

Modi's India: Omitting Pluralism from Education

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It is impossible to alter the past. But to alter how we perceive the past, it is possible to write, rewrite, and revise it. Can the mistakes of the past, whether real or imagined, be corrected by rewriting history? In India, numerous projects are being carried out to alter history including changing the names of famous places, producing Bollywood films, and most recently the modification of textbooks by the National Council of Educational Research and Training (NCERT). The deletion of entire chapters and issues related to the Mughals from its higher secondary history books has come under fire from various sections of the Indian public, including historians and academicians. The Mughal Courts (16th and 17th centuries) and related chapters and topics have reportedly been removed by the board from history textbooks.¹ The change was made as a result of a syllabus rationalization process that was started in December 2021.

Even though public education in India is handled by the state, the 42nd Amendment to the Indian Constitution made it a 'concurrent list' subject in 1976, ordaining that the federal and state governments shared financial and administrative duties for the sector. The Indian government has made repeated attempts to change the national curriculum, most notably when former prime minister Atal Bihari Vajpayee backed the revision of textbooks in 2001, a move that some opposition members deemed to be 'blatantly communal'. The National Curriculum Framework (NCF) was developed in 2005 by the Indian National

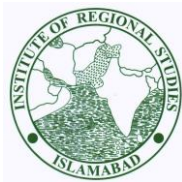
Congress-led United Progressive Alliance to 'de-saffronize', or revise, the BJP revisions made to the NCERT textbooks following the fall of Vajpayee's BJP-led NDA government in 2004.

Almost a decade later, the present BJP government, which is predominately composed of far-right Hindus, has revised NCERT textbooks through three distinct stages. In 2017, the first round—now referred to as 'review'—placed emphasis on the importance of updating textbooks to include current events. Each of NCERT's 182 books had 1,334 revisions.² The following year, at the behest of then education minister Prakash Javadekar, NCERT began a second wave of adjustments known as 'textbook rationalization' to reduce the workload on students by decreasing the syllabus.

NCERT has altered the curriculum significantly for the 2022-23 academic year in its third wave of textbook rationalization. The declared justification for the most recent rounds of revisions—more adjustments are planned for the 2023-24 academic year—is to further lighten student workloads, particularly in the wake of the Covid-19 pandemic in India. However, a lot of professionals believe that 'pandemic weariness' is better treated with grassroots strategies like access to better mental health care.

According to the report by Jagran Josh, chapters about the Mughal Courts in the 16th and 17th centuries have been removed from the book *Themes of Indian History-Part II*. Chapters like *Central Islamic Lands*, *Confrontation of Cultures*, and *The Industrial Revolution* have

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been eliminated from the Class 11 syllabus, and chapters like *Rise of Popular Movements* and *Era of One-Party Dominance* have been eliminated from the Class 12 civics textbook *Politics in India Since Independence*. Additionally, chapters like *Democracy and Diversity*, *Popular Struggles and Movements*, and *Challenges to Democracy* have been eliminated from the Class 10 *Democratic Politics-II* textbooks.³ According to a report by IANS, NCERT has also deleted several passages from the political science textbooks for class 12 that discussed the temporary ban that the then government put on the RSS following Mahatma Gandhi's killing. Additionally, IANS reported that passages about Gandhi's efforts to promote Hindu-Muslim cooperation having angered Hindu fanatics had been deleted.

According to *Indian Express*, a significant portion of the chapter *Our Past-II* in the 7th Grade history textbook—a two-page table listing the accomplishments of the reigns of the emperors Babur, Humayun, Akbar, Jahangir, Shah Jahan, and Aurangzeb—had been removed.⁴ The chapter itself has not been deleted, though. Class 7 students will continue to study the Mughals, but in less depth. The Mughals have not fully vanished from history textbooks, despite some of the material on the Delhi Sultanate and the Mughal Empire having been omitted.

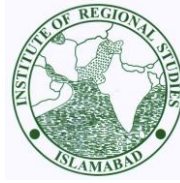
Based on the analysis of several reports on the curriculum modifications made by the National Council of Educational Research and Training (NCERT), it appears that the current regime, led by Prime Minister Modi, aims to remove references to the influence of Muslims and the Mughals from India's history. According to Utathya Chattopadhyaya, a history professor at the University of California, Santa Barbara, the most recent revisions to Indian textbooks constitute a direct assault on children's minds. Chattopadhyaya thinks that these changes

contribute to a generation that is unaware of the intricate and varied history of India. The scholar contends that the modifications are a part of Modi and the BJP's larger campaign to 'Hinduize' South Asian history and trying to diminish the influence asserted by Mughals on India's history.⁵ Indeed, the widespread adoption of these amendments represents an important milestone in the removal of Muslim history from Indian textbooks.

