

Argument

Rewriting India's History Through School Textbooks

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Since the ideological BJP has come to power, a concerted effort has been made to distort the curriculum to promote a monocultural view of the country's past and present

In 2020, schools in India witnessed sweeping overhauls in social science textbooks for grades six through 12. These changes were made in the name of "syllabus rationalizing," and were ostensibly aimed at easing students' study load.

Yet the new textbooks do not provide a complete view of history. References to several contentious but essential events, eras and people from India's political and social history were removed from the books. These included the 2002 Gujarat Riots (when the current prime minister, Narendra Modi, was chief minister of the state and thousands lost their lives). A report by India's National Human Rights Commission report on the violence, which contained a searing indictment of Gujarat's state government at the time — led by Modi's Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP) — was similarly omitted. Vital chapters on Mughal courts, a poem on the Dalit Movement (of the so-called untouchables caste) and a chapter on the Cold War were also among the materials deleted.

Verses by the revolutionary Urdu poet Faiz Ahmed Faiz and references to various important Dalit writers who spoke up about the indignity of the caste system were also withdrawn. Equally significant was the elimination of stories about protests and demonstrations, such as those led by activists like Medha Patkar of the Narmada Bachao Andolan (a social movement against large dam projects across the Narmada River, spearheaded by "adivasis" [tribals], farmers, environmentalists and human rights activists). Writings about the massive protests against India's first so-called Emergency period between 1975 and 1977, when fundamental political rights were suspended, have also been nixed.

Apart from these omissions, patent absurdities have been added to the school textbooks. Take this example, regarding methods to conceive a baby boy, as described in a third-year textbook for the Bachelor's of Ayurvedic Medicine and Surgery (B.A.M.S.) in India: "Collect two north-facing branches of a Banyan tree (east facing will also suffice) that has grown in a stable; take precisely two grains of urad dal (black gram), mustard seeds, grind all the ingredients with curd, and consume the mixture." A Kannada (south Indian language) school textbook claims that the controversial Hindu nationalist ideologue Vinayak Damodar Savarkar would "fly out of prison on the wings of a bird [from time to time]." Similarly, another book asserts that the Mughal Emperor Akbar, who was the monarch when the Mughal empire was at its zenith, "didn't win the Haldighati battle against Maharana Pratap" in 1576. The book maintains the "victory of the Mughal forces was not certified."

These inaccuracies usually draw ire for a while, but mostly laughs, and the noise soon dies out. They continue to inform a captive young audience in state schools, however, and will shape how India's

young people see the world in years to come. At 253 million, India has the largest adolescent population in the world. They are bound to be strongly influenced by the material being touted as knowledge and education in schools, primarily via such textbooks.

Ever since the BJP came to power in India, there has been a major thrust to rewrite history — starting with school textbooks — in order to promote a monocultural view about the country's past. As Mohan Bhagwat, head of the right-wing Hindu nationalist organization Rashtriya Swayamsevak Sangh (RSS), remarked in an interview in January, the BJP portrays its society as being “at war for a thousand years.” Protests and demonstrations against these attempts have not enjoyed wide public support, or at least have not brought people out into the streets. Some opposition parties have made noises, especially those on the left of the political spectrum, but even they perhaps realize that falsehoods in textbooks are unlikely to constitute an issue of mass interest. No large-scale public mobilization has been witnessed to date.

Education in India is usually meant to be handled by state governments. But the central government in Delhi can also set the tone and decide key things which matter across the country. Significant changes were previously made to textbooks when the BJP got their first prime minister elected, Atal Bihari Vajpayee, who held office between 1998 and 2004. Between 2002 and 2004, major scientific discoveries were attributed to the Vedic civilization in National Council of Educational Research and Training textbooks. Furthermore, “glorious ancient India” was described as a time when the only people living there were Indigenous and of the Aryan race. However, this is directly contradicted by genetic, linguistic and other material evidence. Efforts to showcase the past as shining and monolithic are countered by historical studies that have proven that India has been a crucible for many cultures. In the words of the Indian journalist and author Tony Joseph, it was a “pizza” with several layers of toppings added over the centuries.

Ruling Delhi since 2014, the BJP were elected back into office with over 40% of the popular vote in 2019. The first document made public after the BJP's reelection was the new education policy. In the previous seven decades, India had just two education policies: the first in 1968 and the second in 1986, which appeared to maintain a focus on broadening the base of students who had access to public education and making them more employable. However, the success of those policies is debatable.

School textbooks are the primary source of education in a large, poor country such as India. They are varied and, because India's states make decisions about education, they are written in various languages. They have mostly been straight-laced and basic. Those certified by the central authority for textbooks, the National Council for Educational Research and Training, cater to a wide, pluralistic population, and have broadly adhered to what may be termed secular instruction, without prioritizing any faith or religion, especially in history textbooks. Chapters on ancient India teach Buddhism and Jainism as well as Hindu practices, and medieval India is not portrayed as having been captured by Muslims.

