to study three languages and environmental studies is replaced with science and social studies, the rest remains the same as primary level. This scheme, though is not articulated exactly in the same terms in NCF 2000 and NCF 2005; still remains prevalent throughout the nation. The common scheme of studies, however, does not mean that the syllabus in each curricular subject has to be exactly the same across the country. A great deal of flexibility is envisaged for aligning the syllabus to local context. However,

⁵ John Dewey, *Democracy and Education*, Macmillan Company, New York, 1916.

⁶ Christopher Winch, *Quality of Education*, *Journal of Philosophy of Education*, Vol. 30. No. 1. 1996.

⁷ *National Policy on Education*, Ministry of Human Resource Development, New Delhi, 1998.

in the interest of common standards there has to be reasonable similarities in the structures of the subjects. Common scheme of studies allows the possibility of formulating common standards of achievement across the nation.

Common Core Curriculum

NPE 1986 states that 'The National System of Education will be based on a national curricular framework which contains a common core along with other components that are flexible. The common core will include the history of India's freedom movement, the constitutional obligations and other content essential to nurture national identity. These elements will cut across subject areas and will be designed to promote values such as India's common cultural heritage, egalitarianism, democracy and secularism, equality of the sexes, protection of the environment, removal of social barriers, observance of the small family norm and inculcation of the scientific temper. All educational programmes will be carried on in strict conformity with secular values.' (p 5)

This defines what all Indian children are supposed to know as well as gives ample freedom for the contextualisation of the curriculum.

To summarise the discussion so far:

- The makers of modern India came to a conclusion that it shall be a democratic nation with equal rights for all. This conclusion emerged through painful process in the freedom movement.
- But India was, and is, a land of diversity; the idea of equality for all as well as the idea of nationhood were neither understood by all in a similar manner nor accepted with equal commitment.
- In addition, the economic development of the country was urgently needed (still is) for dignified life for all.
- Therefore, to develop peoples' capabilities in various areas of life and to develop a national consciousness with democratic values became an imperative. Education is the only means available to develop the required capabilities, values, knowledge and skills.

- Since we are talking of one nation in which peoples' movement from one place to another is guaranteed, equality of opportunity is guaranteed, there has to be a commonality in the system of education. Therefore, the National System of Education.
- The characteristics of the NSE as we understand it today include common purposes and aims of education, structure of school education, core components and scheme of studies.
- Without this ensuring equal educational opportunity to all is not possible.

National Curriculum Framework

The necessity of a common education system is a result of having a democratic constitution and polity. This need is articulated and justified in the National Policy on Education. The NCF is the instrument through which the ideals of NSE can be actualised. National Curriculum Framework, therefore, becomes a plan of education which derives its justification from the constitution of India and NPE. But its job is to device a framework of principles of what can guide actual teaching in the classrooms as per those basic principles.

Therefore, guidelines for developing syllabi, textbooks, teaching method and assessment have all to find a place in the NCF document, as this is the link between the national education ideals and the action in the classroom to realise those ideals. In other words, it is a route map from where we are to the national educational ideals. Working out such a framework of principles which gives clear directions as well as leave room for flexibility, is a difficult task, though necessary to keep the NSE on the envisaged course. A serious understanding of the socio-political philosophy of the country, of desired society and the human beings in it, of pedagogical principles and actual context and current need of the nation all have to contribute to such a framework of principles.

NCF, therefore, is to a school system as a route map is to a sea voyager. A sea voyager will lose his way without a map and a school system will never know whether it is helping, or hindering, the achievement of national ideals without NCF.

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