

# Presence of the Past: Notions of the Indian Nation in Class VI NCERT History Textbooks

**Muskan Aggarwal**

Symbiosis School for Liberal Arts, Symbiosis International (Deemed University)

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## How to Cite this Paper

Aggarwal, M. (2021).  
Presence of the past:  
Notions of the Indian  
nation in Class VI NCERT  
history textbooks.  
*Confluence: Journal for  
Interdisciplinary Studies*,  
*Volume V*, 1-22.

## Abstract

In the context of a diverse nation like India, education is an important site where the image of the nation is shaped. In this paper, I have studied the notions of the Indian nation as presented in middle school (class VI) NCERT history textbooks published in 1966, 2002 and 2006, using the method of textual analysis. How history is taught or 'which' history is taught is informed by a particular idea of what the nation is. Therefore, writing history textbooks, particularly in a country like India, has been a site rife with contestations. It is important to explore the ways in which the nation is depicted in these textbooks through a close reading of the text as it informs who is perceived to belong to the nation and who is not. It also has the potential to leave a powerful impact on young minds. I compare and contrast the three textbooks by identifying six broad themes, namely – the importance of the study of history, names used to refer to the region, the use of the categories of country, nation and state as natural entities, understandings of Indian culture, portrayal of the contributions of women and finally, the understanding of Hinduism. My analysis reveals that there are significant differences in the portrayal of the nation in these three textbooks. I categorise the notions of the nation present in the three textbooks into three broad viewpoints based on their descriptions of the nature and ordering of constituents that form the nation. Both the 1966 and 2002 books, albeit in different ways, present one dominant narrative of the

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nation while the 2006 book attempts to put forth everyday narratives. It can be said that in the 1966 book, the constituents of the nation (its people and their culture) are a diverse group which are brought together by a common national consciousness, while in the 2006 book, the cultural and political identities of the people coincide to form an organic conception of the nation.

*Keywords:* Indian textbooks, nation, nationalism, textual analysis, historiography, Hindu nationalism.

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## **Introduction**

*“History is not just about the past; it is about the present.”*

– Neeladri Bhattacharya, *Our Pasts-I*

Education, especially that of history, plays a crucial role in the development of a national consciousness. How history is taught or ‘which’ history is taught is informed by a particular idea of what the nation is. Educational policy could be influenced by nationalist ideologies. It serves the function of generating civic values as well as national ones, especially in the homogenization of national identity (Flåten, 2016). It is perhaps a sphere where one conception of the nation becomes dominant, much like Anderson’s explanation of the effect print capitalism had on language and eventually the development of nationalism (2006). However, the content of this education is a controversial topic in India.

Textbooks in India, especially at the national level, are a site of political negotiation, marked by considerable public controversy and multiple revisions. This dynamism is surprising because textbooks themselves, within the Indian education system at the school level, are largely taken to be authoritative and irrefragable texts. They are expected to be thoroughly memorized and reproduced during exam time. This has been identified as a pervasive “textbook culture” prevalent in Indian education (Kumar, 2001 as cited in Flåten, 2016; Mukherjee & Mukherjee, 2001). Textbooks contribute to normalizing a particular ideology such that they occupy a privileged position as repositories of common sense or given “facts”. If this informs one’s identity, it can form the basis of prejudiced views and act as justifications for discriminatory actions at an institutional as well as a personal level.

In this paper, I have analyzed the notions of the Indian nation presented in Class VI National Council for Education and Research Training (NCERT) History textbooks. I focus on the

textbooks published by the NCERT because it is a national body under the Ministry of Human Resource Development. Although education is a subject on the concurrent list and states are allowed to publish their own textbooks and curriculum, it is common practice that NCERT textbooks serve as a model for developing the curriculum of different states (Flåten, 2016). Nation building and national development have been highlighted as essential motivations of education in India (Govinda, 2011). Through my research, I explore how the nation itself is presented in these textbooks over time. If the nation is an “imagined political community” (Anderson, 2006, p. 49), this imagination has taken several forms since India became an independent nation-state in 1947, in ways that have included or excluded certain narratives and groups. A study of the “national” history textbooks published since then, which present differing depictions of the nation’s past, is a worthwhile endeavor and could shed light on the myriad ways in which the nation has been imagined at different points in time. My analysis does not only focus on explicit mentions of the composition of the nation, but also reads between the lines to explore underlying meanings in the texts. To make sense of a country’s past is an exercise which shapes the nation in particular ways. This may have real implications about how citizens think and act and defines who belongs to the nation. The additions, omissions and language used in these textbooks are value loaded, illuminate varying motivations and may reflect the times in which these textbooks were utilized in classrooms.

