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Cleansing the Past, Creating the Future? Do (History) Books Matter?

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Deletions in the NCERT introductory textbook for history indicate that the slightest allusion to respect for social and cultural differences as an ideal is considered irrelevant.

The past few weeks have witnessed discussions on a process that school textbooks prepared by the National Council of Educational Research and Training (NCERT) have been subjected to.

Designated as a process of 'rationalisation' – another euphemism added to the many that we have grown accustomed to – it is apparently inspired by a set of principles. These are removing content that overlaps, doing away with material considered difficult, removing material that the learner can acquire through self-learning, and doing away with what is 'irrelevant'. These principles are wide-ranging enough to deal with very diverse exigencies.

The size of the booklets listing the rationalisations gives us a sense of the scale of the project that is underway. The booklets for classes VI to X consist of 32 pages each, for class XI runs into 80 pages, and for class XII into 108 pages. (They include emendations for all three language versions of the textbooks – Hindi, English, and Urdu).

I will focus more closely on the deletions in *Our Pasts I*, for class VI, where history is introduced to learners. At first sight, it may seem as if the book is relatively unscathed, as it has not been subjected to the 'disappearance' of entire chapters as in the case of some other books. But a closer examination reveals common patterns and principles of elimination.

The implications require consideration. What the present list of 'dropped topics and chapters' reveals is that the content and structure of the books were thought to pose other challenges apart from being allegedly repetitive and irrelevant.

I will touch briefly on deletions in other subjects too, which have not attracted as much attention, but which perhaps have as many long-term implications as the more spectacular ones that history books have been subjected to.

I do not write from a position of 'neutrality'. I have been actively interested in pedagogical issues pertaining to history for decades and have had the opportunity of working closely with teams in the NCERT and other organisations involved in producing material for school children. This has been a challenging learning experience – and one where much more remains to be achieved.

Eliminating, eradicating, erasing

Following the National Curriculum Framework 2005, the history syllabus was envisaged in three phases. Indian history was to be introduced from classes VI to VIII through three volumes of *Our Pasts*. In classes IX and X learners were to be introduced to what was designated as *India and the Contemporary World*, including major political, economic, social, and cultural processes from the 18th to the 20th century. Class XI was devoted to introducing themes in world history ranging from the beginning of human evolution to modernisations, while class XII was meant for an intensive source-based study of themes in Indian history.

Overlaps in terms of content were few and far between. For instance, while the Harappan civilisation was discussed in both class VI and class XII, the latter was far more complex, introducing the learner to the ways in which archaeological evidence can or cannot be interpreted. Further, attempts were made to provide some account of regions in the subcontinent from classes VI to VIII, focusing on a different region in each chapter, to convey a sense of the diversity that is part of our heritage.

Given that *Our Pasts* was meant for learners being introduced to history for the first time, the chapters were divided into manageable sections with appropriate titles and subtitles and had additional material in boxes. Six types of boxes were introduced – containing definitions, source material including visuals, additional information, a box titled 'Elsewhere', keywords, and dates. Questions at the end of the lesson were also divided into those testing recall, as well as more open-ended exercises allowing for comparisons between past and present.

As many as thirty-five changes have been listed for *Our Pasts I* and have already been implemented in the electronic version available on the NCERT website.

