

## How Textbooks Teach Prejudice

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What we learn and teach about history and how the process of this learning has been crafted or developed, shapes our understanding of the events of the past. This understanding of the past influences our ability to grapple with the present and therefore also the future. Such knowledge, if both rich and varied, can also; make and break convictions of both the teacher and the taught.

In 1947, India made a historic tryst with destiny. Independent yet partitioned, after extensive and careful deliberation, we opted for a democratic structure outlined in the Indian Constitution. Whether state directed or autonomously ensured, education in such a democratic polity should have been committed to free enquiry, fair and equal access to knowledge, both quantitative and qualitative, inculcation of the right to debate and dissent. The only restrictions and limits to when and at what junctures what kind of information could be shared with the child should have been pedagogical.

In short, the equality principle in any democracy simply must extend to education. In quantitative terms, this means the right of every Indian child to primary and secondary education. UNICEF figures shamefully record how we have failed, having as we do 370 million illiterates (1991), half a century after we became independent. But qualitatively, too, the equality principle within the Indian education syllabus, especially related to history and social studies teaching, in state and central boards, is sorely wanting.

Wedded to the equality principle, the democratisation of our history and social studies syllabus should have meant a critical revision of both the periodisation, approach and content of the material taught because, pre-Independence, history writing under the British was infested with colonial biases. This has not happened. As a result, in most of our texts and

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syllabi we continue to perpetuate the colonial legacy of portraying ancient India as synonymous with the

Hindu and the medieval Indian past with the Muslim. We have, over the years, further accentuated the colonial biases with sharp and more recent ideological underpinnings linked with the rapid growth in the political sphere of the Hindu Right. Hate language and hate-politics cannot be part of history teaching in a democracy. But, unfortunately, prejudice and division, not a holistic and fair vision, has been the guiding principle for our textbook boards and the authors chosen by them.

### **Ancient India as Hindu**

There is a clear and underlying assumption that the popular faiths and beliefs of the vast majority of people who lived here before the ancient period were 'Hindu' as we understand the term today. The conflict or convulsions between the Dravidian and Aryan cultures and beliefs are not merely glossed over, they are presented as non-inimical to each other in the desire to substantiate the claim that 'Hinduism' was able to absorb contradictions and conflicts 'peacefully'. By implication or actual assertions the textbooks also state that the real conflicts came with the interaction with other faiths. In this context, it would be educative to look closely at the prescribed textbooks for history and social studies teaching in Gujarat, with virtually no alterations since 1991, many books prescribed by the ICSE national board among others, and even some college level texts that contain these problematic formulations. The state syllabus detailed in the texts being currently used by the Gujarat state board, outlines clearly for the teacher and student of history that when the author(s) of the text-book write about India they use the term for the modern nation as synonymous with 'Hindu'. The student is instructed that the idea of studying social studies is to develop a true understanding of ancient India. The political implications of this assumption are significant and dangerous, because, immediately for the history learner paradigms have been drawn. It is only within these that adjustments are subsequently made for 'synthesis' or 'syncretism'. The syllabus for the standard five social studies text printed by the Gujarat State board, outlines the objective of the syllabus that has been laid out for the ten-year-old child: 'Towards understanding the Indian Cultural heritage in a proper perspective'. This 'perspective', as described below in detail, outlines erroneously that the ancient age begins with Vedic times. It becomes clear from this introductory social studies text for the fifth standard child that no perspective of world ancient civilisations is given through the syllabus; that the desire is not just to begin and end with India, but ancient India has been made synonymous with the Vedic; and that values like "respectable status of women in Indian culture" are rooted in the characters depicted through stories taken from the Vedas. There is no attempt to develop any sense of historical enquiry that could lead to a student understanding the quality of life and civilisations that existed pre-Vedas; the exchanges that took place between ancient peoples through river and sea routes etc. Not only is this kind of social studies self-limiting and restrictive, it is an approach that is set to stifle free thinking and enquiry. Here is how the objective of the syllabus