Three major series of NCERT history books have been published since the institution first came into being in 1961. Specifically, I look at the textbooks published for class VI because this is when students are formally introduced to the discipline of history, and in particular, to Indian history. The three textbooks under consideration here are *Ancient India* written by Romila Thapar, published in 1966, *India and the World* by Makkhan Lal, Basabi Khan Banerjee, Sima Yadav and M. Akhtar Hussain published in 2002 and *Our Pasts-I* written by a team of authors led by Hari Vasudevan and Neeladri Bhattacharya published in 2006.

In the following sections, I will first provide an overview of the controversy around NCERT history textbooks, highlighting the context in which the three major series of textbooks were published since independence. Following this, I will summarize and evaluate existing literature on these textbooks. In the subsequent sections, I justify my methodological choice to use textual analysis. Finally, I present my observations and analysis of the texts.

## **Background**

The need for a professional appraisal of India’s past, outside the shadow of colonial narratives, led to the publication, in the 1960s, of NCERT textbooks written by distinguished historians such as Romila Thapar, Arjun Dev, Satish Chandra and Bipan Chandra. National integration was the impulse driving this exercise. This was clearly stated in the 1964-66 Education Commission report as follows, “...the entire thinking of the rising generation would be different and nation

could be immensely strengthened” (National Council of Education Research and Training [NCERT], 1967, p. 230, as cited in Bhattacharya, 2009, p. 109). Written only a few years after independence and partition, these textbooks purportedly had a strong secular-nationalist historiography (Bhattacharya, 2009, p. 100; Guichard, 2010, p. 2). Romila Thapar, author of one of the textbooks published in this series, agrees that her generation was “imprinted by a certain nationalism” (2009, p. 88). They denounced the two-nation theory and the communalization of history-writing, taking instead an approach which emphasized the united character of a diverse Indian nation (Bhattacharya, 2009, p.102; Thapar, 2009). For this paper, I will refer to these as the first series of textbooks.

The second set of textbooks was promoted by the National Democratic Alliance (NDA) government, which in 1999 undertook the project of re-writing national textbooks. According to Murli Manohar Joshi, the Minister for Human Resource Development at the time, the motive behind this revision was to Indianise and reduce the influence of “Macaulay, Marx and Madarasa” (Mohammad-Arif, 2005, p. 156) on history-writing in India. These textbooks were published in 2002 and I will refer to these textbooks as the second series of textbooks. It is argued that in contrast to the secular-nationalist tilt of the earlier textbooks, the 2002 textbooks followed the ideology of Hindu nationalism or Hindutva (Guichard, 2010; Bhattacharya, 2009). However, the textbook controversy in India is not simply a struggle between secular nationalist and religious nationalist forces. Critical theorists (Bhattacharya, 2009), who are wary of the homogenising agenda of history-writing and focus on an open-ended critical approach to textbook-writing, form a third side to the discourse on textbook writing. The third series of textbooks, published during 2006-08, is informed by this methodological approach (Bhattacharya, 2009).

### **Understanding Textbook-writing in India**

Writing and re-writing of history textbooks is closely linked to the ideology of the government in power (Nair 2016). Krishna Kumar (2001), elaborating on this point says that both the old textbooks and the NDA textbooks predominantly aim at furthering the ‘correct’ ideology, which fails to instill in children the value of critical thinking. This point is also made by Mohammad-Arif (2005, p.143) in the context of his argument relating to the use of textbooks to impose a particular idea of citizenship and nationhood, often with strong reference to religion. Elaborating on the teaching of history in Pakistan, Mohammad-Arif notes that through an emphasis on Islamization, selective omission of events since the Indus Valley civilization and a reinforcement of the two-nation theory, Pakistan legitimizes its nationalism and “manufactures a Pakistani identity” (2005, p. 152).

