

Row over California Textbooks?

Who Won? Who Lost?

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Whenever there is a battle, be it political, intellectual, physical or anything in between, people always want to know who won and who lost.

In matters such as textbook corrections, it is not so simple. We had an opportunity to witness the circus (to put it mildly) on February on February 27th.

To explain in detail what has been going on for almost a year is very important before we discuss the whole issue.

Every six years, California State Board of Education (CSBE) reviews contents of its textbooks for different grades. The sixth grade textbooks, which include social studies is up for review.

Hindu Education Foundation (HEF) and Vedic Foundation (VF) have been working diligently with the state board of education to improve content related to Hinduism and India. Things were going great until few politically and ideologically motivated people jumped in to portray Hinduism negatively.

February 27th meeting was the last battle before the full board decides on the fate of these textbooks on March 8th.

All the sides were pretty much prepared with their presentation. The supporters of the Hindu groups made an impassioned appeal one last time to see if the board would be willing to listen to reason, science and evidence. They paraded speakers from all walks of life. Parents, experts, men, women and teenagers pitched in. Their objective was to convene the board to approve remaining 30% of the changes proposed (the board had already accepted 70% of the recommendations earlier).

About dozen teenagers were present to see if they can convince CSBE to change textbooks so that their siblings can be spared of humiliation they suffered. Many had opportunity to speak but many more were disappointed that they were not allowed to speak.

Bhaavika Patel, a 10th-grader at Monte Vista High School in Cupertino asked 'how many California students know that there is more to Hinduism than just the caste system?' We only hear of the negatives, and that makes us feel inferior.?

Kartikeya Katir, a 16-year old student from Davis, said that, "God is always spelled with a small 'g' when talking about Hinduism and God of other religions is spelled with a capital 'G'," and wondered why the scriptures of Hinduism were referred to as 'myths' and 'legends' while the scriptures of all other religions came from God.?

Mr. Maulik Shukla, one of the parent presented documentation from Indian Archeological Society to debunk Aryan Invasion Theory (also known as Aryan Invasion Fantasy), only to be informed that it makes no difference.

Speakers from HEF, VF and Hindu American Foundation (HAF) also highlighted numerous educational and procedural code violations by the CSBE and California department of Education (CDE) leading up to this stage.

Khanderao Kand, coordinator for HEF said, "This is the first time the Hindu community has participated in correcting misrepresentations in the California textbooks. Hindu parents are concerned about impact of negative stereotypes on students. The community has succeeded in getting many of the humiliating comments out of the textbooks. In fact, about 75% of changes from Hindu Education Foundation have been accepted. Many of the changes not accepted leave a distorted view of the basic tenets of Hinduism and leave a negative feeling about India and Hinduism in the textbooks. We will work further to attempt to get rid of all negative stereotypes."

The Hindu groups also highlighted the discriminatory behavior of the board vis-à-vis other religions. Of the changes proposed by different religious groups, Hindus were the only group that had to go through humiliating treatment of multiple review committees and assault from non-experts.

Anjali Patel, coordinator for Hindu Education Foundation said "It appears that SBE does not trust either CDE or the scholars who gave the suggestions based on scientific evidence. We want explanations.?" Referring to discrepancy between The State Board of Education and California Department of Education, constituted by the SBE. She further said, that "the three members of the current Content Review Panel were not qualified to review Hinduism related material as they did not have

proper background and that they were signatories to the letter opposing the contents.?

Speaker after speaker got up and attempted to remind the board that in all this discussion, there are two things missing. First the essence of Hinduism (The whole universe is one family, There is one God, many ways to get there etc.) is not mentioned anywhere in the textbooks and second, the books are aimed at sixth graders and not at scholars.

Those who opposed the changes (one wonders what could be the real reason), too had their speakers lined up. They had Sikhs and Christians claiming to be Dalits to oppose the back projection of Dalit / untouchability / caste system to the roots of Hinduism. They also had line up of Berkeley based communists and linguists (professors in Sanskrit and other languages) from various colleges opposing removal of reference to AIT. We wonder how experts in language can be authoritative in archeology than archeologists themselves.

Most of the professors and lecturers basically focused on AIT with a long speech, typical of intellectuals, which had very little substance. At times, people were wondering whom they were talking to or which side they were supporting. They gave their one minute speech and left the hall, except for Steve Farmer, so called expert in comparative studies. He too had nothing better to say, but he made mark by making gestures unbecoming of a scholar. He even started arguing with participants sitting in the hall while the hearing was ongoing, calling everyone around him ?stupid?, ?idiot? and ?moron? and using profanity. Rohan Desai, a 17 year old senior from Mission San Jose High school said, ?I stepped in and told him to watch what he was saying, because there were six year old children in the room.?

Rohan Desai and few other teenagers, who skipped the class to make their voice heard, were disappointed that they could not speak and were exposed to such a behavior.

Sashank Reddy, other teenager said, ?if this is how he (Farmer) speaks and behaves in public, I wonder what he teaches in college??

It appeared that both camps had their strategy. The Hindu camp was focused on three major issues in correcting the false portrayal of Hinduism. They concentrated on the effect of negative portrayal on the young children, unequal / biased treatment towards Hindus and procedural

violations by the department.

The opposition camp had a single point agenda. It was their attack on the Hindu group and individuals involved in the correction of textbooks.

They paraded number of individuals who tried to drag every communal conflict in India into this public hearing.

Shalini Gera, Raju Rajagopalan, Girish Agarwal and other opposition speakers continued to drag non-relevant issues such as Babri Structure demolition; communal riots, Nazi and such, which at times appeared to be just a rant.

Considering, public had only one minute to speak, Mr. Desai, president of Friends of India Society International (FISI) did manage to provide information exposing links between the opponents of corrections with some unsavory organizations. Friends of South Asia (FOSA) for example have links with Communist party of India. FeTNA, a Tamil organization is associated with LTTE, a Sri Lankan terror group, which assassinated former Prime Minister Rajiv Gandhi and some dalit speakers were associated with Dalit Solidarity Network, a Christian missionary group, but the board was in no mood to listen.

The school board on other hand totally different thought process from the beginning. It appeared that the board was going through his charade of public hearing to satisfy some form of procedural requirements. After about four hours of hearing, the board took less than 30 seconds to pass a resolution recommending to full board, the changes. These changes amounted to about 75% of corrections recommended by HEF.

With this, both camps claimed that their side had won. Unfortunately, the children in California will be the biggest losers if the full board accepts these recommendations without addressing the remaining corrections. The edits proposed by school board are so contradictory; it will be amazing to see how the board will reconcile the differences. God forbid, if the teacher happens to get hold of contradicting textbooks. She / He will probably give up teaching Hinduism.