

**If NCERT Has its Way, the Study of Indian History Will Move Entirely  
Outside of India**

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The recent controversy over the deletions of sections of the textbooks in Indian history written for Classes VI to XII and published by the NCERT raises a multitude of questions. Some of these have been discussed in the recent justified anger over the dismissive treatment of important historical statements and segments in the history textbooks, currently facing a hatchet job as part of our present system of education. I would like to comment on three facets of this controversy: why are textbooks crucial to education; what is the significance of the seemingly arbitrary hacking of earlier versions of Indian history in these textbooks; and what is the immediate purpose in doing so.

**The importance of textbooks**

Textbooks serve at least three functions. One is that they bring together the basic information required to understand a discipline. They are therefore graded in a hierarchy, from the simple ones used in junior classes to the more complex used in senior classes. This cannot be treated as merely a repetition, as it is a deliberate upgrading of information. There is therefore a difference in how history is treated in the two.

Secondly, good textbooks teach and encourage students to ask relevant questions that enhance their knowledge of the subject they are studying. Asking questions, and preferably probing questions in any discipline, is essential to enhancing knowledge. This is ideally what education is meant to encourage.

Thirdly, the textbook is an aid to the teacher in teaching a subject and explaining why that subject has significance in our society and culture. What and how children are taught is the key to the kind of citizens they will become, as is the claim of the Jesuits, the RSS and many other organisations.

So, textbooks deserve to be taken seriously and be given the kind of attention they received when the NCERT books Sets I and II were being written. But

when textbooks have been hacked, one knows that education is not the primary purpose of the books. The actual concern is to nurture citizens that are content with what they are taught by those in authority, without in any way questioning it. It is important to reiterate that education should not be just learning the alphabet and being able to read primers. It has to encourage thinking beyond the obvious, which requires a far larger financial slice of the budget than is currently given, and the need to train both school teachers and school children to ask relevant questions in order to understand the world in which we live. In this, the study of history plays a central role.

### **What has been ‘rationalised’?**

History is based on a continuity of events. It makes little sense to delete large sections of it, as such deletions inevitably confuse both teachers and students. Thus, to jump from the early to the late second millennium AD, and to preferably avoid teaching “Muslim history” can only result in immense confusion. Discussion of the impact of events gets stymied if there are breaks that create huge blanks in the narrative, or else deletions that annul the centrality of discussing an event in order to understand it or observing connections between various actions. Can one really discuss the assassination of a major political leader – in this case Gandhi – without mentioning who exactly the assassin was, what were his possible motives and what resulted as the political aftermath of the event?

History is not a string of events with dates attached. Discussing the context of an event is crucial to its historical understanding. This is equally applicable when discussing why a particular community was targeted and killed in large numbers on a particular occasion. Such actions cannot just be blanked out, by removing mention of them in textbooks, as has been done in the NCERT textbook with the Gujarat killings in 2002. Such events survive as a part of social memory and are spoken of both publicly and in quietude. They become the subject of other books and debates and are not forgotten. This has been the fate of the Holocaust, the Gulag and similar others.

Predictably, the pronouncements of the changes made by the NCERT in the all-India school textbooks come within a cloud of confusion. Two aspects among others, of what has been said, are puzzling as their purpose is unclear. One is what is meant by what it calls ‘rationalising’. The other is the justification for deleting the sentences, passages and chapters from the school textbooks, especially those for Class XI and XII, has not been explained in each case as it

should have been. How does it ease the burden of post-Covid studying if the sentence referring to the assassin of Gandhi being a *brahmana* is removed?

To rationalise what has been written means that the choice of how a text is written is determined by rational and logical explanations of that which has been written. The reason for what is deleted from an existing text has to be explained and from the same perspective. The choice should not be arbitrary or casual or unconcerned with the subject of the text, nor a subjective whim conforming to an obvious ideology. Rationalisation means a justifiable explanation for the changes being made. The deletion of sentences, paragraphs, sections or chapters in a text is not in itself a rationalisation, but rather it is a rationing of what is being presented. Has the NCERT confused ‘rationalising’ with ‘rationing,’ and has simply axed large portions of the text books in order to claim that the students now have less to study? Rationing means to cut down, to prune, to delete – which is precisely what the NCERT has done.