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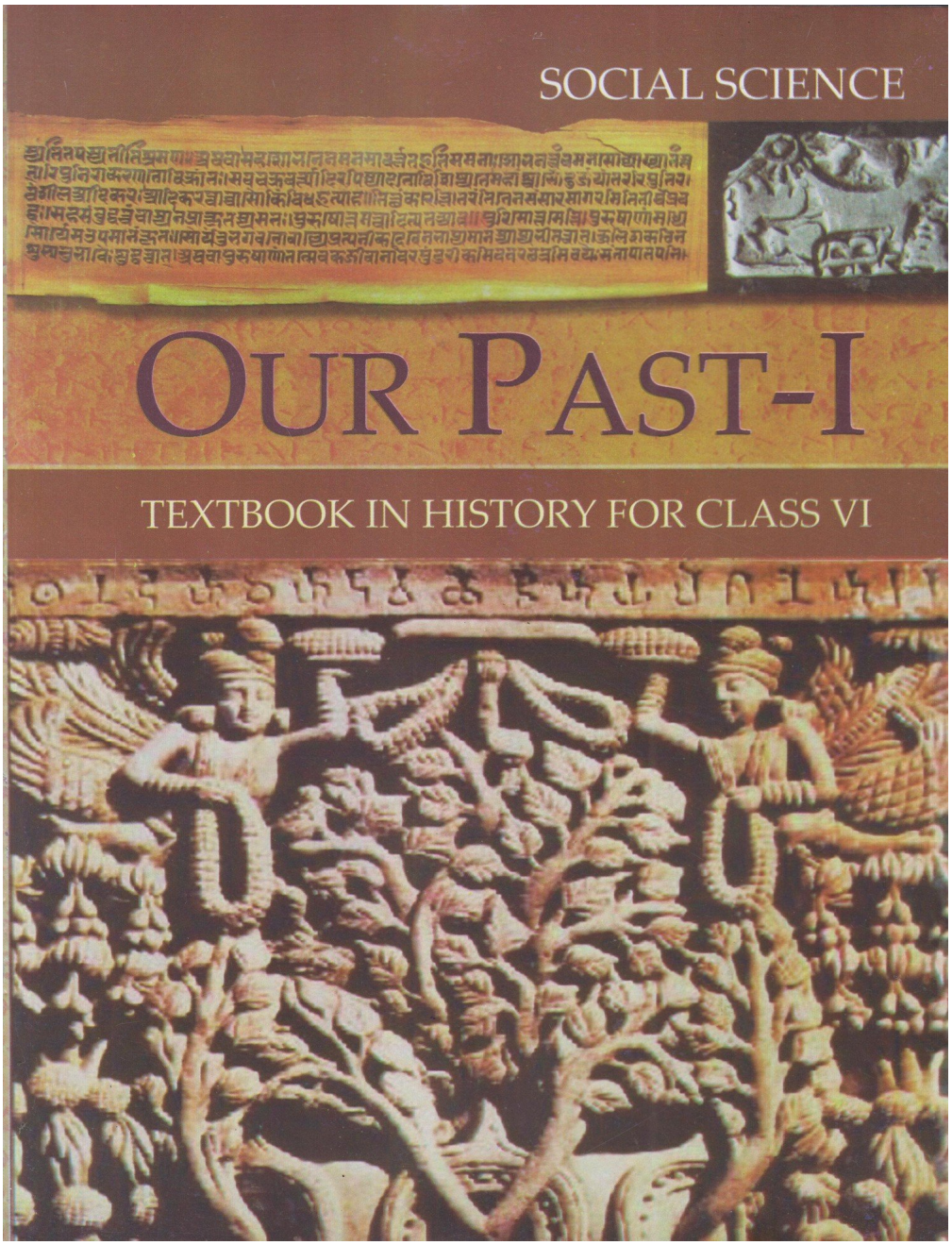
Of the book's structural elements, the one that was apparently considered most problematic was the Elsewhere box. Inserted at the end of every chapter, these boxes introduced the learner to developments in different parts of the world that were more or less simultaneous with those described in the main chapter, which focused on the subcontinent. For example, the chapter on the Harappan civilisation contained a box on the pyramids in Egypt; that on new questions and ideas, discussing Upanishadic thought, Buddhism and Jainism, contained a box on Zoroastrianism; that on Ashoka contained an account of the Great Wall of China, and so on.



These boxes, which provided a glimpse of happenings in the wider world, have now been systematically eliminated from all the chapters in the *Our Pasts* series. What these omissions promote and encourage is a sense of insularity, which is likely to prove counter-productive in an increasingly globalised and connected world.

