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Erasing and shaping national memory: cognitive biases and curriculum politics under right-wing populism in India

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Introduction

India is known to be the largest democracy in the world. However, its education system has become a major point of ideological dispute. A constant revision of textbooks (Chishti, 2023) is not new to Indian politics, but the tone and magnitude of changes since 2014 mark a turning point. These new post-Independence textbook initiatives are an exercise in nation-building and secularizing the country. As a reaction to the Partition trauma, the new stage is focused on cultural homogenization and state capture (Bhattacharya, 2009; Guha, 2008). The question posed in this paper is: how do right-wing populists use mechanisms to change the curricula, why is that important to critical education, and how is the current situation more dangerous to pluralist civic formation than the previous textbook scandals? The author responds in three steps. To begin with, I place the existing curricular developments into the framework of existing literature on populism and cognitive bias (Mudde, 2004; Mueller, 2016; Kahneman, 2014; Nickerson, 1998). Second, I map six interrelated areas, including erasure, mythic substitution, delegitimization of expertise, institutional centralization, selective scientification, and affective mobilization, which state how each of them takes advantage of cognitive biases to restructure national memory through the conduit of education. Finally, the author concludes by offering a roadmap for policymakers.

Populism, cognitive bias, and education

According to populism, politics is a battle of the righteous between the right people and the corrupt individuals (Mudde, 2004). Right-wing populism introduces an exclusionary antagonism, which is usually based on ethnic-religious identity, such as us against them (Greven, 2017; Scott, 2019). The concept of populism as the shadow of democracy was developed by Jan-Werner Mueller, who illuminates the intensification of populist systems in cases where the democratic institutions do not work to counter social dislocation. The outcome of the adoption of populism is that the politics of the people favor majority will and build the people in an exclusionary manner (Mueller, 2016).

The reason is that populist claims may be convincing based on cognitive psychology. Tversky and Kahneman (1974) had established that human behavior in making decisions is based on the intuitive heuristics, which systematically biases judgement. According to Kahneman, fast, affective System 1 thinking (more likely to be vividly narrated and overconfident) and slower, deliberative System 2 thinking are different (Kahneman, 2014). When social networks and media ecosystems broadcasting supporting signals proliferate, confirmation bias (Nickerson, 1998) is multiplied. These processes in the education

sector predispose students (and the population, in general) to simplified moral discourses and to curricular materials that assign greater importance to affective identity rather than thoughtful investigation.

Historical context: textbook politics before and after BJP rule

Controversies over textbooks are not recent in India. From the 1950s onwards, the leading historians worked together to establish secular and pluralist school histories aimed at overcoming colonial as well as communal stereotypes (Bhattacharya, 2009; Guha, 2008). The NCERT projects in the nascent phases started out as an exercise in nation-building. It intended to inculcate civic empathy following Partition through the focus on diversity, social movements, and critical approaches. In the course of time, textbook politics kept re-emerging—under new regimes—but the reforms were subject to the contest of publicity and were left to stay within a plural institutional ecology (Bhattacharya, 2009; Guha, 2008).

What has changed since 2014 can be traced in three tracks: (1) scale and centralization, (2) affective framing, and (3) epistemic substitution, that is, revising empirical, contestable social history and part of the scientific curriculum is substituted by mythic narratives and claims of indigenous knowledge (Bhattacharya, 2009; Greven, 2017; Mansoor, 2022). These changes render the education space more harmful, especially for the skill of civic criticality.

Mechanisms by which right-wing populism reshapes curriculum

Below, the author presents six interlocking mechanisms, each illustrated with concrete evidence and its curricular consequence.

Erasure: nativism and removal of marginalized histories

There has been a systematic and selective elimination of chapters and primary sources that trace the existence of Muslim rule, subaltern struggles and disputed contemporary events. Rationalizations were made by NCERT (2023) about the removed, chicanized and truncated chapters on the Mughal Empire and the Delhi Sultanate and cut documentary passages in chronicles, such as the Akbarnama and the Badshah Nama. The Gujarat 2002 violence was downplayed or muted, and more contextual details on the assassination of Gandhi were deleted (Mansoor, 2022; Sharma, 2023; Chakraborty, 2022). According to Chattopadhyay and Sarkar (2005), South Asian cultural politics tends to collapse the popular into the people and to take the history of the people as the same thing as the history of subaltern classes. This confusion has a political result: the dominant forces are able to represent themselves as representing the people and silence or steal the voices of subalterns. The effects of such a move in the Indian context are the ability of the majoritarian projects to make popular legitimacy even

as they continue to marginalize the same groups—the Muslims, Dalits and Adivasis, whose experiences are structurally under-represented in institutional accounts, including in school curricula (Chattopadhyay and Sarkar, 2005).