The change was made as a result of a syllabus rationalization process that was started in December 2021. The rational process became irrational when it was covered by media and subjected to experts' examination. Numerous sections of the Indian public, including historians and academics, have criticized NCERT for removing entire chapters and topics related to the Mughals from its higher secondary history textbooks. The Mughal Courts (16th and 17th centuries) and related chapters and topics have reportedly been removed by the board from history textbooks.

The impact that updated textbooks might have on students worries historians. Audrey Truschke, an associate professor of South Asian history at Rutgers University, thinks that the Mughals need to be included in the history of India. In addition to being harmful, ignoring the Mughals in textbooks also means ignoring crucial information about one's own ancestry.⁶ Despite being ignored in textbooks, Truschke emphasizes that the Mughals still have a significant influence on Indian history. The modifications made to textbooks may have removed crucial background information that shapes students' worldviews and produces a generation that is ignorant of India's complex past.

Farhat Hasan, a professor of medieval and early modern South Asian history at the University of Delhi, claims that the most recent



revisions to Indian textbooks represent an effort to rewrite Indian history and remove the cultural legacies of the Mughals, which would damage the country's syncretic nature.⁷ Since the Hindu nationalist BJP came to power in 2014, a push to rename streets and cities with Mughal names has been under progress. According to Hasan, the Mughal legacy has had a significant impact on Indian culture for more than four centuries and its influence is more than what is currently acknowledged. This includes music, dance, architecture, culinary preferences, literature, and political culture.

Aditya Mukherjee, a professor of modern Indian history at Jawaharlal Nehru University in Delhi, believes that the latest revisions to Indian textbooks are alarming because they aim to remove the accomplishments and names of Muslims while demonizing and ghettoizing them. Given that India has the largest Muslim minority in the world, these moves are concerning because they diminish Muslim accomplishments and cover up harsh chapters in Indian history involving the Hindu majority. In addition, Mukherjee expressed concerns over the covert involvement of Hindu zealots and communalists in Indian history and warned that such changes to textbooks would be risky for a multireligious nation like India.⁸

Archana Ojha, an associate history professor at Kamala Nehru College, University of Delhi, has expressed concerns regarding the recent modification of Indian textbooks, claiming that the textbooks revision lacks scientific justification and could harm the next generation. Ojha warned that deleting some historical events and figures will result in significant gaps in students' understanding of the subject. She further asked for reasoned public discussion and education in order to stop

additional harm and make decisions about the content of Indian textbooks.⁹

Under the Communist-run government in Kerala, the education department decided not to follow the updated curriculum. The State Council of Education Research and Training (SCERT) Kerala is going to supply additional textbooks in order to teach deleted topics especially those related to history.¹⁰ Since the history, civics, and Hindi textbooks for classes 10, 11, and 12 have been revised as a result of NCERT's rationalization process, the education department intends to develop supplemental texts for these courses so that students can fully comprehend Indian history. Ironically, during their term, the Communist Party of India (Marxist) CPI-M government in West Bengal had ordered the elimination of medieval history in textbooks during its tenure, citing its controversial nature. However, a letter from Rajya Sabha member of the CPI-M Binoy Viswam to the Modi administration recently expressed concern over the removal of the Mughals from NCERT textbooks.¹¹ The decision by Kerala's Education Department raises concerns regarding the function of state governments in formulating the curricula and syllabi for their educational institutions as well as the possibility of politicization of education.

To improve a student's intellectual prospects, it is essential to identify and develop in them a historical sensibility that transcends limited ideological or political considerations. History is not just a list of facts; it is also how we interpret the past in order to understand the present and the future. It's critical to appreciate that history's backdrop is intricate and multi-layered, and that it cannot be adequately captured in straightforward or flat narratives. Furthermore, regardless of their ethnicity or religious affiliation, it is important to recognize the contributions of all historical figures and

dynasties. To combat the Hindu nationalism that is tainting Indian history, Indian academicians seek to engage critically and thoroughly with a nuanced and objective

perspective. Ultimately, encouraging a culture of critical thinking and pluralism, which is crucial for a healthy and democratic society, requires an inclusive and thorough grasp of history.

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