The more sensible way of doing this to meet the weight of the Covid disturbance, would have been to leave the textbook as is, and simply state which sections would not be examined, although they could be read by the student. It would not of course have let the NCERT off the hook but it would have made some sense at least in accommodating the syllabus to students suffering from the after effects of Covid. It would have left the history intact and of much interest to the brighter students who use Book XII as the starting point for asking questions. By not treating it in the obviously logical and rational way, it is clear that Covid was not the reason for making the changes. The changes were made to suit the ideology of those in control who were determined that the history taught officially should be in conformity with this ideology. Deletions have to be justified with rational explanations pertaining to the text itself, namely, why were particular sentences or sections of the text chosen for deletion, and not others. When looked at closely there is a deliberate plan in what has been deleted – as many commentators have pointed out – and to which the NCERT has no coherent answer. No doubt the plan will be explicit when the NCERT Textbooks Set III written by their own team of experts will be published.

If an event that happened in the past is worthy of being referred to in a history textbook for Class XII, then what matters is not just a mention of the event but also discussion of when it happened, what happened, how it happened and why it happened. In a period of 600 years, 1200-1800 AD – the Medieval Period as it is called – if the contents have to be reduced then the solution is not to just erase 300 years of history – a major chunk of history – but to select fewer major events

from the larger span of time and discuss these, whilst decreasing the space given to the less important, in other words the historian has to select what are thought to be the more significant events.

Deleting pages and chapters can only be described as an entirely unintelligent way of reducing content. Given that the NCERT has not convincingly explained the historical reasons for and choice of the deletions, and the viability of such actions in historical study, we can only assume that the intention was not to improve the historical quality of the textbook but to push a particular reading of history, as demanded by those who dictated the choice of deletions. So much for the intellectual independence of the educational system in our country.

### **The origins of these textbooks**

Another confusion has been pointed out by many but it persists. Which are the books and the historians whose histories are thus being obliterated. The NCERT textbooks in history were first written in the 1960s and '70s, and their authors were Romila Thapar, Arjun Dev, R.S. Sharma, Satish Chandra and Bipan Chandra. These were the books that the Morarji Desai government tried to ban but the government fell before this could be done.

Nevertheless, the historians who wrote these books were disapproved of by the BJP in no uncertain terms. They were accused of being Marxists, Leftists and writing a distorted history, followed by the predictable litany of abuse. It reflected a fear of rational history as against the laughable fantasies of their particular constructions of history. The BJP government in 1999 ordered new textbooks to be written by another set of historians who were willing to write the kind of history that suited the politics of the Sangh *parivar*. These also could not come into circulation properly as the government was voted out in 2004.

The UPA led by the Congress was back in power and decided on a new set of textbooks, the first set already being 40 years old. The new set, Set No. 2. as it were, was written by historians who had not earlier written textbooks for the NCERT and who introduced a new historical orientation that was approved of by professional historians, and that could not be labelled as obviously Marxist. The confusion in all this is that the books of Set 2 are currently disapproved of, but their authors are hardly mentioned. Therefore, the personal attacks are on historians disapproved of by the present government and essentially what was written in the books of Set 1, and which incidentally, have not been in use for two decades now. Since the authors of the Set 2 books are not named, it is the

earlier authors that continue to face the brunt. And of those five authors, four are no more and the last is ageing!

The link between changing textbooks and changing governments happened so often that it was beginning to be the butt of jokes. A change in government meant a call for school textbooks to be changed. Some of us, therefore, wrote a strong letter to the UPA government in 2005 arguing that the writing of textbooks in all disciplines should not be under the control of any government, but should be in the hands of the professionals in the particular discipline, and preferably the more reputable professionals should be chosen. Such a choice of 'experts' by professionals in the discipline would certainly be more impressive than those chosen in some disciplines today. Disciplines are now highly specialised and require expertise and training. Textbooks cannot be left to those that are not properly trained in the discipline and its methodology. Needless to say our letters and reminders remained unanswered. But of course, no political party was willing to concede our request, as each is only concerned with capturing the minds of the young but not by teaching the young how to think and to question the world around them. And when citizens learn to question and to think independently, those in authority have to answer their questions. This approach has now been substantially washed away. Education is becoming just a catechism. It does not teach the young to question and to think independently.

