



### Social Sciences or Social Studies?

The relatively recent formulation of social science as a discipline, since the late 19th century, is well known. Even more recent is the evolution of social science as a school subject in terms of content, methods and theoretical foundations. The inability of social sciences to occupy a central place in the primary and secondary school systems has in fact been a matter of grave concern. Social sciences are systematically taught at the university level. What is taught at the primary and secondary levels is usually referred to as 'social studies'. Typically, history, geography and civics are taught in middle schools. High school students study political science, economics, sociology or psychology, as part of the humanities or arts streams. This is perhaps why the social sciences are not part of the school curricula as a coherent body of knowledge. Scholars have argued that global forces and communal forces along with parochial attacks on the universal nature of social sciences have led 'to reduce the nature of social sciences to that of mere social studies' (Chalam, 2002: 922). However, the nuanced emphasis on the term social studies as a school subject needs to be understood within a socio-historical perspective.

One of the earliest formulations of what should be taught in the name of social sciences in schools is based on the definition given by Edger Wesley (1937), in whose view 'the social studies are the social sciences simplified for pedagogical purposes.' While engaging with the question of the foundations of social studies, Lawton (1981: 36) defined a social studies curriculum as "...one which helps young individuals to develop into fully human adults by relating them to their society by means of appropriate knowledge and experience selected from the social sciences and other disciplines". He reiterates that even though the social studies curriculum is likely to vary with time as well as context, depending on the assumptions about the needs of the individual and society, an integration between the three aims of 'individual needs', 'academic subject-matter' and 'citizen education' needs to be achieved. Other scholars have pointed out the need to study social studies because society requires adults who know their rights and responsibilities as citizens and social studies can better achieve these goals. However, as asserted by Wronski (1981: 23), "...education for citizenship is not the exclusive property of social studies. Other subjects

such as literature, art, music, science and even sports contribute towards citizenship education."

With the increasing influence of humanistic psychology in education during the last two decades of the 20th century, social studies came to be regarded as an appropriate space for integrating ideas of citizenship education with the existing paradigm of child-centered approaches to school education. Within this frame, 'the most compelling feature of social studies (came to be) the almost insistent way it invites one to connect with one's (and other's) humanity' (Wishon et al., 1998).

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More recently, reflecting on what he refers to as 'the social science wars', Evans (2004: 47) identifies five distinct camps in social studies, each with its own philosophy, beliefs and pedagogic practices. These include the traditional historians who support history as the core of social science; the advocates of social studies as social sciences; social efficiency educators who hope to create a smoothly controlled, efficient society; Deweyan experimentalists who focus on developing reflective thinking and social constructivists who cast social studies in social sciences in a leading role for transformation. In his view, whatever began as a struggle among interest groups 'gradually evolved into a war against progressive social studies that has strongly influenced the current and future direction of the curriculum.' A reconciliation between different viewpoints led to the emergence of an eclectic camp, echoing Wesley, who advocated a general approach in which the term social studies refers to history and the social sciences simplified, integrated and adapted for pedagogic purposes. Gradually an 'integrative' view of social studies,

with history subsumed under its rubric, embedded within the discourse of 'progressive education' became the official curriculum in many countries (Leming, 2003).

There is, and perhaps will continue to be debates about what social science is and ought to be in schools. However, in most Indian classrooms, social sciences (referred to as social studies) are defined by what the textbook contains and how the subject-matter is presented and organised.

### Evolution of Social Science Teaching in Indian Schools

The teaching of social sciences in post-colonial India, as in other newly emerging nation-states was largely influenced by the perceived needs of nation-building and modernization. The genesis and purpose of formal social science in India can be traced to the purposive engagement on 'the place of teaching social science in the general education of the citizen' (UNESCO, 1954: 60). A continued emphasis on this encoded aim of social science education reverberate the views that emerged in the first few decades of independent India which in turn were informed by the discourse emerging in the new nation-states on the value of social science education. Thus education for citizenship was said to acquire a new meaning and the school was seen as the nucleus of such an educative force. Several perspectives on this question emerged later including the unequivocal emphasis on nation-building as articulated in the first post-independence Indian National Education Commission (GoI, 1966) Report<sup>1</sup>.

