

California Textbooks Issue: A Response

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The recent piece "What is at Stake in Rewriting California Textbooks" (EPW, 16 July) ignores several facts to sustain a baseless attack on Scholars for People, writes Vamsee Juluri.

The recently concluded California textbooks process has brought out a slew of dishonest, poorly informed, and ideologically predetermined articles pretending to lend expertise on the situation, which is first of all a debate on the history curriculum in American schools, rather than Indian history alone. Although Chinnaiah Jangam's [piece](#) in this journal (2016) initially attempts to provide a historic overview of Indian immigration to the US and situate the present controversy in that context, it inevitably trickles down into a narrow course that wilfully ignores several facts in order to sustain a baseless attack on Scholars for People, with some personal presumptions thrown in as well. The mandate of Scholars for People, which began with a community petition in March, protesting the denial of "India" and "Hinduism" in the frameworks, was the issue of denying India's existence, and not caste or even Hinduism, a crucial fact Jangam omits to mention.

An honest analysis of this issue would have at the very least laid out the positions of various parties accurately, as well as the flow of events that took place, instead of resorting to a sophomoric guessing game based on names and identities (would Jangam censure Irfan Habib, say, for writing about Hindu history the way he takes umbrage at some of us in Scholars for People?). It should be noted at the outset that Jangam does not offer a single link to the letters submitted to the Instructional Quality Commission (IQC) by the South Asia Faculty Group (SAFG) in 2015 and 2016 (South Asia Studies Faculty Review of Proposed California Curriculum Framework, Nov 2015; South Asia Faculty Cover Letter 2, Feb 2016). These are the documents in which the SAFG attempted to make a case for their recommendations, namely that several references to India be replaced with "South Asia," and for the word "Hinduism" to be replaced with "religion of ancient India". It was the acceptance of several of these changes in March 2016 by the California History Social Science Project (CHSSP) that led to the formation of Scholars for People, and it was this issue that dominated the petition, letters, and articles initiated by Scholars for People since March.

India Erasure and "Caste Erasure"

The mandate of Scholars for People from the beginning was neither Hinduism nor caste, but fundamentally to debate the fashionable academic notion that India did not exist before 1947, and to challenge the belief that the late cold war concoction "South Asia" was somehow more accurate and inclusive instead. The SAFG edits led to the complete erasure of "India" in several key places in the curriculum, subsuming its people into a *terra nullius* fantasy devoid of existence and accomplishment; for example, changing a line about Central Asian Turks "conquering Northern Indian states" into "expanding into Northern Indian plains (qtd in Edits Proposed by South Asia Faculty Group, no date). A public petition initiated one week after the CHSSP accepted the SAFG edits, gained the support of 25,000 people including several non-Hindus, and even non-Indian persons (Scholars for People, "Don't Replace "India" with "South Asia" in California History Social Science Frameworks," online petition).

Several academics and secular public intellectuals joined the Scholars for People forum, and some academics also wrote independently to the IQC to express their opposition to the SAFG position, including the Social Science and Religion Faculty Group (SSRFG) with over 40 American scholars including Diana Eck and Barbara McGraw.

Unfortunately, beginning in early April, a concerted media and social media smear campaign began with the sole aim of misrepresenting the issues at stake in California (Juluri 2016). These reports began to marginalise a real event, the acceptance of over 30 SAFG edits denying the existence of India and/or Hinduism, in favour of an allegation that various Hindu lobbying groups were trying to erase the mention of caste in the textbooks, which was merely a hypothesis, at least to the extent that virtually none of the dozens of edits requested by these groups were even accepted, nor were all of them about "erasing caste." In any case, the IQC review process concluded in May with a discussion of 30 edits over which much discussion had taken place. 20 edits had to do with the India/South Asia issue, and 18 of these were broadly settled in favour of what Scholars for People had requested. The remaining edits remained as the SAFG had recommended, and the language linking caste to Hinduism remained as strong as it was at first. This version was accepted by the State Board of Education in July (although a last minute representation alleging Islamophobia by a group of Islamic scholars led to a deletion of language referring to "forced conversions" and Islam).

Aryans and Hitler in Hinduism Chapters

While I cannot comment on the hundreds of suggestions submitted by dozens of parents and Hindu advocacy groups over the last two years, I can speak clearly for myself, and for Scholars for People which came together later, on the issues. I submitted my first set of suggestions to the IQC in October 2015 in which I had added several points that would enrich students' appreciation of Hindu philosophy and culture to make the Hinduism content on par with that of other religions, without asking for any deletions of caste (none of my suggestions were acted upon, or even acknowledged in the December draft). My main concern then was with the lingering "colonisation" narrative about Hinduism left over from the "Aryan invasion theory"-language in the books (which existed so widely in the United States that textbooks in one state even had photos of Hitler in the ancient India chapter), and also about expanding positive content on Hinduism, on a par with other religions (Juluri, "Letter To IQC - May 18th 2016").

I did believe then, and still believe now, that there is an issue of inequity in the depiction of Hinduism when compared to Islam, Christianity, and Judaism in the curriculum. There is clear evidence of this, not only in terms of the content of the textbooks, but also in terms of the testimonies presented by dozens of school children who spoke in Sacramento over the past few years (see Arumuganathaswami and Bajpai 2016); Voice of California Hindus). Their point was simple: there is virtually no critical discussion of any other faith (such as their role in global imperialism, conquest, genocide and slavery), but Hinduism alone is studied entirely by its inequities.

