

AIFRTE PUBLICATION

# PAINTING IT SAFFRON

A compilation of articles on  
saffronisation of textbooks in India

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**A**n ideologically motivated chopping and changing cannot but be the greatest disservice that can be done to the future of India's children and youth.

AIFRTE condemns the wasteful and conceited exercise of the NCERT's 'rationalization' of the CBSE curriculum which displays more arrogance than understanding. AIFRTE demands that the imposition of these alterations be stopped forthwith and a transparent and open debate involving discipline experts and the learning community of teachers and students be immediately initiated.



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# AIFRTE Statement on NCERT 'Rationalisation' of CBSE syllabus

Dated: Apr 28, 2023

The ongoing debate on the NCERT's claim to be rationalizing the CBSE curriculum framework and syllabus has created confusion and unrest within academia. Objections have been raised concerning the deletion of important periods of India's history such as the rise and advance of the Mughal empire, the role of different communities during the freedom struggle and the subsequent evolution of India as a constitutional Republic, and of the social and political affiliation of the assassin of Mahatma Gandhi. Given the character of the communal underpinnings of the present regime, these have tended to dominate the public sphere but are in fact only the tip of the iceberg.

The so-called rationalization is a deep and damaging assault on the very nature of education and spearheads an anti-scientific, ideologically limiting and anti-democratic approach to the very process of learning and creative advance of knowledge.

The portrayal of ancient Indian philosophies as being uniform and continuous cannot be supported by any meaningful evidence which is in fact witness to the sharply conflicting nature of Charvaka materialism, Buddhism, Jainism etc., with the vedantic tradition which itself reveals the diversity of the six schools of philosophy. The Sufi-Bhakti medieval monotheistic and even agnostic traditions only amplify the complexity and range of ideas resulting from the advent of Islamic thought in the sub-continent.

The deletion of historical narratives of particular struggles for social and economic justice, for gender liberties etc., creates a false image of a social order marked by conformity and denies the power of dissent in advancing new ideas and social norms.

The freedom struggle was not merely the engagement of traditional ideas with so-called 'western' thought. It was a questioning of entrenched inequalities and historical oppressions of caste, class, gender, linguistic and regional forms of discrimination.

This was the substance that contributed to the idea of a national unity that found expression in the Constitution and rejected firmly the idea of a religion-based 'Hindu Rashtra' despite the partition of the country and Pakistan's establishment of an Islamic state.

The exclusion of Darwin and the theory of evolution highlights the casualness with which scientific advances are approached. Its impact would be funny if it were not so dangerous. A recent cartoon has two schoolchildren discussing if the "modern monkey evolved from ancient Indians"!

The above examples only serve to show how important it is both to conceptualize and contextualize the nature and purpose of a curricular framework and the syllabi that are prepared to achieve its goals. An ideologically motivated chopping and changing cannot but be the greatest disservice that can be done to the future of India's children and youth.

**AIFRTE condemns the wasteful and conceited exercise of the NCERT's 'rationalization' of the CBSE curriculum which displays more arrogance than understanding.**

**AIFRTE demands that the imposition of these alterations be stopped forthwith and a transparent and open debate involving discipline experts and the learning community of teachers and students be immediately initiated.**

# Weaponising History: The Hindutva Communal Project

**Those who want a Hindu rashtra as a mirror image of Muslim Pakistan are now imitating how history is taught in Pakistan.**

10/APR/2023

(Aditya Mukherjee and Mridula Mukherjee  
taught at the Centre for Historical Studies, JNU)

The recent deletions made from the NCERT textbooks have been explained by the NCERT director as a process of 'rationalisation' necessitated by the need to reduce the academic load on children who lost out due to the COVID-19 related disruption of their academic programme. Nothing could be further from the truth.

An analysis of the deletions from the history, sociology and political science texts, the political statements made by members of the ruling party in that context and the long history of the Hindu communalists trying to distort history will make this amply clear. It is in the same vein as the duplicity the communalists have exhibited historically. They never take responsibility for their actions. Unlike Bhagat Singh, Gandhi, Tilak and countless others who bravely took responsibility for their actions and faced the consequences, including exile, jail and the death penalty, we are told no organisation was responsible for Gandhi's assassination (paras fixing the responsibility were removed from the NCERT texts), nobody committed what the Supreme Court called the "criminal act" of destroying the Babri Masjid, nobody was responsible for the Gujarat massacre (all sections removed from NCERT text).

## **Historical overview of distorting history**

The RSS recognised very early that communal ideology constitutes the core of the communal project. A particular version of history in turn forms the core of communal ideology. Therefore, once the ban imposed on the RSS in the wake of the murder of Mahatma Gandhi was lifted after they pledged to work only as a cultural organisation, which would stay away from politics, they set themselves assiduously to the task of spreading communal ideology. Since the 1950s, the RSS, through their schools (the first Saraswati Shishu Mandir being inaugurated by RSS chief M.S. Golwalkar) and their textbooks, tried to promote a distorted, often totally imagined version of history. A version which demonised members of other religious communities.