In the early years of post-Independence India, the Nehruvian framework prevailed dominantly through the agency of the National Council for Educational Research and Training (NCERT) and its regional versions. The NCERT in its early years conducted a study on the 'Position of Social Sciences in India'<sup>2</sup>. The study provided insight into various aspects and shortcomings in the existing social science courses in Indian schools. This led the organization of four all-India workshops with the help of classroom teachers, subject experts and teacher educators between June 1963 and June 1964. A syllabus was developed for Classes I to XI. Based on this, textbooks in social sciences covering 'state', 'country' and 'world' were prepared for Classes III to V. For Classes VI to VIII, separate textbooks were prepared for history, civics and geography (Goel and Sharma, 1987: 176).

The theme of citizenship education characteristic of the early inclusion of social sciences in schools runs across

the national curriculum documents since 1975. However, a close scrutiny of the documents reveals finer nuances and some radical interpretations of this curricular aim. While the first Curriculum Framework (1975) aspired to '... enable the growing citizen of tomorrow to participate in the affairs of the community, the state, the country and the world at large', through the teaching of social sciences, the National Curriculum for Elementary and Secondary Education (NCERT, 1988: 5) stressed the critical importance of teaching social sciences for creating 'a citizenry conscious of their rights and duties and committed to the principles embodied in our Constitution...' More than a decade later, the National Curriculum Framework for School Education (NCERT, 2000), formulated under a new political regime, redefined citizenship education in terms of an explicit emphasis on '... content essential to nurture national identity' with the aim to develop a sense of 'fundamental duties (and)... a sense of pride in being an Indian'.

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This later view was in sharp contrast to the Curriculum Framework, 1975, which had explicitly stated that: "... narrow parochial, chauvinistic and obscurantist tendencies are not allowed to grow... [and that]...instruction in the social sciences promote the values and ideals of humanism, secularism, socialism and democracy ... inculcate attitudes and impart the knowledge necessary for the achievement of the principal values of a just world order, maximization of economic and social welfare, minimization of violence and maximization of ecological stability" (NCERT, 1975: 19).

The views stated in NCFSE, 2000 were also in sharp contrast to the curriculum document of 1988 in which the development of social skills and civic competencies were to equip citizens to ‘...participate in the task of social and economic reconstruction’ through social science teaching. It attempted to locate social sciences in the overall aim of ‘...education as a powerful instrument of human resource development [that] should help in the process of desired social transformation...’ (NCERT, 1988: 3).

The most recent NCF Review (NCERT, 2005), while reiterating the need to adhere to a commitment towards the values enshrined in the Constitution, articulates a more radical aim for the teaching of social sciences. First, it explicates the critical significance of social science perspective and knowledge towards developing a ‘just and peaceful society’, thus acknowledging its overarching essentiality in education and in this sense ‘(re)locating the social sciences in the overall aim of education’, as indicated in the 1988 curriculum framework. Second, and more importantly, it establishes social enquiry as a scientific endeavour that must challenge patriarchal frames and strive to generate in students ‘... a critical moral and mental energy, making them alert to the social forces that threaten these (constitutional) values... (and) develop amongst them ... sensitive, interrogative and transformative citizens...’ (NCERT, 2005: 48).

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The popular belief that social science merely transmits information; is too centered on the written text, and requires

to be rote memorized for examinations however, continues to prevail in classrooms. Even though this view emanates from and is sustained by the manner in which social science subjects are taught in schools, it dominates the thinking of many curriculum developers as well. For instance, the NCFSE, 2000 position, that the quantum of history needs to be ‘substantially reduced’ favours the argument that social science provides ‘unnecessary details about the past’ and should therefore be integrated thematically in texts of civics and geography. The suppression of history has been referred to by scholars as a form of ‘social amnesia’ (Jacoby, 1975) and ‘the call to ignore history’ in curriculum debates taking place in the US in the third quarter of the 20th century, as ‘an assault on thinking itself’ (Giroux, 1981). Interrogating claims of ‘truth’ in the writing of history, Menon (2010) argues for the need to recognize ‘society as historically constituted’ and to enquire into ‘history as political intervention’.

