

POLITICS OVER THE PRINTED WORD

Relevant for: Developmental Issues | Topic: Education and related issues

File photo of Union Home Minister Amit Shah, Chief Minister Basavaraj Bommai and Ministers paying respect to the bust of 12th Century social reformer Basaveshwara on the occasion of Basava Jayanti in Bengaluru. The BJP is now facing criticism from the Veerashiva-Lingayats for alleged distortions in the profile of Basaveshwara in a revised school textbook. | Photo Credit: Special Arrangement

The raging controversy over school textbook revision in Karnataka has seen several twists and turns. It began with many expressing outrage over the addition of a speech by RSS founder K.B. Hedgewar in a revised textbook and the decision to leave out or edit lessons by many authors associated with the progressive stream in Kannada literature and tweak content that were critical of Brahminical traditions. Students, and Dalit and progressive organisations, have protested against the “saffronisation” and “Brahminisation” of the curriculum. These developments spurred over 10 writers to withdraw permission to use their works in textbooks, while the government insisted that it was impossible to drop or revise any text since the new books were already in print and had been partially distributed to students. A slew of BJP leaders launched a counter-attack, calling into question the credibility of the protesters.

However, the government was compelled to change tack when caste and religious organisations began to raise objections too. Seers associated with the powerful Veerashiva-Lingayat and Vokkaliga castes expressed dissent over some revisions and questioned the conduct of the head of the textbook revision committee, Rohith Chakrathirtha. The Veerashiva-Lingayats flagged alleged distortions in the profile of 12th Century social reformer Basaveshwara, such as leaving out references to his rebellion against the Brahminical order. The Vokkaligas pointed to Mr. Chakrathirtha’s allegedly disparaging remarks on Kannada’s literary icon Kuvempu and his sharing on social media a parody of *nada geethe* (State anthem), which was penned by Kuvempu.

Chief Minister Basavaraj Bommai asked Primary and Secondary Education Minister B.C. Nagesh to give him a report on the objections, and after prolonged deliberations, announced that the government had an “open mind” on changing content “that hurt sentiments”. He said that some parts in the profile of Basaveshwara would be tweaked again, keeping in mind the objections raised, and the allegations of distorting *nada geethe* would be probed. But he made it clear that there was no question of dropping Hedgewar’s speech. There is no indication of the government sparing a thought to the scores of objections raised against the ideological tweaking of historical facts.

With Assembly elections less than a year away, it is not hard to guess why the political dispensation, which has been growing more ideologically strident, has deferred to the demands of the seers. While the Veerashaiva-Lingayat community (to which Mr. Bommai belongs) is an important vote base for the BJP, the party is hopeful of increasing its footprint in the Vokkaliga heartland.

Interestingly, the genesis of the textbook revision can be traced back to the Karnataka Brahmin Mahasabha’s objections that a lesson in the earlier social science textbooks “hurt the sentiments” of the community, following which the revision committee was set up.

For students, textbook revision is the latest in the series of unfortunate political manoeuvres affecting them. If the authorities’ claim that over three-fourths of the books are already printed

and more than half are distributed is true, the logistical challenges involved in making changes again would be immense. While the academic calendar was thrown out of gear by COVID-19 for two years, in Karnataka, the hijab controversy later also muddied the atmosphere.

The saga highlights the importance of an established protocol for taking up textbook revision. Those protesting against the revisions have questioned the academic credentials of the head the panel and the lack of methodology. Until there is a methodology in place, with autonomy to scholars involved in the exercise assured, classrooms are bound to be spaces for political manipulations.

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