Two keywords have been eliminated from the Class VI history book. Not surprisingly, these pertain to political developments and processes. So 'ruler' and 'democracy' have been erased. The understanding that these concepts evolved historically is clearly regarded

as irrelevant in the present context. Other eliminations include paragraphs on the varna order, where two introductory paragraphs, as well as two concluding paragraphs, have been removed.

> Anything suggestive of social and economic differences and hierarchies is regarded as disruptive, if not dangerous.

The first paragraph introduced the later Vedic literature and ended by stating: "These were composed by priests, and described how rituals were to be performed. They also contained rules about society" (55–56).

The second paragraph, now deleted, was as follows:

There were several different groups in society at this time – priests and warriors, farmers, herders, traders, crafts persons, labourers, fishing folk, and forest people. Some priests and warriors were rich, as were some farmers and traders. Others, including many herders, craftspersons, labourers, fishing folk, and hunters and gatherers were poor.

The last two paragraphs, also deleted, were as follows:

The priests also said that these groups were decided on the basis of birth. For example, if one's father and mother were brahmins, one would automatically become a brahmin and so on. Later, they classified some people as untouchable. These included some crafts person, hunters and gatherers, as well as people who helped perform burials and cremations. The priests said that contact with these groups was polluting. Many people did not accept the system of varna laid down by the brahmins. Some kings thought they were superior to the priests. Others felt that birth could not be a basis for deciding which varna people belonged to. Besides, some people felt that there should be no differences amongst people based on occupation. Others felt that everybody should be able to perform rituals. And others condemned the practice of untouchability. Also, there were many areas in the subcontinent, such as the north-east, where social and economic differences were not very sharp and where the influence of the priests was limited.

Eliminating these paragraphs provides one with a bland account of the social order, unchanging and unchallenged, duly sanitised and sanctified. What is evident in this and other instances is that anything suggestive of social and economic differences and hierarchies is regarded as disruptive, if not dangerous.

So, it is no surprise that mention of the hard work involved in intensive agriculture in early India has been eliminated. The earlier text noted that work that increased rice production, such as transplantation:

was back breaking work. Generally, slave men and women (dasas and dasis) and landless agricultural labourers (kammakaras) had to do this work (60).

Erasing the existence of actual workers allows for a picture of increased production and prosperity that is created and presented seamlessly.

If references to workers, and implicitly, the existence of poverty are dropped at one end of the socio-economic order, the fate of the Mauryan emperor Ashoka (as well as that of one of his greatest admirers, is also illuminating.

In the earlier text, the chapter on the Mauryan empire had the title 'Ashoka, the Emperor who gave up war' (75). This allusion to a pacifist ruler is now obviously considered undesirable as a role model for young learners, so there is now a more 'appropriate' title, "From a Kingdom to an Empire", underscoring what is regarded as "progress" in terms of political developments.

Part of the 12th Major Rock Edict of Ashoka was summarised in the text as follows:

It is both wrong to praise one's own religion or criticise another's. Each one should respect the other's religion. If one praises one's own religion while criticising another's, one is actually doing greater harm to one's own religion. Therefore, one should try to understand the main ideas of another's religion and respect it.

The box containing this excerpt from the Ashokan inscription also included the following statement, to enable the learner to make a connection between past and present:

Pandit Jawaharlal Nehru, the first Prime Minister of India, wrote: "His [i.e. Ashoka's] edicts (instructions) still speak to us in a language we can understand and we can still learn much from them" (81).

This has been deleted. One is left wondering whether even the slightest allusion to respect for social and cultural differences as an ideal is now considered irrelevant. If so, the consequences are worrisome, to say the least.

Parallel erasures

Erasures in other subjects, books and classes enable us to understand the pattern at work.

In class VII, four pages from the chapter on the Delhi sultans have been dropped from *Our Pasts II*, including a discussion on the significance of mosques. Also eliminated are two pages on the Mughal empire and two chapters dealing with the histories of medieval architecture and with trade and towns, respectively.

