

History, National Identities and Politics of History Textbooks in India

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ABSTRACT

The purpose of this paper is to comprehend and analyze the political project of constructing national identity through the creation of history textbooks. History textbooks have been strategically used as a political tool in India to help build national identity. This paper contends that the politics of history influenced the creation of history textbooks in India, resulting in the politics of history textbooks. The paper will investigate how changes in national identity have manifested and been constructed in history textbooks.

Keywords: History; Textbooks; Secular; Hindu; India; Politics

INTRODUCTION

Only historical knowledge can help us understand contemporary identities. History reveals the social and collective consciousness of contemporary identities. History and identity are inextricably linked, both interdependent and influencing one another. This is also true in the context of the nation-state, because every state requires an identity in order to maintain its legitimacy, and states obtain this identity through their history [1].

History textbooks play an important role in the formation of national identity. There is a close relationship between national identity, history, and school textbooks. History textbooks function as a political tool, introducing identity-based politics into society. The state's control over knowledge formation and sharing directly facilitates identity politics. In India, this has been the case. In the context of school textbooks in India, history textbooks have always been the source of much debate or conflict. Identity politics is also at the heart of the textbook debate in India [2].

National identities arose either from a civic model that originated in the European context and was mediated by factors such as territory, political equality, ideology, and political culture, among others, or from an ethnic model that evolved in most non-western societies and was primarily shaped by local rituals and traditions, popular mobilization, vernacular language, customs, and so on. India's postcolonial state has adopted both models of national identity. The textbook is viewed as a means of

disseminating a specific national identity and history in the discourse of Indian identity, whether secular or Hindu identity. In contrast to the homogeneous treatment of European national identities, India's secular identity views the country's internal diversity as the primary source of national identity. India's secular ideology is defined by its multi-lingual, multi-religious, multi-caste, democratic, and equal-rights system [3].

India's Hindu nationalist identity is based on the concepts of majority religiosity, homogeneous ethnicity, and the separation of self (Hindu) and Other (Muslims/Christians). Like the European identity, Hindu nationalist identity seeks to define the Indian nation based on Hindu religiosity and caste homogeneity. On the one hand, history textbooks in India are directly related to the formation of national identity, while on the other hand, the textbooks clearly depict the conflict between two opposing identities. The main reason for this is that history is influenced by the different ideas of these two identities, resulting in two distinct types of historical interpretation. These two historical interpretations represent two distinct identities, which I refer to as the 'Politics of History.'

Hindu nationalist and secular interpretation of Indian history

The interpretation of Indian history by Hindu Nationalists is heavily influenced by colonial and nationalist writings. Just as colonialists and nationalists recognized the religion-based division of Indian history, Hindu nationalists interpret this

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division as well. According to Hindu Nationalists, Indian history is made up of the differences, animosity, and opposing sentiments of two different religious communities, with ancient history representing Hindu history and mediaeval history representing Muslims. Hindu Nationalists' interpretation, like nationalist historiography, sees Hindu history as a source of pride [4].

Hindu nationalists believe that Hindu ancient times were a time when Hindu philosophy and religion flourished, when scientific achievements were prominent, great books were written, when the social structure was formed by the concept of a united society, when all classes, groups, and people lived peacefully together, when there was no conflict of any kind, and when life was full of happiness. The great civilization of Hindus declined in mediaeval history (Muslim history), as did their self-identity. This entire period, according to Hindutva, was one of exploitation of Hindus, hatred of Hindus, conversion to Islam, destruction of Hindu knowledge, and destruction of Hindu places and temples. For Hindus, mediaeval Indian history was a dark time [5].

