

How are Textbooks in India Reproducing the Coloniality of Knowledge?

Written by Annapurna Menon

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ANNAPURNA MENON, JUN 28 2023

In my final year of school, I studied Humanities at an Army Public School in Central India. One of the subjects I studied was History which was taught by one of my favourite teachers. She was incredibly supportive in an environment where studying History was considered a subject for the 'weaker' or 'less smart' students and encouraged me to continue studying it after school. While I remember her pastoral support very clearly, amidst the present furore over the content revisions in Indian textbooks, it is her lessons that have been playing on my mind. For almost every chapter, she would inform us of an 'alternative' history. At that time I naively thought of these 'alternative' histories as sharing information beyond the textbooks. Looking back, I realise all of the 'out of textbook' information was directly Hindutva nationalist propaganda; a prime example being the debunked myth of the Taj Mahal as having originally being a Hindu Temple.

The above reflects the multiplicity of histories in the country. Unsurprisingly, the power holders determine what version of History is acceptable. My teacher exercised influence over us but in a limited capacity as, in our case, the textbooks were the final authority due to the examination system in India. If we were to imagine the nation as a classroom, the government has a monopoly over what can be classified as history, knowledge, and worth learning.

Alterations to India's national curriculum are not something new and the changes made by the Hindu Nationalist Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP) come as no surprise. Yet the brazen attitude towards the erasure of material that does not align with the Hindu nationalist ideology are exceptional. These actions are understandably motivated by political gains and, as I argue in this article, serve to maintain the coloniality of knowledge which can be briefly understood as knowledge used to serve the dominance of the powerful on the oppression of the powerless.

In this article, I briefly explain the concept of the coloniality of knowledge and provide context to the usage of school textbooks in India. After that, I briefly outline my research findings on the school textbooks in the region of Indian Administered Jammu & Kashmir (Hereafter IAJK) and use them to draw out the implications of the recent syllabus changes.

Coloniality of Knowledge

'Coloniality of knowledge' refers to the control of knowledge production being monopolized by the colonizing entity to maintain the hierarchy of the colonizer over the colonized. This concept was formulated by Anibal Quijano as systems of knowledge based on Eurocentrism used to provide the theoretical justification for the concept of 'race'. In his works, Quijano looks at how the colonial construct of race was subsequently used to naturalize colonial relations between Europeans and non-Europeans and designate racial groups to specific forms of labour. This was done through the coloniality of knowledge that creates and circulates knowledge and knowledge systems favouring the colonizer in primarily two ways: one, by establishing "colonial difference" which transformed difference into values; and two, it centred a modernity where a specific cultural complex (European) was seen as rational and the universal paradigm for all knowledge. In the case of India, this cultural complex is largely based on the dominant understanding of Hinduism, as Hindus were favoured by the British and were crucial in implementing indirect rule of the British. This Hinduism has since then evolved and adopted a language that is palatable to the 'West': one of colonial neoliberal

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development based on extractivism and dispossession.

Colonial difference ought to be grasped through a postcolonial lens, wherein there is a focus on the representations of 'self' and 'other' and the difference between them is weaponized to justify control of a colonial nature under the garb of rationality and modernity. This modernity, as practised by the postcolonial nation-state is heavily influenced by coloniality – legacies of its own colonial rulers, a visual reflection of the same coin with two sides, coloniality/modernity. However, I only refer to this as an 'influence' since the understanding of modernity as adopted by the postcolonial nation includes similar notions of development, freedom and knowledge; it also includes the re-remembering of a generally glorified pre-colonial past which suits the interests of the elites within the post-colonial structures of governance and power, leading to specific constructions of the nation-state and national identity embedded in coloniality. The emphasis on coloniality then serves the purpose of situating the postcolonial nation-state within the capitalist world system, which rewards colonially defined understandings of nations and nationalism, cartography, gender and sexuality, knowledge, development and progress.

