

Why are organizations linked to militant Hindu groups in India providing input on California textbooks?

On December 2, 2005, the California State Board of Education Curriculum Commission, an advisory body to the Board, accepted 131 of the 153 textbook changes proposed by the **Hindu Education Foundation (HEF)** and **Vedic Foundation (VF)**, both connected with the militant Hindu nationalist / supremacist conglomerate known as the Sangh Parivar. The edits aimed to revise sections on India, Indian history and Hinduism in 6th grade textbooks in California. The changes were approved by an Ad Hoc Committee that included Shiva Bajpai, a Professor Emeritus in the History Department at California State University, Northridge (CSU Northridge)¹ and a member of the Steering Committee of World Association for Vedic Studies (WAVES),² a Sangh-affiliated organization.³

Rewriting history is a critical component of Hindutva's Hindu extremist ideology. Hindutva calls for the construction of India as a Hindu nation in which India's diverse cultures are assimilated, expelled or annihilated to the benefit of Hindus. To do so requires the construction of a history that renders India as "Hindu" and Hindu as Brahmanical. In this instance, the California textbook revisions proposed by Hindu nationalists / supremacists deny, contrary to historical scholarship, the migration of Aryans (identified as the community from which Hindu practices emerged) from Central Asia into India. The HEF and VF revisions pose Hinduism as an indigenous religion, invisibilizing *adivasi* (tribal, first peoples) histories, and presenting Christians and Muslims as "outsiders". The rewrites to the California curriculum sanitize caste and gender hierarchies that permeate ancient Indian history, omit mention of caste and gender injustices in India today, and delete the word *dalit* (former "untouchable" castes).

The changes proposed by Sangh-affiliates HEF and VF were accepted by the California State Board of Education Curriculum Commission in spite of a letter, received by Commission and Board members on November 8,⁴ from forty-seven renowned South Asian scholars, including Professor Romila Thapar, the (2003) Kluge Chair in Countries and Cultures of the South at the Library of Congress, expressing concern regarding the political agenda of the HEF and VF. On November 30, more than 130 United States-based scholars of South Asia sent a letter to the Curriculum Commission, protesting the changes proposed by HEF and VF.

What is the Sangh Parivar?

In India, members the Sangh Parivar (the Sangh) have been charged by Indian citizens groups and international organizations with numerous brutal violations against cultural and religious minorities in carrying out their Hindu supremacist agenda, including economic boycotts, social ostracization, threats, and physical and sexual violence.⁵ The Sangh consists of dozens of organizations in India; the major ones include: Rashtriya Swayamsevak Sangh (RSS), the fountainhead hardliner group; Vishwa Hindu Parishad (VHP), the social-cultural mouthpiece; Bajrang Dal, the militant youth wing; and Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP), the political party. Their main counterparts in the United States are, respectively: Hindu Swayamsevak Sangh (HSS), VHP of America (VHP-A), HinduUnity, and the Overseas Friends of the BJP. Several other front organizations are also connected with the HSS, VHP-A, and HinduUnity.

How are the Hindu Education Foundation and the Vedic Foundation connected to the Sangh?

1. According to the Hindu Swayamsevak Sangh website, the Hindu Education Foundation is an "educational project of the Hindu Swayamsevak Sangh" in the United States.⁶ The HEF's coordinators and advisors include members of other Sangh-related organizations, such as HSS, Hindu University (also a project of the VHP-A)⁷, India Development and Relief Fund⁸, and VHP-A.⁹

2. The Vedic Foundation shares a spiritual leader and location with Barsana Dham, a temple in Texas.¹⁰ This temple hosted the 1999 North American Dharma Sansad (a VHP-A event), attended by Ashok Singhal (identified as Working President of VHP of India) and Dr. B. K. Modi (identified as Working President-External Affairs of VHP of India).¹¹ The Vedic Foundation was also inaugurated by Professor K. C. Gupta, Hindu University President in 2003.¹²

3. The organizations that support the HEF changes are listed on the HEF website.¹³ Many of them are linked with the Sangh, including: HSS, VHP-A, and the Hindu American Foundation. Mihir Meghani, President of the Hindu American Foundation, which has threatened legal action against the California Board of Education in regard to the textbook changes,¹⁴ has been active as a member in both the VHP-A¹⁵ and the HSS¹⁶.

How did the HEF and VF become involved in the textbook editing process?

