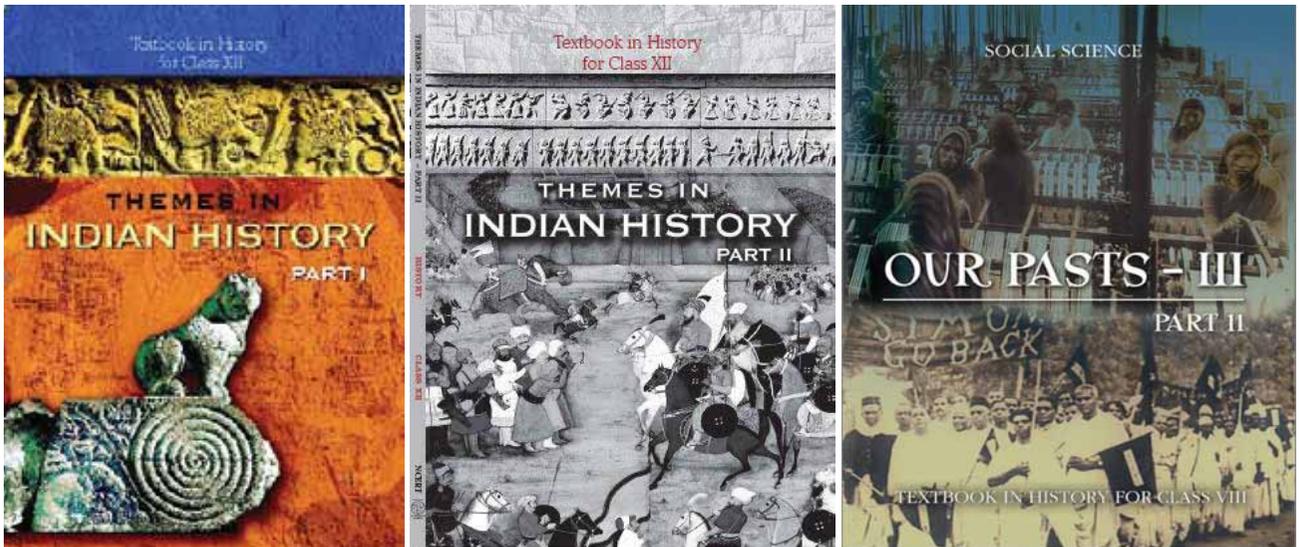


Politics and the writing of textbook

Michel Danino



To those who see education as little more than a provider of skills and a gateway to the job market, history as a discipline counts among the least important ones. A few years ago, an education minister in the Tamil Nadu government even suggested that it should be scrapped altogether, since it serves no purpose. Ironically, history is at the same time the darling of our sensation-hungry media, which unflinching brings us daily reports of claims and counterclaims about historical distortions, 'controversial' topics and scholars, writing, and rewriting of history textbooks and so forth. In the last year, for instance, we have heard countless accounts of the 'saffronization' of Indian history, repeating almost verbatim the dire charges that were heard from 1999 onward, when the first NDA government assumed power. From this perspective, it rather looks as if history is the most important of all disciplines!

The solution to this apparent paradox is plain enough: unlike mathematics, science, or geography, history deals with ticklish issues of nationality, culture, and ultimately, identity. It is history that, to a large extent, defines who we are or are not, where we come from and where we might be headed. As a result, the discipline has tended to look like a messy battlefield rather than a placid academic discipline with dreary exchanges among venerable scholars. And this is in no way peculiar to India: 'History is

the lie commonly agreed upon,' proclaimed Voltaire two-and-a-half centuries ago. The 20th century U.S. historian Will Durant was hardly more optimistic: 'Most history is guessing, and the rest is prejudice.'¹

But let us return to India, whose first histories, in the modern sense of the term, were written by British scholars early in the colonial era, and expectedly, reflected the prejudices of the times. James Mill's *History of British India*, first published in 1817, poured contempt on the very notion of Indian civilization and depicted the Indians' condition as 'one of the rudest and weakest states of the human mind'.² For much of the 19th century, Mill's book remained the prescribed reference in the preparation for the Indian Civil Service, although condemned by many (including Max Müller) as hopelessly biased. Indians often complained against such bias. Tagore, for instance, wrote, 'Our real ties are with Bharatavarsha that lies outside our textbooks. ... After all, we are no weeds or parasitical plants in India. ... Unfortunately, we are obliged to learn a brand of history that makes our children forget this very fact. It appears as if we are nobody in India.'³

