

Unburdening the Child

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The deletion of three chapters of the history textbook of Class 9 has been carried out in the name of reducing the burden on children. Quantifying burden in this manner and equating it with “bulk” alone reflects a myopic view of the problem of academic load and its relationship with textbooks, and is an attempt to invisibilise interconnections between time, place and ideas/events, intersectionalities between caste, class, and gender, and issues of conflict and social injustice.

The National Council of Educational Research and Training (NCERT) textbooks are being revised again. Three chapters from NCERT’s Class 9 social science textbook, *India and the Contemporary World-1*, will be dropped from the new academic session. This revision is more in the nature of tinkering with the existing books, which were developed in accordance with the National Curriculum Framework of 2005. The objective as stated by the Ministry of Human Resource Development (MHRD) is to reduce the “curriculum load” on students by 15% this year and 50% by 2021. It is also said that social studies will be subjected to greater cuts and the textbooks will be made “thinner” and their language more “concise” and “crisp.” While the earlier review was based on feedback received by an internal review committee in total disregard of children’s experiences (Nawani 2018), the latest exercise¹ is a follow-up of around 37,000 complaints received by MHRD from parents, teachers and educationists, requesting it to reduce the school syllabus and unburden the child (PTI 2018).

It is difficult to disagree with the concern that the Indian schoolgoing child is burdened and that this is not a new problem. “Heavy syllabus”/“bulky content,” among many other things have made children’s lives miserable, leaving them with little time to engage in other activities. For instance, even a cursory look at the Class 7 history syllabus of West Bengal in the early 1990s, will indicate its “burdensome” nature:

1 Modern age; 2 Renaissance in Europe; 3 Europeans widen the world; 4 Reformation in Europe; 5 The English Revolution in the 17th century; 6 India; 7 Foundation and growth of the British power in India till 1857 in short narrative form; 8 World in the 18th century 9 Europe since 1815 ... 17. (a) Revolution in China 1911–1949; (b) Revolution in South East Asia after 1945; (c) Spread of nationalism and unrest in subject countries during the 2nd world war. (GoI: 1993: 12)

This syllabus was organised in 17 chapters and condensed in 135 pages of the history textbook. One can find several such examples in our school syllabi and textbooks. However, the number of pages or chapters in a textbook may not always have a unilateral relationship with the burden. More wordy text may not automatically convert itself into “curricular load.” Similarly, a thin text does not necessarily mean less load. A mechanical interpretation of load leading to removal of bulky or seemingly irrelevant or undesirable chapters is likely to create more problems than solve.

Since the official objective of this round of changes/deletions in the history textbook of Class 9 is being linked to burden, the aim of this article is to: (i) unpack the meaning of burden, especially in the context of social studies, and (ii) examine whether the deletions being proposed will reduce the burden thus conceptualised.

Meaning of ‘Burden’

The report, “Learning without Burden” (GoI 1993) was perhaps the first of its kind that provided a fresh perspective on what burden really meant in the context of school education. Even though it began by examining the physical load of the school bag of schoolgoing children across the country, it brought sharply into attention the mental load experienced by them in schools. The fact that children did not enjoy the process of learning, could not use their experiences to make sense of what was happening in the classrooms, could not ask questions and were not allowed to look at things from their own perspective, were identified as factors leading to “burden of incomprehensibility.” Unreflective homework, the gruelling routine of tuitions and one-off, year-end exams, etc. were pointed out as other significant irritants. In one classic statement, “a lot is taught but little is learnt or understood” (GoI 1993: 4), the report summarised the essential flaw in our education system.

In the context of textbooks, related pedagogic processes, and examinations, some of the problems highlighted were: (i) Alienating the lives, experiences and

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even language of children from the world of school.

(ii) Condensing/cramming enormous content spanning across varying time periods/geographic spaces, concepts and ideas into a limited number of prescribed pages of a textbook.

(iii) Teaching that revolves around the textbook content, defined and curtailed children's curiosity to examine further and created an irreconcilable divide between what children know and what they are supposed to know.

(iv) Memorising the textbook content for exams.

These concerns got amplified further in the context of social studies, especially history. The fact that somebody may have had actually reconstructed the past with the help of sources and that children could also be "little historians" in their own right was never considered, leave alone acknowledged. Being told and not jointly making sense of the past, was the principle underlying both writing and teaching of history in school. The problem was not much with content per se but the way in which history was conceptualised and presented in textbooks as a body of indestructible truths.