Both of the above take place through control of knowledge and subjectivity, occurring through stringent control of education and colonizing existing knowledge. Drawing on the works of scholars from the decolonial school of thought, I highlight some key aspects of the coloniality of knowledge. These include creating and justifying Eurocentric domination of knowledge production, maintaining the epistemic distinction between the researcher and subject where the subject is incapable of producing knowledge, ignoring and dismissing indigenous and local knowledge systems, and creating a 'self' and 'other' located in a totality that cements the colonial difference between the self and the other.

Nick Shephard in *'Epistemic Decolonisation'* conceptualises this as constitutive of three 'dimensions': structural and logical; epistemic; and ethical and moral. The structural and logical dimension refers to the institutions where knowledge production takes place; the epistemic dimension refers to the kinds of knowledge produced; and the ethical and moral dimension refers to the tools of legitimisation of knowledge. In the context of IAJK, my research looks at the establishment of the J&K State Board of Education and its subsequent school board Acts which were used to understand how the Indian state establishes structural control over knowledge production and circulation in the region, followed by an analysis of the epistemic dimension focusing on school textbooks and thinktank publications. The final aspect of morality is reflected within the New Education Investment Policy (2021-30) that establishes the Indian state as the benevolent and moral actor that seeks to modernize IAJK while disempowering peoples it claims as its citizens. The following section contextualises the education system in India.

Textbooks & Central Board of Secondary Education (CBSE) in India

Education in India is a subject under the Concurrent List, meaning that both the Central Government and the State Governments have the authority in enacting and implementing Education policies. With the increased centralisation of power— as evidenced in the newly formulated National Education Policy 2020—education has become a contested subject in which the State Governments, especially those with non-BJP political parties in power have limited agency in challenging the Central Government. Moreover, all government-funded schools have standardised textbooks published by the National Council of Education, Research and Training (NCERT) which are regularly assessed, and as mentioned above, periodically revised, often to reflect political parties in power. Private schools may have other textbooks until high school, where students switch to NCERT textbooks to be eligible for the nationalised final exams. Importantly, admission to prestigious higher education institutes often depends on the scores achieved in these exams.

The state textbooks are largely based on the national NCERT textbooks but may have slight variations to reflect regional histories/knowledge or languages. However, the textbooks used in the senior-secondary school education generally follow the national curriculum. The only exceptions to this trend are the International Board schools, which are fairly elite and follow either the British or American curriculums and textbooks. These schools are relatively less in number, can cater to a small percentage of school-going children in India and are almost non-existent outside of urban centres. The most recent survey noted that over 70% of India's school children are enrolled in government schools and the ratio of students going to private schools has steadily declined. Therefore, it can be argued that the

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extent of influence of government-produced textbooks in India is paramount.

The NCERT textbooks are supposed to be designed to suit all schools within the jurisdiction of the Indian state. They embody nationalist thought throughout, as all these textbooks begin with the Preamble of the Indian Constitution and the use of national symbols. Despite this, it must be reiterated that textbooks are not the only source of information and, much like my History teacher, students learn from their environments as much as from textbooks. However, textbooks offer crucial insights into the state's perception of itself and the construct of the ideal Indian citizen. The next section summarises my research on textbooks in IAJK and uses this to reflect upon the recent curriculum changes.

Education in “New India”

In my research, I focus on how textbooks serve as a medium to assert colonial power by the Indian state in the region of IAJK. Using textual analysis as the method, the research found that the Indian state uses specific modes of representation through text and visual imagery of the ‘self’ and ‘other’ to maintain the colonial difference between the ‘Indian self’ and the ‘other’. This difference is then weaponised to assert dominance over the region and create the ‘other’ who can be marginalised. Consequently, there is a skewed-up sense of ‘self’ that is intimately tied with the oppression of the ‘other’. This ‘othering’ then leads to the creation of the postcolonial citizen who is in opposition with the nation, whose aspirations do not fit within the postcolonial desires of the nation-state. This identity can pose a challenge to the postcolonial Indian nation and is often represented as a threat, specifically the identity of the Kashmiri Muslim. The analysis draws upon two main themes: First, the representation of the self (Indian state) as an ancient Hindu land with much diversity yet united as a modern nation with secular, progressive, and democratic credentials; second, constructing the ‘other’ (IAJK and its peoples) as a historical part of a “Hindu” India, a tourist destination crucial for its resources and a natural frontier for India. This is based on a textual analysis of all NCERT & the State board published Social Sciences textbooks used in the region from the 3rd to the 12th Grade.