#### **First Series**

Mohammad-Arif argues that the first iteration of textbooks in India published by the central government and written by ‘leftist historians’, was committed to the idea of India as a “secular polity” (2005, p.153). These textbooks are perceived to have a distinct nationalist inclination (Nair, 2016), on account of which they have been accused of overlooking “discordant voices” which were in opposition to the dominant secular-nationalist narrative that these textbooks sought to construct (Guichard 2013). Thapar (2009) agrees with this criticism. Reflecting on her work as one of the authors, she says that although she tried to highlight subaltern groups, they were perhaps not illustrated with “sufficient examples” (p. 91). More recently, this homogenizing nationalist approach has faced criticism at the hands of critical secularists who prefer presenting a non-teleological view of history (Bhattacharya, 2009).

Methodological criticisms of these old books have emerged from the right as well. Jain (2003), who was involved in the writing of the second series of textbooks, critiques the authors of these previous series of books for using imported or colonial categories of thought (p. 5). It is interesting to note that the same criticism is also applied to the Hindu right by scholars who argue that the periodization of India into distinct eras of Hindu, Muslim, and British rule, favoured by Hindu nationalist historians, is also an adoption of a popular colonial narrative (Mohammad-Arif 2005; Bhattacharya 2009).

### **Second Series**

The National Curriculum Framework for School Education (2000) sought to emphasize the importance of cultivating religious values and a spiritual quotient in students (Nussbaum, 2007). In reality, the textbooks introduced based on the recommendations of this framework tended to “toe the orthodox RSS line” (Nussbaum, 2007, p. 269). Until these textbooks were published in 2002, old ‘secular’ textbooks were often modified to suit Hindu nationalist ideology without notifying the authors about such revisions (Mohammad-Arif, 2005, p.158). For example, a paragraph depicting beef-eating by Brahmins was deleted (to protect the image of the sacred cow), language which highlights the discriminatory nature of the caste system was excluded (to present a unified Hindu community), and archaeological evidence questioning the historicity of Ram and Krishna was also excluded (to infuse history with mythology) (Mohammad-Arif, 2005, p.158). Secular groups interpret these alterations and the content of the subsequently published 2002 textbooks as an attempt to communalize history and equate Hinduism with nationalism (Mukherjee & Mukherjee, 2001). Secular historians problematize the narrative which locates the origin of the nation in ancient India, which is portrayed as the glorious Hindu age (Mohammad-Arif, 2005). According to scholars, this narrative classifies not only the British, but also Muslims as outsiders to the Indian nation (Visweswaran et al., 2009; Mohammad-Arif, 2005; Nussbaum, 2007).

### **Third Series**

As per Nussbaum (2007) and Nair (2016), the objective of critical secularists is to put forward textbooks that highlight the multiplicity of histories at play in constituting the past, and inculcate an analytical temper in children; an enterprise which Thapar thought to be “confusing to child-readers” (2009, p. 97). Neeladri Bhattacharya (2009), the chief advisor for this newest series of textbooks, notes a gulf between the evolving discipline of history as it is studied in academia and the manner in which textbooks of history are written for children. He highlights that while academic traditions in history approach the subject through the lenses of gender, subaltern narratives, colonialism, and post-colonialism, textbooks rarely engage with history with any degree of criticality. For example, as Guichard (2013) points out, although the assassination of Mahatma Gandhi is mentioned in school textbooks, very little is said on the significance of him being shot at the hands of a Hindu nationalist. This serves to sideline internal social conflict and maintain national integrity (Guichard, 2013). Similarly, Nair (2016), noting the omission within these textbooks, of significant debates regarding the construction of India among the foremost thinkers involved in the freedom movement such as Gandhi and Ambedkar, identifies it as an effort to produce “coherent truth” and suggests that this effort, undertaken by both secular-nationalists and Hindu nationalists should be abandoned to make Indian history textbooks a place “safe for disagreement” (2016, p. 250).

