

Rationale for the Bihar Curriculum Framework and the Process of Drafting: Education for Equity, Harmony and Excellence

Abstract

As a follow up of the National Curriculum Framework-2005, the Bihar Curriculum Framework (BCF)-2006/2008 was brought out. This article narrates the reason behind making of the BCF and also details out the process perspective of BCF which is now a guiding document for the school education in the state of Bihar.

NCERT started designing curriculum frameworks in 1975 and has worked on its periodic redesigns. The lastest one came in 2005, and triggered country-wide debate at the instance of NCERT which supported such efforts. In Bihar, syllabi had been prepared in the nineties, but the idea of a full-fledged curriculum framework was still new. The first round of discussion began after the NCF 2000. National Curriculum Framework (NCF)-2005 turned out to be even more radical with a paradigm shift from behaviourism to constructivism. Given its uniqueness, both in respect of problems and potential State Council of Educational Research and Training (SCERT), Bihar decided to write a separate curriculum for itself.

It was a great privilege for me to be associated with the first ever exercise in the state to design a curriculum framework. Hitherto such a task was undertaken by the NCERT at the national level only and states were content with writing syllabi, if they must. After a period of hesitation this responsibility was taken up by the SCERT, Bihar and I got the privilege of piloting the committee constituted for the purpose. After a two day workshop in

March 2006, it was decided to organize a series of consultations and workshops to prepare a draft Bihar Curriculum Framework. Notwithstanding delays and slippages now and then a wide ranging consultation were made with a large number of people. In these subject experts, and school teachers constituted a majority. Apart from NCF 2005, some of the previous documents and the position papers of National Focus Groups setup during NCF-2005, development exercise were also perused before giving shape to our own ideas on issues. BCF thus was the outcome of a sustained state level consultation, drawing ideas and inspiration from the most recent curriculum related documents available at that point of time.

Curriculum debate is directly linked to the question of quality of education, which assumes greater importance as the system of school education moves further towards the goal of universalisation. Elementary education now has the status of a fundamental right. Programmes like Sarva Shiksha Abhiyan, even if not entirely successful, aim at universal elementary education. A subcommittee of Central Advisory Board on Education (CABE) has

made recommendations for universal secondary education and the idea has entered into the debates on the eleventh plan. A concurrent concern at this juncture is about what we teach in schools and how well do we do it. Debates on curriculum have tended to be more thoughtful and serious as well as contentious in the recent years. Perhaps it is a sign of increasing realization of the importance of school education for democracy.

NCF-2005 was prepared after a long and fairly widespread consultation involving a large number of stakeholders in different walks of life organized in twenty one focus groups, they produced meaningful position papers which were used in the making of this illuminating document. Against this background the first natural question that our committee was expected to answer was the rationale for a state level curriculum framework in view of the existence of NCF.

There are two sets of reasons for which we find this exercise desirable—the first set is valid regardless of the type of national curriculum framework, while there are reasons relating to the specific nature of NCF-2005 that suggest small modifications in the context of Bihar.

From Kothari onwards serious commentators on curriculum

have underlined the need for a decentralized approach to curriculum design. Considering the variable range of situations in the schools or their surrounding milieus, Kothari visualized the possibility of several curricula. Krishna Kumar has been critical of the preference of ‘mechanical devices retailed by American behaviourists’ bypassing humanist agenda of Gandhi, Tagore, Gijubhai and Krishnamurti and local social reality. The options and frame for the design of sets of learning opportunities can not be identical or uniform in a country of the size and diversity as ours. NCF 2005 also clarifies that ‘The term National Curriculum Framework is often wrongly construed to mean that an instrument of uniformity is being proposed.’ If choices of learning opportunities vary from place to place, so do the patterns of local needs and expectations. After all curriculum is not designed in a social and historical void. Moreover, it is desirable to involve local groups and build their capacities through debates at the local and regional levels.

The second set of reasons relate to the peculiarities of the Bihar situation at this point of time, which justifies a separate curricular framework. In the first chapter of BCF its rationale is explained in following words:

“First and foremost, among the reasons, will be the issue of contextual relevance. Bihar may appear to be the microcosm of India in terms of its cultural diversity, yet its cultural specificity ought to reflect in its curriculum. More significantly, the level of urbanization in the state, at just 10.47% (2001 Census), was well below the national average of 27.78% and documents like NCF 2005 seem to be designed with the urban middle class children in mind. The state capital Patna has the largest urban population and yet it is not a metropolis, not to speak of the lesser towns, whose character is not far removed from rural. A substantial number of children intended to be brought within the fold of schools today are first generation learners speaking local dialects which are their home language. The status of infrastructure facilities in the schools is generally poor, which is made worse due to chronic shortage of teachers. Besides the state has its own set of problems including

floods in the north and violence and strife characterizing social life in many parts especially south Bihar. Feudal characteristics of the society linger on throwing up a different kind of pedagogic challenge. In sum the challenges before curriculum developers in Bihar are in many ways unique and by all means daunting, which call for focused attention on the situation of the state.”

One more historical fact, which was hard to ignore was the basic education scheme, or *nayi talim*. Its seeds were sown during the Champaran Satyagraha of 1917. In the initial discussion one group felt that BCF should have a rural framework, but the majority favoured only a full-length chapter on rural curricular framework. This turned out to be the unique feature of BCF 2006/2008.

In addition to the chapter on rural framework and the declared preference for a decentralized approach to curriculum design, yet another attempt for a decentralized approach was the idea of school-level curriculum, for which again a separate chapter was created.

It would be presumptuous to claim that BCF addresses the major pedagogic concerns in the specific context of Bihar and yet, there are distinctive features of this document which were identified and defined after several rounds of discussions with teachers, teacher educators, sensitive citizens and curriculum developers. The most important among these is an independent chapter on Rural Education. As noted above nine out of ten students in Bihar reside in villages and many of them are first generation learners.

As a matter of fact the very approach to curriculum is perceptibly modified in the entire document either with an eye on contextualization or to bring it closer to the realities in the state from the point of view of teachers' opinions, parental expectations and social analysts in the state. In a sense BCF is far less

radical in its pedagogic approach than NCF, especially in terms of its avowed theoretical position. BCF takes a more pragmatic view on pedagogy which is more accommodative of prevailing or conventional ideas among teachers or members of community without, of course, settling for status quo.

As part of the country, Bihar shares many concerns taken up in the National Policy on Education. At the same time it has to grapple with its own problems and for that it has to fall back upon its own resources –cultural and social, and devise its own techniques and strategies. There are systemic reforms in the discussion process in the state, e.g., the possibility of introduction of a common school system and several more institutional initiatives are needed which have been outlined in the chapter on systemic reforms.

An idea suggested in Kothari report and impliedly endorsed in NCF has been developed and concretized. It is the idea of schools designing their own curriculum and a separate chapter has been devoted on that. Guided by an underlying premise that actual curriculum takes shape in the real setting of schools care has been taken to give some simple suggestions to the head teachers and teachers to enable them to attempt it in every school. NCF has provided several interesting clues and ideas regarding what can be done in the schools and much of that has been incorporated in the framework that we have evolved and we go one step further by asking teachers to design a school curriculum on their own. If schools actually start doing it, that indeed will

be the beginning of the much needed quality reform in education.

Bihar is in a state of transition– a painful one which may possibly linger

for some time more. If this curriculum is of any help to the young learners of today to find resources to negotiate this transition, it will be our highest reward.

References

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