

HOW TO IMPROVE HISTORICAL THINKING

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A common claim by activists is that the 'other side' of the political spectrum is distorting history. At the 400th birth anniversary celebration of Ahom Army General Lachit Borphukan, Union Home Minister Amit Shah said, "I often hear that our history has been distorted... Maybe it's true. But who has stopped us now from presenting a glorious history to the world?"

Along the lines of what Mr. Shah said, the Parliamentary Standing Committee on Education, Women, Children, Youth and Sports, headed by Vinay P. Sahasrabudhe, presented the 'Reforms in Content and Design of School Textbooks' to both Houses of Parliament on November 30, 2021. The circular by the Committee stated three objectives: removing references to unhistorical facts and distortions about our national heroes from textbooks; ensuring equal or proportionate references to all periods of Indian history; and highlighting the role of great historic women heroes. Post consultations, the Committee brought out 25 suggestions that related to improvement of engagement of children for learning, content of the textbooks, representation of women in history during the Indian freedom struggle along with changing the way women are traditionally represented in textbooks, use of EdTech in content delivery, promotion of scientific temper, innovation, communication, collaboration, creativity, and critical thinking. The report also focused on the need for textbooks to promote national integration, unity and constitutional values. While acknowledging the importance of the suggestions, it is equally important to observe the class and caste composition of the Committee and the fact that it did not have a single woman member.

On July 14, 2021, the Indian History Congress (IHC) released a scathing criticism of the circular. It said: "The critique of the existing textbooks implicit in the 'Reforms' being contemplated is not emerging from any expert body of nationally and internationally recognised historians but from a political position favoured by non-academic votaries of prejudice. The implicit critique is in fact the same as that argued in a Report brought out recently by the Public Policy Research Centre. This is reminiscent of the effort made in 2001-2002 to make deletions from existing NCERT textbooks and... replace them with books written by those with chauvinistic and communal bias. That effort too was preceded by a publication *The Enemies of Indianisation: The Children of Marx, Macaulay and Madrasa* edited by Dina Nath Batra, General Secretary of the RSS-run Vidya Bharati." The IHC release contested the three objectives of the circular by providing around 11 pages of tabular data detailing the distribution of content in existing history textbooks. The IHC continued, "School textbooks written for the NCERT by some of the tallest scholars in the country... were actually removed, and in their place books with a clear sectarian, majoritarian bias were introduced in 2002... The textbooks of the NCERT, with the brief exception of the books brought out in 2002, have always been authored by eminent scholars in the field of Indian

history.... The books brought out in 2002 were severely critiqued in a publication of the IHC... Under widespread public criticism the books had to be withdrawn.”

In December 2019, at the IHC conference at Kannur University, there was an alleged altercation between Kerala Governor Arif Mohammed Khan and historian Irfan Habib. The 81st session of the Indian History Congress will take place at Madras Christian College, Chennai (December 27-29, 2022). This will be closely watched.

Is it possible to accurately recreate the past? Are the data sufficient to make causal claims? Is it possible to uphold the values of the past in its entirety or is there a possibility to reinterpret the past based on the lens we wear? Is there a scientific process involved in the study of history or is it simply static content meant for memorisation? These and other questions were answered by Professor Gary Nash and his colleagues in *History on Trial: Culture Wars and the Teaching of the Past*, relating to the preparation of the National History Standards in the U.S. Perhaps there are lessons to be learned from those experiences.

Should citizens be able to evaluate the quality of history in their textbooks? How will they do this? Is it even necessary? If the source of India's sovereignty are the people of India, it is essential that citizens are equipped with tools of historical thinking in order to be able to effectively participate in a democracy. An analysis of the history textbooks across education boards shows that the engagement in historical thinking is abysmally low. There are various frameworks that have been proven to develop strong historical thinking such as the SCIM-C (Summarising, Contextualising, Inferring, Monitoring, and Corroborating) or ARCH (Assessment Center for History) or the Historical Thinking Standards articulated by Gary Nash et al. In the third, students engaged in activities draw upon skills in five types of historical thinking: chronological thinking; historical comprehension; historical analysis and interpretation; historical research capabilities; historical issues — analysis and decision-making.

How much work will it take to improve the history curriculum of various State boards? Perhaps, the Delhi government was wise when the Delhi Board of School Education signed an agreement with the International Baccalaureate to adopt the latter's global curriculum framework in government schools. Even the poorest aspire for the best possible education.

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