It is public knowledge that a) the California Board of Education evaluates and modifies instructional materials for each of the core subjects (History-Social Science, Mathematics, Reading/Language Arts, Science) every six years on a staggered schedule, and b) the instructional materials for the History-Social Science core subject would be up for review this year.¹⁷ As of April 21, 2005, proposed textbooks were made available for public review at Learning Resource Display Centers throughout the state,¹⁸ and public hearings were held at the end of September.¹⁹ At these public hearings, numerous individuals and several organizations from different religious communities--including the HEF and VF -- called for revisions in the instructional materials. Due of the unexpectedly high public turnout, the State Board of Education formed an Ad Hoc Committee at the end of September to review the submitted edits from the public.

It is unknown to us at which point the HEF and VF mobilized around the textbook changes. According to an article published on Hindu Press International, the HEF and VF had been working with the California Department of Education "for months" on the textbook edits.²⁰ The HEF's website name was registered in May 2005²¹; it is likely that the HEF has been working on the textbooks edits since its inception. The Vedic Foundation, for its part, produced a 27-page document with suggested additions and critiques of the instructional materials on display by September 6, 2005.

Professor Shiva Bajpai was contracted by the Curriculum Commission to review the changes suggested by HEF and VF as a member of this Ad Hoc Committee. It is unknown at this point exactly how Professor Bajpai came to occupy this advisory role, although it appears that he was recommended by the Vedic Foundation. One other detail of note is that his key supporter amongst the Commissioners at the meeting on December 2, Stan Metzenberg, is also a professor at CSU Northridge, the only Curriculum Commissioner hailing from CSU Northridge.²² On November 2, a memo sent to the California

State Board of Education indicated Bajpai's approval of most of the HEF and VF suggested changes.²³

The letter sent by Professor Romila Thapar and other scholars to the California Board of Education on November 8 was read aloud to the Board during a meeting and public hearing of the State Board of Education on November 9. Reportedly, due to the November 8 letter, a large number of chapter rewrites and additions submitted by the Vedic Foundation were rejected. The Board then directed the edits of the Ad Hoc Committee to be reviewed-- for historical accuracy only-- by another group composed of Professors Michael Witzel (Harvard), James Heitzman (UC Davis), and Stanley Wolpert (UCLA). On November 22, a list of suggested changes from the Witzel Panel was sent to the Curriculum Commission.²⁴ However, on December 2, the Curriculum Commission accepted most of the changes approved by the Ad Hoc Committee (advised by Professor Bajpai). If the adoption process stays on schedule, these textbooks could be in classrooms as early as September 2006.

Key Curricular changes Proposed by Hindu Nationalists

Context: Hindutva, History and Education

Hindutva deprioritizes the lives and interests of cultural and religious minorities, especially those of women (in all communities), adivasis, dalits, Muslims and Christians. India is home to innumerable cultural and religious communities-- tribal, non-Vedic, Muslim, Christian, Parsi, and Jewish, among others, that may not identify with Vedic or Brahmanical practices or ideals which function to de-legitimize them in society. Hindutva's version of Hinduism and history draws upon Brahmanical and upper caste scriptures and practices, downplaying the diversity of disenfranchised caste and non-Vedic Hindu communities, as well as the traditions that emerged in resistance to Brahmanical dominance (e.g. Buddhism, Jainism, Sikhism).

When the BJP came to power at the national level in 1998, Sangh sympathizers were placed in the National Council for Education and Research Training (NCERT), the school curriculum development and review body at the national level. NCERT then introduced changes to the school curricula in alignment with the Sangh's agenda.²⁵ With the defeat of the BJP at the national level in 2004, academics have been calling for the reversal or re-evaluation of those changes.²⁶ The United States Department of State's International Religious Freedom reports of 2002, 2003 and 2004 recorded Sangh attempts to revise curriculum in India as threats to religious freedom.²⁷ Ironically, these attempts that are being currently reversed in India are being played out now in California.