Students have an incomplete exposure to pre-modern and modern plural Indian history; the lack of multi-year study of Mughal history (in Class 7, slightly thereafter, and removed at Class 12) has a cohort effect of historical illiteracy of Indo-Islamic effects (Mansoor, 2022; Sharma, 2023). Formal erasure desensitizes omission into policy and subversion of the historical sense of empathy; erasure is not an act but a process, a series of undergraduations, a gradual defeat of the historical lineage in which students study it, which alters the historical curve. To restore the place of subaltern and under-represented histories, it is integral to re-establish independent textbook review bodies, including historians, sociologists, educationists and regional experts, and not emphasize centrally appointed officials. Curriculum politics can provide some guardrails in the form of multi-perspective curriculum frameworks which demand the representation of caste, religion, gender, and regional diversity in the form of a mandate.

Mythic substitution and selective scientization

The introduction of devotional, civilisational histories and indigenous assertions into history and science courses and the elimination of evolution and other fundamental courses in science have been the recent changes in Indian curricula. The Darwinian evolution in the NCERT/CBSE textbooks was deleted in some classes in 9 and 10, and there have been claims of ancient technologies of the flying vehicle (*Pushpaka Vimana from the Legend of Prince Shri Ram in the epic Ramayana*) in Gujarat supplementary books (D. N. Batra and others). The Prime Minister's foreword supporting this view and the acceptance and distribution of such state-made books further validate it (Kumar, 2014; Al Jazeera, 2023). The Scroll and TIME record improved curricular coverage on sacred geography and sites of pilgrimages (Naqvi, 2025; Mansoor, 2022). The world of science and history has been made to overlap: the myth is scientized, and empirical argumentation is supplanted by the epistemic disorientation. Teleological accounts of a continuous, glorious Hindu past are taught to students instead of evidence-based historiography or the scientific method. It is a dire need to place non-negotiable scientific standards that cannot be taken away, which can be overseen by erudite scholars in a particular field.

Delegitimization of expertise and anti-pluralism

State and anti-national casting of elites drives dissent and professional criticism to the periphery, excluding secular historians and critical scholars and pluralist institutions. The trend can be illustrated by public attacks on academics (e.g., attacks on Romila Thapar and the removal of A. K. Ramanujan's Three Hundred Ramayanas from some syllabi) and the exclusion of pluralist

authors like Maulana Abul Kalam Azad by political science books (Mohammed, 2024; Al Jazeera, 2023). And the statements of the NCERT director stating that the edits were expert-led, not clearly reviewed, or even named procedures also create a top-down assertion of authority (Al Jazeera, 2023). Official texts at the state level get staged as undeniable reality; pluralist voices and primary sources that can be challenged are put to the periphery. According to Chattopadhyay and Sarkar (2005), state and dominant players are attempting to hegemonise the subaltern by incorporating their figures and symbols into a homogenized popular politics. Something of this sort occurs at the level of understanding in the current revisions of textbooks: it continues to produce a rhetorical appeal to the people but at the structural level constrains the revelation of subaltern actors, movements, and conflicts to school history. The autonomy of NCERT and the state textbook board should be restored to somehow shield these institutions against ministerial pressure.

Institutional capture and centralized dissemination (NCERT/CBSE dynamics)

The standardized and disseminated texts are revised and implemented by the apex bodies (NCERT, CBSE) in a national system of schools and state boards and lessen local curricular autonomy. NCERT textbooks are popular both in CBSE schools and in state boards; the process of synchronous rationalization adopted by CBSE enforced numerous NCERT edits on the whole country (India Today Web Desk, 2022; Mansoor, 2022; Sharma, 2023). It is reported that it was distributed even to CBSE-related schools in other countries (Al Jazeera, 2023). Rashtriya Swayamsevak Sangh (RSS), via its 50,000 shakhas and affiliated schools, spreads so-called saffronized curricula by which Hindu domination is naturalized and hostility against Muslims is reproduced (Mohammed, 2024). The digital media further enhances this informal schooling ecosystem as online creators spread their videos about forgotten history and mythological history and change populist narratives into viral knowing (Mohammed, 2024). This closed process of epistemology is one in which state texts offer selective silences of information, and these silences are filled in by civil society and online networks through the application of ideological affect, creating an uninterrupted pedagogy of conviction. To battle this problem, it is necessary to install a robust mechanism of dual-layered curriculum governance: an independent expert review board and a federal curriculum board. Having these bodies publish minutes, justification documents for changes, reconsideration documents, and all the reasons for dissenting a particular inclusion or exclusion must be inculcated in the process of ratifying a curriculum.