There were no major social changes or discoveries during this period, but it was a period of Muslim autocracy. The Hindu interpretation, according to Lars Tore Flaten and Sudhir Kakkar, is derived from the idea of Hindu-Muslim homogeneity and the division of conflicting relations with the Muslim 'other'. Hindu nationalists believe that the fundamental fact of Indian history is that Hindus and Muslims are separate and can never be one because they have opposing religious identities. In the context of Muslim-Hindu relations, it appears that Hindu tolerance and Muslim intolerance are normal, while Muslim tolerance and Hindu intolerance are unusual. Ancient history is viewed as a golden age, while mediaeval and colonial times are viewed as symbols of exploitation, oppression, autocracy, and tyranny.

Secular interpretations of Indian history are directly related to Marxist interpretations, which exist in stark contrast to Hindu Nationalist interpretations. The secular interpretation, first and foremost, rejects the rationality of the supremacy of religious categories in the representation of the Hindu interpretation's history and past. According to the secular interpretation, neither Hindu nor Muslim communities are homogeneous; their boundaries are not fixed, but rather open and flexible. While the Hindu interpretation emphasizes the concept of similarity, the secular interpretation emphasizes the concept of difference [6].

According to Martha Nussbaum and Kakkar, secular interpretation is based on the concepts of pluralism, complexities, differences, harmony, coexistence, and tolerance, and the center of history is not religious communities and their religious identities, but political and economic ideologies. Secularists believe that Hindu and Muslim classifications are new and modern, and that pre-colonial history was merely a symbol of a cohesive and syncretic culture. The British regime created these classifications in opposition to each other in order to maintain their social standing, and they remained internally divided. The secular interpretation completely rejects the Hindu interpretation's role of the 'other,' but the secular interpretation,

in keeping with liberalism's positive values, presents a unitary, syncretic, and co-existentialist identity of Indian history.

According to Sylvie Guichard, Hindutva represents the 'enemy' form of history, with the enemies being Muslims, secularists, and Christians. The same secular interpretation represents the 'defender' form of history, in which secularism, tolerance, rationality, and other liberal values are defended [7].

Politics of history textbooks

The conflict between the secular and Hindu interpretations of history has given rise to the politics of history, which is directly linked to the textbooks that give rise to the 'politics of history textbooks.' Textbooks are widely used and are an important part of the school curriculum. The Indian school system is based on the classroom system, with textbooks published by the central or state governments serving as the primary source of knowledge and instruction in the classroom. Reading textbooks is the bare minimum of compulsory school education [8].

During British rule, textbook culture emerged in India. The modern education system in India was established during colonial rule in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries. The textbooks, written by British administrative bureaucrats and 'externally enlightened' people, were the mainstay of this education system. These textbooks were influenced by colonial historiography, and they contained colonial interpretations of history. These textbooks represented and dominated the colonial bureaucracy's (ruler's) values and visions, in which indigenous knowledge and culture had no place [9].

It presented the exact reality that served the ruling class's ideological interests. The colonial textbooks were explicitly divided into "self" (British) and "other" (Indian). The textbooks emphasized the superiority of the 'self' and the negativity and inferiority of the 'other.' The importance of textbooks and their use as political tools in India was a purely colonial concept that we all adopted after independence.

Following independence, an independent Indian state took control of textbook production and distribution. The first phase was dominated by 'Secular History Textbooks,' which began in the 1960s with the first stream of NCERT textbooks used in schools until 2002. Secular History Textbooks were the first NCERT textbooks, written by eminent Indian historians influenced by Marxist writings and interpretations. Because of the influence of Marxist writings and the direct relationship of Marxism to secular interpretation, these textbooks have a secular identity.

Guichard offers four points in history textbooks that represent the dimension of secular national identity. First, these textbooks denied the role of religion in historical context. Second, he questioned and criticized the glorious character of Hindu history and the demonic character of Muslim history. Third, the concepts of tolerance and harmony were promoted, and fourth, the Congress party was portrayed as the sole representative of the Indian nation. The primary goal of these textbooks was to examine history from a secular perspective, to foster Hindu-Muslim unity, and to advance the ideology of Congress and Nehru after independence. The primary goal of these textbooks

was to forge India's secular national identity. When these textbooks were written, secular interpretation of history was kept in mind, which was based on secularism, national unity, tolerance, harmony, scientific rationality, and so on.

