

[Textbooks Get It Wrong](#)

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EDUCATION

Textbooks Get It Wrong

Abysmal presentation of Hinduism stirs a parental revolt in Virginia

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Dr. Rakesh Bahadur, whose children are in the Fairfax County Public School (FCPS) system in northern Virginia, told Hinduism Today, "One day my daughter came home and said, 'Daddy, what you teach us about Hinduism is wrong, since the description of Hinduism in my textbook is different.' "

Bahadur (bahadurr@comcast.net) had just experienced firsthand what many Hindu parents have discovered: textbooks and teachers across the United States are woefully ill-equipped to provide an accurate view of Hinduism. Our 5,000-year-old Hindu culture is being summarized in a mere page or two, as part of a few classes. But now there are efforts underway in several parts of the country, including Virginia, Texas and California, to bring changes to the teaching of Hinduism in public schools. Bahadur's experience is typical of these efforts. His petition, signed by 200 local residents, brought the Hindu complaints to the FCPS board.

"Our concern is that incorrect books distort the minds of the young Hindu children. Also, these books make them feel embarrassed about their religion because their fellow students are getting a distorted view of Hinduism, " said Vittal Venkataraman, one of the parents working alongside Bahadur. "When we found out the books used at the school presented a conflicting and biased view of Hinduism and what it stands for, we had to take steps to educate the county officials and create awareness among the Hindus, " he explained. Bahadur added, "The books contain factual inaccuracies, distortions, bias, prejudice and personal opinion about Hinduism and the history of India."

Bahadur analyzed the eight textbooks awaiting adoption by the school board. One was a Grade 5 textbook, *World History (Harcourt Horizons)* written by Michael J. Berson and published in 2005. It includes in its section on Hinduism, "Over time, people made up stories to help them better understand the ideas expressed in the Vedas. Later these stories were grouped together in epic poems, such as the Mahabharata." Bahadur objected that the epics should be regarded as "made up," when they are regarded by Hindus as factual history. In a recent California dispute over texts, the Jewish community successfully got one book excluded because it referred to the Jewish exodus from Egypt circa 13th century bce in a similar fashion, that this key event in Jewish history may never have happened.

At the same time, Christianity is portrayed in an unjustifiably favorable light. For example, the 10th grade *World History* book (excerpts illustrated on this page) states, "Why was Christianity able to attract so many followers [by the third century ce]? First, the Christian message had much to offer the Roman world. Christianity was personal and offered salvation and eternal life to individuals. Christianity gave meaning and purpose to life." Nowhere does the text mention the bloody armed conflict and political machinations which actually brought about Christianity's spread, as recounted in the book *God against the Gods, The History of the War Between Monotheism and Polytheism* (see review on preceding pages).

Alice Reilly, Social Studies K-12 Coordinator for FCPS, said, "As a result of public comment from Hindu parents, our school system sought the advice of scholars in this area." A scholarly panel was brought together to analyze the textbooks and make recommendations as to what further steps the school board could take with regard to the concerns of parents. The committee compared the texts' description of Hinduism with other world religions, according to Vijay Kumar, a systems engineering graduate student at The University of Maryland College Park. He is assisting the committee with his expertise in Hindu philosophy and literature. The findings, as summarized by the FCPS, were: 1) the treatment of Hinduism and India emphasizes clichés; 2) there is a focus on material that is not important or illuminating; 3) the treatment of Hinduism is oversimplified and often lacking context; 4) the exotic is often overemphasized while other religions are examined from the perspective of followers; and 5) the material does not adequately present the fundamental belief systems of the religion. Experiences with "scholarly panels" in other areas have been mixed, as these scholars are often themselves the source of misinformation on Hinduism.

Kumar said, "Everything in the books leads back to caste as a central concept. For example, many textbooks say reincarnation justifies karma which justifies caste."

He added that most textbooks also cover the Aryan migration and reincarnation; some cover karma, the Vedas and Vishnu or Siva worship as a facet of modern Hinduism.

Kumar gives the example of "cow worship, " which is a common subject for the Hindu section. "Ask a Hindu school child about cow worship and you will most likely receive a puzzled look and the response, 'I don't go home and worship a cow,' " Kumar said. "Of all the textbooks we reviewed, only one mentions the concept of moksha [release from the on-going cycle of rebirth] but does not attach the notion of salvation to it." But in the sections on other religions, Kumar observed, the means to salvation is presented quite clearly. In the case of the Abrahamic religions--Judaism, Christianity and Islam--salvation is expressed in terms of a permanent state of eternal life in heaven. The Hindu concept is somewhat different, but the idea is still that there is a higher form of existence to be attained by means of the religious life. Unfortunately, this is not conveyed by the texts, leaving the impression that Hinduism does not offer a means of salvation.

FCPS decided to drop only one book after the scholarly committee's review, as a result of "stiff opposition from parents, " said Bahadur. That is World History Modern Time. The committee recommended additional teacher training for social studies teachers, supplementary material on Hinduism, buying of books only after corrections and teaching 5th grade students about Hindu daily worship and the Holi and Deepavali festival.

Venkataraman said that the Hindu communities in Fairfax County plan to keep up their work until their children can come home and say that writing on their tests that "Hindus believe in only one Supreme God " is marked as "correct " by their teacher. He concluded, "Until the above objective is realized, we will remain engaged and help the school board adopt books and other educational materials which are free from distortions and prejudice."