

Writing History: Truth and Ideology By Shalini Dixit and Bharat Chandra Rout

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We carry our history with us. How is this history constituted? Is there an ‘objective’ history? Or is it always ideological? Here is piece that throws light on this question—particularly in the context of India where contesting political groups seek to perceive history through their ideologies of nationalism.

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Writing exactly hundred years ago, John Dewey referred to two extremes of education – one being traditional and the other progressive (Dewey, 1916). He vehemently criticized traditional education for its being so structured, disciplined, ordered, and, therefore, its failure to understand the wellbeing of the students and its inability to appreciate diversity in education. On the other hand, Dewey argued in favor of a progressive paradigm of education which, he thought, is relatively free, based on the idea of freedom and autonomy for students as well as institutions, and is inherently student-directed. The National Curriculum Framework 2005 does reflect Dewey’s educational philosophy of student-centered learning based on an understanding of the nature of children’s experiences. However, had John Dewey been today, he would have lamented knowing that education today is used largely to maneuver political goals and to navigate the ideologies of ‘majoritarianism’ through curricular and pedagogic processes. As a matter of fact, neither discursively nor practically can the domain of education be kept disassociated from politics. The role of the State within the domain of education can hardly be denied. This commentary reviews some of the historical antecedents and hidden purposes of Indian State’s intervention in education.

State and the Curriculum

The recent remark of Mr. Ram Shankar Katheria, Minister of State for Human Resource Development on ‘saffronisation of education’ has not yet received wide attention among concerned citizens in the country. Think of the remark: ‘The saffronisation of curriculum would increase the nation’s *samman* (honour) and *swabhimaan* (self-respect) in the world.’ Not solely that. Mr. Katheria added, “If we do not study the history of Maharana Pratap and Shivaji Maharaj, then will we study the history of Genghis Khan?” (*The Hindu*, 19 June). The subject of history, we all know, has been a site of intense political and ideological struggle. History tells us about our past, our collective aspirations; it also signals to a kind of future that we can aim at. Any attempt to change the curriculum to represent a hegemonic and parochial doctrine of

knowledge, ideology and worldview to students would be disastrous. India, we should not forget, is a country of diversities, and as argued by Meghan Moodie, inequalities of all kinds shape social and cultural interactions (Modie, 2016).

Imposing Silence ? / Source: Sachtimes

From time to time, India has witnessed some of the unprecedented incidents in academic and institutional history often challenging intellectual discourses and dissents, causing encroachment on the internal and day-to-day affairs of our universities and institutions, and even suppressing freedom in campuses. This has raised questions on the very existence and purpose of educational institutions and the changing relationship between the state and nation building, and, therefore, the role of educational institutions. As Andre Béteille, Yash Pal and Prabhat Patnaik have repeatedly argued, the creation of new knowledge cannot be fruitfully undertaken without the continuous criticism of the existing one. This acknowledgement was influenced by the fact that universities do not stand in isolation, but are deeply linked with the larger society. This explains the recurrence of struggles and demands for equality, freedom, dignity and justice in our universities. And herein lies the tension emerging out of the conflict between the quest for new knowledge and the status quo.

State and the Textbook: Context of History

The way education has been targeted in the disguise of 'improving' it leads us to ask a pertinent question: Are we able to foster basic critical and democratic educational values in our schools today? Taking the case of history textbooks in schools, one wonders, there have been efforts to tamper or 'mend' the contents. History as an academic subject should be taught as a mode of critical enquiry rather than as an ideological apparatus for the 'ruling party'. However, looking at the way history textbooks have been subject to distortions, it is evident that the very educational purpose of teaching history has been compromised by the ruling forces. Not only it compromises the credibility of historical enquiry but also defies the very purpose of education.

It is well documented in the studies in Social Psychology that our self image depends on the group we identify with (Tajfel and Turner 1986; Guichard 2013); one of the eminent social psychologists explains how history has been used as a tool for nation building in post Independent India. In an interesting analysis about the depiction of violence in the history textbooks, she demonstrates that there have been systematic efforts by the BJP government to constantly glamorize the Hindu religious belief. She also highlights how the Muslims have been constructed as the 'other' in the narratives written in NCERT textbooks when the BJP- led coalition government came to power in 1998. This was further followed by an effort by the Congress-led UPA government to 'reform' and 'redesign' the texts for its supposedly 'secular' objectives.

The recognition of history textbooks in the formation of national identity is not new. Back in 1969, a Report by the Ministry of Education recognized the relevance of history in nation- building. This was subsequent to a meeting of the National Integration Council held in Srinagar in June 1968. There was

enough deliberation to decide upon which episodes of history to include in textbooks to form 'national unity'. Subsequently, the first set of NCERT textbooks were produced during the 1960s and 1970s; they served the broader objectives of secularism, democracy and communal harmony. The Congress-CPI alliance facilitated the 'secular ethos'; but again party ideology and electoral logic played a critical role in the selection of knowledge contents. It is also a fact that the Hindu nationalists accused these secular historians of underplaying what they saw as the Muslim invaders' misdeeds.

The BJP's effort to give Hindutva flavor to school textbooks continued in the regional states where it came to power. In 1992 the Centre appointed a steering committee (led by Professor Bipan Chandra) to evaluate school textbooks published in various states; the committee found serious anomalies in these books. Quite often, there was an attempt to reinforce colonial stereotypes about the Hindu-Muslim antagonism; moreover, the texts portrayed the medieval conflict with the same communal brush and blamed the Muslims for the evils that have beset the Hindu society. Despite these findings, when the BJP-led government came to power in 1998, it took the project of rewriting the NCERT textbooks. A huge amount of money was invested only to disseminate what is regarded as the 'Hindu nationalist ideology'.

These revised textbooks were severely criticized in academic circles for providing distorted and divisive vision of Indian History (Kumar, 2002; Dhavan, 2001). It should be recalled that the then Education minister Sri. Murli Manohar Joshi went on to say that "the state can teach moral values drawn from Indian's past to students, and history must be written so that it does not project India as a country of week, supplicant and useless." No wonder, there were many critics of this project. Sumit Sarkar (2001) saw it as "an attempt to turn the clock back and do away with history altogether." And Irfan Habib, Suvara Jaisawal, and Aditya Mukharjee published *History in the New NCERT Textbooks: A Report and Index of Errors* in 2003. This report highlighted how the textbooks glorified the 'Hindu past', and claimed the Upanishads to be the "most profound work of philosophy and religion"; and most of the crucial scientific discoveries were attributed to the Vedic civilization. And Aryans were projected to be indigenous, even though this argument is not supported by linguistic data (Habib et al. 2003).

When the Congress-led coalition government came to power in 2004, another set of history textbooks were prepared. While attempting to balance nation building and pedagogical concerns, these new texts overemphasized the idea of secularism and the history of the Indian National Congress—possibly to attract voters from the minorities, Dalits and tribals. Nonetheless, instead of focusing on political aspects and leadership, the efforts aimed at presenting peoples' experiences, economic and cultural history.

However, the future of these textbooks looks grim now. Once again we see an attempt to assert the ideology of Hindutva, and isolate 'other' identities, prove them to be 'anti-national', and then take it as a ground for remapping the textbooks, especially the history textbooks. The danger is that it would eventually damage the core values of critical education.

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