RSS school texts, for example, would teach nine-year-old tender minds in class IV about Islam:

*"Wherever they went, they had a sword in their hand.... Any country that came their way was destroyed. Houses of prayers and universities were destroyed. Libraries were burnt. Religious books were destroyed. Mothers and sisters were humiliated. Mercy and justice were unknown to them"*

*"Delhi's Qutb Minar.... was actually built by emperor Samudragupta. Its real name was Vishnu Stambha.... This Sultan (Qutbuddin Aibak) actually got some parts of it demolished and its name was changed."*

Similar invective was reserved for the Christians, Parsees etc., who like the Muslims were defined as "foreigners" not deserving full citizenship rights, using Savarkar's definition that only those whose "fatherland" (pitribhumi) and "holy land" (punya bhumi) were in India could claim to be Indians. (An absurd definition - if applied to all the Christians of Europe, America and Korea or to the Buddhists of Japan, it would make them foreigners in their own country as their holy lands were not in the country they inhabited!)

## **Use of state power to distort history**

1977-79

While promoting this kind of history in RSS schools which had multiplied by the thousands over the years was bad enough, what was even more dangerous was that the RSS tried to use state power, whenever they had access to it, to introduce similar history in state-run schools and into the national curriculum and launched an attack on secular scientific history.

The first major attack came when the Janata party was in power from 1977-79, as the Jana Sangh, the political/electoral wing of the RSS, had merged with the Janata Party. The existing NCERT textbooks written by the tallest of our scholars, who were globally recognised, such as Romila Thapar, Bipan Chandra, Satish Chandra, R.S. Sharma and Arjun Dev, were sought to be banned. But at that time, the institutions in India were still functioning with considerable independence and the effort was resisted strongly, from within the NCERT itself, in the media and universities across the country. The books survived.

#### 1999-2004

Next time round, when the NDA came to power at the Centre in 1999, the Bharatiya Janata Party, which had replaced the Jana Sangh as the political arm of the RSS, was in the driving seat. Learning from past experience, they removed key people from the syllabus committees and appointed pliant people to top administrative positions in the NCERT, UGC (University Grants Commission), ICSSR (Indian Council of Social Science Research) and ICHR (Indian Council of Historical Research), before launching a frontal attack on secular scientific historians.

On grounds of religious and community feelings being hurt, passages were sought to be deleted from NCERT textbooks written by R.S. Sharma, Romila Thapar, Bipan Chandra, Satish Chandra, etc. Notably, 41 passages which were sought to be removed had already been identified in a RSS publication, *The Enemies of Indianisation: The Children of Marx, Macaulay and Madarsa*, in which the newly appointed NCERT director J.S. Rajput himself had contributed an article. The secular scholars and those who defended them (which included the Indian History Congress, the most representative body of professional historians in the country, Nobel laureate Amartya Sen, President of India, K.R. Narayanan, editors of major newspapers, etc.)<sup>[obj]</sup> were described as “anti-national”. The RSS chief, K.S. Sudarshan, branded them as “anti-Hindu Euro-Indians”.

The alarming tendency of intimidating those who did not agree with the Hindutva (Hindu communal) version of history was evident when a group of self-appointed protectors of Indian nationalism collected at the house of education minister Murli Manohar Joshi and demanded the arrest of historians like Romila Thapar, R.S. Sharma and Arjun Dev. The minister added fuel to this fascist tendency, branding the history written by these scholars as “intellectual terrorism”, which was “more dangerous than cross border terrorism” that needed to be countered effectively!

Eventually, the existing NCERT books written by ostensible “intellectual terrorists” were removed and a new set of books were brought in. Such was the poor quality of the books and the communal bias that was being dished out to our children that the Indian History Congress was constrained to bring out a book in 2003 called *History in the New NCERT Textbooks: A Report and an Index of Errors*.<sup>[obj]</sup> The report concluded: “Often the errors are apparently mere products of ignorance; but as often they stem from an anxiety to present History with a very strong chauvinistic and communal bias. The textbooks draw heavily on the kind of propaganda that the so called Sangh Parivar publications have been projecting for quite some time.”

The decade beginning 2004, when the Hindu communal forces lost state power at the Centre, provided some reprieve from the communal onslaught. These books were withdrawn and a new set of books was prepared involving a team of scholars from all over the country. They were chosen for their scholarship, not political sycophancy. While this was a welcome move, the secular forces unfortunately failed to utilise the opportunity fully to challenge on a war footing the rapid communalisation of society done through the spread of a virulent, communal interpretation of history through texts taught in RSS schools or in schools run by religious minorities.

#### 2021-23

The return to power at the Centre of the BJP-led NDA in 2014 and again in 2019 provided the RSS/BJP combine a new opportunity to return to their favourite pastime of rewriting India’s past in their own image.

Reports of major deletions being made from the NCERT textbooks in print began to emerge. As in 2001, the deletions in the NCERT texts was preceded by an RSS publication demanding the same. In June 2021, the Public Policy Research Center headed by the National Convener of the e-training cell of the BJP produced a report demanding changes in the existing history curriculum. In tandem, the parliamentary committee headed by Vinay Sahsrabudhe, a BJP/RSS ideologue, produced a similar report. The NCERT produced a revised syllabus, details of which were printed in the Indian Express in April 2022. In this syllabus major deletions were made from the history of the Moghul period as well as the Delhi Sultanate including the Tughlaqs, Khaljis and Lodis.

Lest one thinks it was a purely an academic exercise, the home minister declared on November 24, 2022 that no one could stop India from rewriting its history with pride to remove past distortions. The prime minister on December 26, 2022 talked of the “concocted narratives” taught till now that needed to be corrected. He went on to declare “On the one hand, there was terrorism, and on the other, spiritualism... On the one hand there was the mighty Mughal Sultanate blinded by religious fanaticism, while on the other hand, there were our Gurus gleaming in the knowledge and living by the ancient principles of India...”

