Outcome Unknown on California Texts
Category : April/May/June 2006
Published by Anonymous on Apr. 02, 2006

EDUCATION

Outcome Unknown on California Texts

Last minute siege led by Harvard academic holds up revisions to lessons on Hinduism and early India in ten proposed sixth grade social studies books

California Hindus were hopeful following the December 2, 2005, meeting of the California State Board of Education Curriculum Commission. Their request to revise the Hinduism sections of several textbooks under consideration for adoption by the State was mostly approved. But a month later, the Board set that approval aside and went about revisiting the entire issue. As we go to press, there is no final resolution. The issue has generated national interest, with articles--both inaccurate and anti-Hindu--appearing in Wall Street Journal and Christian Science Monitor.

The Vedic Foundation (http:/www.thevedicfoundation.org) and Hindu Education Foundation (http:/www.hindueducation.org) had worked for months through the California Department of Education (CDE) procedures proposing improvements to those sections of California textbooks that deal with India and Hinduism. They requested 170 corrections ("edits, " as the CDE calls them). These were initially reviewed by a committee which included renowned Indologist, Dr. Shiva Bajpai, who had been hired by the Commission. Bajpai approved most of the edits.

Then, unexpectedly, Dr. Michael Witzel of Harvard University intervened, charging in a letter to the CDE that the changes were motivated by "Hindutva " forces and would "lead without fail to an international educational scandal if they are accepted by California's State Board of Education." The besieged Board set up a last-minute committee comprised of Dr. Witzel, Dr. Stanley Wolpert of UCLA and Dr. James Heitzman, of the University of California at Davis to review the edits. These non-Hindu academics rejected 58 of the proposed Hindu edits approved by Bajpai, especially those dealing with caste and an Aryan invasion of India in ancient times.

Hindus despaired that the Curriculum Commission might accept the Witzel panel recommendations in their entirety on December 2. This is not, however, what happened. The Hindu view prevailed at this meeting in large part, and Hindus were momentarily relieved.

Then in late December the Board of Education chose to ignore the Commission recommendations entirely. Instead, they called a closed-door meeting on January 6 involving members of the Board of Education, staff, Witzel and Bajpai, to reconsider all the disputed edits. The meeting structure was such that Witzel and Bajpai were asked to agree or come to a compromise on each edit in question. If they failed to agree or compromise, then the original wording of the text would stand. As Witzel agreed with most of the original wordings, he needed only to reject any compromise with Bajpai to have his own opinion prevail. There was a certain amount of agreement or compromise, Bajpai said about 85 percent of the edits were decided in a manner acceptable to Hindus. But the remaining 15 percent, involving critical issues of Aryan influence in India, caste and rights of women were not.

As of late January, no official report has been made on this meeting. A subcommittee has been formed by the Board of Education to review the meeting's results. Under California state law, any meeting which results in "decisions " has to be open to the public, and the January 6 session was not. Bajpai was the only Hindu present at the day-long meeting, while others waited in the hall outside. The subcommittee may report in time for the Board's February meeting. They face pressure from the book publishers, who must make all the requested corrections and get the books printed for the coming school year, which begins in the fall. For the latest update, visit our Hindu Press International website at http:/www.hinduismtoday.com/hpi

The Curriculum Commission Meeting

Though the results are now moot, the Curriculum Commission meeting was encouraging to Hindus, as they found a sympathetic ally in Commissioner Dr. Stan Metzenberg, a biologist at California State University Northridge. At the beginning of the meeting, he made a motion to accept all of the original recommendations of the Hindu groups as approved by Dr. Bajpai's committee, with the provision to go through the Witzel panel rejections of 58 one by one. This motion passed. By the time the hearing was over, only 16 of the Witzel committee edits were accepted.

Dr. Metzenberg is no stranger to teaching controversies. According to Forbes

magazine, he has been "a leader, along with Nobel laureate Glenn Seaborg, in the effort to make the standards for California science teaching as rigorous as possible." He has testified before the US Congress at hearings on the national standards for teaching science at the middle and high school level.