The first and second series of textbooks have been widely discussed in academia and public circles (Mukherjee & Mukherjee, 2001; Jain, 2003). A comparison of the old and new textbooks on their depiction of violence and social conflict (Guichard, 2013) is also available. Further, there is literature providing a comparison of Indian and Pakistani textbooks in their approaches to imagining the two nations (Kumar, 2001; Mohammad-Arif, 2005; Joshi, 2010; Banerjee & Strober, 2016). The available literature focuses predominantly on the broader discourse around the controversy generated by these textbooks rather than on a detailed reading of the texts themselves. Thus, in this study I address this gap and attempt to contribute to a better understanding of the finer details of the text. The goal is not to criticize a certain textbook or author, but to develop a way to categorize the different conceptions of Indian nation underpinning these textbooks. I focus on class VI textbooks as they introduce the student to the discipline of history in general and Indian history in particular.

According to the literature outlined above, there have been multiple attempts to understand the construction of the Indian nation. My analysis is based on a close reading of the text and a comparison between the three Class VI textbooks. This ‘text’ acts as “forensic evidence” (Hartley, 1993, p. 29) that documents the meaning making practices which have contributed towards imagining the nation. Written national histories in particular are well suited to this endeavor as they are, some argue, written for the very purpose of nation-building and identity construction (Sippy, 2012; Chakrabarty, 1992). Hartley says that this “forensic” method provides an alternative to binary thinking (1993, p. 9). Just one signifier cannot encompass the entire

gamut of meanings associated with an idea or object. Therefore, I focus attention on the ways in which the story of the nation is told in all iterations of the Class VI textbooks published by the NCERT (McKee, 2002, p. 15) and gauge varying viewpoints on the Indian nation by analyzing these textbooks written at multiple points in India's life as an independent nation. This allows me to unravel, highlight and contrast the points of disjuncture and similarity in the manner in which these different textbooks have represented the Indian nation.

### **The 'Nation' in NCERT Textbooks**

History-writing in India is rife with contestations. If India, as Kaviraj suggests "is not an object of discovery but of invention" (1992, p. 1), then history becomes a site where historians actively promote or dismiss certain notions of the Indian nation. By scrutinizing the elements of this exercise in historiography, I aim to uncover the underlying implications they have in shaping the representations of the nation. In the following section, I identify certain themes which emerge after a close reading of the texts that are pertinent to my research question – to analyze the notions of the Indian nation in Class VI NCERT History textbooks. The six broad themes are, namely – the importance of the study of history, names used to refer to the region, the use of the categories of country, nation and state as natural entities, understandings of Indian culture, portrayal of the contributions of women and finally the understanding of Hinduism, particularly how society was structured as per the caste system. I inquire into the manner in which these books describe these topics. Later, I draw from these themes to arrive at three broad viewpoints which can be inferred from each textbook respectively.

#### **Approach to Historiography**

The 1966 book, as stated by its editors in the preface, attempts to move away from "dynastic history" towards understanding the "forces, trends and institutions" which have formed the "history of the Indian people" (NCERT, 1966, Preface). They also give importance to adopting a scientific approach to the subject and understanding the "oneness of India and the evolution of Indian culture which transcends religions and regions" (Thapar, 1966, Preface). In the foreword of the 2006 book, the then director of the NCERT, Krishna Kumar states that the book attempts to engage the child as a "participant in learning" and not merely a receiver of bookish knowledge. He says that the book aims to bridge the gap between "school, home and community" (NCERT, 2006, p. iv), encouraging hands-on learning through contemplation and activities. In the same book, in a section titled "Why Study History?" Neeladri Bhattacharya, addressing his student readers, explains that an understanding of the past is crucial to understand the present. He says that history tells us about different worlds and explains how those worlds evolved into what they are today. The name of the 2006 textbook, *Our Pasts*, hints at the possibility of multiple understandings of how societies may have functioned. He emphasises that

history is about ordinary women and men as much as it is about great men. Furthermore, he highlights that history helps one develop skills to understand people who are unlike them.