is outlined: Ancient Age (From Vedic times to Harshavardhan) Is introduced to Vedic literature which is an expression of Indian Culture. Knows about the respectable status of women in Indian culture. Gets acquainted with the basic truths of life against a backdrop of Indian Culture. Learns for himself the truth; that in the context of Indian culture a person acquires a high status not by right of birth but by merit. Knows about how in the Indian Cultural context the rules were oriented towards the subjects. Imbibes the basic values of Indian Culture expressed by the narratives of the epics, Ramayana, Mahabharat, and by the main characters in it. For instance, the importance of 1) The purity of domestic life 2) Steadfastness in adhering to truth even at the cost of suffering. Moulds the character which makes one abide by ones duty when there is a conflict between personal relationship and a sense of duty. (Social Studies text, Gujarat state board, Std. V). Apart from the stated objective of portraying ancient Indian culture as synonymous with the Vedas, the Gujarat board texts also proceed to depict Indian culture as inherently superior to any other. In the chapter titled, 'The Cultural Heritage of Ancient India, the child is told: "Ancient Indian history covers a period of about four thousand years. It can be divided into the following periods: The Indus valley civilisation period, the Vedic period, the post-Vedic period, the Epic period, the Age of Buddha and Mahavir, the Maurya and the Post-Gupta periods and the Early Muslim period". The same text goes on to assert that from the beginning of the Indus valley period to the 'end of Hindu supremacy\* the contribution of Indian civilisation was unique, implying that, thereafter, with the 'Muslim period' the contribution could not be measured in a similar fashion. "Right from the coming of the Aryans to India (around 2000 B.C.) to the end of the Hindu supremacy (around 1200 A.D.). The Indian civilisation made a unique contribution in many different fields of life, a contribution which includes certain high moral values. It is because of this reason that the ancient civilisation of India has survived today in the form of Indian culture while other ancient civilisation like those of Egypt, Mesopotamia (Iraq) and China have disappeared from the world. These countries do not have the continuity of culture, which is found in the Indian culture". The same, Std. IX text, that selectively excludes historical details like the Shaivite-Buddhist conflicts, oppression of women and the shudras, the state of Dalits even today, is however emphatic that 'the inherent peace and tolerance of Indian culture' is one of its characteristics. This is one of the recurring myths that have been repeated ad nauseum about India and her ancient culture, the fact that it is "the most non-violent, peace-loving and tolerant", a myth that is essential if the 'Hindu' is to be pitted as the quintessential Indian, a myth that sits well with the 'others' being labelled both 'invaders' and 'foreigners'. It is also a myth that seeks to justify present-day violence against the country's minorities, seeking justification for this in 'the wrongs of yore'. In a section titled "Tolerance and urge for peace", the fourteen-year-old is told: "Tolerance and a strong desire for peace are two distinct features of Indian culture. Brahminism with its two main functions namely Shaivism and Vishnavism. Buddhism and Jainism were the main faith followed in ancient India. These faiths adopted a policy of tolerance towards one another. For examples the Satwahanas and the Guptas were followers of Brahminism. But they showed tolerance towards Buddhism and Jainism and gave financial grants to their places of worship.

Over the years, our history and social studies texts, more and more, emphasise a prejudicial understanding and rendering of history, that is certainly not borne out by historical facts. Crucial inclusions and exclusions that are explored through abstracts from state board texts, ICSE textbooks and college texts as well, quoted extensively in stories accompanying this essay, bear this out.

### **Caste is a Precious Gift**

The caste system receives generous treatment in Indian textbooks. Even the section in the text book of the Gujarat state board that seeks to explain the constitutional policy of reservations makes remarks about the continued illiteracy of the "'scheduled castes and tribes".

So, for instance, the same textbook pays lip service to political correctness through a fleeting reference to the fact that the varna system later became hierarchical, but in the same chapter, a few paragraphs later, literally extols the virtues of the intent of the varna system itself. There is also no attempt nor desire, either in this text or the ICSE texts to explain the inhuman concept of 'untouchability' (based on the notion, 'so impure as to be untouchable') that Jyotiba Phule and B.R. Ambedkar made it their life's mission to challenge, socially and politically. In understanding and teaching about caste, both this text and other ICSE texts display a marked reluctance to admit or link the ancient-day varna system to modern-day Indian social reality. 'The 'Varna' System: The Varna system was a precious gift of the Aryans to the mankind. It was a social and economic organisation of the society built on the basis of the principle of division of labour. Learning or education, defence, trade and agriculture and service of the community are inseparable organs of the social fabric. The Aryans divided the society into four classes or 'varnas'. Those who were engaged in the pursuit of learning and imparted education were called "Brahmins or Purohits (the priestly classes). Those who defended the country against the enemy were called the Kshatriyas or the warrior class. Those who were engaged in trade agriculture were called the Vaishyas. And those who acted as servants or slave of the other three classes were called the Shudras. In the beginning, there were no distinction of 'high' and low. The varna or class of a person was decided not on the basis of birth but on the basis of his work or karma. Thus a person born of a Shudra father could become a Brahmin by acquiring learning or by joining the teaching profession. In course of time however, the varna system became corrupted and 'birth' rather than 'vocation' came to be accepted as the distinguishing feature of the varna system. Thus society was permanently divided into a hierarchy of classes.