Ten textbooks were under consideration for adoption for 6th grade social studies classes in the California schools. The textbook manufacturers produced preliminary editions of their books, which were then distributed throughout school districts in California requesting comments and corrections. The Curriculum Commission considered changes from certain groups. These edits had to be relatively minor, and not represent major additions or deletions to the texts. Each group was allowed to submit from dozens to hundreds of edits. Everything had to be in keeping with the California "Standards, " which set overall teaching concepts and the "Framework " or specific outline of the subject.

Debating the Edits

Much of the discussion during the four-hour meeting was between Commissioner Dr. Charles Munger, Jr., physicist, Stanford Linear Accelerator Center, and Commissioner Metzenberg. Consultant Heitzman was the only one allowed to address the Commission on any questions until Janeshwari Devi, Director of Programs for the Vedic Foundation, complained to Commission members that no Hindus were being consulted. She was allowed to make a few comments, and then no further questions were addressed either to her or Dr. Heitzman.

Commissioner Munger, who identified himself as an Episcopalian, was the only Board member who advocated accepting the edits of the Witzel panel. Commissioner Metzenberg, on the other hand, took the view that Hindus should at least be able to "recognize their own religion when they read these textbooks." Several Commissioners abstained from voting, citing lack of expertise on the subject. Commissioners Man and Levine actively made and seconded motions to get the Commission through the long list of edits in a timely way. Commissioner Munger's attempts to get Witzel's version of Hindu religion into the texts were voted down time and again.

On the contentious point of an Aryan invasion of India around 1500 bce, Heitzman agreed to soften this to Aryan migration, as there is no evidence found of a violent invasion. But Commissioner Metzenberg, a biologist, objected on scientific grounds. He said, "I've read the DNA research, and there was no Aryan migration. I believe

the hard evidence of DNA more than I believe historians." It was finally agreed to say, "Some historians believe in the theory of an Aryan migration." This is not as much change as Hindus requested, but it was a major advancement.

One change recommended by the Vedic Foundation was the use of "deity " for "statue " in referring to the sculpted image of a God or Goddess, called murti in Sanskrit. This change was recommended by Bajpai and rejected by Witzel's group. The Commission agreed to the Hindu request to change "statue " to "deity." At this point, Commission Munger said in an exasperated manner, "It's just too extreme to call a statue a deity. It's just too extreme." One meaning of deity, according Webster's dictionary, is "a representation of a god or goddess, such as a statue or carving."

Another issue the Witzel panel disapproved was using upper-case "G " for God when referring to Hindu worship of God. Commissioner Levine noted that for Hindus there are many forms of the one God. Hindus requested one sentence in one book be changed from saying, "Modern Hindus continue to visit temples to express their love of the gods, " to "...visit temples to worship and express their love for God." This was rejected by Witzel's group, but accepted by the Commission. Similar changes on "God " were accepted throughout the books, thus bringing the Hindu view of the Supreme Being on par with the other religions taught to children.

At one point, Dr. Heitzman warned the Commission, "I advise you to err on the side of conservatism and be very careful about adopting any of these changes. " Commissioner Metzenberg replied pointedly, "On the contrary, to err on the side of conservatism, we should err on the side of Hindus. After all, it's their religion." Metzenberg also felt a comment by Witzel's panel on one edit was "insensitive." That edit was to fix the incorrect statement that the Ramayana was written later than the Mahabharata. Witzel's group wrote, "Who in sixth grade cares which epic was 'written' first?" Metzenberg observed, "It obviously matters to Hindus."

Janeshwari Devi, Vedic Foundation, Director of Programs, considers the proceedings a partial victory. Her main concern was that 355 edits submitted by the Vedic Foundation dealing with eight of the ten books were shelved during earlier proceedings and not even considered at this meeting. She felt this was a breach of CDE procedure and plans to appeal. She said, "The most significant event of yesterday was that scholarship prevailed instead of scholars who hold anti-Hindu views and have an agenda to keep the Aryan Invasion in the books."

How the Jewish Faith Fared

Immediately following the Hindu edits, more than 600 edits from the Jewish community were accepted in their entirety without a single challenge. This recommendaiton of the Commission has not been subject to any further challenge, while their recommendation on the Hindus edits was rejected in entirety.