At the beginning of the 1966 book, a section titled “The study of Indian history” highlights similar points about the importance of the past in understanding the present. However, a crucial distinction is Thapar’s focus on India or as she puts it “to know the story of your country” (1966, p. 12). It is perhaps important to note that in the first chapter of the 1966 book is a chart showing different Indian scripts such as ancient Brahmi, Tamil, Oriya, Bengali, and Devanagari. The sentence that is reproduced in different scripts can be translated as “India is a great country”. In contrast to Bhattacharya, she also notes that studying the past is like a game of treasure hunt, where one can follow a trail of clues which lead you to the “treasure,” or the understanding of “what went on in our country” (Thapar, 1966, p. 11). Contrary to the 1966 and 2006 books, which discuss the importance of history either in the first chapter or as a prologue before the chapters, the 2002 book does not discuss this in much detail.

These varied approaches to historiography underline their understanding of not only history in general, but also inform how they portray the Indian nation – as a syncretic culture which “transcends region and religion” as the 1966 book does or emphasizing on the subaltern narratives within the nation like the 2006 book tends to do. This difference in their approach is evident in the tables of contents of the respective textbooks. In the 1966 textbook, chapters are titled after empires and ages such as “The Mauryan Empire”, “The Age of the Guptas” and “Life in the Vedic Age”. Other chapters are titled after India, namely, “India after the Mauryas,” and “India and the World” (Thapar, 1966). This is a good example of the emphasis Thapar puts on India either as a geographical space or a political entity.

Makkhan Lal, author of the history section of the 2002 textbook, does not explicitly state his preferred kind of historiography. This can be construed as an attempt to present the material in the book as non-ideological or as merely factual information. It is noteworthy that perhaps the only instance where he is critical about historical interpretation is when he attempts to locate roots of the Indian civilization and establish its “unbroken” (Lal et al., 2002, p. 58) nature. He states that:

*On the basis of similarities between like same geographical areas, advanced civilization and religious practices many scholars think that RigVedic Culture and Harappan Culture are the same. However, some scholars do not agree with this, this issue can be resolved after the Harappan inscriptions have been deciphered (2002, p. 91; emphasis added).*

Even though he says the matter has not been resolved, the placement of the words ‘many’ and ‘some’ (italicized above) indicates that more people think that the Rig Vedic and Harappan

civilizations are the same. A closer look at the index of the book reveals a nationalist bent, as chapters are neatly divided into “Non-Indian Civilizations” which include the “Egyptian, Mesopotamian, Greek, Roman, Chinese and Iranian Civilizations” and “Indian Civilization” which includes the Harappan Civilization and the Vedic Civilization. It is important to note that the book speaks of an “Indian Civilization which has an unbroken history of 8000 years” (p. 58) because it finds continuity from the Harappan civilization until the present day, unlike other civilizations (except Chinese civilization) which have no connection to the past (2002, p. 58). Like in Thapar’s book, other chapter titles refer to India as either a geographic region or a political entity. It includes chapters like “Deccan and South India”, “India’s Cultural Contacts with the Outside World”, and makes references to great empires, as seen in the names “Mauryas”, “Sungas”, “The Gupta Empire”, and “The Era of Harsha” (Thapar, 1966).

In contrast, the 2006 book has chapters named “What Books and Burials Tell Us”, “New Questions and Ideas”, “Vital Villages and Towns” and “Buildings, Paintings and Books” among others. Even when kings and kingdoms are mentioned in the title, it is in combination with narrative themes; for example, “Kingdoms, Kings and the Early Republic”, “Ashoka, the Emperor who gave up War”, “New Empires and Kingdoms” and “Traders, Kings and Pilgrims” (NCERT, 2006). It can be inferred from the above discussion that in the 1966 textbook, reference to great events and men is used to present a homogenous narrative moving towards a coherent end. Meanwhile, the 2006 textbook focuses more on presenting the “little narratives” of life as it was lived by ordinary people. Perhaps, applying the distinction made by Duara (1995, p. 8), it could be said that in Thapar’s book, “nationalism is of the nation” and in Bhattacharya’s, it is merely a site where different views of the nation contest and negotiate with each other. Thapar adopts a nationalist approach to history writing which seeks to narrate a chain of events gradually realising the formation of a particular nation, while for the authors of the 2006 book, historiography is an exercise in presenting fragmented elements and ideas without attempting to let them define the nation in any grand, singular way.