Proposed changes: Women and Gender Inequities

The changes to the California curriculum proposed by HEF attempt to downplay the historical inequities of power between men and women. One example: the HEF called for the sentence "Men had many more rights than women." to be replaced by "Men had different duties (dharma) as well as rights than women. Many women were among the sages to whom the Vedas were revealed." This change distorts and ignores a) scriptural and customary laws that have produced past and present power imbalances between women and men, as well as sexual and gender minorities, in terms of safety, livelihood, property, education, sexual access to one's body, and access to justice systems; b) the diverse gender relations of the tribal communities of India, many of which do not consider themselves to be Hindu or Vedic; c) only about fifteen of the 1000+ hymns of the *Rg Veda* were wholly attributed to women sages-- about one percent²⁸. These histories inform the social, cultural, and legal treatment of women in Indian communities today.

Proposed changes: The Caste System

Many of the approved changes from HEF and VF distance the Aryans from the caste system and replaced the word "caste" with "varna", or "social class". This misinforms students, as caste operates in ways distinct from social class, governing conduct related to marriage, inheritance, worship, purity and pollution, in addition to livelihood and social status. How can students respectfully engage with Indian or Indian histories without a substantive understanding of caste, which informs the daily reality, conduct, identity, meaning, as well as systematic oppression for so many people?

Proposed changes: Religion, Racism, and Meaningful Histories

The HEF and VF both wish to correct inaccuracies and racist representations of India and Hinduism. These concerns reflect the realities of racism that diasporic communities and communities of color continue to face in the United States, which are necessary for teachers and textbook writers to face. However, history is not only about the positive achievements of particular groups; it also reflects the reality of social oppression. Can't the realities of caste, class, religious and gender oppression in India, historical and present, be discussed with sensitivity and care so that students can engage more meaningfully with Indians and Indian pasts without the distortions of sanitized histories? Isn't it possible to include multiple histories that allow students to engage with diverse communities, while keeping their imaginations open and curious to those yet unknown? Endorsing erasures of past and present inequities disempowers students from recognizing and interrogating injustices, maintaining or worsening the conditions of those who live on the margins: immigrants, gender, religious, and sexual minorities, lower caste persons, people of color, poor, and working-class communities.

California's Example

California is home to one of the largest textbook markets in the nation. If the California State Board of Education allows itself to be schooled by organizations with ethno-nationalist agendas, a dangerous precedent is being set in regards to California's curricula in other arenas, as well as for educational curricula in the rest of the United States. One step toward addressing this situation is to set up a transparent process for soliciting the expertise of established scholars and committed community members in revising textbooks.

Questions About the Process

1. Will the Board accept the Curriculum Commission's recommendations?
2. What were the decision-making processes that authorized Professor Shiva Bajpai to provide input to the Curriculum Commission on India and Hinduism?
3. Does the California State Board of Education conduct research on the political agendas and connections of the groups that seek to influence curriculum?
4. The Curriculum Commission was directed by the California State Board of Education on November 9 to approve or disapprove the VF and HEF proposed edits on the basis of their historical accuracy. Does failure to do so indicate that the Commission has stepped outside its authority?

Timeline

The California Board of Education evaluates and makes changes to existing instructional materials every six years in each of the core subjects (History-Social Science, Mathematics, Reading/Language Arts, Science) on a staggered schedule. This year (2005), the instruction materials for the History-Social Science subject are up for modification.

The following is a brief timeline of the issue thus far:

April 21, 2005 - November 2005	Instructional materials (e.g. textbooks) submitted for adoption are made available for public review at Learning Resource Display Centers (LRDCs) throughout the state. ²⁹
September 29-30, 2005	The Curriculum Commission holds two public hearings on each day to receive public feedback on the proposed changes to instructional materials. ³⁰
September 30	Due to the high volume of public feedback, the Curriculum Commission forms an Ad Hoc Committee to review the public comments and edits and corrections received from experts. The Ad Hoc committee could only approve of specific edits; it is not allowed to approve the addition or deletion of long passages in the textbooks. ³¹ The expert on Indian history that served on the Ad Hoc Committee is Shiva Bajpai, a Professor Emeritus of History at CSU Northridge. ³²
October 2005	Thirty-day public commentary period; general public sends written comments to the State Board on the Curriculum Commission's recommendations throughout the month. ³³
October 31, 2005	Ad Hoc Committee meets to review the list of edits and corrections recommended by the Content Review Panel members (including Professor Bajpai) and California Department of Education staff. ³⁴
November 8, 2005	Harvard Professor Michael Witzel and 46 other Indologists write a letter to the State Board of Education urging it "to reject the demands by nationalist Hindu ("Hindutva") groups that California textbooks be altered to conform to their religious-political views". ³⁵
November 9	In response to the letter, the State Board of Education directs the Curriculum Commission to reexamine the Ad Hoc edits and corrections with the aid of another committee consisting of Professors Michael Witzel (Harvard), James Heitzman (UC Davis), and Stanley Wolpert (UCLA). ³⁶
November 22, 2005	A memo is sent to the Curriculum Commission containing suggested changes from the Witzel Panel. ³⁷
December 2, 2005	The Curriculum Commission accepts most of the changes approved by the Ad Hoc (Bajpai) Committee. ³⁸