The list of Jewish edits shows the possibilities for adjustment to the texts. The entire list of edits is available http:/www.cde.ca.gov/be/ag/ag/yr05/documents/bluenov05item05.doc This is a 117-page document, beginning with the Jewish and Muslim issues and ending with the Hindu (from pages 77 to 105). This document also contains the Hindu corrections as reviewed and recommended by Dr. Bajpai.

Many of the complaints from the Jewish groups were on the subject of Jesus. One, for example, said, "The text often implicated Jews in the death of Jesus, and suggests conflict between Jesus and the Jewish authorities. This is in violation of the California Standards." On page 27 of the edit document is a list of general complaints by Jews. "The Institute for Curriculum Services (who reviewed the texts) reviewers object to the use of the word 'story' in reference to the Hebrew Bible, as they allege it conveys the idea that the events described are fictitious." Hindus made a similar complaint about their scriptures being referred to as "stories."

The Jews objected to this sentence, "King Herod was known for his cruelty and the additions he made to the Jewish temple in Jerusalem." They said, "The statement of Herod's cruelty is another instance of unnecessary negative information about Jewish kings." Their objection was accepted, and the statement rewritten.

A common theme in the Jewish edits was taking out references to Christianity as somehow an "improvement " upon Judaism, or a "replacement " for Judaism. This same kind of thinking comes in the text descriptions of both Buddhism and Jainism, which are presented as "improvements " over Hinduism. For example, a textbook by publisher McGraw Hill/Glencoe, reads, "By 600 bc, many Indians began to question Hindu ideas. The Brahman priests seemed to care only about their temple ceremonies and not about the needs of the people." Khandarao of the Hindu Education Foundation, argued, "Just as the books can't criticize Judaism in explaining Christianity, they shouldn't be able to criticize Hinduism in presenting Buddhism."

California's Teaching System

It is important to understand these issues in the light of the California laws governing school textbooks. There are two documents which contain these laws. One is the "Standards for Evaluating Instruction Materials for Social Content, " (http:/www.cde.ca.gov/ci/cr/cf/documents/socialcontent.pdf), and the other is the "History-Social Science Framework, " (http:/www.cde.ca.gov/re/pn/fd/documents/hist-social-sci-frame.pdf). They are manifestly an attempt at social engineering through the school system. The idea is to educate children into a harmonious view of California's pluralistic society while not perpetuating stereotypes and prejudices of the past.

The first document defines the guiding principles. With regard to religion, it reads in full: "Purpose. The standards enable all students to become aware and accepting of religious diversity while being allowed to remain secure in any religious beliefs they may already have. Method. The standards will be achieved by depicting, when appropriate, the diversity of religious beliefs held in the United States and California, as well as in other societies, without displaying bias toward or prejudice against any of those beliefs or religious beliefs in general.

"Applicability of Standards. The standards are derived to a degree from the United States and the California constitutions and relate closely to the requirements concerning the portrayal of cultural diversity. Compliance is required. .... 1. Adverse reflection. No religious belief or practice may be held up to ridicule and no religious group may be portrayed as inferior. 2. Indoctrination. Any explanation or description of a religious belief or practice should be presented in a manner that does not encourage or discourage belief or indoctrinate the student in any particular religious belief. 3. Diversity. When religion is discussed or depicted, portrayals of contemporary American society should reflect religious diversity." The Jewish groups often cited these principles in making edits, especially "adverse reflection."

The second document, the "Framework, " lists in detail what is to be taught. Hinduism appears in section 6.5 on ancient history. It reads: "Students analyze the geographic, political, economic, religious, and social structures of the early civilizations of India. 1. Locate and describe the major river system and discuss the physical setting that supported the rise of this civilization. 2. Discuss the significance of the Aryan invasions. 3. Explain the major beliefs and practices of Brahmanism in India and how they evolved into early Hinduism. 4. Outline the social structure of the caste system. 5. Know the life and moral teachings of the Buddha and how Buddhism spread in India, Ceylon, and Central Asia. 6. Describe the growth of the Maurya empire and the political and moral achievements of the emperor

Asoka. 7. Discuss important aesthetic and intellectual traditions (e.g., Sanskrit literature, including the Bhagavad Gita; medicine; metallurgy; and mathematics, including Hindu-Arabic numerals and the zero)."