In the foreword to the 1966 book, L.S. Chandrakant writes that it is important for children to “understand the mosaic of civilizations and cultures that underline (the) modern Indian nation” (Thapar, 1966, Foreword). He further states that the history of the country should be seen as one “that transcends region and religion” and enables the child to connect local community with the “the life of the nation”, and to “think in national terms”. Therefore, some similarities can be drawn between the 1966 textbook and the 2002 textbook in terms of their focus on great empires or the primacy given to the Indian nation. However, a noteworthy distinction between these two texts is the period to which they trace the emergence of an ‘Indian identity’ in the past. For the 1966 book, such a cohesive identity is first seen in the time of Ashoka and then finds firmer ground during the age of the Guptas. Meanwhile, for the 2002 book, Indian identity takes root right at the beginning, with the Harappan Civilization. The latter posits a significantly more ancient origin to Indian society and culture, which provides a different idea of the nation.

The manner in which the 2006 and 2002 books talk about the epics Ramayana and Mahabharata also indicates the differences in approach to history writing. For the 2006 book, these texts are “stories” (NCERT, 2006, p. 128) and therefore not histories. References are made to *Sanskrit* Ramayana and Mahabharata, which allow for the possibility of non-Sanskrit versions of these epics. The existence of “several versions of the Mahabharata and Ramayana, popular amongst people in different parts of the subcontinent” (NCERT, 2006, p. 128) is explicitly acknowledged in the textbook. However, in the 2002 textbook no reference is made to multiple versions. Furthermore, the 2002 book treats the Ramayana as a source of history when it claims that, “from the days of the Ramayana, India had close links with Sri Lanka” (Lal et al., 2002, p. 130).

### **India, that is Bharat: What’s in a Name?**

How one identifies the self has specific connotations. The 2006 textbook mentions that India and Bharat are “two words we often use for our country” today (NCERT, 2006, p. 4). It states that India is a term coined by the Iranians and Greeks after the river Indus and is about 2500 years old. The name Bharat takes after the “group of people” mentioned in the *Rig Veda* who lived in the north-west and dates back 3500 years (NCERT, 2006, p. 4). It could be said that this is true to the textbook’s motive of presenting multiple points of view on history. However, beyond providing this information, the significance of these two names is not discussed. Names are relevant because words are used to help “participate in the construction of reality” (Clémentin-Ojha, 2014, p. 1). The term Hindustan, which has a Persian origin (Clémentin-Ojha, 2014, p. 1), has been omitted from the 2006 book implying that today it is not used as a mainstream way of referring to the country. Perhaps, the textbook also draws from the Indian constitution which includes India and Bharat as the official names of the nation. Hence, even the 2006 textbook follows the lead of a grand text, falling short of the subaltern history orientation of its authors.

Reference to the name Bharat can be found in the 2002 book as well, albeit very briefly (NCERT, 2006, p. 89). It is mentioned in the context of the Rig Vedic people, who according to the book are called Bharata, and therefore “this country” is named Bharat (Lal et al., 2002, p. 89). A fill in the blanks question at the end of the chapter reads “Name of our country Bharat is after the name of Rig Vedic people \_\_\_\_” (Lal et al., 2002, p. 92). This name, i.e., Bharat, is thus accorded a primal position. Notably, it does not say that Bharat is *one* of the names used for the country. It traces the origin of the name of the country to the Rig Vedic people called Bharata. The implication follows that Rig Vedic people are the original inhabitants of this country which is called Bharat. The people “Bharata” become the nation “Bharat” hinting at the idea that there is one people and one nation, the foundations for which had been laid down in the Vedic period (which as I mentioned earlier, the book claims, might be the same as the Harappan civilization). Bharat for Hindu nationalists represents something pure and unadulterated, which was evident in

RSS Sarsanghchalak Mohan Bhagwat's comment on a heinous gang rape in Delhi where he said "Such crimes hardly take place in Bharat, but they frequently occur in India" (PTI, 2013). This follows from the premise that the original people (of Vedic origin) are irreproachable and so is the nation composed of those original inhabitants.