The new textbooks with all the deletions incorporated hit the market in early April 2023. Again, immediately on release of the books, BJP leader Kapil Mishra, as reported on April 4, 2023, declared: “It is a great decision to remove false history of Mughals from NCERT. Thieves, pickpockets and two-penny road raiders were called the Mughal Sultanate and the emperor of India. Akbar, Babar, Shahjehan, Aurangzeb are not in the history books, they are in the dustbin.”

Given this context, the repeated statements by the NCERT director that the deletions were a part of a rationalisation done to reduce the academic load on students who got a setback due to COVID-19 cuts no ice. Nor does his claim that a few “faltu” (useless) sections have been removed.

A quick look at the so called “faltu” deletions makes clear the primary motivation. Some deletions defy any reasoning except total ignorance or incompetence. A lot of the deletions as noted above relate to the Mughal period and the Delhi Sultanate. This is in tune with the constant vilification of the Muslim community and the efforts to remove their names from roads, cities and now textbooks and also to push them into ghettos. Significantly, references to the 2002 Gujarat riots, the National Human Right Commission’s observations on the Gujarat government’s (headed by Narendra Modi) handling of the riots and on how such riots lead to ghettoisation, converting mixed neighbourhoods into single community ones have also been deleted.

Research in many parts of the world has shown that genocide of a community is often preceded by the community being demonised, their names changed, their history being erased and they being pushed into ghettos so that people do not interact with them in their daily lives. These processes have begun in India and open calls for genocide of Muslims are being given in various parts of the country with amazing impunity. These early signs must be noted and resisted by the democratic forces in the country.

The erasure of the Mughal and the Sultanate period is also extremely detrimental to the understanding of our own history. Do remember that if all was evil in this period, India at the beginning of the 18th century would not be producing nearly a quarter of the world’s GDP, more than that of entire West Europe put together and eight times the GDP of the United Kingdom. India was then the largest exporter of textiles to the world and the British were indulging in industrial espionage to try and steal techniques and design prevalent here.

This was also the period when a syncretic culture evolved and amazing advances were made in music, art, architecture and literature.

The people of India did not see this period as one of Muslim atrocities over Hindus. British colonial ideologues were the first to view this period in this manner, a view lapped up and propagated by the Hindu communalists. It is worth reminding ourselves that during the 1857 revolt, soldiers and people belonging to all communities attempted to overthrow the British and install in their place none other than the Moghul Emperor Bahadur Shah Zafar! To deny our children a peep into this period is to cut one’s own feet.

Those who want a Hindu rashtra as a mirror image of Muslim Pakistan are now imitating how history is taught in Pakistan where they teach about Harappa and Mohenjodaro as it is in Pakistan and pre-Hindu, then gloss over several centuries of pre-Islamic period and the period of the Indian national movement. This, when the existing historiography in India had advanced to among the best in the world.

Another set of deletions relate to the assassination of Mahatma Gandhi. These deletions were made surreptitiously and were not even mentioned in the list circulated to schools in April 2022, as highlighted yet again by The Indian Express. Passages which spoke of Gandhi’s conviction “that any attempt to make India into a country only for the Hindus would destroy India” and how his “steadfast pursuit of Hindu-Muslim unity provoked Hindu extremists so much that they made several attempts to assassinate Gandhiji” were deleted. So were the lines that said: “Government of India cracked down on organisations that were spreading communal hatred. Organisations like the Rashtriya Swayamsewak Sangh were banned for some time”.

In the revised paragraph in the class XII history text all details regarding Gandhi’s assassin’s political views are removed.

It now just says, “At his daily prayer meeting on the evening of 30 January, Gandhiji was shot dead by a young man. The assassin who surrendered afterwards, was Nathuram Godse.” A clear attempt at a whitewash where typically the responsibility of the forces of Hindu communalism in the murder of the Father of the Nation was sought to be denied. At the same time in the prevalent political eco system, Nathu Ram Godse is allowed to be worshipped and BJP Member of Parliament Pragya Thakur can retain her office after calling Godse a “Deshbhakt”! Clearly, no lessons are to be learnt by the next generation from circumstances that led to the ghastly murder of one of the greatest Indians.

We do not have space here to discuss the inexplicable deletion of other ‘faltu’ subjects like the Industrial Revolution, caste oppression, Rise of Popular Movements, ‘Confrontation of Cultures’, Democracy and Diversity, Challenges of Democracy, The Emergency, Central Islamic Lands, Environment and Society, Urban Environment (with a section dealing with urban inequities with the police backing the privileged against the poor), etc.

With such deletions we will succeed in creating a generation of unthinking bhakts who do not ask questions. We do not wish our children to be bigoted morons.

Fortunately, large number of academics and several state governments have registered strong protests and demanded the immediate withdrawal of the changes which are seen to be guided by divisive motives going against the constitutional ethos and the democratic and composite culture of the Indian subcontinent. Many newspapers too have published editorials critical of the NCERT decision. It is to be hoped that saner voices will prevail and persuade those entrusted with the education of our children to act in their best interests.◆

# ‘Rationalization’ of Text books or Communalization of Polity?

11/04/2023

**T**ext books of schools are also a site of contestation between differing versions of nationalism. The two inheritors of colonial India, India and Pakistan show this in a parallel and opposite ways. In Pakistan since the country came up in the name of Islam, it taught a history in schools which began with Mohammad bin Kasim ruling in Sind in eight century. The Hindu kings and Hindus are shown in a poor light to the extent that an average child in Pakistan school will refer to a Hindu in a very derogatory way.