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¹ <http://www.csun.edu/~hfhis003/faculty.html>, consulted December 6, 2005

² http://www.hindunet.org/hindu_history/ancient/indus/waves.html, consulted December 6, 2005; the

a. WAVES leaders include

1. David Frawley - Hindu University faculty (<http://www.hindu-university.edu/faculty.htm#Frawley>, consulted December 8, 2005)
2. Bhu Dev Sharma - Hindu University Board of Directors (<http://www.hindu-university.edu/vision.htm>, consulted December 8, 2005)
3. Subhash C. Kak - Hindu University faculty (<http://hindu-university.edu/faculty.htm#Kak>, consulted December 8, 2005)
4. Shiva G. Bajpai

b. WAVES also hosted a conference where David Frawley, Mahesh Mehta (founder of VHP-America), BK Modi (VHPO), Ramesh Rao, and Koenraad Elst were in attendance (http://www.umassd.edu/indic/waves/prog_schedule.htm, consulted December 6, 2005).

³ http://www.umassd.edu/indic/waves/prog_schedule.htm, consulted December 6, 2005

⁴ <http://www.people.fas.harvard.edu/~witzel/witzelletter.pdf>, consulted December 5, 2005

⁵ Please see:

- a) People's Union for Democratic Rights (PUDR) (2002) " 'Maaro! Kaapo! Baalo!': State, Society, and Communalism in Gujarat". URL (consulted December 15, 2005): <http://www.onlinevolunteers.org/gujarat/reports/pudr/>
- b) Amnesty International (2005) "Justice, the victim - Gujarat state fails to protect women from violence" (27 January). URL (consulted December 6, 2005): <http://web.amnesty.org/library/index/engasa200012005bbui>
- c) Human Rights Watch (2002) "'We Have No Orders to Save You': State Participation and Complicity in Communal Violence in Gujarat" URL (consulted December 6, 2005): <http://hrw.org/reports/2002/india/>
- d) United States State Department (2003-2005) "International Religious Freedom Reports - India" URL (consulted December 5, 2005): <http://www.state.gov/g/drl/rls/irf/>

⁶ <http://www.hssus.org/content/view/93/2/>, consulted December 5, 2005

⁷ <http://www.vhp-america.org/whatvhp/significantevents.htm>, consulted December 6, 2005

⁸ Sabrang and SACW (2002) "Foreign Exchange of Hate: IDRF and the American Funding of Hindutva". URL (consulted December 6, 2005): <http://stopfundinghate.org/sacw/index.html>

⁹ The HEF's leaders are listed on its website: <http://www.hindueducation.org/advisors.htm>, consulted December 8, 2005. They include:

Coordinators:

1. Madhav Naidu- HSS contact (http://www.hindunet.org/alt_hindu/1995_Jul_1/msg00071.html, consulted December 6, 2005)
2. Anjali Patel- HSS contact (<http://www.hssus.org/content/view/67/2/>, consulted December 8, 2005)
3. Narayan Chandak- IDRF contact (<http://www.idrf.org/dynamic/modules.php?name=Hncontent&pa=showpage&pid=24>, consulted December 6, 2005)
4. Dr. Srinivas Tilak- present at HSS event (<http://www.hssus.org/content/view/79/2/>, consulted December 6, 2005)

5. Yashwant Belsare - HSS contact

(http://www.hssus.org/index.php?option=com_events&task=view_detail&Itemid=75&agid=43&year=2005&month=12&day=17, consulted December 8, 2005)