The other argument against the social sciences is that they are bereft of the ‘skills’ required to function in the real world. This, along with the hegemony of the physical and natural sciences (corresponding with management studies in a neo-liberal frame) has led to the popular belief that the subject of social science is redundant. It is therefore a major challenge to re-establish the importance of the social sciences in school education at a time when instrumentalist aims of education threaten to disengage the individual from the social.

As argued by Giroux (1981) a significant rationale for the inclusion of social sciences in school curriculum lies in the need to interrogate the socially constructed assumptions that underlie the concerns of curriculum and classroom social relationships. The position paper on the teaching of social sciences (NCERT, 2006) builds a strong case for an epistemological shift in the role of social science in school education. It argues for the critical role that social sciences can provide to develop social, cultural and analytical skills required to adjust to an increasingly interdependent world, and to deal with the political and economic realities that govern its functioning.

### Major Debates in the Teaching of Social Sciences in Schools

#### *Integrated Social Sciences vs Disciplinary Emphasis*

Several scholars have argued that history, geography, economics and other social sciences should be taught for their inherent worth. In this perspective it is the nature of

the discipline and its methodology that takes primacy and is believed to facilitate students' understanding of society they live in.

Arguments in favour of an integrated approach to social science teaching derive from the need to create a consonance with the cognitive processes of children who do not necessarily see the world through the divisions of academic disciplines<sup>3</sup>. Academic disciplines are perceived to be historico-cultural constructs, each with its discourse and perspective. This, it is argued, can be an imposition on the child's 'natural' way of viewing the world as a whole. Another argument in favour of an integrated approach is that, a strict focus on traditional academic disciplines stands the risk of ignoring interdisciplinary knowledge domains engendered by the 'relatively newer' social science disciplines such as social anthropology, environmental education and population studies that draw upon the natural and social sciences.

An integrated social science curriculum is perceived to help students see the inter-connections between and the inter-relatedness of various facets of society. Integration is achieved through concepts and generalisations from the social sciences by following specific questions and problems and drawing upon various disciplines as needed. This view of social studies was first proposed in the US through the Report of the Committee on Social Studies (Dunn, 1916). Thereafter, it received impetus in the 1930s with the textbook series: *Man and His Changing Society* by Harold Rugg. It was argued that, "Rugg's goal was to rid social studies of disciplinary compartments. From his perspective, the curriculum should instead focus pupil attention on contemporary problems... themes in the Rugg textbook series included the excesses of laissez faire capitalism, unfair distribution of income and wealth, unemployment, class conflict, immigration, rapid cultural change, and imperialism ... [with the aim] to criticize selected aspects of contemporary society and tradition. (Leming, 2003: 126).

Associated with progressive educational ideas of the time that focused on creating a 'more collective social order', this approach received further support from textbooks on the methods of teaching social studies (Hunt and Metcalfe, 1955/1968). The integrated approach sought to align content along specific questions and problems. The approach with 'public issues' as a nucleus emerged from the Harvard Social Studies Project in the US in the 1960s (Oliver and Shaver, 1966 cited in Leming, 2003: 128). These could include various

social issues that face the contemporary world today, such as increasing poverty, environmental pollution and religious violence. While focusing on a specific problem or theme, students draw upon concepts, perspectives and ideas from various disciplines. The problem-pursuing approach, it is argued, is useful in giving students a perspective on society as a whole, as each issue would involve a nuanced understanding of the various facets of life.

A simultaneous, but different orientation to integration was the curriculum development project carried out in 1967 by the Monash University in Australia. In this project a 'social studies' curriculum was developed along select themes which incorporated the 'newer' social science disciplines into school education. The curriculum was designed around the theme of 'Man in Society'. This approach tried to ensure that the specific methodology of each discipline got incorporated into the integrated curriculum. While examining the various themes students would work as 'novice social scientists'. This rested on the assumptions that social science techniques serve as aids in the development of abilities to analyze and interpret data and that learning by doing is a significant pedagogic principle (Hunt, 1971). The attempts of the Monash University become particularly significant in the light of a major criticism of an integrated curriculum, that it does not introduce students to the methodology of the social science disciplines.