India had a much different trajectory and succeeding the early historians, an attempt was made to make the history scientific and rational. Religion was not the sole marker of the king's rule or diverse aspects of history, till BJP ruled NDA came to power in 1999, when Murli Manohar Joshi as MHRD minister undertook project of 'saffronization of history and syllabus'. Saffronization term was broadly put to promote the view including understanding of History around Hindu nationalist discourse. It was based on the 'glorious Hindu kings versus evil Muslim kings'. In addition the faith based subjects like astrology were made part of the curriculum. Rituals like 'Putra Kameshti Yagya' (ritual to have a son) found a place in the new syllabus.

With UPA coming to power (2004) and attempt was made to undo part of this saffronization. Now with BJP in the saddle the process of communalization is being brought back, in the name of 'rationalization'. NCERT on the pretext that Covid epidemic and the lockdown has put extra pressure on the students so there is a need to lighten the burden of students is deleting portions of the books which are a sore to the eye of ruling dispensation. Aghast by the rash and untoughtful 'deletions' which break the link of the whole many historians have expressed their dismay to the whole process, as portions related to Mughal history are being deleted while the portions relation to Vijayanagar Kingdom continue to be retained.

In the Hindu nationalist view of the ruling dispensation, Islam is a 'foreign' religion and Muslim kings were aggressors who came here and spread Islam on the point of the sword. The syncretism and social interactions during this period stands erased. How will these ideologues present the rise of great Sikh religion, Bhakti and Sufi tradition during this period remains to be seen. The Mughal period or any other period, cannot not be understood solely around the religion of the king. This pattern was introduced by British to pursue their policy of 'divide and rule'. Particularly during the medieval period the alliances between Muslim and Hindu kings will have to be erased by this method of History writing.

Just a single example, how will it be explained that in the battle of Haldighati Akbar's commander in Chief was Raja Mansing and amongst the two generals of Rana Pratap, one was Hakim Khan Sur.

This aspect of 'deletion' of Mughals, though at present in part, has been the most glaring part of the present process of rationalization. The accompanying other deletions go on to tell us the whole agenda of the ruling party.

Gandhi's life was the supreme example of promoting fraternity, mainly Hindu Muslim unity in the country. Now this stands deleted. The deleted portion is as follows "His (Gandhi's) steadfast pursuit of Hindu-Muslim unity provoked Hindu extremists so much that they made several attempts to assassinate Gandhiji... Gandhiji's death had an almost magical effect on the communal situation in the country... The Government of India cracked down on organizations that were spreading communal hatred. Organizations like the Rashtriya Swayamsewak Sangh were banned for some time..."

The other major aspect, the outcome of communal politics is the rise of communal violence in Gujarat, which was orchestrated on the pretext of Godhra train burning.



Now reference to this carnage is being dropped from the books, particularly where the role of BJP is indicated by National Human Rights Commission in failure of the Government to control the carnage, which was possible as large military contingent was available to the state Government but it preferred to put the army action on hold for three long days! The deleted passage includes an apt observation, "Instances, like in Gujarat, alert us to the dangers involved in using religious sentiments for political purposes. This poses a threat to democratic politics." It also deletes the advice of Prime Minister Atal Bihari Vajpayee to CM of Gujarat, Narendra Modi, "My one message to the Chief Minister (of Gujarat) is that he should follow 'raj dharma'. A ruler should not make any discrimination between his subjects on the basis of caste, creed and religion."

One of the agenda of communal politics is to stifle democracy and suppress the mass movements. Many such movements which took place during the last several decades stand omitted from the new books. The one aimed at preserving the environment, Chipko Movement is out and the movement Narmada Bachao, which aimed to preserve Adivasi's rights and also save the environment will not be there anymore. Communal politics also wants to ensure that the dalits-OBC remain on the lower strata of society. While communal politics adopts complex tactics for this, the books will not mention the significant rebellion of dalits in the form of Dalit Panthers, which awakened the dalit masses to their plight and rights in the decade of 1970s. The most democratically empowering 'Right to Information' movement, the main achievement of democratic struggles will stand deleted from the new books.

Origin of caste which has been from within the social norms and religious practices has been mostly attributed to the foreigners, Muslims in particular. So such a para has no place in the new books, "The priests also said that these groups were decided on the basis of birth... Later, they classified some people as untouchable. These included some crafts persons, hunters and gatherers, as well as people who helped perform burials and cremations. The priests said that contact with these groups was polluting..." "...Caste rules were set which did not allow the so-called "untouchables" to take on work, other than what they were meant to do. For example, some groups were forced to pick garbage and remove dead animals from the village. But they were not allowed to enter the homes of the upper castes or take water from the village well, or even enter temples. Their children could not sit next to children of other castes in school..."

And of course Nehru's vision of temples of Modern India has no place in the scheme of things practiced by communal forces today. How can this vision of the Architect Modern India can withstand the communalization of our textbooks, "Which place can be greater than this, this Bhakra Nangal, where thousands and lakhs of men have worked, have shed their blood and sweat and laid down their lives as well?"