The Brahmins were regarded as the highest class while the Shudras were treated as the lowest. These distinctions have persisted in spite of the attempts made by reformers to remove them. Yet, the importance of the 'Varna' system as an ideal system of building the social and economic structure of a society cannot be overlooked. (Emphasis added). (Social Studies text, Gujarat State Board, Std. IX) The only reference in this standard IX text to the indignities of the caste system as it exists today is through an attempt to blame the plight of the untouchables on their own illiteracy and

blind faith. "Problems of Schedule Castes and Scheduled Tribes: Of course, their ignorance, illiteracy and blind faith are to be blamed for lack of progress because they still fail to realise importance of education in life. Therefore, there is large-scale illiteracy among them and female illiteracy is a most striking fact" (Emphasis added). (Social Studies text, Gujarat State Board, Std. IX).

The ICSE texts are similarly non-critical and evasive. The New ICSE History and Civics, edited by Hart and Barrow, Part 1 has this to say. "The Caste System: The division of society into four varnas (classes) had its origin in the Rig Vedic period. Members of the priestly class were called brahmins; those of the warrior class, kshatriyas; agriculturists and traders, vaisyas; and the menials, sudras. It is said that the caste system in the Rig Vedic times was based on occupations of the people and not on birth. Change of caste was common. A Brahmin child could become a kshatriya or a vaisya according to his choice or ability" Varna in Sanskrit means the colour of skin and the caste system was probably used to distinguish the fair coloured Aryans from the dark coloured natives. The people of higher castes (brahmins, kshatriyas, and vaisyas) were Aryans. The dark skinned natives were the sudras, the lowest class in society, whose duty was to serve the high class.

What the RSS and other rabid organisations with a clearly political objective would have us believe about history has been succinctly summed up by the accompanying abstract of an NCERT (National Council for Educational Research and Training) report. The report enumerates instances that clearly reflect the bias of the organisation that has sponsored them.

### **Demonising Christianity, Islam**

In a chapter titled, "Problems of the Country and Their Solutions", the Social Studies, Std.IX text of the Gujarat Board has a section with a sub-heading, 'Minority Community', that labels Muslims, even Christians and Parsees, as 'foreigners'. It also states that Hindus are in a minority in most states. It reads: "But apart from the Muslims, even the Christians, Parsees and other foreigners are also recognised as the minority communities. In most of the states the Hindus are in minority and Muslims, Christians and Sikhs are in majority in these respective states". The same text also selectively denigrates the Catholic priesthood of the middle ages which may be legitimate but is suspicious when similar exacting criticism is not accorded to the Brahmin religious hierarchy. Monetary exploitation and persistent sexual harassment by the caste hierarchy in India which was not merely historically legitimised by caste but brutally holds Dalit women to ransom even today. "The priests of the Catholic church had accumulated plenty of wealth through unjust taxes, illegal fees, ownership of large tracts of land, selling miracles and indulgences. They spent this money on worldly pleasures and immoral behaviour (SS, Std.IX)". The Christian Church was a part and parcel of this integrated feudal system. Almost half of the land and other property belonged to the bishops or the heads of parishes. The Pope who was the head of the Roman Catholic Church was himself a big landlord. The Church received sumptuous gifts of land from the king as well as the lords. Thus the Church had