Perhaps not surprisingly, questions in the last chapter, which would have allowed the learner to explore the histories of regional polities that emerged in the 18th century as the Mughal empire disintegrated, have been selectively trimmed. Thus, while those dealing with the Rajputs, Sikhs and Marathas are retained, questions about the Nawabs of Awadh and Bengal and the Nizam of Hyderabad have been erased.

Pages from the class VI textbook on *Social and Political Life*, which dealt with the stereotyping of Muslims and the experience of caste discrimination, have been excised (18–19), as has chapter 4, titled 'Key Elements of a Democratic Government'.

For class VII, the first chapter in the book on *Social and Political Life*, 'On Equality', has been shortened by five pages to eliminate any discussion on poverty, caste discrimination and discrimination on the basis of religious identities. Also, not surprisingly, the chapter on struggles for equality has been dropped completely. The chapter that disappears in class VIII in the same series pertains to the criminal justice system. Two chapters disappear from the class VIII History book – one on industrial production and the other on India after Independence.

The history books for classes IX and X had been 'rationalised' earlier. In the case of class IX, chapters on peasants and farmers, cricket and clothing were eliminated. Similarly, for class X, chapters on Vietnam, on modern cities, and on the novel and other literary forms were dropped. As all these chapters were optional, retaining them would have provided a wider choice for learners. Removing them has meant that the remaining chapters have, in effect, become compulsory. Given that 'choice' is amongst the most fashionable buzzwords at present, the systematic blocking of existing choices is surprising, to say the least.

Also, three of the eight chapters of the class X book on Democratic Politics have been dropped. Their titles are self-explanatory: 'Democracy and Diversity' (chapter 3), 'Popular Struggles and Movements' (Chapter 5), and 'Challenges to Democracy' (Chapter 8). Also axed are two visuals of posters containing poems by Faiz. The text of the first was as follows:

Not enough to shed tears, to suffer anguish Not enough to nurse love in secret Today, walk in the public square fettered in chains (46, 48).

Turning to class XI, two chapters, one on poverty and the other on infrastructure, have been dropped from the book on *Indian Economic Development*. For history, four chapters have been dropped. These include one dealing with the earliest phases of human evolution, another on the 'Central Islamic Lands', a third on colonialism, titled 'Confrontation of Cultures', and a fourth on the industrial revolution. Effectively, the course is reduced by about a third. Entire chapters titled 'Peace' and 'Development' have been dropped from *Political Theory*.

For class XII, the dropping of the chapter on Mughal courts and chronicles has deservedly attracted attention. Two other chapters have been dropped from history as well – one on colonial cities and the second on understanding partition. Other books subjected to 'rationalisations' include 'Fundamentals of Human Geography' and 'India: People and Economy'. Two chapters have been dropped from 'Contemporary World Politics', and over a hundred sections/ paragraphs/ pages from 'Social Change and Development in India'. Given that the book probably originally had around 160 pages, the extent of the transformation can only be imagined. The fate of the book on 'Indian Society' seems to be similar, with approximately 70 changes.

There are several other subjects that have been subjected to 'rationalisation'. For example, in Class XI, these include Mathematics, Biology, Chemistry, Physics, Statistics, Business Studies, Accountancy, Physical Geography, Physical Environment, Sociology, Psychology, Human Ecology and Family Sciences. Chapters from language books in Hindi, Sanskrit, and English have also been trimmed. In several instances, full chapters have been dropped; in others, there are sections and pages that have been removed. Ideally, these changes too need to be examined carefully to understand the logic behind such changes as well as their implications for learners.

Contextualising the 'rational'

It is important to acknowledge that the NCF 2005's idealised scheme of teaching history ran into challenges which were not satisfactorily resolved. Given the thriving private textbook industry, many schools opted to use non-NCERT books for all years except those which had a board examination. This meant that the pedagogical principles developed through the NCERT books were engaged with only sporadically in some classes rather than continuously from the middle to the higher secondary level.