Similarly, chapters like 'Democracy and Diversity' along with comments on the Emergency when the media and civil liberties were stifled stands deleted. All in all the deletions are total reflections of the political agenda of communal politics and it is not just the deletion of Mughals.◆

# Biology Without Darwin. Next, Physics Without Newton and Einstein?

**The removal of Darwin from the school syllabus is not an innocuous change. Seen in the context of revivalism and a return to the so-called ancient science, it is a retrograde step for the teaching of science and an onslaught on rational thinking and scientific temper.**

23/APR/2023

**T**he National Council of Educational Research and Training (NCERT) has dropped the theory of evolution as propounded by

Charles Darwin from the science syllabus for the tenth standard. This has been done as a part of the 'rationalisation' exercise taken up during the SARS-CoV-2 pandemic to reduce the 'content load' on students. The purging of the section on evolution on the pretext of the pandemic could not have been more ironical - the novel coronavirus that caused the pandemic is indeed a result of the natural selection process that Darwin sought to explain and children ought to learn more about it. The theory of evolution is fundamental to understanding the basis of several sub-branches of modern biology like genetics, immunology and so on.

It is hard to believe that the change effected by NCERT, particularly relating to the chapter on evolution and heredity, has anything to do with the stated goal of reducing the burden on students in the wake of the pandemic. In 2018, minister of state for human resources development Satyapal Singh declared that Darwin's theory of evolution was scientifically wrong because "no one had ever seen a monkey turn into a human" and that ever since man had come on the earth, he was a man.

Singh later defended his comments and asserted that schools and colleges should stop teaching evolution theory. Singh is no longer in the education ministry but what he desired is being implemented.

Darwin has raised the hackles of obscurantist groups and different religions in many parts of the world including the US during the past several decades, but only a few have taken the extreme step of stopping teaching evolution to their children. Most of these countries are in the Middle East and India's neighbourhood. Science textbooks in Pakistan, for instance, have been rubbishing the evolution theory for a long time. The theory has been banned completely in Saudi Arabia, Oman, Algeria and Morocco, and it is not taught in Lebanon. It is taught within the framework of religion in Jordan and is portrayed as an unproven hypothesis in textbooks in Egypt and Tunisia. Darwin is also a subject of many fatwas. In the US, a creationism lobby - backed by some Catholic groups - has been advocating the teaching of creationism as an alternative to the human evolution theory. Creationists believe that the world - humans, natural life, the universe - is a creation of the divine power or the god, and it did not evolve.

## Implications

The removal of Darwin from the school syllabus is not an innocuous change. Seen in the context of revivalism and a return to the so-called ancient science, it is a retrograde step for the teaching of science and an onslaught on rational thinking and scientific temper. It can adversely impact the quality of higher education in science, scientific research and India's position as a formidable science and technology power in the world community.

The concept of evolution is fundamental to all branches of biology and research in this field is going to help the world fight against some of the biggest challenges facing humanity - be it climate change or antibiotic resistance or future pandemics emanating from the increased animal-human-environment interface. As it is, the teaching of science in Indian schools is a matter of concern. With the new changes in the school curriculum - and perhaps more in the future in line with the drive to reinforce traditional values and mythology - the teaching of science at the school and college levels could suffer more.

Just imagine the state of Indian science in future if our schools start teaching Dashavatara as an alternative to the evolution theory. The dashavatara theory was propagated by Andhra University Vice Chancellor G. Nageshwar Rao at the Indian Science Congress session in 2019. 'Papers' were also presented debunking theories of Newton and Einstein at this meeting.

The school curriculum change has serious implications for scientific research in the country. In recent years, we have witnessed the rise of pseudoscience activities in research institutions and universities in the name of research on ancient knowledge and to provide a scientific basis to myths. Funding agencies like the Department of Science and Technology and the Council of Scientific and Industrial Research (CSIR) have also been forced to support research on some topics concerning 'ancient science' - cow urine, cow dung, spiritual farming, medical astrology etc. With a state agency (NCERT) discarding the theory of evolution, funding agencies may soon have to deal with proposals to study alternatives to the evolution theory and to find a 'scientific basis' for ancient ideas. All such trends don't augur well for the future of Indian science.

### **Response from scientific community**

When Satyapal Singh rubbished the theory of evolution in 2018, the scientific community condemned it strongly. In a rare move, three academies - Indian National Science Academy (INSA), the Indian Academy of Science (IASc) and the National Academy of Sciences-India (NASI) - issued a joint statement. They categorically stated that "Evolutionary theory, to which Darwin made seminal contributions, is well established. There is no scientific dispute about the basic facts of evolution.

This is a scientific theory, and one that has made many predictions that have been repeatedly confirmed by experiments and observation."

Referring to Singh's statement that the theory should be removed from the syllabus, the academies said: "It would be a retrograde step to remove the teaching of the theory of evolution from school and college curricula or to dilute this by offering non-scientific explanations or myths." Evolutionary biologists presented their arguments and requested the minister to retract his statement. Now that what Singh said then is being implemented by NCERT, the academies should reiterate their stand and use their collective clout to reverse the decision. Science academies the world over have been fighting anti-science and pseudoscience tendencies, and proactively trying to promote public understanding of science. Indian science academies should be no exception.

An independent group of scientists and educators, Breakthrough Science Society, has written an open letter criticising NCERT. It said "an understanding of the process of evolution is also crucial in building a scientific temper and a rational worldview. The way Darwin's painstaking observations and his keen insights led him to the theory of natural selection educates students about the process of science and the importance of critical thinking. Depriving students, who do not go on to study biology after the 10th standard, of any exposure to this vitally important field, is a travesty of education."