amassed great wealth. The Pope, archbishop, bishops and other priests lost their heads, forgot their duties and lived a life of luxury and sensual pleasures" (SS, Std. X). The following extract is from a recommended third year B.A. textbook for the student of history in Maharashtra. The chapter on Mahmud of Ghaznavi is used blatantly by the author to launch a tirade against Islam itself. The opening para reads: "The advent of Islam might have been a boon to the Arabs who got united under its banner, and were enthused by it to carry on conquests in Asia, Africa and Europe but it has been a curse for the people outside Arab world because wherever the Islamic hordes went, they not only conquered the countries, but killed millions of people and plundered their homes and places of worship and destroyed their homes, places of worship and above all their artworks". The author continues: "The general Islamic belief that political power can be claimed by anyone who can wield power goes not only against the legality of inheritance to throne but encourages intrigues, plots rebellions and assassinations of father by his son, brother by his brother, ruler by his military commander or minister and above all master by his servant, nay, even by his slave. There might have been some killings of such a type among the people of other religious faiths like the Hindus or Christians but those were exceptions while in the Islamic people these have occurred as a rule, not as exceptions". The author makes his orientation more and more plain as we read on. The question, however, is how did such a text past muster and how does it continue to be one of the recommended texts at the graduation level in Maharashtra. "The king of the Ghaznavides, Subuktigin, who started raids on India in the last decades of 10th century A.D. was a slave of Alptagin, who himself was a slave of Samanid ruler of Khorasan. So it is the slave of the slave who set in process, the Islamic invasion from 10th century A.D". This is how the concluding para reads. "Why these atrocities? Because Islam teaches only atrocities. Have not Islamic invaders done so wherever they had gone, be that India or Africa or Europe"? (Emphasis added). Mahmud returned to Ghazni with a large booty".

What is far more worrisome and needs careful and equally studied examination is how the textbooks in use in most of our states under the ambit of the state textbook boards, as well as the texts of prominent national boards, echo the same historical precepts, misconceptions and formulations. Sometimes in a diluted or scattered form, but more often with the same resultant damage. The dangerous patterns woven through the syllabus in general and the history and social studies curriculum in particular, for the young mind, need to be traced carefully. They reveal how the average Indian text looks at the historical and present question of caste-based discriminations, community-driven stereotypes and, as significantly, what we teach students about the status of women, then and now.

These patterns, distorted and prejudicial as they are, will open our eyes to the process that has actually contributed to mainstream secular space

being dominated by the discourse dictated by the Right. We will then begin to understand how certain manipulated discourses and imageries that have been pulled out for public consumption over the past decade-and-a-half find instant and widespread resonance in civil society.

What am I referring to? How come the crude allusions to Muslims as 'Babar ki aulad' in the mid-eighties and the charge of 'forced' conversions against Christians in the late nineties finds a silent acceptance in the marketplace of popular ideas, and even dominates the media? This is because many of post-Independent India's textbooks have been unable to offer a clean, holistic, rational and multi-dimensional vision of the past that includes a historically honest portrayal of how different faiths arrived on the shores of this sub-continent. Our textbooks are, similarly and suspiciously, silent on the motives behind thousands of Indians converting to different faiths over generations. Instead, through allusions and exclusions, they strengthen the false claim that in a vast majority of cases these conversions happened under force.

Are we, as citizens, concerned about whether our education system encourages the creative and thought processes, develops the quality of thinking in our young, whether our attitude to learning and teaching engenders the processes of inquiry? If yes, we need to examine whether our school textbooks tackle the question of free inquiry, dissent and debate. We need also to pay attention to specific inclusions and exclusions within the content of these texts. Other crucial questions also need to be raised. How do Indian texts specifically deal with the fundamental question of race, origin, culture and faith on the sub-continent?

It is surely impossible to speak about apartheid in the world context without linking it to the birth of South Africa under Nelson Mandela as an independent nation. Or to understand slavery in the modern context without knowledge of the role of colonial powers in Africa or, equally pertinently, the whole phenomenon of the American War of Independence and Abraham Lincoln. But do Indian textbooks reflect the ability to examine social inequality, specifically the caste system, as it emerged and was legitimised historically and how it continues to exist today, perpetrating an exploitative and unjust social order?

Can a young student of social studies really seek to understand the caste system without, first of all, being informed of modern-day social and

economic apartheid that 16-17 per cent of the Indian population continues to be forced to live under today? There is hardly any Indian text that honestly and candidly sketches out the indignities that continue to be perpetuated on Indian Dalits today.

The life-sketch of Dr. Bhimrao Ambedkar is restricted to his contribution as the 'architect' of the Indian constitution. The serious challenges he posed to the pre-Independence struggle and the Brahmanical order, or his radical conversion to Buddhism as a method of 'social and political emancipation' (10 lakh Dalits converted to Buddhism on October 14, 1948) find scant or no mention at all in 'secular' Indian textbooks.