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The board examinations themselves remained resilient in relying on testing rote learning rather than conceptual understanding. Teachers and students relied far more on guidebooks which provided cryptic answers to be memorised, rather than the more open-ended textbooks that aimed to encourage critical thinking. Encouraging and supporting social science teachers, who may or may not have graduated in history, to grapple with material that they had not studied themselves required far more investment in terms of time and resources than was readily available.

Finally, in a situation where STEM subjects are prioritised, followed by commerce and economics, most learners who opt to study humanities and history do so not out of choice but out of compulsion. As such, these are generally regarded as low-priority subjects.

Additionally, piecemeal changes in the books were introduced over the years. While some were ostensibly meant to reduce the burden, others were meant to assuage 'hurt sentiments'. While there were discussions on some of these matters, and efforts were made to evolve a consensus, in other instances, the changes were probably more ad hoc in nature.

Devising an effective and continuous means of addressing these issues remains a desideratum. None of these challenges is insurmountable—but working with and through them requires political and social will, vision, planning and resources that do not seem to be available at present.

The last three years, marked by an unprecedented pandemic, lockdowns, and disruptions within the formal educational system, have witnessed changes whose implications remain to be assessed, understood, and hopefully addressed. These include changes in modes of communication in educational institutions, where the reliance on a range of online modes brought challenges that need to be acknowledged and addressed creatively, supporting all those who have had to cope with losses during this crisis. This is by no means easy or automatic.

Certain long-term issues remain important, even as others have acquired far more immediacy than they had fifteen years ago when these books were produced. To cite an example of the former, India's sex ratio remains dismal, ranking 189 out of 201 countries in the world in 2021. Environmental degradation and climate change, with perhaps unforeseeable consequences, loom large today. In this context, the news that India (following Brazil) is the country that has lost the second-largest area of forest cover in the last five years is alarming, to say the least. If anything, concerns such as these should animate and inform discussions on revised curricula, syllabi, and books.

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What we find, instead, is an almost stony silence on these issues. And yet, this is not all. There are some indications that new content is being envisaged for learners, and traces of this surface in the midst of this cleaning-up operation. One example, once again from the Class VI history book, must suffice. In the chapter on 'New Questions and Ideas', the earlier book mentioned Gargi as follows:

Occasionally, there is mention of women thinkers, such as Gargi, who was famous for her learning, and participated in debates held in royal courts (68).

Now, the booklet for Class VI recommends the addition of the names of Apala, Ghosha, Lopamudra and Maitreyi (18). It may be noted that the first three figures are in the *Rigveda* but not in the Upanishadic tradition. What will happen, then, is that names, without any further details, can be inserted wherever thought necessary, creating a further burden on the learner, who may be expected to memorise these.

This is particularly likely given the new emphasis, at all levels of education, on what is being described as the 'Indian Knowledge System', more often than not regarded as synonymous with Sanskrit textual traditions. The extent to which this will enable learners to meet the challenges of the future remains uncertain at best.

At another level, the world of education has become increasingly differentiated. At one end are schools that are now part of a global network, catering to the aspirations of the affluent, while at the other end are the government schools, in a state of crisis, struggling to meet the needs of the marginalised in terms of gender, caste, class, and community, even as all those who can attempt to enrol their children in a range of private institutions. Sadly, it is those in the government schools who are likely to be subjected to these rationalisations, and who will be deprived of a chance to acquire a critical and constructive understanding of the complexities of the world in which they find themselves. Issues of inclusivity remain crucial and critical.

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Ironically, all the booklets on rationalisation end with a visual of a young girl jumping near a tree on which a bird is perched. The text reads: "*Pardhungi, barhungi, sapnon ke aasmaan mein unchi urungi, bas maukaa chaahiye mujhe, apni raah khud chunungi.*"An approximate translation would be: "I will study, grow, fly high in the sky of my dreams, all I need is an opportunity, and I will choose my own path."

That aspiration, at once simple and profound, is unlikely to be met any time soon.

Kumkum Roy retired as professor of ancient history at the Centre for Historical Studies, Jawaharlal Nehru University.