Although our main focus was on the India/South Asia question, Scholars for People did offer, towards the end of the process, an attempt to evaluate the multiple claims made by different Hindu advocacy groups and parents on some of these issues (the May letter cited by Jangam), an act which somehow seems to have lent itself to unsubstantiated taints of "guilt by association" by Jangam and other activists who find it convenient to lump our position into the same category as those of certain religious advocacy groups like Hindu American Foundation, whose mandate and history has been very different from that of Scholars for People. He accuses us of replicating the "Hindu right-wing government's ... historical narrative" without any specific evidence of either this "government narrative" or ours. He cites our criticism of Pollock and Doniger without revealing where he himself stands on the issue of Hindus being depicted as "fascist conquerors of their own land." Does he agree with them? Or with the Aryan invasion theory, and the sly attempts by these scholars to somehow blame Hinduism for the horrors of the Nazi holocaust?

Outright Lies Against Scholars for People and My Book

In conclusion, I should place on record that in addition to ignoring or suppressing the whole range of issues that Scholars for People has been engaged with, Jangam also attempts to

misrepresent our credentials. His claim that no historians supported our position is totally false and suppresses the fact that Ravi Korisettar, one of India's most respected archaeologists, supported our May letter in which we questioned the SAFG's claims on archaeology and Indus Valley among other issues (other historians like Michel Danino and Saradindu Mukherjee support our letter too, but Jangam would perhaps prefer to duck out of engaging their work by dismissing them as "not credentialed enough" as the SAFG did).

As for caste privilege, I can only try to be accountable to mine, but would ask him to introspect whether "beneficiaries of...colonialism", as he calls us, would really be struggling so hard to contest ignorant and racist textbook content from the colonial era in 21st century America. One of the ironies of the caste debate in California is that the SAFG position on Dalits has often been supported by self-identified Brahmin activists whereas the much vilified Hindu groups, like the Hindu Education Foundation, actually consist of members of underprivileged caste groups who wish to see a better depiction of subaltern contributions to Indian history, than merely as victims and "palace sweepers."[\[i\]](#)

I also urge Jangam to take a look at the other important scholarly interventions he skipped mentioning—the Social Science Faculty Research Group, consisting of over 40 US scholars including Diana Eck, Francis X. Clooney and Barbara McGraw, who have also called for a change in how caste and Hinduism are depicted in the textbooks. I wonder if he skipped mentioning them because their "castes" don't quite lend themselves to his sort of analysis, or simply because their intervention affirms that the textbooks issue is an American minority issue rather than some Indian right-wing project.

And as for his allegation about my having sworn allegiance to the Brahminical ideology of sanatana dharma at my book talk in Hyderabad, it is indeed a very colourful way of characterising someone who was simply born a Hindu (as for what this "ideology" means to me, he can also look up my writings on Sri Sathya Sai Baba, a poor peasant caste child of Rayalaseema, whom my family accepted as guru, daivam, and sarvam).

Finally, I strongly disagree with Jangam's presumptuous declaration that my book *Rearming Hinduism* is somehow a "scholarly justification for Hindu militancy". It is a very hurtful charge to make so lightly, and since he has not offered any evidence from my book to back up his frivolous allegation, it is clear that not only has he failed to read my book before commenting, he has studiously avoided reading the numerous readers' comments on my book on websites like Amazon, and elsewhere which explicitly point out that my book has

nothing to do with arms, armaments, or militaristic predilections of any kind. While I do talk about the need for righteous anger against today's violently anthropocentric global modernity, I have been anti-militant and unapologetically sentimental in my book to the extent of stating clearly that the right way to "rearm Hinduism" is through "kindness and love."

I am also not sure what "ferocious Hindu gods and their actions" Jangam thinks I propitiate in my book. But if it is a reference to the broken Hampi Lakshmi-Narasimhaswami on the cover, it is telling that he sees its broken state not as a reminder of misogyny, violence and imperialism against an ancient and indigenous nature-worshipping culture that ought to be preserved and cherished, but sees it only through the prejudiced lens of a colonial-protestant mythology about Hinduism's dark and dangerous gods. Surely, the task of decolonising Indian history demands at the very least an accurate understanding, and then an appropriate critique, before we decide that only a normative and pure conception of anti-Hindu ideology will suffice as acceptable in academia? When a subaltern position makes that claim, accountability, and decency demand that one listens. But when the very existence of global anti-Hindu ideologies, institutions, and forces is denied blissfully, how credible can academia remain?

What Jangam and other impulsive commentators have missed out is the fact that questioning the present form in which Hinduism and caste are taught in California (ScholarsforPeopleJuly16, July 2016) does not mean we oppose a factual, precise, and age-appropriate discussion of caste in California. Scholars for People has never supported the view that caste and Dalit issues should not be taught for fear of bullying, and I request Jangam to show any evidence that we have said this. Our position very simply is that there needs to be honesty and fairness in the textbooks, and one cannot simultaneously whitewash imperialism and violence associated with global monotheisms while continuing to demonise Hinduism, and even its liberal interpreters so viciously. It is remarkable that so many observers who cannot identify and eliminate colonial-era missionary propaganda from their critiques believe that they have a monopoly of knowledge on the "real roots of Hinduism."

The final outcome of the 2016 review process is this; the slightest mentions of the spread of Islam through force have been erased; Hinduism alone continues to be criticised among all religions (though a few positive points have been added compared to the 2005 version), and the words "India" and "Hinduism" have been reinstated after being initially denied altogether. What has changed though, is the fact that ten years ago there were perhaps no more than two or three scholars willing to speak up against the academic dogma on

Hinduism and Indian history, and now there are at least fifty. And no matter how many devious attempts are made to misrepresent scholars who question the current dogma of normative anti-Hindu fanaticism in academia, the truth cannot be suppressed forever.

Notes

[1] See our letter, (Degade 2016) for more on this example.

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