This blinkered vision of Indian social disparity extends to the fashion in which Dr. Ambedkar is portrayed for the young and the struggles that he led are depicted. On December 25, 1925, Ambedkar burnt copies of the Manu Smruti at Mahad village in Maharashtra. This was a strong political statement against the domination suffered by Dalits, epitomised in this Brahmanical text that has laid down the code of a social order which regards 'shudras' and 'women' together as deserving of no rights. The incident finds no mention at all in any Indian school textbook, revealing a sharp upper caste bias that has excluded real inquiry into these events and movements. There is no attempt at a critical look at texts like the Manu Smruti that have, since their being written several centuries ago, reflected the attitudes of vested interests. In fact this Brahmanical text itself receives favourable mention in Indian school textbooks. As extension of the same argument, some of our average Indian textbooks continue to label Christians, Muslims and Parsees as 'foreigners' and moreover depict Hindus as "the minority in most states of the country".

They selectively speak about the "immoral behaviour of Catholic priests in the middle ages" while exonerating the Brahmins and the Indian ruling classes. What is the message that we send out to the growing child with these factual misrepresentations and deliberate exclusions of some historical events and modern day social realities when it comes to the conduct of the Brahmanical elite? The same college textbook in Maharashtra that speaks at length, and with a fair degree of venom, about Islam and its violent nature is silent on what many ancient Indian kings did to Buddhist 'monasteries' and bhikus during the ancient period. (King Sashanka of Assam is reputed to have destroyed several

monasteries). What then are the conclusions that a critic needs to draw about the motivation behind these selective inclusions and exclusions?

Exclusion is a subtle but potent form of prejudice. If, therefore, the average Indian textbook is silent on the motivations of many a 'Hindu' king who employed officials to raid and destroy temples in the ancient and medieval periods, simply because he could be certain to find wealth there (King Harshadev of Kashmir is one such, referred to by Kalhana in his *Rajatarini*), is there a not-so-subtle attempt to allow the popularly cherished belief that temple breaking was the 'Muslim' rulers favoured prerogative, to fester and grow? Rabid observations on Islam and Christianity are overtly visible in excerpts of the books conceived by the RSS and used for 'teaching' in the Shishu Mandirs. For discerning observers and educationists, this commitment to indoctrination that pre-supposes injecting small yet potent doses of poison against an 'enemy other' is not really surprising when we understand the true nature of the ideological project of these outfits. The content of RSS texts has invited sharp criticism by the NCERT committee (see accompanying document). To find blatantly damaging statements within the texts of schools run by the RSS is one thing. But to have 'secular' Indian textbooks - ranging from those produced by some state textbook boards, to recommended texts for the study of history at the graduation level, as also some ICSE texts - containing discernible strains of the same kind of caste, community and gender prejudice reflects how mainstream Indian thought has not only swallowed a biased and uncritical interpretation of history but is cheerfully allowing this myopic vision to be passed down to future generations.

Take, for instance, a textbook recommended for the final year Bachelor of Arts students in history in Maharashtra. The chapter titled "Invasion of Mahmud of Ghaznavi" is cleverly used by the author to launch a tirade against Islam itself. The content of this textbook could compare favourably, chapter and verse, with sections of Shishu Mandir texts that, are in other parts, far more direct, having nothing positive to say about Islam or Christianity.

As critically, how do our history and social studies' textbooks approach the complex question of gender? What is the underpinning of analysis on critical gender issues within these books? How do our textbooks explain notions of 'pativrata' (worship of the husband), sati (widow

burning), child marriage, burning of women at the stake (called 'witch hunting' during the medieval ages), polygamy, polyandry etc. to the child?