The Framework requirements governing other religions are far more philosophically and spiritually rich. For comparison, here is part of Framework section 6.3 on Judaism: "Students analyze the geographic, political, economic, religious, and social structures of the Ancient Hebrews. 1. Describe the origins and significance of Judaism as the first monotheistic religion based on the concept of one God who sets down moral laws for humanity. 2. Identify the sources of the ethical teachings and central beliefs of Judaism (the Hebrew Bible, the Commentaries): belief in God, observance of law, practice of the concepts of righteousness and justice, and importance of study; and describe how the ideas of the Hebrew traditions are reflected in the moral and ethical traditions of Western civilization. 3. Explain the significance of Abraham, Moses, Naomi, Ruth, David, and Yohanan ben Zaccai in the development of the Jewish religion. 4. Discuss the locations of the settlements and movements of Hebrew peoples, including the Exodus...."

The Judaism Framework section is far more comprehensive in terms of theology than the Hindu section is. Under Hinduism, students learn Aryan Invasion and caste more than theology, and the Bhagavad Gita is listed under "aesthetic and intellectual traditions, " rather than religion. Neither God nor religion is mentioned under Hinduism, while both appear twice under Judaism. The Framework comes up for review in 2008, at which times Hindus are planning to request changes to bring the teaching of Hinduism in line with the other religions.

California Hindus have achieved at least a modest victory on the textbook issue. Their successes, failures and lessons learned will be of strategic help in dealing with the same issues in other states, and even internationally. The Vedic Foundation and Hindu Education Foundation through months of diligent work have begun to change the depiction of Hinduism in US classrooms.

What's in Those Vexed Texts?

Neither the worst nor the best, but typical for California's sixth-grade social studies textbooks, this lesson from World History, Ancient Civilizations, published by

McDougal Littell, tells a tale. Save a few topics covered briefly elsewhere in the book, it constitutes the book's entire information on Hinduism. Put on your reading glasses and read it for yourself, beginning at the upper left and continuing around counter-clockwise.

The word Aryan appears 36 times on these six pages. Hindu worship, Sanskrit language and the Vedas are said to have been brought to India by the Aryans--conclusions based on linguistics but unsupported by either archeology or recent DNA research. Dravidians are said to have lived in North India, a conjecture with no supporting evidence. The words caste and class appear collectively 19 times throughout the lesson, as if this was the central feature of Hinduism.

Topics such as the many saints, scriptures and subjects of the scriptures, which are covered at great length in the same book's lessons on Judaism and Christianity, are absent from this lesson on Hinduism. For example, this book's chapter, "The Hebrew Kingdoms, " opens with a poignant, illustrated two-page story about Ruth and Naomi, two key figures in Judaism's early history. Lesson One devotes the first two of its six pages to the most important precepts of Jewish theology, continues with four pages on the religion's history that any Jew today would recognize and be pleased with, then adds an illustrated four-page special feature on The Exodus from the Bible at the end.

The Hindu religion's respectful tolerance, which allowed followers of other religions to migrate to India and live free from persecution and proselytization for the last two thousand years is overlooked. Countless other facets of Hinduism, such as its lofty, sensible theology, philosophy, temple worship, home culture, music and dance, the South Indian tradition and Hinduism's spread into other parts of Asia, are flagrantly ignored. The Bhagavad Gita is declared to be Hinduism's most important text instead of the Vedas and Agamas.

A short, middle-school social studies lesson on Hinduism is not the place for scholars to explore every perceived injustice of ancient Indian history. This isn't the mode by which other religions' histories are taught. In one book, a reference to slavery in ancient Israel, for example, was objected to and consequently deleted from the lessons on Judaism. The Hindu lesson should present children with a well-rounded and respectful summary of a religion and its historical context in the same way the lessons on Judaism and Christianity do. But Hinduism is clearly presented in the worst possible light as a bizarre, antiquated, inferior religion,

leaving both Hindu and non-Hindu children with an aversion to this oldest and most philosophically sophisticated of world faiths. Little wonder one boy, after studying Hinduism at school, announced to his mother, "I don't want to be Hindu anymore."