

# REWRITING 'OLD HISTORY' FOR A NEW INDIA

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

'The proposed changes to the history textbooks fit within the larger narrative of this government'  
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Recent investigative reports ( *The Indian Express*, June 19-22, 2022) bring to light proposals for deletions and changes to school textbooks across the board. The aim, purportedly, is to reduce the load on school students who have suffered a loss of learning due to extended shutdowns during the novel coronavirus pandemic. However, the changes made in the history textbooks specifically target certain areas of India's past and will result in an ideological shift in history teaching at the school level.

The Government is currently undertaking a series of curricular changes. The Parliamentary Standing Committee on Education, Women, Children, Youth and Sports recently tabled its [Report on the Reforms in Content and Design of School Text books](#) (November 30, 2021). The National Council of Educational Research and Training (NCERT) is already in the process of formulating the new National Curricular Framework, which will direct the syllabi of central and State educational boards. At the heart of this process is the rewriting of school textbooks. The Report of the Parliamentary Committee notes right at the beginning that, 'School Textbooks, in our educational system, remain the easiest way of sharing a single narrative across millions of students through the multitude of diversity that defines our country'.

In the tabled report, the discussions in the NCERT and the public statements by members of the ruling establishment, there is an overwhelming emphasis on the need to rewrite history textbooks, to remove 'un-historical facts and distortions about national heroes'. This is not surprising in itself, since history is at the heart of the political discourse today. The majoritarian political rhetoric rides on the vilification of the Muslims of India as 'outsiders' and 'invaders'. The real story of India, it argues, lies in the ancient period, which is imagined as the glorious Hindu past. Violence — through invasions, battles and bloodshed — is seen as the prime medium of change. The victorious, masculine hero is celebrated, and defeat is seen as an ignominious emasculation. This history focuses on heroes and kings, rulers and armies, even though the craft of history writing has long moved beyond this kind of understanding. However, the suggested changes look to enshrine this as the dominant perspective in history textbooks.

This raises two points of concern:

One, this is a limited and unimaginative approach to school education in general and history education in particular. The discussions, especially in the tabled report suggest that the use of audio-visual resources and digital content through QR codes would make school textbooks interesting for students. Such changes are welcome. But these are pedagogic techniques, carriers of content. It is when the students are challenged in the realm of ideas that education becomes more engaging and a meaningful vehicle of change.

Two, this narrative makes a demand upon students to suspend critical thinking about the world around them and reduces the past to static and static in their imagination. For example, there is a proposal to delete the description of some of the practices of Akbar's court. These include the translation of Sanskrit texts such as the *Ramayana*, the *Mahabharata* and the *Rajatarangini* into Persian, Akbar's engagement with diverse social and religious practices in the empire, and a section on the emergence of composite architectural traditions.

Akbar's armies built a grand empire, stretching from Kashmir to the Deccan, from Kabul to Bengal. His court saw an assemblage of administrators, military commanders, the learned and the gifted from regions across India, and from central and west Asia. The administrative culture of the empire and its language of politics emerged out of the engagements and dissensions in the courtly space.

The traditions of the Mughal court influenced the political culture of kingdoms across the subcontinent. If you have ever wondered about the *mélange* that is our modern Indian languages, or about the cusped arches on houses and temples in villages and small towns, the answer is not that the Mughal armies marched through these areas. Different traditions, courtly and popular, interacted to produce new political, social and cultural forms. These populate our everyday practices, rituals and traditions, languages and food, artistic sensibilities and so on. However, this sense of history — as fluid, fractious and dynamic — is lost when Akbar is presented only as an emperor who won battles.

Akbar is just one example. The proposed changes in textbooks censor out the diversity in our past, and reduce the space for exploring other histories, like that of inequality — whether of caste or gender, or stories of challenges to hegemonic orders. By posing the history of India as a glory tale, it curtails the possibilities of asking questions of it.

The proposed changes to the history textbooks fit within the larger narrative of this government. In a recent speech at the Delhi University, the Home Minister declared that since 2014, a 'New India' is being crafted. This New India needs a new history. However, this new history makes villains of some communities and privileges a fragmented historical narrative which is subject to the demands of community sentiments.

In 1947, when India was emerging from the shadows of colonialism, Indian historians were faced with the question of their role in this nation in the making. In his Presidential address to the Indian History Congress in December 1947, four months after Independence and in midst of the events of Partition, Mohammad Habib asked the historians of the newly independent India to write histories which would create a 'national community', one which rose above all differences of community and caste, where citizens were to be subject to national laws. His address was both poignant and prophetic.

Habib's words ring out strongly today, when as citizens we see the very idea of the Indian nation being redefined, its Constitution challenged. They ring out even more strongly as history becomes the main battleground where this new idea of the nation is being manufactured, literally by the sword and the bulldozer, through blood and tears.

The stories of India's past are complex and diverse. It is unjust to fit it into simple accounts of golden and dark ages, of great and bad men, of remembered and imagined hurts. The proposed rewriting of the history textbook seeks to raise future generations of Indians on ahistorical ideas and a unity premised on falsehoods.

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