India – both the nation and the state – is represented through multiple strategies that involve the use of cartographic imagery, homogenizing differences and diversity for the sake of the nation, whilst marginalizing indigenous histories and traditions. This invokes and glorifies nationalist symbols, such as the Indian Army or leaders such as Mahatma Gandhi; emphasizing on the benevolence of the state for its citizens, the naturalization of Hindi and Hinduism within India as if the three are bound in a timeless, historical bond. The final aspect of representation of the Indian self also involves the standardization of Hindi as an alternative to language even in non-Hindi speaking areas. IAJK is represented in a different light – as one of immense diversity and potential for development, through pictures as a tourist hot-spot, and as an integral part of the Indian nation as historically being Hindu and contemporarily as the nation-state ‘saving’ the region from foreign invaders. It should be noted that many of these chapters are not a part of NCERT textbooks and hence are specifically meant for students within the region – moulding the ideal IAJK citizen. This imposition of a specific identity favourable to Indian statism is a colonial act, one which takes place by disregarding indigenous knowledge systems and imposing a standardized, national curriculum.

The ‘self’ here is seen as a paternalistic caretaker simply waiting for the ‘other’ to embrace the ‘self’ for better future prospects at the cost of political self-determination. This is done under the umbrella of postcolonial modernity, but invokes the same tropes of a ‘civilising mission’ that erstwhile colonial powers have employed. This erasure of history and delegitimization of regional knowledge systems is crucial to the process of depersonalizing the people of this region while building consent for its policies. This coloniality of knowledge enables the Indian state to create and sustain a political economy based on possession, extractivism and exploitation, all central to colonialism.

Let’s review some of the proposed changes to the Indian school textbooks in light of this background. The changes can be categorised as of three kinds: (a) erasure/appropriation of History, (b) devaluing of scientific knowledge, and (c) normalising neo-liberalisation. The first two can be said to be directly supportive of the Hindutva nationalist government by removing ideological opposition, whilst the latter is directed towards a better integration of India into the globalised world economy, producing the ideal ‘Indian customer’. Each of these categories requires discussion in turn:.

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Erasure/Appropriation of History

NCERT has approved the reduction of the focus on the Mughal empire in India, the removal of the ideological affiliations of Nathuram Godse, the right-wing extremist who assassinated Mahatma Gandhi and the removal of riots and political conflicts when the BJP has been in power. The rewriting of history to suit the current government in power is fairly straightforward and is in continuation of previous measures, such as removal of quotes by Jawaharlal Nehru, who belonged to the opposition party as well as those of Dr BR Ambedkar, India's first Law Minister and architect of the Constitution. Ambedkar was a fierce anti-caste revolutionary and a staunch critic of Hinduism and espoused secularism – seen as a dangerous threat to Indian society by the BJP. Anti-caste social movements had already been dropped from the syllabus in 2019.

In addition, policies enacted by the government are added to textbooks, often not completely researched and glorifying the current government as in the case of the addition of chapters relating to J&K's removal of statehood in 2019. Last year, the government also dropped the impact of the Emergency period, a dark period in India's democracy that saw the severe curtailment of civil and personal liberties of Indians. Noting these changes, it is quite obvious that there is a deliberate attempt to rewrite history in a manner that supports the Hindutva narrative and limits discussion on contemporary oppressive power regimes and resistance to them.