Deletion for Unburdening?

It is therefore important to understand whether the deleted content conforms to the idea of burden thus formulated and whether such an exercise will reduce the curricular load on children.

The book in question is divided into three sections: Events and Processes; Livelihoods, Economies and Societies; and Everyday Life, Culture, and Politics. A chapter on "peasants and farmers" from the second section and two chapters from the third section titled, "History and Sport: The Story of Cricket" and "Clothing: A Social History" have been identified as being undesirable of inclusion in the new textbook. An attempt is made here to examine the content and intent of these chapters in the context of the curricular framework adopted in 2005.

The chapter on peasants and farmers discusses material changes such as the organisation of agriculture, technological advancements, etc, in the rural world of India, the United Kingdom and the

United States, and its differential impact on the lives of diverse sections of people—rich and the poor, men and women, and adults and children. It reveals how the story of modernisation was not simply a glorious story of growth and development, but how it entailed social strains such as displacement, impoverishment, ecological crises, social rebellion, colonisation, and repression.

The chapter on cricket traces the long and chequered history of the game, its origin on the English soil, its association with the culture of Victorian society, its symbolism with English values of fair play, discipline and gentlemanliness and its spread to the colonies. It highlights the manner in which cricket became associated with the politics of caste, region, community, and nation. Thus, through its focus on an everyday event—cricket, in this case—it brings out the process of history alive: the idea being that everything around us has a history. Students often complain, "Why should one study the distant past which has no relevance to one's present?" In a cricket-struck country, one could not have had a better example to show how the past shapes the present.

The chapter on clothing endeavours to take the child through the complex interplay of factors such as class, caste, gender, status and region and shows how they determine what people wore in different places in varying time periods. One part of the chapter also mentions the revolt of the Shanars against the Nairs who prohibited their women from covering the upper part of their bodies.

The caste system clearly defined what subordinate and dominant caste Hindus should wear, eat, etc and these codes had the force of law. Changes in clothing styles that threatened these norms therefore often created violent social reactions. (NCERT 2006: 168)

This chapter has several other interesting details—how clothing in Victorian England demanded that women looked attractive and have slim waists for which they had to wear corsets at the cost of great physical discomfort; the way in which khadi became a symbol of protest during the swadeshi movement and yet, there were varying responses to khadi depending on people's diverse socio-economic locations. Changes in

styles of clothing are thus shown to be linked with shifts in cultural tastes and notions of beauty, with changes within the economy and society, and with issues in social and political conflict, etc.

These chapters are quite extraordinary in their intent and narrative style and the way in which they give meaning to history. They are imbued with a sense of historical inquiry, a journey which the students are expected to simultaneously embark upon. They make use of a wide variety of pedagogic tools such as photographs, sketches, posters, cartoons, excerpts from books—not as add-ons but as sources to make sense of the past. For example, students are encouraged to not just see but read and interpret pictures:

Notice how the upper-class social character of the game is brought out by the focus on gentlemen in bowler hats and ladies with their parasols shading them from the sun. (NCERT 2006: 146)

Notice the sumptuous clothing, the elaborate headgear ... their faces painted a delicate shade of pink, for the display of natural skin was considered uncultured. (NCERT 2006: 161)

At another place, students are asked to interpret historical sources given in the chapter:

Imagine a conversation between Thomas Arnold, the headmaster of Rugby school, and Mahatma Gandhi on the value of cricket in education. What would each say? Write out a conversation in the form of a dialogue. (NCERT 2006: 157)

These two quotations (Sources E and F) from about the same period are from two different regions of India, Kerala, and Bengal. What do they tell you about the very different notions of shame regarding women's attire. (NCERT 2006: 172)

Explain briefly what the open field system meant to rural people in eighteenth-century England. Look at the system from the point of view of: a) a rich farmer b) a labourer and c) a peasant woman. (NCERT 2006: 137)

Neither is the content presented as a "given," nor is the student expected to unreflectively memorise it.

Has the deletion led to unburdening? What can be the possible reasons for deletion of these three chapters spread across 70 pages? To understand the relationship between "text length" and "burden," it is important to revisit "readability formulas" (Dale and Chall 1949) evolved in the 1940s. These formulas considered the difficulty level of the text by looking at the number of syllables

in a word/number of words in a sentence along with the age of a child, with the assumption that the lesser/shorter the word/sentence, the more readable it would be. Several textbook publishers started mechanically tampering with the textbook content in order to arrive at a perfect readability formula to get their books approved. In the process, however, meaning got compromised and the books became difficult to comprehend, making it more difficult for children to make sense of cryptic sentences and oversimplified words.