We have to concede that putting together a syllabus is a complicated and time-consuming exercise. I recall the lengthy discussions we had on each item of the history syllabus in the meetings of the committee that over saw the NCERT Set 1 textbooks and of which we were the authors. Items put forward were discussed in terms of the evidence that supported them, their role in the wider history of that moment, and its aftermath. Activities were seen from multiple perspectives to determine their significance. This meant debates on many items.

### **Wiping out pages that matter**

In the writing of the NCERT Set 2 textbooks, the same procedure was followed when the syllabus was drawn up. The discussion by those who participated in it was very thorough. The history narrated was more up to date but the procedure was the same. Before an item of history was accepted for inclusion or declined, there was much debate. The committee involved in this consisted of more than those contributing to the book, and included other experts in the subject as well. This procedure was evidently not followed by the NCERT in the recent decisions to delete sections of the textbooks. From public statements by the NCERT and

its teams, there was only one main official reason for making deletions, namely lessening the burden on the school-child after Covid. Cutting out repetition from Class VI to Class X makes little sense since obviously the way events are taught in Class VI will not be the same as in Class X. It was not a repetition. Attributing the resort to deleting sections because of Covid does not in any way whatsoever, explain why particular historical statements or selected histories were deleted. It is crucial to know this in any circumstances and more so here. Going through the list of deletions as listed in the booklets, it becomes clear that the purpose has little to do with the work load on the student. It is more clearly the intention to support a particular interpretation of history, one acceptable to the those in power. The deletions are not arbitrary and the resultant history, judging by the reactions to it, is unacceptable to many professional historians. If a syllabus has to be made lighter, then it has to be restructured and not just axed.

In the textbook for Class XII, there are two parts on themes in Indian history. There is no change in Part I. In Part II, the full chapter of 30 pages had been deleted. This is listed as being on Kings and Chronicles; the Mughal Courts; Sixteenth and Seventeenth Centuries. Each page of the booklet is described as “list of rationalised content in Textbooks for Class XII”.

In trying to understand why a whole chapter was deleted, it becomes obvious that the deletion fits into the current attempts to denigrate Mughal rule in official history. Mughal rule was previously described as the pinnacle of Muslim rule. Therefore, if the intention is to denigrate Muslim rule then the Mughal period would be the obvious one to be marginalised if not deleted. But such a decision can only come from those that know little or no history.

Does one have to remind them that whether they like it or not, the period of the 16th and 17th centuries was one of an immense interface of cultures, economies and social groups? This is demonstrated for instance in the flourishing commercial economy manned more often by Jaina and Hindu merchants and those of Arab descent. The nexus between landowners and merchants encouraged the evolution of an impressive economy. Magnificent buildings were a mix of architectural features from sources Indian and other. The imperial court and the courts of their feudatories established excellent ateliers of miniature paintings that vividly reproduced the life of the times and handsomely illustrated the increasing numbers of books that were being made available in those times. There was no love-jihad so marriages between Hindu Rajput women and Muslim men among the elite were celebrated. The Kacchwaha Rajputs were in any case majorly involved in the top level of administration in the Mughal empire.

Shouldn't Indian citizens today get to know how this and other empires in India were administered?

It was a time of immense and impressive new departures in religious ideas, many of which we still identify with in Hindu belief and worship. The Bhakti movement that enormously enriched Hinduism was part of these religious innovations. Sufi sects were in dialogue with groups of Yogis and the dispersal of the ideas that ensued gave form to not only the literature of the time in Hindi and other regional languages, but to many aspects of the intellectual life of India in the period prior to the colonial. Hindu and Muslim *krishna-bhakts* composed songs that are still sung in the repertoire of classical Indian music. There were wide-ranging studies and exchanges in mathematics, astronomy and medicine that spread to academic centres beyond India and that imprinted their cultures as well. Is all this to be wiped out?

Of course, there was the other side of the coin too in the contribution of social laws specific to India. The *Dharmashastras* continued to insist on the low status of those outside caste, the *avarna* and the *asprishya*/untouchable, and this carried over into all the religions, resulting in Muslim *pasmandas*, and Sikh *mazhabis*. Islam may have spoken of the equality of all in the eyes of Allah but the *Shari'a* laws enforced social distances. These were the sections of society that were victimised for over two millennia of our history but by those who belonged to the same religion. Such references are preferably deleted in current textbooks. Instead, it is stated on every possible occasion that Muslims victimised all Hindus – even if such statements are not based on evidence.