The second phase arose as a result of the rise of Hindu nationalism and the challenge to secular textbooks. It began with a shift in state-level textbooks in the 1990s, followed by the introduction of new NCERT textbooks after Hindu nationalists took power, which can be referred to as the 'Hindu Nationalists History Textbook.' In response to the challenges posed by secular textbooks, Hindu history textbooks were born in India. Previous textbooks were criticized on two grounds: first, they rejected the specific contribution of Hindu civilization, while the oppression and exploitation by Muslims and Islam were not properly presented, and mediaeval history was treated in social and economic terms rather than as a religious conflict.

These textbooks present history in such a way that Indian identity can be understood almost entirely through Hindu identity. The Hindu nationalist textbooks, according to Maria Lall and Lars Tore Flaten, represented two things. First, there is Hindu cultural equality, homogeneity, and supremacy; second, Muslims and Islam are demonized. Hindu interpretation and the concept of Hindu identity and nation were heavily influenced in Hindu nationalist textbooks.

The Discourse of National Identity in India offers a historical explanation based on two distinct identities. At the same time, school textbooks, in particular, have become a political tool for these identities as well as a site of conflict between identities. These textbooks were used by both identities to establish their respective national identities. Aside from that, they only presented history and not histories, and the groups of women, Dalits, farmers, labourers, and subaltern classes were not given a place in the nation's history. Secular textbooks acknowledge events and stories that establish the values of syncretism, tolerance, and secular identity while ignoring events that contradict them.

On the other hand, Hindu textbooks in history only depict tales of Hindu kings and Muslim exploitation, with no mention of Muslim rule's architectural achievements or India's political unification. While the pace of history is determined by the center of secular values in secular textbooks, it is associated with the idea of Hindu unity and anti-'other' elements in Hindu textbooks. Secular textbooks regard the Nehruvian state as the end of history, whereas Hindu textbooks acknowledge the ongoing struggle between self and others.

The third phase emerged, which differed from the previous two not only in ideological form, but also in research form *via* 'Beyond Secular and Hindu' textbooks (after 2005). These NCERT textbooks went beyond secular and Hindu history to establish a foundation for critical history. According to Guichard, these textbooks represented high-quality, innovative content and a nonpartisan history. The primary goal of these textbooks was to connect local, national, and transnational history so that the essence of history is not the nation but the collective association of all three. The concept of transnational

history was central to these textbooks. As a result, I consider these textbooks to go beyond Hindu and secular textbooks.

Aside from the NCERT textbooks, textbooks in states ruled by the Hindu nationalist party Bharatiya Janata Party contain biased facts about communal fundamentalism and Hindu identity. For example, the Rajasthan government introduced new textbooks in 2017 that were heavily influenced by Hindu nationalist ideology.

We see historical dominance of Hindu History in these textbooks, for example, Vedic myths as truth, Hindu mediaeval and ancient rulers portrayed in glory, establishing the independence movement as a violent struggle led by Hindu patriots [10].

CONCLUSION

Every day, school history textbooks represent the nation and national identity, and they spread a common sense of collective belonging throughout society. The analysis shows that the political class in power (a specific political party or individual leadership) creates its own special national identity through school textbooks in order to gain legitimacy and consent for its rule. For example, there were secular history textbooks when the Congress was in power, but when the Bharatiya Janata Party took over, the essence of history textbooks became Hindu.

History textbooks are traditional history textbooks in which the essence of history is solely centered on identity. School textbooks create a national identity, because this work is quiet and slow, it is never at the center of a major political controversy. Finally, national identity is formed through school textbooks, and the politics of national identity is the primary foundation of history textbooks, which I refer to as the 'Politics of History Textbooks.'

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