

TOTAL HISTORY

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The Centre is working to set up a panel to vet text books published by private organizations. In its line of fire would be schools backed by the RSS and madrasas. — News item.

India has seen passionate writing and rewriting of history. The NDA government sought to purge history textbooks of their alleged leftist slant. The successor UPA government accused its predecessor of saffronizing school curricula and attempted detoxification. Now it proposes a Text book Council to scrutinize what is taught in schools. What sort of history would the UPA dish out?

Dutch historian J Huizinga believed: 'historical thinking is always teleological'. Doyen of British historians E H Carr elaborated: 'Interpretation in history is always bound up with value judgments, and causality is bound up with interpretation.' He continued: 'Good historians have the future in their bones.' Indian historians we are sure are boney, and the government has some future left.

In China, Shanghai has just introduced new high school textbooks of history. The text on world history drops wars, dynasties and communist revolutions in favour of colourful tutorials on economics, technology, social customs and globalization.

Textbooks reflect the political viewpoint of China's top leadership including Jiang Zemin (whose 'Three Represents' slogan aimed to broaden the Communist Party's mandate and dilute its traditional emphasis on class struggle), and his successor Hu Jintao (who has coined the phrase 'harmonious society' persuading people to build a stable, prosperous, unified China under one-party rule).

The curriculum overhaul in Shanghai enlivens mandatory history courses for high school students and better prepares them for life in the real world. Socialism is still referred to as having a glorious future; but the concept is reduced to mere one chapter out of 52 chapters in senior high school text. Revolutionary socialism gets less attention than what the Industrial Revolution and the information revolution do. J P Morgan, Bill Gates, the New York Stock Exchange, the space shuttle and Japan's bullet train are all highlighted. The French and Bolshevik Revolutions, once seen as turning points in world history, now receive less adulation. Mao, Long March, colonial oppression of China, and the rape of Nanjing are taught only in a compressed history course in junior high. Deng Xioping who began China's market-oriented reforms appears in the junior and senior high school versions with emphasis on his economic vision.

'Our traditional version of history was focused on ideology and national unity', said Zhu Xueqin, a historian at Sanghai University. 'The new history is

less ideological, and that suits the political goals of today.’ Zhou Chunsheng, a professor at Shanghai Normal University and one of the lead authors of the new textbook series, stated his purpose was to rescue history from its traditional emphasis on leaders and wars in order to make people and societies the central theme. ‘History does not belong to emperors or generals’, he said. ‘It belongs to the people. It may take some time for others to accept this, naturally, but a similar process has long been underway in Europe and the United States.’

The new textbooks, Zhou continued, followed the idea of French historian Fernand Braudel. Braudel advocates including culture, religion, social customs, economics, ideology to constitute a ‘Total History’, a history of all people. That approach has been popular in many a Western country for more than half a century. Braudel elevates history above the ideology of any nation. China has steadily moved away from its ruling ideology of communism, but the Shanghai textbooks are the first to try examining it as a phenomenon rather than preaching it as the truth.

Braudel keeps the totality in view — the entire system, not merely a part of it. He finds not one but several economies. The one most commonly written about is the so-called market economy. But there is another, shadowy zone, lying underneath the market economy, the world of self-sufficiency and often barter trade of goods and services within a small radius. Then there is a third one, this one above the market economy: it is the multinational or transnational economy where a few wealthy merchants manipulate strings of the world market.

Society too has triple layers: the ruling elite class at the top, the underclass at the bottom, and a middle class in between. The coexistence of the upper and lower strata forces upon the historian an illuminating dialectics. How can one understand the town without understanding the countryside, money without barter, the varieties of luxuries without the varieties of poverty, the whole bread of the rich without the black bread of the poor?

D D Kosambi indeed had observed a social mosaic in the history of India, a country of long survivals. Here people of the atomic age rub elbows with those of the stone age. History of such a state cannot be capsuled into a neatly sequential three or four distinct stages of civilization.