Provocation, spectacle, and affective mobilization

Provocative public statements, moral rhetoric, and media spectacles amplify revisions, converting controversy into performative legitimacy (Apoorvanand, 2023) and recruiting

emotional loyalties. Political leaders framed revisions as a moral correction (e.g., Amit Shah's "rewrite slave mentality" rhetoric); high-profile events such as the Ram temple inauguration were narrated as civilisational closure, reinforcing the curriculum's affective messages (The Guardian, 2023; Mohammed, 2024). Ethics takes the place of deliberative pedagogy; civic criticism is made to sound like disloyalty. High-volume media environments and social platforms intensify the confirmation bias and selective exposure, and corrective and evidence-based narratives become more difficult to scale; thus, subjects such as media literacy need to be taught in classes 6 to 12. Also, teacher-training courses on how to detect propaganda, sensationalism and polarizing stories.

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Civil society countermeasures and their limitations

Attempts to have remedial or alternative (non-mainstream) education include student groups, historian groups, and digital archives, which create alternative materials and forums for the wider public. The Karwaan and webinars run by historians establish remedial archives and social dialogues (Mansoor, 2022). These sources are valuable counter-narratives but are not institutionally penetrated; their influence is confined to digitally literate urban readers, and they are not yet able to reach state-wide readership paralleled by state textbooks. Developing funding structures of non-partisan public history projects that would enhance textbooks with easily accessible material. The open access repositories should be constructed in areas whereby the materials undergo peer review by experts of all fields. What will be beneficial is to establish effective freedom-of-information specifications in such a way that curricular reforms are no longer done at a low profile or beyond the radar of other pre-existing norms.

Conclusion

Indian education is in an unprecedented change at the present moment. The amount of curricular material that is under the control of fewer authorities than it has ever been has increased, and the overall consequence of numerous, and seemingly trivial, interventions is a systemic constriction of what is

considered legitimate knowledge. Historical and scientific research is being increasingly swept out by ideologically friendly, selective, mythological narratives. Compared to the previous instances of textbook controversy, which were discussed openly and, in some cases, overturned, the modern-day deletions are being carried out on a scale that leaves whole cohorts with permanent gaps in their intellectual background. The absence of coherence among NCERT, CBSE, state boards and parallel systems of ideological schooling reduces the gaps within which pluralist, critical and local pedagogies can thrive. Once the evidence-based knowledge is replaced by myths that are affectively charged, the curriculum will no longer lead to the development of the habits of skepticism, debate, or methodological thinking that democratic citizenship demands. These changes over time have transformed education not as a place of enquiry, but as a tool of enforcement of identity, and the whole process has resulted in far-reaching effects on the health of the Indian democratic imagination.

What is the consequence of this direction? A danger bigger than curricular falsification: the progressive restructuring of the citizen as an inactive consumer of official truth validated by a select powerful cohort of the country. In such an atmosphere, the role of educators becomes very integral in finding gaps where skills to question the given narrative are inculcated among students. Let us assume that even if the resistance against homogenized monochromatic narratives becomes the order of the day, educators must be trained to teach students to question and learn from secondary sources and form a triangulation of thought. This practice will be vital in sharpening one's critical thinking skills as well. However, on the other hand, when students are taught to perceive history as something that cannot be argued with and nationalism as something that can be worshiped and not discussed, the ability to think publicly will decay in generations. It is not so much a less informed polity but a polity that is less capable and ultimately less willing to challenge power. This trend, if it remains unchallenged, will pave the way to the antithesis of what a large democracy stands for. This trend will have to be reversed with more than regular criticism. It needs a new social investment in the appearance of school, an independent examination of the curriculum, and a civil society that adores plurality and discord as democratic principles. Until these commitments are reworked, India can discover that the greatest legacy of this epoch is not what was burnt in books, but that which was burnt in Indians: the

capacity to think, to think separately, and to see the country beyond the rationality of the majoritarian mythology.

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