The other meaning that is often attached to reducing the burden on children is to make a child's world conflict-proof. This is an old concern which refers to the tendency to write "safe" (Krug 1960) textbooks, devoid of any mention of conflict, keeping the strains and ugliness of society away from children's worlds in schools, even if they were experiencing it in their daily lives. It is in this larger pedagogic context that the recent decision to delete a section of textbook needs to be understood. NCERT textbooks before 2005 as well never mentioned any fissures or ills in society. "Hindu, Muslim, Sikh, Isai, apas mein sab bhai-bhai" (Hindu, Muslim, Sikh and Christian are all brothers) was one of the themes underlying the teaching of social sciences.

It was quite possible that a child torn by communal conflict in the neighbourhood and encountering a rowdy mob on the way to school, reads that all is well between the communities. This creates an incomprehensible gap between the inhabited world and the world of school. Issues of caste-conflict, gender discrimination and oppression of hitherto disadvantaged groups or even corruption, multiple impacts of displacement and technological innovations, etc, never formed a part of textbooks or classroom discussions.

The other reason could perhaps be the idea of the burden being linked to the overall presentation of content which was not crisp and precise. These chapters presented a lot of interesting and minor details and information which gave life to these chapters. But seen otherwise, from a conventional exam point of view, they would be tantamount

to more content to be memorised for exams, increasing their burden.

In Conclusion

Books like the one in question were conceptualised within the framework of a national curriculum that recognised the rot that had set in the Indian school system, where there was a deep schism between the real world of the child and the fragmented and sanitised world of school and one which confused rote memorisation with learning. Therefore, the new books (after 2005) attempted to bridge this gap and talked about concerns with which children could identify. More importantly through them, they showed the interconnections between time, place and ideas/events, further highlighting the intersectionalities between caste, class, and gender, etc. They attempted to weave in the past with the present and thereby facilitated the process through which the past could be reconstructed and made sense of. For instance, the history book of Class 9 states:

Once we learn to ask historical questions about all that is around us, history in fact acquires a new meaning. It allows us to see everyday things from a different angle. We realise that even seemingly ordinary things have a history that is important for us to know. (NCERT 2006: vi)

At the outset, this book also states that the history of the contemporary world is not only about the growth of industries and trade, technology and science, railways and trade. But,

It is equally about the forest dwellers and pastoralists, shifting cultivators and small peasants. All these groups in diverse ways have played their part in making the contemporary world what it is. (NCERT 2006: vi)

Most importantly, these books did not shy away from discussing issues of conflict and engage upfront with issues of social injustice, oppression, and inequality around us. They treated children as actively cognising the world they are living in² and were probably based on the belief that an objective acknowledgement of social strains would facilitate ways of addressing them as well. They brought in hitherto unheard voices into the text and made for a nuanced understanding of different societies and the ways in which they evolved over time.

These books recognised the importance of both teachers and students and resisted against the tendency to treat students like empty vessels. Instead, they created spaces and provided opportunities for reflection and generating knowledge. They also underscored the need to re-orient one's understanding of "teaching-learning" and "assessing," whereby assessments were integrally interwoven with teaching-learning, and eventually supported learning. An unreflective selection of some content from a book which problematises what it means to learn and gives a fresh dimension to writing and studying of history, would cause more harm than good.

NOTES

- 1 One is apprehensive that this may be just the beginning, and more such revisions will be carried out. Similar initiatives, which entailed the reduction of the syllabus for students up to Class 8, were carried out in 2015 by the Delhi government as well. Thus, it is important that one does not view such changes only from the lens of the right or left political orientation.
- 2 The author's student, Shaily Bhaduria recounted her experience of teaching history in a private elite school in Indore. The chapter on cricket was being discussed in class. As she came upon the part discussing struggles faced by Palwankar Baloo in his cricketer career due to his Dalit status, one boy, who otherwise was not so interested in history, suddenly became attentive and excited. He told the class that he was from the same family as Palwankar and Vithal Baloo. He brought books and family albums to prove his point the next day, which the previously sceptical class took in great stride. Thus, history became alive, present and relatable. Students found a cultural connect, not through any dead artefact but a living person amongst their own. Needless to say, the chapter, which itself is one of the most favoured and enjoyed amongst teenagers, became even more exciting and close to the heart.

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