The government in India classifies people by categories based on religion with the following result: scheduled tribes (16 percent of the population), scheduled castes (16 percent), religio-minorities (15 percent), other backward classes (27 percent) that add up to a neat 74 percent; they belong to the underclass. The ruling elite and the middle class account for the remaining one-fourth of the population. How does one write history textbooks for such a country with a hierarchy of manifold classes?

On the progress of civilization Nehru said: ‘A creative minority is always small in number, but if it is in tune with the majority, and is always trying to pull the latter up and make it advance so that the gap between the two is

lessened, a stable and progressive culture results. But it may also decay if the bond between a creative minority and the majority is broken and there is a loss of social unity in society as a whole, and ultimately that minority itself loses its creativeness and becomes barren and sterile; or else it gives place to another creative or rival force which society throws up.'

There is plenty of evidence in India's history that a class which plays the leading role in the advance of civilization in one period is unlikely to play a similar role in the next period. For it will be too deeply imbued with the traditions, interests and ideologies of the earlier period to be able to adapt itself to the demand and conditions of the next period. Three-fourths of the people of India are classified as 'backward'; the remaining one-fourth is the middle class and ruling elite. The class which will be leading may well emerge from among the present-day 'backward' classes.

But how does a ruling class come to waste its elan in the first place? Two explanations are available, one by Nehru, the other by Arab historian Ibn Khaldun (1332-1406).

Indian civilization had displayed two contrary features, viz. 'metaphysical democracy' (Nehru's phrase) and materialist theocracy. The *upanisads* are instinct with a spirit of inquiry, of mental adventure, of a passion for finding the truth about things. This search of truth is, of course, not by objective methods of modern science, but essentially by self-realization, on knowledge of the individual self and the absolute self, both of which are said to be the same in essence.

'There is nothing higher than the person', say the *upanisads*. The ethic of individual perfection, this metaphysical democracy, was over-emphasized, Nehru laments. Hence the social outlook suffered. That very individualism led the Indo-Aryans to attach little valence to the social aspect of man, of man's duty to society. On the other hand, by the code of ethic, each person's life was divided and fixed up, a bundle of duties within his narrow sphere in a graded hierarchy. It was a materialistic theocracy. He had no duty to, or conception of, society as a whole, and no attempt was made to make him feel his solidarity with it.

Ibn Khaldun watched one dynasty after another fall in the Magrib (northern Africa), the western part of the Muslim realm. It was a strong sense of social solidarity that enabled a people to survive and, if conditions permit to subjugate others. This conquest meant that the dominant group could absorb the resources of the subject people, develop a culture and a complex urban life. But as the ruling class became accustomed to a luxurious lifestyle, complacency set in and began to erode their vigour. They no longer paid sufficient heed to their subjects; there were jealousy, corruption, infighting, decay. A new leadership emerged to replace the renegade.

Ibn Khaldun had estimated that a dynasty would reign for a span of three generations and then yield the place to another. It so happens that the Nehru-Gandhi dynasty is in its third generation.

Society is a system of three interconnected spheres, viz. economy, polity, culture. Each historical event has a cause derived from the system. Now a cause itself is an effect of a preceding cause, and so on, down the line. Total history is mindful of the whole system of society and the entire chain of causes as far as possible; it is not partial, truncated, discrete.

No history can be written in the absence of a pre-determined set of value. The Indian society is fractured enough making it impossible to ascertain the general will, if any. How could the proposed Textbook Council then formulate its purpose which will be acceptable to all and immune of detoxification procedure by the next government?

There is no better authority than the Constitution of India to state the putative ideal of the nation. Its Preamble articulates the general will: the people have solemnly resolved to constitute India a sovereign socialist secular democratic republic. The ideal is to secure all citizens: dignity, justice, liberty, freedom. The Textbook Council has to take this as the fundamental set of value and the yardstick of judgment. Every event of history will be judged by this metric. People are the sole creator of history. Progress is defined as the enlargement of dignity, justice, liberty and freedom of all people, not of a particular section of them. Each event will be judged by this standard.

No one imposes today's norm upon yesterday, nor is it expected of any time in the past. However, the distance of yesterday's performance from today's norm is a measure of the extent of its progress, to be compared with that of the day before yesterday. That differential is an indicator of the rate of the nation's progress. ~~zzz~~