The voices of rationality need to become stronger because the onslaught against science is not going to stop at Charles Darwin and the theory of evolution, if the developments leading to this decision are any indication. It should not be seen as just a matter of science education or science academies but as something that concerns society and the country as a whole. ♦

**Dr Dinesh C. Sharma is a New Delhi-based journalist and author. His latest book is Indian Innovation, Not Jugaad: 100 Ideas That Transformed India (Roli Books, 2022).**

# Scientists' open letter on NCERT books

**NCERT removes Darwin's evolution theory from science textbook, 1800 scientists and educators pen open letter.**

**'An Appeal Against Exclusion of Evolution from Curriculum'**

**W**e, the undersigned, have learned that sweeping changes are being proposed in the CBSE curriculum in the secondary and senior secondary courses. These changes, first introduced as a temporary measure during the Corona pandemic, are being continued even when schooling has gone back to offline mode.

In particular, we are concerned with the exclusion of the teaching of Darwinian evolution from the 10th standard curriculum, as seen in the information (see <https://ncert.nic.in/pdf/BookletClass10.pdf>, page 21) available on the NCERT website.

In the current educational structure, only a small fraction of students choose the science stream in grade 11 or 12, and an even smaller fraction of those choose biology as one of the subjects of study. Thus, the exclusion of key concepts from the curriculum till grade 10 amounts to a vast majority of students missing a critical part of essential learning in this field.

Knowledge and understanding of evolutionary biology is important not just to any subfield of biology, but is also key to understanding the world around us. Evolutionary biology is an area of science with a huge impact on how we choose to deal with an array of problems we face as societies and nations from medicine and drug discovery, epidemiology, ecology and environment, to psychology, and it also

addresses our understanding of humans and their place in the tapestry of life. Although many of us do not explicitly realise, the principles of natural selection help us understand how any pandemic progresses or why certain species go extinct, among many other critical issues.

An understanding of the process of evolution is also crucial in building a scientific temper and a rational worldview. The way Darwin's painstaking observations and his keen insights led him to the theory of natural selection educates students about the process of science and the importance of critical thinking. Depriving students, who do not go on to study biology after the 10th standard, of any exposure to this vitally important field is a travesty of education.

**We, the undersigned scientists, science teachers, educators, science popularisers and concerned citizens disagree with such dangerous changes in school science education and demand to restore the theory of Darwinian evolution in secondary education.◆**

# Indian History Congress denounces changes in NCERT syllabi.

**It urged historians to stand up against 'distortions of history'**

April 10, 2023  
ZIYA US SALAM

**T**he Indian History Congress has said that it is “greatly alarmed by the changes in the history syllabi and textbooks” recently effected by the National Council for Educational Research and Training (NCERT), and urged historians to stand up against “distortions of history”.

The body issued a statement signed by its president Professor Kesavan Vekuthat and secretary Syed Ali Nadeem Rezavi, expressing apprehensions about the consequences of the new changes.

“The Indian History Congress has been greatly alarmed by the changes in the History syllabi and textbooks that have recently been effected by central official agencies, leading to a plainly prejudiced and irrational perception of our past,” the statement read.

## **The distortions**

It pointed out that the University Grants Commission (UGC), in the draft syllabus that it has framed for the Bachelor’s course for History, claims for India the “honour” of being the Aryan homeland, deems the epics as possible historical chronicles and excludes all reference to caste system in its ancient India portion. In fact, it expressly treats the caste system as an institution arising after the coming of Islam, the statement added.

Likewise, Mughal emperor Akbar along with his policy of religious tolerance between various religions has been totally excluded from the syllabus.

“The students in the Bachelor’s course would not thus learn of any cultural or intellectual developments of the Mughal era [neither Kabir, nor Tulsidas nor Abul Fazl],” it read.

It claimed that the same process of “misrepresentation has been introduced in the prescribed History textbooks by omitting whole sections, along with individual passages and sentences [or parts thereof]”. These include complete omission of the narrative of the Mughal dynasty which gave India political unity for such a long period, and sundry other deletions of statements that are held to be inconsistent with the narrow communalist formulations favoured by the present regime. Even the narrative of Mahatma Gandhi’s assassination has been trifled with, the statement added.

The Indian History Congress recalled its own effort from twenty years ago when it published a volume assessing critically the History textbooks then published by the NCERT, pointing out their various errors and misjudgments. They were subsequently withdrawn.

**“It is now necessary for all historians, loyal to the rational and scientific nature and purpose of their profession, to stand up and make it clear that such distortions of History as the NCERT has now sought to spread through its deletions and revisions are simply unacceptable,” the IHC statement said.◆**

# India takes a distressing retreat from democracy.

April 20, 2023

By The Editorial Board, The Washington Post

Not long ago, a 12th-grade political science textbook in India informed students about the 2002 Gujarat riots. Triggered by the death of Hindu pilgrims in a train fire, a violent rampage killed nearly a thousand Muslims. The chief minister of the province was Narendra Modi. The school textbook noted that the government was criticized for failing to control the violence, and told students that the events “alert us to the dangers involved in using religious sentiments for political purposes. This poses a threat to democratic politics.”

But future classes will not read this passage. Mr. Modi, now prime minister of India, is attempting to impose a Hindu-led majoritarianism upon the country, including on its school curriculums and textbooks. Two pages about the Gujarat events were slashed, and other events in the long history of India’s 200 million Muslims deleted. India’s schoolchildren and its democracy are the worse for it.