Advisors

1. Dr. Abhinav Dwivedi - HSS Camp President (http://nrpulse.com/CityNews_HSSCamp.htm, consulted December 8, 2005), and Founding Board member of Hindu University (<http://www.hindu-university.edu/faggeneral.htm>, consulted December 8, 2005)
2. Dr. David Frawley - Hindu University faculty (<http://www.hindu-university.edu/faculty.htm#Frawley>, consulted December 8, 2005)
3. Linda Johnsen
4. Beth Kulkarni (President of the Houston VHP-America Chapter, Source: <http://www.vhp-america.org/dynamic/modules.php?name=News&file=print&sid=11>, consulted December 6, 2005)
5. Dr. Kalyanraman
6. Prof. Ved Nanda - HSS leader (<http://www.hssbayarea.org/contactus.html>, consulted December 8, 2005)
7. Dr. B. P. Lathi
8. Dr. Yashwant Pathak - involved in HSS (<http://www.hssus.org/content/view/116/2/>, consulted December 8, 2005)
9. Dr. Rakesh Shreedhar
10. http://www.thevedicfoundation.org/about_us/how_we_came_to_be.htm, consulted December 6, 2005
11. <http://www.vhp-america.org/dynamic/modules.php?name=News&file=print&sid=4>, consulted December 6, 2005
12. <http://www.hindu-university.edu/Newsletters/HU-Newsletter-7-03.pdf>, consulted December 6, 2005
13. <http://www.hindueducation.org/orgs.htm>, consulted December 6, 2005
14. http://www.hinduismtoday.com/press_releases/school_textbooks/HAF_Text_Review_Letter.pdf, consulted December 6, 2005
15. <http://www.vhp-america.org/dynamic/modules.php?name=News&file=article&sid=13>, consulted December 6, 2005
16. <http://www.hvk.org/specialrepo/idrf/authors.html>, consulted December 6, 2005
17. <http://www.cde.ca.gov/re/pn/fb/yr04ciframeworks.asp>, consulted December 6, 2005
18. <http://www.cde.ca.gov/be/ag/ag/yr05/documents/nov05item05.doc>, consulted 5 December 2005
19. <http://www.cde.ca.gov/be/ag/ag/yr05/documents/nov05item05.doc>, consulted 5 December 2005
20. <http://www.hinduismtoday.com/hpi/2005/12/4.shtml>, consulted 5 December 2005
21. <http://www.whois.sc/hindueducation.org>, consulted 8 December 2005
22. <http://www.cde.ca.gov/be/cc/cd/members.asp>, consulted December 6, 2005
23. <http://www.safarmer.com/Indo-Eurasian/snippets.pdf>, consulted December 8, 2005
24. http://www.hinduismtoday.com/press_releases/school_textbooks/newchanges.pdf, consulted December 6, 2005
25. <http://www.ercwilcom.net/indowindow/sad/article.php?child=29&article=28>, consulted December 6, 2005
26. <http://www.tribuneindia.com/2004/20040521/main6.htm>, consulted December 6, 2005
27. United States State Department (2002-2004) "International Religious Freedom Reports - India" URL (consulted December 5, 2005): <http://www.state.gov/g/drl/rls/irf/>
28. Roy, Kumkum (1995) "Where Women are Worshipped, There the Gods Rejoice": The Mirage of the Ancestress of the Hindu Woman" Women and Right-Wing Movements: Indian Experiences. New Jersey: Zed Books. Pp. 10-28.
29. <http://www.cde.ca.gov/be/ag/ag/yr05/documents/nov05item05.doc>, consulted December 6, 2005
30. <http://www.cde.ca.gov/be/ag/ag/yr05/documents/nov05item05.doc>, consulted December 6, 2005
31. <http://www.cde.ca.gov/be/ag/ag/yr05/documents/nov05item05.doc>, consulted December 6, 2005
32. <http://www.hinduismtoday.com/hpi/2005/12/4.shtml>, consulted December 6, 2005
33. <http://www.cde.ca.gov/be/ag/ag/yr05/documents/nov05item05.doc>, consulted December 6, 2005
34. <http://www.cde.ca.gov/be/ag/ag/yr05/documents/bluenov05item05.doc>, consulted December 6, 2005
35. <http://www.people.fas.harvard.edu/~witzel/witzelletter.pdf>, consulted December 6, 2005
36. <http://www.cde.ca.gov/be/ag/ag/yr05/documents/bluenov05item05.doc>, consulted December 6, 2005
37. http://www.hinduismtoday.com/press_releases/school_textbooks/newchanges.pdf, consulted December 6, 2005
38. <http://www.hinduismtoday.com/hpi/2005/12/4.shtml>, consulted December 6, 2005