

Compromise over California textbook issue

A California State Board of Education sub-committee recommends some of the controversial corrections proposed by the Hindu groups for sixth grade history books but ignores many critical ones in deference to the groups and individuals opposing them

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Presenting a mixed bag, a sub-committee of the California State Board of Education last week recommended scores of changes relating to India and Hinduism in 6th grade history textbooks, including some of the corrections proposed by the Hindu groups but ignoring others in deference to the demands by those who opposed them.

In what is admittedly a compromise, the subcommittee recommended on February 27 that the 11-member California Board of Education adopt the changes on the portrayal of ancient Hinduism in the 6th grade textbooks during its meeting March 8. Following four hours of heated public testimony on the issue that began last September, the board's five-member subcommittee on history and social sciences made the recommendation for approval of the Board of Education.

'Both sides thought we didn't go far enough,' Glee Johnson, state Board of Education president, was quoted as saying in the *Los Angeles Times*. 'But a lot of this represented a reasonable compromise,' he said referring to the changes.

Khanderao Kand, a spokesperson of the Hindu Education Foundation, agreed that the recommendations were a compromise, a half-way house but disputed that they were reasonable or just. "It seems to me that the committee settled for a compromise but the fact remains that you cannot have a compromise on historical facts," Kand told *India Abroad*.

However, groups like the Friends of South Asia, the Federation of Tamil Sangams of North America and the Coalition Against Communalism that have opposed the edits proposed by the likes of HEF and the Vedic Foundation on grounds that they are motivated by a sectarian agenda of fundamentalist Hindu forces, expressed satisfaction over the sub-committee's decision.

The intense struggle over the content of Indian history in California text books ended February 27 with the special committee voting unanimously to overturn a majority of contentious changes proposed by right-wing groups. This decision is a victory for community organizations that have worked diligently to ensure that sectarian content proposed by the Hindu right-wing groups is removed from history textbooks, the Friends of South Asia said in a statement.

At the center of the controversy are an estimated 160-odd revisions - or edits as they are called - proposed by groups like the Hindu Education Foundation and Vedic Foundation that have spearheaded the campaign to correct what they call distortions and defamatory references to ancient Hinduism in the history textbooks. Last year these two groups, along with a number of individuals, sent their proposed changes to the Curriculum Development Commission, an advisory body to the state education board that reviews books every six years and takes suggestions for improvement from the members of the public.

The process was almost nearing completion in November last year after an ad-hoc Committee, set up by the commission due to the large volumes of edits suggested, approved many of the edits. Just before they were supposed to be sent to the board, Professor Michael Witzel,

Wales Professor of Sanskrit in the Department of Sanskrit and Indian Studies at Harvard University and others, including noted Indologist Stanley Wolpert, wrote to the board expressing their opposition to the suggested changes.

They said that the nature of the revisions as approved by the ad-hoc committee, allegedly at the behest of the Hindu

that the proposed revisions by groups like HEF and VF are not of scholarly but of religious-political nature and promoted by Hindutva supporters and non-specialist academics who write on issues outside their areas of expertise.

At the February 27 testimony, which the HEF and VD charged were sham because a decision regarding the changes had allegedly been taken before by the subcommittee before the public testimony, there was little accommodation of views between rival groups as to what would be in the best interest of children. Johnson said the hearing that drew more than 200 people 'got ugly' at times, with both sides comparing the other to Hitler and the Ku Klux Klan.

While supporters of the VF and HEF claimed that references to negative aspects of Hinduism such as the caste system and the oppression of women damage the self-esteem of their children, others strongly disagreed.

Speaking from her experiences of learning about caste and gender oppression in middle school, Veena Dubal, a joint law and doctoral student at the University of California, Berkeley, explained, 'Like many of my European-American classmates whose ancestral histories could be traced to a time before women and people of color were given independent legal identities and allowed political participation...', she said. 'I was painfully embarrassed to read about the injustices committed in my parents' homeland. Yet it was precisely these lessons that taught me about the necessity for universal civil liberties and human rights,' she said.

In response to a question Kand said that it was foolish to declare one side or the other a victor. "There is no such thing as victory here; it is not apolitical battle. It is a question of accuracy of knowledge for children and that is what we should keep in mind," he said.

"As far as VD is concerned that some progress had been made in correcting the derogatory references in the text books. This is a first step. More corrections are to be made," Devi said.

Both Devi and Kand said that the corrections proposed are very haphazard and they are going to be very confusing for children who are trying to understand the basic tenets of Hinduism. "We are going to represent at the March 8 meeting where they will take the final decision and we will ask them to consider 80 percent of the edits of the VF that have been kept out of consideration by the Board," Devi said.

Asked if he is frustrated that not all the changes have been accepted, Kand parried a direct reply. "It is a long process. Nothing is frustrating, but the way they have violated the process, is really disappointing. That is of concern. It shows there is discrimination against Hindu community."

Suhag Shukla, legal counsel for the Hindu American Foundation that became involved in the process when SBE invited from opposing scholars said that HAF is gravely disappointed that the SBE has demonstrated a lack of concern for the protocol and process provided by law. 'HAF is continuing to consider legal options,' she said in a statement.



■ Supporters of Hindu Education Foundation gathered for a public testimony at the State Board of Education in Sacramento February 27. More than 200 people that included supporters of Friends of South Asia and Coalition Against Communalism were present at the testimony.

groups, were prompted more by the groups' hidden agenda than historical facts. Over 100 other academics of Indian origin from different educational institutions in the US also wrote a similar letter to the board. Consequently, Witzel, Wolpert and a third academic were retained by the Board and the commission was asked to revisit the changes approved by the committee.

In December the commission decided to revert back to the original edits as approved by the committee, rejecting most of the Witzel panel amendments to the original committee edits following a vote.

Last month, however, the sub-committee announced that it has included only some of the edits as proposed by HEF, VF and others, and left out what the Hindu Press International described as "substantial number" of critical ones.

Asked how many of the 160-odd edits jointly proposed by the HEF and VF have been accepted. Janeshwari Devi, director of the programs for the Austin-based Vedic Foundation, said she does not have the exact number. "It is more than half, but I do not know for sure because some were approved, some modified and some were rejected," Devi told *India Abroad*.

"What the Hindu community is calling for is a panel of scholars who are Hindus and are specialists in the subject. We do not feel that we had an impartial and unbiased review of the book," she said. "The state consulted with someone who petitioned against us and made false accusations against us. To hire that person to determine how Hinduism should be portrayed was not fair to the Hindu community," she said alluding to Witzel. "Prof Witzel is not qualified to say how Hinduism is practiced."

In an earlier interview with *India Abroad* Witzel said