India’s National Council of Educational Research and Training has been working since last year on the revised curriculum. According to The Post’s Anumita Kaur, the changes will be felt in thousands of classrooms in at least 20 states. The deletions are wide-ranging. Chapters on the country’s historic Islamic rulers are either slimmed down or gone; an entire chapter in the 12th-grade history textbook, “Kings and Chronicles: The Mughal Courts,” was deleted.

Millions of students across India will know of the iconic Taj Mahal, but their textbooks will not delve into the Mughal Empire that constructed it.

According to the Indian Express, which first detailed the cuts last June, four chapters in different grade levels about democracy — and the making of India’s renowned democracy — have been sliced. For example, a chapter titled “Key Elements of a Democratic Government” in the sixth-grade political science text was dropped. The Express reports this is the first detailed introduction to the concept of democracy in middle school and describes critical elements that influence the working of a democratic government, including people’s participation, conflict resolution, equality and justice.

State governments led by Mr. Modi’s Hindu nationalist Bharatiya Janata Party have for years been rewriting local school textbooks, but now the effort has been extended to the national level. This is a discouraging development for the world’s most populous democracy. A healthy democracy must be prepared to re-examine its past without airbrushing out unpleasant events. It must accommodate different views and disparate peoples in open debate. Erasing the story of India’s Muslims from textbooks is just as outrageous as Russia airbrushing out the history of Joseph Stalin’s repressions or China suppressing mention of the Tiananmen Square massacre. What’s more, indoctrinating children now will ensure that a warped version of history lingers for generations.

There are other disturbing signs of retreat. The BBC recently aired a two-part documentary, “India: The Modi Question,” shown on television only in Britain. The film is focused on the prime minister’s role in the Gujarat violence. It describes a previously unpublished report, obtained by the BBC from the U.K. Foreign Office, claiming that Mr. Modi was “directly responsible” for the “climate of impunity” that enabled the violence. (The United States also banned Mr. Modi from entering the United States for a decade because of his actions. It was lifted when he became prime minister in 2014.) Mr. Modi has rejected the accusation, and a Supreme Court panel said there wasn’t enough evidence to prosecute.

But as soon as word of the documentary began circulating in India, Mr. Modi’s government reacted harshly, attempting to block people from streaming it. Then Indian tax agents raided BBC offices in New Delhi and Mumbai. This is an intimidation tactic most commonly used by China, Russia and other dictatorships to silence the news media. It is hardly appropriate for a democracy.

India has now surpassed China as the world’s most populous nation. Its role in the world, a counterweight to China’s, remains a vital concern of the United States. The Biden administration has chosen not to speak loudly about Mr. Modi’s distressing retreat from democracy. Commerce Secretary Gina Raimondo described Mr. Modi recently as “unbelievable, visionary.” The administration should be just as vocal about his backsliding.◆

# Decimating schools to accommodate Shakhas

Published originally in 'Sabrang'

Madhu Prasad, member, Presidium and Spokesperson, AIFRTE

The hide-and-seek game being played with the national education policy is over and the agenda behind it is now clear.

Beginning with the more than four hundred page Subramaniam Committee report, which was neither accepted nor released to the public by the Union government, the GOI suddenly released its own 68-page document. After the then Rajya Sabha MP Sitaram Yechury publicly exposed the fact that it was taken out verbatim from an RSS document, Education Minister Javedekar immediately withdrew the document stating that it had been released 'by mistake'! Another almost two years later the Prof. Kasturirangan Committee's report came out. However, during the Covid pandemic a National Education Policy (NEP 2020) was passed by the Cabinet without being presented in Parliament or being sent to a select committee. With no transparent debate among academicians or reference to the states as was constitutionally required since education comes under the concurrent list of subjects, the NEP 2020 began to be implemented in a haphazard manner through executive decisions and through central institutions including the University Grants Commission (UGC), the Central Board of Secondary Education (CBSE), the National Council of Educational Research and Training (NCERT), the National Testing Agency (NTA) and the like.

There were strong critical objections to the policy, to the manner of its implementation and the unseemly haste to push it through come what may. Institutions were threatened that central funds would be withheld if it was not implemented by the next academic session. Teachers at both school level and higher education were intimidated and bullied not to speak out against the policy and responses by unions were sought to be suppressed. In spite of continuing opposition, institutional administrations were literally forced to implement the policy even if it meant their having to resort to using emergency powers to do so.

Chaos was created at all levels of the education system with structural, pedagogical and curriculum changes being pushed through without preparation, planning or resources.

A system already in crisis with 50% to 60% shortage of faculty and lacking physical infrastructure was being pushed over the brink. Teaching was to be done through hybrid modes of online and offline functioning irrespective of the lack of access to devices and connectivity. Anganwadi workers were to receive online 'training' for taking on Early Childhood Care and Education (ECCE) responsibilities! Merger and closure of schools was happening across the country so that 'school complexes' could be made to 'share' what were in fact non-existent 'resources' resulting in a further dropping out of children who were losing neighbouring schools or being crammed into 'merged' schools.

