

NCERT silence on expert panel on schoolbooks

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New Delhi: The NCERT has engaged a team of 22 consultants, headed by a man associated with an RSS-linked organisation, for the preparation of school textbooks but seems reluctant to share details about the group.

The national textbook body stonewalled this newspaper's queries, filed under the Right to Information Act, about its Programme Office, where these consultants have been working.

The Programme Office has been operating out of the NCERT headquarters — it's located on the ground floor of the Zakir Hussain block — for the last three years.

It's headed by Gajanan Londhe, who has been executive director of the Samvit Research Foundation, a Bangalore-based NGO linked to the RSS.

Samvit's website describes it as an "Indian Knowledge System" (IKS) resource centre approved by the Union education ministry. The website carries pictures of multiple meetings between Samvit officials and people it identifies as RSS office-bearers.

NCERT textbooks have in recent years incorporated a lot of content in the name of IKS.

Experts have complained that a chapter on ayurveda in a Class XI textbook exaggerates the antiquity of the discipline. They say the book claims ayurveda was codified 4,000 years ago although the earliest known ayurveda classics date back to around the sixth century BCE.

The new textbooks mention Londhe, describing him as the head of the Programme Office and a member of the National Syllabus and Teaching Learning Material Committee, the NCERT's apex committee

for approving textbooks.

Official sources said the Programme Office members collaborate with the NCERT's team of textbook writers, contribute content, go through the draft textbooks and suggest corrections. "The Programme Office people have no accountability, but do all the crucial work on the textbooks," a source, who did not wish to be identified, said.

The Telegraph filed an RTI application in February seeking a copy of the order that set up the Programme Office, the mandate of this office, the names of its members, the procedure followed in selecting them, and the pay they receive.

A reply on March 19 from Ranjana Arora, public information officer (PIO) and head of the NCERT's department of curriculum studies and development, stonewalled the queries.

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Textbook consultants

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To each question, Arora gave the same single-sentence reply: "This information is not available in the office record of Department of Curriculum Studies & Development."

An appeal filed with the first appellate authority, Prakash Chandra Agrawal, brought a reply on May 15 that said the PIO had already responded to the application.

A separate RTI application filed by this newspaper with EdCIL (India) Ltd, a public-sector undertaking under the education ministry, however, did bring some information about the Programme

Office and its members.

EdCIL provided the names of the 22 members. It said it had engaged these consultants as part of a memorandum of understanding it had signed with the NCERT to establish a technical support group for the development and formulation of the National Curriculum Framework (NCF).

To the question on the procedure followed in selecting the consultants, EdCIL responded: "Based on the recommendations of NCERT, the consultants were engaged from time to time under NCF project."

EdCIL's reply suggests the NCERT had selected these 22 members and, therefore,

had the information about them that it had claimed to lack.

Londhe has been engaged as the principal chief consultant along with 6 chief consultants, 12 senior consultants and 3 consultants, EdCIL said.

It said it paid ₹1.5 lakh a month to the principal chief consultant, ₹1.2 lakh to a chief consultant, ₹1 lakh to a senior consultant and ₹80,000 to a consultant.

An email was sent to NCERT director Dinesh Prasad Saklani on Monday seeking the reason for the denial of information on the Programme Office to the RTI query. His response is awaited.