Devaluing scientific knowledge

The attack on scientific knowledge under the current government is not new but the recent changes do take this to a new level. Concepts like evolution were important for students to study and learn, not just to know the world but to be able to challenge values based on religion or culture. It centred the importance of facts while making space for debate and discussion. From senior classes, important topics like evolution have been dropped and are replaced by mythological stories from Hinduism. This should be read in the context of the sea of misinformation that sustains in India and is often exploited by the ruling government and their supporters to normalise Hindutva narratives. During the COVID pandemic, a study found that one out of six pieces of COVID information gathered from India was fake. The fake information has been weaponised to blame minority communities and/or instigate riots especially during politically important times such as during elections. Devaluing scientific knowledge directly correlated to the uncritical acceptance of information, making it easier for the ruling government to spread propaganda and influence people without any challenge.

Normalising Neoliberalisation

In the current changes, government policies such as 'Digital India' are exclusively glorified without any critical discussion on the same. There is ample scholarly work on the impact of these policies in an environment of increasing income inequality behind the glamour in which these policies are packaged and sold. In 2022, anti-neoliberalisation movements such as the Naxalite movement and the recent farmers protests have been removed or shortened. In addition, the adverse impacts of globalisation on the agriculture industry in India have been quietly dropped. This is happening in the context of a suffering economy, severely struggling public sector, increasing poverty rates and some of the highest unemployment rates the country has seen. As the glitz of globalisation falls bare globally, it is not surprising that a government that emphasised on economic growth, privatisation and individual monetary benefits is keen on supporting a pro-neo liberalisation narrative in school textbooks. After all, it is these students who will form the workforce for India's future economy and it supports the ruling political parties close friendship with some of India's biggest Industrialists who are also co-incidentally, the world's richest men.

Based on the above discussion, it is apparent that the current Indian government has been using textbooks as a medium to establish historicised epistemological dominance over the country. They are doing this through the rewriting of history, determining what qualifies as knowledge and who can produce this knowledge. Thus, such a goal is achieved through the erasure of knowledge that is not conducive to the Hindu right-wing narrative and the normalisation of neoliberalisation that upholds Anglo-European ways of extractivism, possession and displacement as ways to establish and maintain power.

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Re-creating a postcolonial citizen

These textbooks contribute to the creation of a postcolonial citizen with limited control over their own histories. Only one narrative of Hindu superiority and dominance is acceptable and if you do not fit within this, you are systematically excluded and othered. The motive is not to overemphasise on the role played by textbooks as we know that students learn from a range of environments and are not limited to simply texts, in addition in India, the increasing reliance on private tuitions is surely going to have an impact on knowledge exchange and production as well as identity formation. However, the textbooks are an important demonstration of the state's view on the ideal postcolonial citizen and to curb dissent which is of relevance here.

This leads to the continuation of the colonial hierarchies of Hindus over minorities who are othered through these textbooks, in their retelling of the dominance of Hindu mythology over science and the support for the integration of India into the capitalised world economy. These textbooks seek to assert a particular kind of "Indian-ness", which is now sought to be defined by the BJP government where the ideal citizen is the Hindu who yearns to be successful based on their support for the government and nation (in contrast to dissent); maintaining the image of India is a rising power in the global market. This project serves the interests of the present Hindu nationalist government by building the consent of its citizens, thus enabling it to establish hegemonic rule in the country. As these new textbooks are being used in schools and read by millions of students, we await to see what this means for overall education standards and us Indians of 'Naya Bharat' ['New India'].

About the author:

Dr. Annapurna Menon is a Teaching Associate at the Department of Politics and International Relations at the University of Sheffield. Her research focuses on the coloniality of postcolonial nation-states, specifically studying the Indian nation-state's exercise of power in Indian-administered Jammu & Kashmir. She has also published on topics relating to Hindutva, right-wing politics, militarisation, gender and activism.