In her textbook, Thapar mentions that the term Hindu was coined by Arabs when they referred to the people of "Hind i.e., India" (1966, p. 108). Thapar does not mention the name Bharat in her book, perhaps attempting to move away from a term which has often been appropriated by Hindu nationalists because it finds its origins in an "indigenous" Sanskrit text rather than given to the land by "foreigners". This is not to say that Bharat is used only by Hindu nationalists. However, the importance given to a vernacular name in an English-language textbook is noteworthy. Furthermore, the genesis of this term is clearly traced to Hindu religious sources rather than secular sources, creating a sense of ownership and identification with the name.

### **Naturalization of the Category of "Country"**

Throughout the 1966 book, India is referred to as a natural entity that has existed since the beginning of time. It presents India not as an "imagined community" as Anderson (2006) would propose, but as a real distinguishable limited region which has existed since time immemorial – such that "the past of India goes back several thousand years" (Thapar, 1966, p. 11). Thus, the modern category of the nation is historicized. It is implied that the people living in this region had a sense of being "Indian" or a national identity. However, it is possible that the book was referring to only to the geographical space that is the Indian subcontinent rather than suggesting the presence of a national consciousness in India as a political and cultural entity. In contrast, the 2002 book asserts the latter claim. For example, it mentions that the whole of India was brought under "one political authority" by Chandragupta Maurya who defeated a number of kings and unified the country (Lal et al., 2002, p. 98). Thus, India is referred to as a unified political entity after this and its contact with other "south-east Asian countries in the 4<sup>th</sup>-5<sup>th</sup> century AD" is also noted (Lal et al., 2002, p. 109).

In the 1966 book, Thapar describes the observations about hot-tempered but honest "Indians" made by the Chinese traveler Hiuen Tsang (p. 119). This stitching together (Kaviraj, 1984, p. 3) of people by identifying them as "Indians" lends support to my claim that the land is portrayed as having a common national identity. The 2002 textbook also makes this argument claiming that "most of the invaders who came to India during this period accepted one Indian religion or the other. They absorbed the Indian culture and became a part of Indian society" (Lal et al., 2002, p. 112). Indian religions here include Hinduism, Buddhism or Jainism. Later, I discuss how this textbook portrays Jainism and Buddhism as merely sects within Hinduism.

In the 2006 book, the use of the word India as a nation is not that frequent. They have also clarified towards the beginning that they use “present day names of places where people lived in the past”. Often, the prefix “present-day” is added before places such as Kashmir, India, etc. are mentioned. Strikingly, Thapar uses a temporal prefix to identify only Pakistan which is referred to as “what is now Pakistan” (Thapar, 1966, p.32). The implications of this aberration in usage could be that, according to Thapar, India and Pakistan share a common culture and therefore when she refers to India, it is in the broad sense of the term which includes Pakistan. It may also be construed as an attempt to locate Pakistan in more recent history and assert India’s civilizational superiority.