Independent India

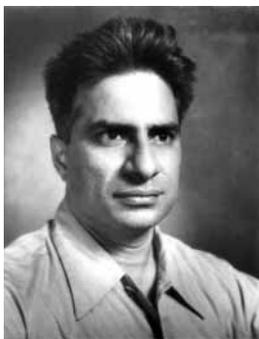
Soon after Independence, the reputed and prolific historian of ancient India R.C. Majumdar proposed that the new government should sponsor a detailed

history

history of the Freedom Movement. The idea was well received and arrangements were made under a board of scholars headed by Majumdar. Preparatory work went on for some years, but it became clear that the government expected a Congress-centred, Gandhi-centred history, while Majumdar favoured an approach that included diverse non-Congress figures and movements and subjected the Indian National Congress and the Mahatma to critical scrutiny. This approach did not find favour with the new rulers: in 1956, Majumdar found the rug unceremoniously pulled out from under him and the project handed over to a government-appointed scholar, Tara Chand, who steered the project along predictable lines. (Majumdar went on to publish his three-volume *History of the Freedom Movement in India* independently⁴) This was possibly the first instance of major political interference in the writing of history in India.



RC Majumdar



DD Kosambi

The 1960s and 1970s saw the rise of a new school of historiography based on Marx's view of history; it was pioneered in India by the brilliant and versatile scholar D.D. Kosambi and produced new perspectives with a chiefly social, caste-centred focus from which India's cultural and civilizational achievements tended to recede or disappear,

sometimes portrayed as no more than obscurantist or retrograde developments. Patronized by the Congress government, this 'Marxist' or 'Left' school (both terms being unsatisfactory, though I will use the latter for the sake of convenience) soon dominated the academic scene, institutions, and textbooks.

In 1972, for instance, the then Education Minister, Nurul Hasan, a medieval historian of strong Marxist leanings, was the chief guest at a seminar 'in honour of Lenin' held at the Indian Institute of Advanced Study, Shimla. According to the convenor, the seminar was 'not designed to be merely an act of homage to Lenin' but 'intended to provide a springboard for a realistic appraisal of the cultural situation in India that may lead to the emergence of an outline of a cultural policy' – that is to say, a government-controlled cultural orientation. After praising Lenin as a model for India, Nurul Hasan spoke on the exploitation of Indian 'masses' by the 'upper class' whose culture 'was an injustice and supported an outlook which could only be sustained on the basis of obscurantism and revivalism.'⁵

These last two words became part of a standard vocabulary used to characterize traditional Indian society and culture. In a class XI textbook, the late R.S. Sharma wrote that the chief purpose in studying Indian history is to understand the 'gross social injustice' of the caste system and to stop those who 'clamour for the restoration of ancient culture and civilization' because they want 'to prevent [India's] progress,' a progress based of course on 'the achievements of modern science and technology.'⁶ In plain language, India's 'ancient culture and civilization' was anti-science and anti-progress. It is no wonder that such textbooks never highlighted the high achievements of Indian knowledge systems, especially in fields like mathematics, astronomy, medicine, metallurgy, or water management, keeping generations of students in self-denigrating ignorance of them.

Ancient India was not the sole target of the new school; fault was found even with the freedom movement: either it promoted regressive religious feelings about the motherland (thus, in a class XII textbook, Bipin Chandra held Sri Aurobindo's 'concept of India as mother and nationalism as religion' to be a 'step back' because it had 'a strong religious and Hindu tinge'⁷), or the freedom fighters who used violence to overthrow the alien rule were labelled 'terrorists',⁸ the same term the colonial powers had used against them.



Aurobindo

By the same token, historians and scholars who happened to value classical India's culture and heritage were now to be shunned. R.C. Majumdar, for example, was no more a nationalist historian, but a 'communal' one.

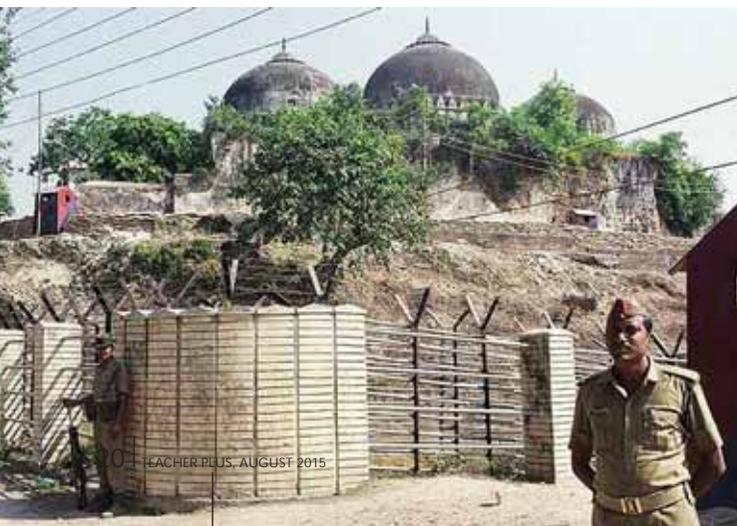
Recent controversies

This ominous trend signalled a marked shift in India's academic climate as far as history was concerned. In an ideal world, we could have hoped for a rich and stimulating dialogue between the Left and the nationalist schools – and several more that were neither here nor there. The opposite happened: mud-slinging and demonization became the norm. All too often, sticking a label of 'communal', 'chauvinist' or 'jingoist' on a scholar was all it took to conveniently avoid discussing his or her work.