### **Sati was a Virtue**

The authors of Indian textbooks retain an extremely ambivalent position when it comes to describing the status of women in ancient India. Gujarat state social studies' texts have no critical comment on the Manusmriti. "The Manusmriti or Manava Dharma Shastra has helped in the forming of the Hindu code while the Puranas besides being religious books are a treasure of Indian history". How equitable or inequitable was, or is, the Hindu code? What was the status accorded to women under it? There is a suspicious silence in the text on the issue. There is, however, clear-cut statement on the 'low' position of women in the Ancient civilisations of Greece in the same Std. IX social studies text in Gujarat. "Women occupied a very low position in Athens and other city-states of Greece. They were denied the right to participate in public life or to get education. Home was considered to be the best place for them. They hardly ever appeared in public places. They were denied the right even to vote. The references to women in the literature of that period can be regarded as derogatory. Students studying the ICSE course are given a novel understanding of how Rajputs translated into practice "their respect for women". The text starts by telling us how Rajputs had a deep respect for their women. But a few paras later we are told: "The birth of a female was considered as a bad omen in the family. Very often, such a child was killed immediately after its birth. (Emphasis added). In a chapter titled, 'Rajput Contribution', the New ICSE History and Civics, edited by Hart and Barrow, Part 1, accords special place to the Rajput period. The authors state that this period has a special importance in India. Why? "It is noteworthy that the Rajputs were the last Hindu kings in Indian history", state the authors going on to extol the uniqueness of the period under the heading of 'Rajput Custom'. Here we are told of the Rajputs' 'Respect for Women': "The Rajputs respected their women. The women too had their self-respect. They would burn themselves in the fire of jauhar rather than fall victims in the hands of their enemies". "Position of Women. The Rajput women enjoyed freedom in society. They could choose their husbands in swayamvara. They were educated, they could read and write Sanskrit. They took part in public life. Re-marriage of widows was not allowed. Rajput women were deeply religious. They spent most of their time listening to pious stories from religious books like the Ramayana and the Mahabharata". "Polygamy and Female Infanticide: The rich and the ruling class practised polygamy, though one of the wives was treated as the chief wife. The birth of a female was considered as a bad omen in the family. Very often, such a child was killed immediately after its birth".

### **Child Marriage**

The daughters of the family were married off at an early age in order to safeguard their honour. Once married, the Rajput women were very devoted to their husbands. They would sacrifice their lives to safeguard their honour. The same Rajputs we are also told, with no critical comment, abhorred untouchables".

### **Caste System**

While the Rajputs held the Brahmins in high regard, they despised the untouchables who were even forbidden to live within the town or the village. The Rajputs considered that it was their exclusive right to fight battles and no other person could raise arms in the battlefield. The rigidity of the caste system led to the narrow-minded attitude among the Indians during this period.

### **Sati and Jauhar**

It was considered a virtue to perform sati, that is, to immolate oneself at the funeral pyre of one's husband. The jauhar was performed when the Rajput women burnt themselves to death to escape dishonour at the hands of the Muslim invaders. It is said that Rani Padmini, with 16,000 Rajput women did jauhar in Chittorgarh by walking into fire when their men marched into the battlefield to fight to the finish instead of surrendering themselves to their enemy.

On Fascism and Nazism The textbooks of the Gujarat State Board, apart from the inherent contradictions mentioned above, commit another grave folly. For the student of Std. X, in the section that deals with the period in world history between the two world wars, we have a section on the 'Ideology of Fascism'. There is a positive ambivalence in the treatment of this political phenomenon, an ambivalence that stands heightened in later paragraphs that deal with 'Nazism'.

There could be no more derogatory references to women than those contained in the Manu Smriti, an ancient Indian Brahmanical text. But it receives uncritical and passing mention in most Indian textbooks. There is no attempt to outline the oppressive 'Brahmanical Hindu' code contained within the Manu Smriti. The code outlined in this text has significantly influenced how women have and continue to be treated within the family structure and in society, as also the base fashion in which treatment to 'shudras' has manifest itself in Indian society.

What were the variegated facts, and, therefore, what is the multi-layered truth behind the emergence of different faiths on the sub-continent? The historical account is not an over-simplified one of Babar ki aulad, armed with swords, forcing reluctant victims to convert and smashing down their temples in the bargain. Unfortunately for proponents of a hate-driven history, facts tell a different story. The tale of the often-ruthless methods that Portuguese Christians took to effect conversions in Goa may be more recent but it is by no means the whole story of how Christianity arrived on the shores of the sub-continent and found deep and abiding routes. That is an inquiry that is more complex, more varied and far richer in detail.

The record of persons opting to convert to different faiths, be it Buddhism, Jainism, Christianity Islam or Sikhism, is a worthy exploration in itself. Honestly told, it could offer vital insights on the impulses of ideas and motives as they have driven humankind over the ages. It is, however, a subject that has been significantly ignored except through banal references to 'syncretism' and 'synthesis' that are left thematically and conceptually unexplored.

The subject of shifts and changes to different faiths is educative, simply because if fairly approached, the process will throw up different sets of reasons and varying motivations for these actions, these changes of faith that persons opted for. The differences and variety would depend upon the period when the change took place, the region within India that we would be looking at and, finally, the method employed for the conversion itself.