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The idea of an integrated social science curriculum, however, has not been a significant part of the curriculum discourse in India. A proactive co-operation between social sciences was suggested by Vakil (1954) in the early post-colonial period. It was argued that this need for co-operation should not be looked at from the viewpoint of the extension of a



“given stock of knowledge available for any particular social science.... In many cases a greater intensive cultivation of those aspects of study which are exclusive to any particular social science itself depends on a change in perspective or methodology ...”; arguing that “there may be hidden areas of knowledge which are not accessible if one pursues only one’s own sphere of study” (Vakil, 1954: 75).

One of the few discussions on an ‘integrated’ approach is found in the ‘Ten-Year School’ curriculum document (1975), which posited it as one of the possible means of teaching social sciences at the primary, middle and lower secondary school level<sup>4</sup>. The document displays a keen understanding of the nature of debates around this theme as it further goes on to state that while the selection of topics should be done ‘...care may be taken to preserve the general structure of the discipline and include those facts which are useful to a growing adolescent’ (NCERT, 1975: 21). This approach was however, never adopted and textbooks continued to approach history, civics and geography as independent disciplines with no inter-linkages. Moreover, the paradigms presented in the three subjects also remained mutually exclusive. This holds true especially for geography whose content (unlike history and civics) is not characterized by the official discourse on nationalism.

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The NCF, 2005 reiterates the need to preserve disciplinary boundaries in engaging students with social sciences at the middle and high school levels. Interdisciplinary thinking in the view of NCF, 2005 needs to be reflected in the treatment of subject-matter and is also sought to be addressed through

thematic approaches in ‘social and political life’, a new subject that draws upon the disciplines of economics, sociology and political science and replaces what has traditionally been called civics. Environmental studies, a subject at the primary level attempts to put together meaningful themes that draw upon sciences as well as social sciences.

### ***Aims of Education and Nationalism***

Questions of the social context of education and aims of education have been circumscribed to the development of a national citizenry. Philosophical engagements have also tended to confine themselves to seeking objective universal truths about education. Hobsbawm (1992: 9) argued how national bureaucracies controlled education all across Europe with the emergence of modern nation-states, communicating the image and heritage of the “nation”. In post-colonial India, the construction of a national identity via education, in particular, the social science curriculum was also of great importance. The Kothari Commission report saw modernity and nationalism as synonymous. Educational objectives were defined within the paradigm of national development and reflected in the ritualized practices of everyday schooling. This was a marked departure from the Secondary Education Commission (GoI, 1953), which in the early 1950s had laid emphasis on the psychological requirements of the child and the need to relate school subjects to the immediate environment of the child. In his analysis of the Kothari Commission, Krishna Kumar (2001: 51) writes, ‘... a young nation-state which had fought two wars in a span of four years and was undergoing a period of political uncertainty was less patient than before with the ideal of a child’s freedom to reconstruct knowledge in the context of a local ethos.’<sup>16</sup>

The ‘pan-Indian’ historical narrative of ‘unity in diversity’, constructed during the nation-building years acclaimed the country’s pluralistic heritage, thus capturing the imagination of the Indian people. The State had taken upon itself the task of constructing a history of harmonious coexistence and cultural synthesis of religious communities. While the narrative of ‘secular nationalism’ often stood the test of various political forces within the Congress, it came under serious challenge from the Hindu Right especially with the rewriting of history school textbooks under the NDA regime. The history curriculum to be taught in schools, became a fiercely contested terrain. Introduced in October 2002 (post-

NCFSE, 2000), the history textbooks presented a narrative of 'Hindu nationalism'; one that glorified India's 'Hindu' past, sought to incorporate Buddhism and Jainism into the fold of Hinduism and brutalize the Islamic rule of the medieval period (Marlena, 2003). The controversy around history texts brought into direct public scrutiny issues of curriculum content selection and presentation as well as the need to examine linkages between ideology and the state in the design of school curricula<sup>5</sup>.

Finer nuances of the tenuous relationship between aims of education and nationalism emerged when the UPA government led the exercise of the NCF review in 2005. For the first time we saw a national curriculum document (NCF, 2005) move beyond the critique of de-saffronisation and establish school curriculum as a legitimate concern of the pedagogue within a frame that links society and education intimately.