Until now, textbooks have presented India's accomplishments in art, music, medicine, philosophy, architecture and literature as syncretistic, or unifying; a joint effort over several centuries of Hindu and other non-Hindu influences, including Islam. India was broadly depicted in the Gandhian framework of belonging to all faiths, with Mahatma Gandhi's quotations printed as a sort of talisman at the beginning of all books. A critical look at some of the ills of Indian society, such as its hierarchical and oppressive caste system, had also found its way into school textbooks. The national independence movement waged by Indians against the British Empire was taught as one of a unified struggle in which Hindus, Muslims, women and individuals from all castes, classes and regions participated in the country's liberation. Indian textbooks may not have been considered riveting or innovative, but the content of the history curriculum was at least in line with what is taught globally,

with an effort to explore all that is good in India, alongside an awareness of what is regressive in its social structure.

No one claims that textbooks in India were perfect. The academic Suhas Palshikar, who was chief adviser to the government textbook council's advisory committee on political science in the previous dispensation, told New Lines that his committee's job was to make Indian textbooks more accessible. "We tried to make the books student-friendly. We also wanted them to not be seen like the gospel truth but work to encourage questioning, in the full spirit of enquiry, which we wanted to promote." He explained that the situation has dramatically altered now, with the new political dispensation focused on fully reworking the books and drastically changing the content. This is happening in the most haphazard way, he cautions, with the least possible consultation, and "facts are just being left out."

Textbooks are important all over the world. But in India, given the levels of poverty and the low state budgets for other tools of education, the prescribed textbook is at the center of education. It frames the attitudes of teachers, who dispense information through it. Palshikar pointed out that the rote system in India, of committing facts to memory, is still the dominant one. As a result, textbooks are wholly internalized — read and reread very often by students. "This means that the next few generations will be victims of the haphazard way in which they are being written now but, more critically, their ideological worldview will have been shaped," he added.

Schools in India are of many types. There are Christian missionary schools, other private schools of varying qualities, "madrasahs" (Islamic educational facilities) and also schools run by Hindu nationalist-inspired organizations. The historian Mridula Mukherjee has closely studied the books in the Shishu Mandirs (for primary classes) run by the RSS, which were introduced in 1962 and then expanded for use in Vidya Mandirs (higher classes) in 1977. Mukherjee told New Lines that the template for syllabuses in these schools, some 50,000 in number, uniformly and aggressively characterizes Muslims as evil outsiders. A pro-Hindu bias was evident in all the subjects that Mukherjee looked at. She said it was "not about just a misleading interpretation of facts. The very idea of facts is being challenged and that upends the basis of what history or one's past is."

Historians say that, if what has been taught in these schools were to be replicated in state schools, it would "amount to replacing history with mythology." This means teaching many obscurantist beliefs as facts. In "The Saffronisation of Indian Textbooks (2002-2018)," Caitlin Westerfield writes that, in the state of Rajasthan, a meeting in July 2015 was held to list precise instructions and decisions about what the textbooks should contain, which included a chapter on Vedic mathematics for every class, a focus on "Indian culture" while teaching history, and science explained through stories from Indian mythology. The banned practice of Sati, in which widows immolated themselves with their husband's bodies during cremation, is described in glowing terms. Government schemes and initiatives are taught as necessarily leading to good outcomes. Books on practically every subject are trying to instill nationalism and unquestioning respect for the armed forces.

Moreover, to minimize the role of Muslims in the anticolonial movement or to portray the rule of Muslim monarchs in a bad light, the medieval period of Indian history has been curtailed. Several pages on the Delhi sultanate — which was ruled by many dynasties, including the Mamluks, Tughlaqs, Khilji and Lodi, and the Mughal empire — are cut out of the books. Art and the architectural heritage of medieval India; temples of the south Indian Chola kingdom, undoubtedly a high point of peninsular India; mosques of Delhi sultans, Mughals and Deccan sultans; and the gardens and forts built then, which bear testimony to the accomplishments of that period — all have been deleted.

The Delhi sultanate was the period when art, sculpture and architecture flourished in India. The

coming together of Hindu art with art influenced by Islam or West Asia produced a very rich synthesis, all of which can be seen in monuments such as the Taj Mahal, Red Fort, Agra Fort, the many forts of Udaipur and Jaipur and elsewhere. Music, painting and important works such as the Hindu scriptures as well were translated in that period, but by deleting these references, the rewriters of history ensure that students will be ignorant of the efflorescent results of syncretic India, which the coming together of such different cultures accomplished in that period. Furthermore, some portions on “Central Islamic Lands” that dealt with the evolution of Islam in West Asia and the social, economic and political conditions of that time have been axed. In reality, the European Dark Ages (in terms of science and knowledge) coincided with the time when the “Central Islamic lands,” from around 600 to 1200, were the torchbearers of knowledge, science and the spirit of inquiry.

Moreover, information on innumerable civil society and reform movements that flourished in India has also been scrubbed out of the new textbooks. Last summer, a chapter on popular movements in India was dropped. It dealt with the Chipko movement in Uttarakhand that focused on preservation of forests; the aforementioned Narmada Bachao Andolan; the anti-liquor movement in the state of Andhra Pradesh; movements for the right to information; the movement for the rights of displaced forest dwellers in Satpura, Maharashtra; and an extreme left-wing movement called the Naxalite movement. The radical Dalit Panther movement of the communities previously regarded as untouchable has also been nixed.