None of the mainline Indian textbooks really do justice to this subject. We often find a single sentence reference to the fact that Islam first came to the shores of the Malabar coast through the regular visits of Arab traders who enjoyed a long-standing relationship of trade and commerce with India. But the next sentence immediately shifts gear to the other way that Islam came to the Indian sub-continent - through the 'invasions' in Sind. From thereon our children are told in graphic detail of the numerous 'invasions' but nothing of the coming of Islam through trade and the formations of living communities that resulted.

Many conversions to Islam or Christianity in the modern period of history have also coincided with the passage of emancipatory laws liberating bonded labour. This allowed oppressed sections the freedom to exercise choice in the matter of faith. These sections, then, exercised this choice, rightly or wrongly, perceiving either Islam or Christianity to be more egalitarian than Hinduism's oppressive system of caste.

There were several instances of conversions during the second half of the 19th century in Travancore, for instance. Educational endeavours of missionaries and the resultant aspirations to equality of status encouraged many persons of 'low' caste to change faith and through this to a perceived position of equality. For example, the first 'low' caste person to walk the public road near the temple in Tiruvalla in 1851 was a Christian. Around 1859, many thousands converted to Christianity in the midst of emancipatory struggles that were supported by missionaries

in the region: for example, the struggle of Nadars on the right of their women to cover the upper part of their body, a practice opposed by the upper castes!

There are so many fascinating examples. Large-scale conversions to Islam took place on the Malabar coast not during the invasions by Tipu Sultan but during the 1843-1890 period. These were directly linked to the fact that in 1843, under the British, slavery was formally abolished in the region. As a result, large numbers from the formerly oppressed castes, bonded in slavery to upper caste Hindus moved over to Islam, which they perceived, rightly or wrongly to preach a message of equality and justice.

Trade and commerce finds dry and peripheral treatment in our texts as do the impact of technological developments through history. Religious interpretations and explanations often pre-dominate, with little attempt to explain how ideas and thought-processes travelled across continents and borders; the means and modes of communication etc., are hardly explored. Within the Indian sub-continent, this century saw the emergence of different streams of thought that contributed significantly to the struggle for independence against the British. It also saw the emergence on the sub-continent of processes, fully encouraged by the British, of exclusivist and sectarian trends within the broader national movement that chose to articulate their worldview in terms of narrow religious identities.

Within a few years of each other, we saw the birth of organisations like the Hindu Mahasabha and the Muslim League, as also the Akali Dal and the Rashtriya Sayamsevak Sangh. This process of the emergence of different communalisms that contributed in no small measure to the final vivisection of the sub-continent, with all its attendant stories of vengeance and horror is extremely selectively dealt with in Indian textbooks.

### **Ideology of Fascism**

The views regarding the State administration adopted by the topmost leader of the Fascist Party, Mussolini, came to be known as the Ideology of Fascism (Principles of Fascism). According to this ideology the State is sovereign. An individual exists for the State. An individual does not have freedom over and above the State. Here, everyone is absorbed within the State. Since the party firmly believed in Militant Nationalism, it opposed Internationalism. National interest and progress were its

basic aim. The Party believed that the total power of the nation should be wielded by a leader endowed with Divine power. This party was a staunch opposer of democracy and individual freedom and also of communism. Thus Fascism was totally opposed to Democracy. (Gujarat state social studies text for Std. X). This text-book while attempting an explanation of the political phenomenon of fascism and nazism gives a frighteningly uncritical picture of both. The strong national pride that both these phenomena generated, the efficiency in the bureaucracy and the administration and other 'achievements' are detailed, but the violent, uncivilised and uncritical result of the politics of exclusion - of Jews, of trade unionists, of migrant labourers, of any section that did not fit into Mussolini or Hitler's definition of rightful citizen - just do not find any mention. The systematic extermination of six million Jews in concentration camps, the Holocaust that is, simply does not figure in these texts. "Ideology of Nazism: Like Fascism, the principles or ideologies for governing a nation, propounded by Hitler, came to be known as the ideology of Nazism. On assuming power, the Nazi Party gave unlimited total and all embracing and supreme power to the dictator. The dictator was known as the 'Führer' ..Hitler had strongly declared, that the Germans were the only pure Aryans in the entire world and they were born to rule the world". In order to ensure that the German people strictly followed the principles of Nazism, it was included in the curriculum of the educational institutions. The text-books said, 'Hitler is our leader and we love him'. "Internal Achievements of Nazism: Hitler lent dignity and prestige to the German government within a short time by establishing a strong administrative set up. He created the vast state of Greater Germany. He adopted the policy of opposition towards the Jewish people and advocated the supremacy of the German race. He adopted a new economic policy and brought prosperity to Germany. He began efforts for the eradication of unemployment. He started constructing Public buildings, providing irrigation facilities, building Railways, roads and production of war materials. He made untiring efforts to make Germany self-reliant within one decade. Hitler discarded the Treaty of Versailles by calling it just 'a piece of paper' and stopped paying the war penalty. He instilled the spirit of adventure in the common people. (Gujarat state social studies text for Std.X).