Although there is now much talk of lessening the burden of learning and breaking away from methods of 'rote' learning, there will now be all-India exams at Class 3, 5 and 8 as well as board exams at Class 10 and 12. The former will decide whose 'education' stops at 'numeracy and literacy', who goes on to 'vocational training' (these two categories would cover approximately 85 to 90 percent bahunjan children) while the latter will determine who completes higher secondary. But to get to higher education even the less than 10% 'elite' students will have to sit for a centralized entrance exam (currently compulsory only for central universities, it is proposed to be extended across the country). Coaching classes are booming, 97% of Delhi University admissions are from CBSE schools this time and the number of women students have dropped alarmingly.

Why is the education system being systematically destroyed and learning being kept out of reach for the vast majority of India's children? Why is it not being reformed to facilitate universalization of compulsory education for all? What does the government hope to gain from this worsening of the existing crisis in education?

The answer lies in the NEP 2020 inspired position paper on "Knowledge of India" (KI) (January 2022) including 'Indian Knowledge Systems' (IKS). Several 'Guidelines' have since been issued for the introduction of such courses in schools and higher educational institutions and also for training teachers to impart instruction.

Centrally selected and well-funded research projects are already underway to discover 'scientific' support for ancient ritual practices. The focus is on what are termed 'Vedic' achievements in ancient India in all spheres of knowledge from the sciences, mathematics, astronomy (including 'astrology'), medical sciences, social organization and governance, art, aesthetics, architecture etc., and on the Sanskrit language in which these are accessible. Ancient texts, such as the Puranas, Smritis, the epics, Vedas and Upanishads are the core source materials. Gurukuls and temple schools are venerated as the proper institutions in which this knowledge was transmitted (apparently without caste exclusions) and preserved.

This fanciful picture is placed in the framework of what is identified as the proper historical 'narrative', one which is not tainted by the ideology of 'invaders and colonisers', so that Bharatiyata is to be rediscovered and IKS are to take their rightful place *above* and *prior* to the rise of modern science, the Enlightenment, and the Industrial Revolution. The historical narrative must display "steadfastness in protecting the civilization". The role of Hindu kingdoms and dynasties has to be emphasized instead of elaborating the achievements of the invaders and colonisers. And so we are told, in flagrant violation of historical evidence, that "Buddhism started declining" as a "direct result of these invasions"!

The document claims that being colonized "for a thousand years" has apparently confused a "group of our intellectuals" who make ancient civilization "responsible" for social wrongs by "misinterpreting" ancient texts (like Manusmriti) thereby leading to a loss of "traditional" patterns of employment. So we must see caste divisions and oppression as a form of societal harmony and stability! This blatant support for Brahmanical principles of social organization and its ideological propagation of caste hierarchies in daily life is seen as the foundational Bharatiya Dharma which is to be glorified and strengthened by the new historical narrative.

The IKS/KI is nothing else but the promotion of the ideology of the RSS shakha in the entire education system. It will be a compulsory add-on to the curriculum for which time has to be allocated although it will not be examined and graded along with other subjects. Every school and educational institution will have a 'cell' to organize the instruction of IKS/KI and its other activities, including displays, debates, quizzes, etc., and physical training and yoga. Every school library will have a special section on IKS/KI with books and other reading material.

Of course the teachers imparting such instruction cannot be expected to be drawn from the existing colonially inspired education system. So they will have to be drawn from RSS/Sangh Parivar organisations, from the 'community' and from the 'family', that are compatible with IKS ideology. Frequent workshops will require to be held to 'sensitise' them to the needs of the NEP 2020.

Even the very idea of re-vamping education on this basis would require a well-researched account of ancient Sanskrit texts. This is a massive intellectual task and hardly one that can be achieved without 'burdening' researchers, teachers and students! It is particularly problematic because Brahmanical ideology itself grew out of sharp conflicts with the Lokayata Charvaka materialism, and the Sankhya Yoga and Naya Vaisheshika realisms. The anti-caste and anti-ritualist Buddhist and Jain philosophies of social organization were frankly anti-Brahmanical. The rich body of Prakrits and Pali literatures are a recognized tradition distinct from and at variance with the Brahmanical Sanskrit literature.

Thus the attempt to glorify Brahminism by portraying India's ancient civilizational history as a homogeneous continuum, until the advent of the 'invaders', is itself a deeply biased and prejudicial account that is hardly conducive to being the basis for a modern critical system of education.

In fact the position paper itself, while it seems unaware of the irony of its stand, states that recovering Bharatiyata requires the Indian presence of a Joseph Needham who produced an extensive study of the civilizational achievements of Chinese science and technology! However, far from following in his footsteps, IKS/KI moves in the opposite direction.

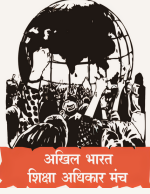
In the absence of serious research on the actual achievements of early civilizational philosophers and thinkers, not to mention the completely neglected medieval philosophical monotheisms and their sociological and linguistic impact in the spread and development of Prakrits, the ideologically motivated and unsubstantiated 'shakha propaganda' about a 'golden age' of Brahmanical achievement remains just that - propaganda.

It is this shakha-based propaganda to which the mass of India's children will be subjected as the public system of education is crippled without resources and the constitutional commitment to providing quality education on the part of the Government is simply brushed aside.

The privileged elite, of course, will increasingly buy their education abroad or at foreign campuses located in India with the unregulated freedom to profit and repatriate.◆







# AIFRTE PUBLICATION

A compilation of articles on saffronisation  
of textbooks in India

## **PAINTING IT SAFFRON**

**Painting it Saffron: A compilation of articles on saffronisation of  
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