Imaginary depiction of Aryans invading Indus cities

This polarization became extreme when a few historical controversies erupted, especially the Aryan debate (the Left school sticking to the old invasion theory or a diluted migration scenario), the issue of the Sarasvati River (which historians like Irfan Habib asserted was never more than a 'mythical' river) or the Ram Janmabhumi – Babri Masjid controversy



(with the Left historians strongly supporting the Babri Masjid Action Committee's stand that no Hindu temple had existed at the spot prior to the construction of the disputed structure). All norms of courtesy and open-mindedness were thrown to the winds; in fact, it may be said that India's enriching Hindu, Buddhist, and Jain traditions of intellectual debate died in the 1980s.

While I do not have space to discuss the merits or demerits of the main arguments at play in those controversies, I should add that the media fed on the polarization and generally assisted the demonization of those opposing the politically correct views of the Left school – with one exception, however: whenever the critics happened to be respected mainstream Western academics beyond the reach of demonization, their views were simply brushed under the carpet.

By the 1990s, most NCERT history textbooks had been written by Left historians, with their sanitized view of Indian history transparent at every page. In 1998, the political commentator Arun Shourie released his *Eminent Historians: Their Technology, Their Line, Their Fraud* in which he exposed academic and financial scandals affecting the Left-controlled institutions, especially the Indian Council of Historical Research. He also highlighted objectionable circulars issued by the CPM-ruled West Bengal government, asking for instance that the 'Muslim rule should never attract any criticism. Destruction of temples by Muslim rulers and invaders should not be mentioned.'⁹ This was no different from Soviet-controlled history writing.

Shourie's book, replete with facts and figures, did not give rise to the national debate one would have expected, yet had a deep impact. The NDA government, coming to power a year later, ordered the rewriting of textbooks, amidst an outcry by the Left school and the media against the dangerous 'saffronization' of history and education. The new textbooks, however, were of uneven standards, several of them replete with howlers. It looked as if, with an exception or two, the Nationalist school was not up to the task. Attempts in recent months to introduce reading material purporting to show advanced genetic manipulations, aircraft, and fast cars in the Vedic age have rightly invited ridicule. They are all the more pathetic as Sushruta's surgery or advanced technological skills are well documented and beyond controversy, although still concealed from our students.



Guru Tegh Bahadur

The UPA's return to power in 2004 saw a new crop of NCERT textbooks, which were better designed, with a more student-friendly pedagogy, but with many of the old biases still in place. Among numerous omissions or distortions, especially as regards the medieval and colonial periods, I may state the absence of a mention of Guru Tegh Bahadur's

execution by Aurangzeb. Compare with this account in *Encyclopaedia Britannica*: 'Tegh Bahadur ran afoul of the Mughal authorities by giving aid and shelter to some Hindu holy men from Kashmir who had sought his help after they were ordered by the emperor Aurangzeb to accept Islam. ... Tegh Bahadur then left for Delhi to defend the Hindus before Aurangzeb and was arrested at the emperor's order along the way. ... While in prison he was given the opportunity to accept Islam or be tortured; he refused to convert. ... Accepting the death sentence, the Guru ... was decapitated in one blow by the executioner.'

Why should our students be denied access to such basic facts of history? The argument that they would promote 'communal hatred' is a perverse one: dark chapters of humanity's chequered history may be 'controversial' or unpleasant, but are those we need to study the most if we wish them not to recur. Otherwise, we should stop teaching Hitler's rule and the horrors of the Third Reich.

Two remedies are called for if we wish an end to Independent India's political interference in history: (1) Nurturing a respect for all academic stands and calling for civilized national debates free from demonization; (2) Lessening the dependence on textbooks: they are not just biased, but too often, uninspiring and outdated. We must move away from textbooks, fearlessly discuss multiple viewpoints and perspectives, and encourage innovative pedagogies, for instance engaging students in field visits or mini-research projects to try and make history come alive.

In fact, regional history – beginning with the local fort, an old temple and its inscriptions, the village's hero stone, perhaps a stone circle, local craft traditions or some heritage site – should run in a stream parallel to national history: students will relate to it more intimately and will therefore take much more interest in it.

Above all, we must trust their intelligence and cease regarding them as passive recipients to be brainwashed by the ideology of the day. If, as E.H. Carr once wrote, history is 'an unending dialogue between the present and the past' and 'between the society of today and the society of yesterday',¹⁰ why should we exclude students from this enriching exercise?

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