

Present's Trespass on South Asian Pasts

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"Textbook history writing is as much a project of nation-building as it is of educating... There are politics involved with not just how histories are revised, and stories retold, but also in the politics of mention: what gets mentioned and what omitted." (Photos by Ahmed Sharif)

History, or rather, the space of history writing, often becomes the battle-ground for competing visions of a nation. Aryans and Indians

In the case of Indian history, many historians, many of whom work out of Indian or American or British universities often find themselves in an inevitable dialog with present political concerns.

It is often the case that the most ancient of histories are ones with the greatest relevance to present political concerns. This can happen when nationalists start looking back to define a nation and explain roots of a people. For example, the questions of whether the Aryans (by extension, Hindus) were indigenous to India becomes important for Hindutva folks (Hindu Nationalists who call for a "Hindu India") because much of their nationalist ideology rest on the assumption that Hinduism is native to South Asian soil while Islam is foreign. Never mind that the overwhelming majority of India's Muslims are converts. Some of this historical rhetoric that drove people to destroy the Babri Masjid and dismember entire Indian Muslim populations in Ayodhya in 1992, rested on the flimsiest archaeological and numismatic evidence. That Ayodhya where the Babri Masjid stood was the birth place of Ram, the Hindu God, was first claimed in literary sources, and also greatly circulated the British colonial state, as one among myriad strategies of "Divide and Rule."

The other area of controversy in Indian history writing has to do with the period of Muslim rule in the subcontinent. Debates rage over how benevolent and tolerant Muslim rulers were to the South Asian masses. On the one hand you have modern-day secularists propelled by the Nehruvian dream who highlight the tolerance of Emperor Akbar, his love for his Rajput wife, his concoction of a new religion despite protests from Muslim orthodoxy, the fusion of the "Indic" and the "Islamicate" in Indian cuisine, music and architecture and so on. On the other hand, you have badla-minded folks, with an axe to grind to undo what they see as historical wrongs, ranging from destruction of Hindu temples by Muslim rulers to Aurangzeb's persecution of certain Hindus and Sikhs. Turks and Pakistanis

History writing has also attracted controversy in Pakistan. After General Zia came to power, at a time when Islamism of a certain conservative kind was flourishing all over from Egypt to Iran to Afghanistan, new syllabi were devised to provide historical depth to Pakistan's Islamic nationalism. In Pakistani school textbooks, the 1965 war against India became absorbed into chapters on Islamic history and written alongside great battles in early Islam.

Pakistani school children were encouraged to understand their heritage as not one that was Indic, but one that was continuous with 10-11th century CE Turks in South Asia. Ridiculous but unsurprising then is President Pervez Musharraf's claim in his recently published, highly self-congratulatory autobiography, that both the Urdu language as well as Pakistani cuisine have evolved out of Turkish counterparts; completely ignoring their more substantial similarities with languages and cuisines South Asian. Hanadars and Razakars in Bangladesh

Historiography in Bangladesh has also drawn attention of late among secular circles, and rightly so. A certain politicization has crept in unnoticed. After a conversation with Dr. Muntassir Mamoon, a popular Bangladeshi intellectual, greatly harangued by student wings of the ruling coalition, I confirmed that references to the word "Rajakar" are being dropped from secondary school history textbooks. "Rajakar" ("Razakar" in Persian) was a term used to describe loyalists of the Pakistani state who were against the creation of Bangladesh.

Moreover, the chapter that describes atrocities committed during '71 on the Dhaka University campus, have dropped mention of Jagannath Hall. Curiously, Jagannath Hall was the site of the largest massacre of DU students, a largely Hindu dormitory. The new set of authors have also dropped Sheikh Mujib's adornment of "Bongobondhu." And if one compares the older school history texts before and after the ruling Jama'at-BNP cartel — instances of mention of Mujib has dropped noticeably. Furthermore, as Dr. Jalal Alamgir has pointed out in a newspaper article, the Pakistani Army instead of being called just that, is referred to as "Hanadar Bahini," a nameless, near meaningless entity without any national affiliation. The invisible author

At this point, one might ask if this politicization of textbook history writing is inevitable. While it is always difficult to make a case for inevitability of any kind, politicization of textbook histories is much larger than only a South Asian phenomenon. It happens in the West as well, with treatment of Native American histories in the American context and colonialism in the British context. This is because textbook history writing is as much a project of nation-building as it is of

educating. In order to advance a certain nationalist strand, whether leftist, religious or otherwise, there is always politics involved. There are politics involved with not just how histories are revised, and stories retold, but also in the politics of mention – what gets mentioned and what omitted.

It is often said that a mark of a good novel is its ability to dissociate itself from its author, so the story appears authorless. Curiously, this authorless-ness is also a feature of textbooks. Unlike other forms of historical literature, academic or popular, textbook seldom come to their readers with their authorial identities emblazoned on their covers. This gives them an air of objectivity, like a book of rules of mathematics or laws of physics. This authorless-ness endows textbooks with an air of scientific objectivity, as if its histories are unquestionable “facts” uncolored by the subjectivity of an author. Of course, this facade only serves to further a nationalist project. However, if one were to expand the notion of “the author,” one might begin to see that the author of history textbooks is none other than the state itself.

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