### **Values and Curriculum**

The discourse on 'values' has been an important one in the curriculum documents in India. From the time of the Secondary Education Commission in the early '50s and in continuation of the pre-independence focus of civics teaching, the role of civics was one of training citizens to improve their 'quality of character' and to inculcate the 'right ideals, habits and attitude' in them (Jain, 2004: 178). An unusual position was however taken by the Ten-Year School Curriculum Framework (1975) which asserted its commitment to 'character building and human values'.

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Social science was seen as a subject that shall, '... help children to develop an insight into human relationships, social values and attitudes' (NCERT, 1975: 21). Civics, more specifically was seen as having two objectives: to create 'an active and intelligent citizenship', as also to develop 'an intelligent understanding of the structure and working of social and political institutions' (NCERT, 1975: 23) These objectives stand in sharp contrast to the explicit statements made by later curriculum documents regarding the need to instill specific values in students. The National Curriculum Framework, 2000 states the role of social science teaching in clear terms: 'many values have to be inculcated through the teaching of social science.' The feeling of 'Indianness' that had been talked about by the 1988 document is interpreted rather narrowly and distorted to project the Hindutva agenda in NCFSE, 2000.

The discourse of nationalism and value education has been closely intertwined in the making of social science curricula. It is not the nature of the disciplines or the understanding of society that are regarded as the central objectives of social science teaching, but the values required to create a loyal citizenry with a strong sense of national identity. Recent researches have attempted to unfold the linkages between nationalism, identity and gender in school textbooks (Nirantar, 2009). The exercise of curriculum renewal brings a fresh focus on the critical significance of social sciences in establishing 'social enquiry as a scientific endeavour' and in developing a 'just and peaceful society' (NCF, 2005), within the larger frame of Constitutional values.

### **Conclusion**

This short essay has attempted to provide a glimpse of some of the key concerns and debates that confront the social science teacher and curriculum developer. It does not attempt to resolve any of these debates but to flag them with a plea to deepen the discourse. The criticality of social science teaching in schools assumes greater significance in the current context of a globalized world where matters of individual and national identities are highly politicized. This view stands at odds amidst a policy discourse that threatens the very existence of social sciences via an imposed regime of standardized curricula and evaluation. It is at this time that one finds some of the finest exemplars of social science texts of the NCERT written for the middle, secondary and higher secondary levels. It would not be iniquitous to say

that the framework used to create in particular, the middle school texts, including the texts on 'social and political life' that replaces civics, derives ideas and inspiration from the 30 years of experience of Eklavya in curriculum design and textbook writing.

Conventional social science teaching emphasizes learning about societies and times without reference to the child's actual lived experiences. The Eklavya and NCERT textbooks 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 often posed between the child and the curriculum. They address the

multiple dynamic issues of - organizing subject-matter in developmentally appropriate ways and engaging the reader in a dialogical process of constructing meaning - all at once. Converting sets of 'social science facts' into processes of social inquiry has been a major strength of the new texts. This has been done by presenting different viewpoints about a phenomenon, comparing the normative with actual experiences and by demonstrating the use of methods of constructing knowledge. Without impinging upon the autonomy of the teacher, the texts provide useful pedagogical spaces and ideas. They open up possibilities for learners to engage with issues and ideas that may be remotely connected with their lives but which gradually acquire meaning within the larger social reality.

## Footnotes

1. Also known as the Kothari Commission Report
2. Cited in Goel and Sharma (1987)
3. The Plowden report noted that 'children's learning does not fit into subject categories' (DES, 1967: 203) cited in Penelope Harnett (2004)
4. The Curriculum for the Ten-Year School: A Framework (NCERT, 1975) recommended that the social sciences be 'taught as a part of the study of the environment in classes I and II and as the independent subject of social studies in subsequent classes'. While Environmental studies 'will include both natural and social environment in classes I and II, it would be more appropriate to use the term "social studies" rather than social sciences at the primary stage since it represents a broad and composite instructional area' (p. 20)
5. See SAHMAT Publications: Against Communalisation of Education (2002), Saffron Agenda in Education: An Expose (2001) and The Assault on History (2000) for a critique of the NCSE, 2000, on the issue of communalizing; Digantar (2007), for a critical review of Rajasthan textbooks

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