Put simply, all these texts speak at length about the birth and misdemeanours of the Muslim League, the Muslim communal outfit that contributed significantly to the politics of the period. No mention is at all made to the birth around the same time of the Hindu Mahasabha and the Rashtriya Swayamsevak Sangh, both Hindu communal outfits that contributed in no small measure to the sharp polarisations and schisms at the time.

Mahatma Gandhi's assassination is fleetingly mentioned without the ideology that drove Godse to kill him being mentioned, leave alone explored. The fact that the RSS had to face a ban on the question, too, is blotted out to the young student of modern Indian history.

With these kinds of interpretations and inclusions of historical facts in our regular texts, coupled with the repetitious, discourse within civil society that has, in recent times, taken a vicious form-and which selectively heaps the blame for partition squarely on the Muslim is it any wonder that communities and citizens of the country continue to carry the burden of being dubbed 'traitors' and 'anti-national'?,

The young student of history in India, therefore, can without compunction put the entire blame of the partition of the sub-continent on the Muslim League and Mohammed Ali Jinnah's shoulders. The bias does not end here. While the Muslim League receives detailed treatment in the average Indian text, it does not give a single line to Hindu communal outfits. In furtherance of the same theme, there is no attempt to either explain or detail that the Muslim League enjoyed a limited hold over only sections of the Muslim elite and landed gentry; that many hundreds of thousands of Muslims participated actively in the struggle for Independence against the British; that the idea of Partition was backed by a miniscule section of Indian Muslims; that the artisan class which constitutes a large section of Muslims demonstrated actively against Partition.

In short, if you read an average Indian text, be it from the state or central boards, the Hindu Mahasabha and the RSS bear no part of the historical blame for Partition. The crime is worse compounded by the fact that Mahatma Gandhi's assassination is glossed over, often receiving no more than one sentence in explanation.

The ICSE History and Civics textbook, Part II for Std. X, devotes a whole chapter to the "Formation of the Muslim League". But there is no mention at all of Hindu communal organisations. And to top it all, here is what the same ICSE text has to say about Mahatma Gandhi's assassination: "Mahatma Gandhi toured the hate-torn land of Bengal, trying to put a stop to the communal frenzy and salvage the people from ruthless communal slaughter. While celebrations and riots were still going on the architect of the nation was shot dead on 30th January by Nathuram Godse". There is no further comment on the assassination, or the ideology that drove the assassin. Neither is there any mention of the fact that the government of India banned the RSS following Gandhi's murder because of Godse's close association both with the RSS and the

Hindu Mahasabha. There is no information on the trial of the assassins of Gandhi, the justification by Godse of his act and so on.

Similarly, the Social Studies text for standard VIII of the Gujarat State Board, has a tiny sub-section titled, "The Murder of Gandhi". This reads thus: "After Independence there were severe communal riots in India. Gandhiji tried his utmost to suppress it. Many people did not like this. Gandhiji was murdered at the hands of Godsay on 30th January 1948".

Again, no words of explanation of the ideology that was responsible for the murder of Gandhi though painstaking efforts are made in this and other texts to explain the ideology that partitioned the sub-continent. It appears logical and inevitable for the stated political project of the RSS and its Shishu Mandir-style education to offer such an immutable approach, a series of unquestionable absolutes, to the young mind. How else can the RSS organisation, whether it be at the shakha or the Shishu Mandir level, create a social and political atmosphere where selectively half-truths and blatant falsehoods dominate all discourse? How else does one create an environment where critical questions are never asked, leave alone answered? And, worst of all, prevailing social inequalities, indignities and humiliations are left unaddressed. In short, leave the social and economic hierarchy unchallenged? But the fact that independent and democratic India's 'secular' texts reflect, with sometimes uncanny similarity, the very same disregard for a growing and inquiring mind, apart from being laced with a series of questionable formulations that hide gender, caste and community-driven bias is what requires urgent and specific attention. And remedy.

(This article has relied heavily on the research work that the writer undertook as the Co-ordinator of KHOJ, a secular education project).