### **The dominance of anti-intellectualism**

Colonial writers who first wrote modern histories of India deliberately garbled our history and insisted on the validity of the two-nation theory, as did James Mill in 1817. This was then endorsed as a cornerstone of colonial writing on India. Some Indian historians who were anti-colonial nationalists disagreed with it. Those that have appropriated this theory and made it basic to their own ideology, are the religious nationalists – the creators of Pakistan and the hopefuls that there will be a Hindu Rashtra. This requires the majoritarian rule of Muslims in Pakistan and Hindus in the Hindu Rashtra. Those who write a nuanced history and argue for a critical inquiry and reasoned arguments, were and are dismissed by the religious nationalists as the children of Macaulay. Yet the irony of it is, that it is precisely the religious nationalists, Muslim and Hindu, who endorse the colonial two-nation theory, inherited directly from colonial authority.

The struggle as reflected in historical writing now goes beyond even the majoritarian ideologies of dominance whether of Hindu rule or Muslim rule. What we are confronted with is the equally dangerous wiping out of any of the essentials of a methodology in the writing of history or the other social sciences. Methodologies have yet to find their roots in Indian intellectual life. I am surprised by those Indian scientists who claim to base their work on the scientific method but are quite ready to believe the history that has been concocted without any critical enquiry or observance of the historical method. These scientists refer to the history of professional historians, based on evidence, as ‘distorted history’, or else dismiss it as the wishful thinking of leftists and Marxists, and they happily go on repeating the fantasies of those who are as ignorant of history as they are. They don’t pause for a moment to ask whether the historical theories that they support and propound emerge from the use of a scientific method of analysis.

Speaking of which, the NCERT has been hacking away at textbooks in other disciplines too. Darwin’s theory of evolution, useful to many disciplines, has been deleted. There isn’t even the hint of a suggestion that it should have been discussed prior to deletion. This isn’t an issue of Left-Liberals versus the Hindu Right, as has been the contention in the history controversy. This concerns a fundamental principle on which many disciplines are based. If the NCERT is going to cut away the foundational principles of reasoned intellectual thought then there will be nothing left of education, barring knowing the alphabet and numbers 1 to 10. It is already evident that anti-intellectualism is the dominant practice of those in authority. This has been amply demonstrated in the manner in which the history textbooks have been expunged. The question is when will the intellectual and intellectual concerns become assertive again, if only to correct the blatantly incorrect statements made by public persons in public speeches. These latter statements are applauded as correct since the audience knows no better or is too frightened to point out the mistakes. We are living in anti-intellectual times. We seem to have lost our nexus with that which challenges us to think, and think freely.

The question we have to ask ourselves is, what do these systematic deletions do to the education of the generation using these books? At one level, as long as education is kept within the boundaries of India, then anything goes. Only Indians will decline educationally. If we produce a generation of non-starters then it won’t make much of a difference to the world. It will make a difference to us. But it is an even more serious matter. Knowledge is advancing rapidly not just in the sciences but also in the humanities. If educated Indians are hoping to



keep up then we cannot get by with reading a history that has gaping holes, is entirely selective in knowing only the history of one Indian community, and is incapable of explaining, in a meaningful way, the world we have lived in and the world we hope to live in. History is the perspective of the evolution of humanity in many ways and the clarity of this perspective relies on the quality of knowledge we use for building our lives.

We may go on deleting sections of our history but in the world outside where there are multiple centres of research into the Indian past, and many scholars, there these expunged sections from books used in India will continue to be studied. They will be subjected to new methods of analyses, will be commented upon, will enrich the understanding of India with new knowledge, and all this will be incorporated into the history of India that will be taught everywhere except in India. We in India will not know anything about that section of Indian history which has been deleted from our books.

Outside India, the multiple cultures of India and their achievements will be studied as part of Indian history and Indian culture, irrespective of the religion of the dynasties that may have presided over the achievements. They will be studied in universities, libraries and museums dedicated to the study of India, as a continuation of not only the Indian past but also of the past pertaining to happenings current in various parts of the world. These will have pride of place not only in the history of India but in the history of human achievements. But we in India will be entirely ignorant of their significance since we shall not know them as a part of Indian history nor as a part of other histories of the world. These would have been cultures that we once recognised as those to which we once contributed, and with which we once had exchanges, when we created the Indian civilisation of past times.

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