An exercise in the book given to students to discuss the three controversial farm laws recently passed by the present government (from which it was forced to backtrack in the face of intense and widespread farm protests) was also dropped. The spirited fight against the 1975 Emergency, which forms a landmark in India’s democratic journey and civil rights movement, will be unknown to most young minds. The spirit of questioning is not even being introduced, let alone inculcated, with the sole emphasis being on “duties” rather than rights. In an already socially regressive and hierarchical society, this blunting of the idea of an active citizen could further distort India’s democracy. In his recent book “The New Despotism,” the political scientist John Keane has defined this new phenomenon as emerging from the “willing complicity” of citizens.

The weaponization of the past and its effective deployment via textbooks to feed young minds over generations to build a society that is ideologically compliant with ethnic nationalism has been the story of modern South Asia. Pakistan, since the years of the army coup and the Islamization drive by General Zia-ul-Haq in the late 1970s, bears witness to how mindsets were shaped to consider all individuals as subjects under authority. History, political science and natural sciences were marshaled in the service of the Islamic Republic of Pakistan.

Pakistan’s Federal Ministry of Education curriculum document for primary classes of 1995 demands that students be required to “acknowledge and identify forces that may be working against Pakistan,” learn about “India’s evil designs against Pakistan” and practice “making speeches on jihad and shahadat (martyrdom).” Experts say that official textbooks in the country ensure that a sense of siege and embattlement is created, teaching students that the enemies of Pakistan are constantly plotting and scheming to weaken it. Reference to Islam is critical on every matter. Therefore, democracy, personal and political freedoms, culture, lifestyles and the statuses of women and religious minorities can have validity only insofar as Islam permits. The first chapter of every science book is, by law, about the great achievements of Muslim scientists and culture. The varied ethno-lingual heritage of Pakistan is near-absent.

Pervez Hoodbhoy, an Islamabad-based physicist and author who is deeply concerned with education and freedoms, told New Lines that “admitting to Pakistan’s diversity is considered impermissible since this supposedly weakens nation building. South Asian identity is also to be rejected.” Broadly,

history has been liberally rewritten and distorted. Historical events have been altered to suit a singular, Islamist narrative. Contrary to the facts, the founder of Pakistan, Mohammad Ali Jinnah is represented as a pious Muslim in Zia-era textbooks; the 1965 war with India is said to have been initiated by India; and the secession of East Pakistan in 1971 and concomitant establishment of Bangladesh resulted from a Hindu conspiracy.

The results of these textbooks in Pakistan, says Hoodbhoy, have been catastrophic. As youngsters fed on a steady narrative of supremacy have grown into adults, “piety has exploded on every Pakistani university campus. Discussions on jinns, black magic, and supernatural agencies draw huge crowds. Beards and burqas are everywhere, proselytizing groups like Tablighi Jamaat operate freely, and religious-minded teachers freely preach their beliefs during class time. The pious are angry at the West for countless reasons, and equally angry at the liberal permissiveness on campuses which allow celebration of Valentine’s Day and male-female couples to sit together.”

The current ruling party in India, the BJP, seems unconcerned with how Islamization — beginning with textbooks that produced and encouraged a warped worldview — arguably ended up inhibiting independent thinking and reasoning, and eventually stalled Pakistan’s progress. The effects might not have been immediately visible, but after only a few years of the push toward Islamization in school textbooks, many Pakistani intellectuals now lament that their country has found itself in a quandary of its own making. The infusion of Islamization and intolerance into society has led to grave consequences. Even the army and the government have failed to keep in step with the forces that have been unleashed.

In India, modern institutions should have raised questions about deletions and changes in syllabi but did not do so. The domination of the RSS-BJP that was bestowed on them by a more-than-comfortable political majority and broad social support among the already-powerful sections of Indian society, including large industrial houses, have resulted in complete control over all political and social institutions. They have been focused on tackling education as an area of interest and making changes swiftly. The media, which could offer a different point of view or take a poll about interest in resistance, is not always free or willing to do so, barring a few independent digital outfits.

India has been an outlier in South Asia since 1950, defying all predictions in the past about its imminent collapse as a modern democracy. No country so poor, large or with so many social differences had ever embarked on such an ambitious democratic project before. Yet democracy is sustained only by a questioning, reasoning and rational citizenry who share a belief in it and hold collective hopes for the future. Being fed on a steady diet of incorrect information and divisive facts will eventually take a toll. India is the largest young country on the planet today, with young people constituting a majority of the population. Every fifth Indian is between 10 and 19 years old, and 60% of India is young. By comparison, in 2021, it was reported that only 16.8% of China’s population was below 15 years of age. If history can be effectively rewritten in the minds of students via textbooks and then flourish in an unquestioning public environment, it will have a lasting impact.

Seema Chishti is editor of *The Wire*

P.S.

• New Lines Magazine. March 9, 2023:

<https://newlinesmag.com/argument/rewriting-indias-history-through-school-textbooks/>