### **Understanding of “Indian” Culture**

The 1966 book emphasizes the heterodox nature of Indian culture “which had a mosaic of civilization and cultures” (Thapar, 1996, Preface) and practiced different religions, languages and art forms among others. It contends that India was both “exporting its culture and importing a new culture” (Thapar, 1966, p. 141) through trade and the movement of people. A distinct theme of unity in diversity pervades her writing. In her discussion about “foreigners” such as the Central Asians, Shakas and Kushanas (Thapar, 1966, p. 93, p. 99, p. 101), she highlights how they adapted themselves to Indian culture (p. 93) and “enriched” it with new elements (p. 99). Indian culture is therefore presented as dynamic and open to additions while maintaining a strong core of ideas revolving around “Hinduism, Buddhism and Sanskrit” (Thapar, 1966, p. 135). This is reflected even when she states that eventually, these people settled in the country, so they were “no longer foreigners” (Thapar, 1966, p. 101). National histories, according to Pandey (1994), tend to “wipe out signs of struggle and violence to mark their success” and make nations appear natural (p. 190). What is overlooked in Thapar’s description of such a smooth process of assimilation is the possible struggle which may have ensued in the transition from being a ‘foreigner’ to ‘not a foreigner.’

This process of assimilation is emphasised to an even greater degree in the 2002 book which states that “invaders” gradually settled in India and became a part of society by “accepting Indian religions and way of life” (Lal et al., 2002, p. 112). Therefore, it imagines a static conception of culture which is characterized in a unidirectional manner without the occurrence of any reciprocal exchange. There is a special emphasis on “Indian religions” which have been identified as Hinduism, Buddhism, and Jainism earlier in the book. Such an understanding of integration in the Indian society may be problematic for people of “non-Indian” religions who reside in India today and would not belong to the Indian society according to this book’s definition. Additionally, in the 2002 book, direct connections are made between Harappan culture and present-day India especially in the area of religious practices. Unlike the 1966 or the 2006 books, it states that the “pipal tree” and “Siva” were worshipped then as is “done today

also” (Lal et al., 2002, p. 84). This situates a distinctly Hindu practice in ancient Indian civilization and indicates continuity until the present day.

Interestingly, the 2002 book does not list the Aryan settlement as a possible reason for the decline of the Harappan Civilization (Lal et al, p. 86). In fact, the book says nothing about the Aryans, or as Thapar (1966) identifies them, those that “came from outside India, from north-eastern Iran and the region around the Caspian Sea” and “first settled in Punjab” (p. 43). It shows a linear, undisturbed progression from the Harappan to the Vedic civilization unlike Thapar’s book, which suggests hostile relations between the incoming Aryans and already resident Dasyus (1966, p. 48). Additionally, as mentioned earlier, the 2002 book also argues that the Rig Vedic and Harappan civilizations are the same owing to “similar geographic areas, religious practices and advanced nature of civilization” (Lal et al., 2002, p. 89, p. 134). By not mentioning the Aryans, the book strengthens this claim that the Harappan and Vedic civilizations are the same. Such purposeful “forgetting” as Ernst Renan said, “or even say historical error, is an essential factor in the creation of a nation” (1992, para 9).

The difference between the 1966 and 2002 books is perhaps most evident in their appraisal of the cow in Vedic life. Both books assign the cow a place of great reverence and honour. However, Thapar mentions that beef was served to distinguished guests (1966, p. 45). This presents a very different picture from the 2002 book, according to which the cow was regarded as a sacred animal, not to be killed or injured, the punishment for which would be “expulsion from the kingdom or death” (Lal et al., 2002, p. 89). Therefore, people who engage in such practices are effectively rendered not worthy of residing in the community, which as stated by the author, is the ancient Indian civilization. Although this claim in the 2002 textbook has been discredited for being inaccurate through references to Vedic texts (Noronha, 1994, p. 1447; Jha, 2002), it should be placed in light of the book’s insistence on drawing parallels between ancient civilizations and present day society and its implications in Hindutva ideology. In Hindutva, the cow is both a marker of property and a sacred symbol (Pandey, 1991, p. 3004).

A perceptible shift can be noticed within Thapar’s text regarding the term “Indian culture”. Until the Maurya period, culture is qualified with the denomination Harappa or Vedic and how they contributed to Indian culture. After this, Maurya or Gupta culture is spoken in terms of being “Indian culture”. This is perhaps because of the vastness of these empires (which connotes pre-given geography of the nation) or alternatively hints at a consolidation of what constitutes “Indian culture” at large. This consolidation is similar to what Kaviraj (1992) identifies as the depiction of nationalism in post-colonial nationalist historiography as something that arises steadily and then moves to its destiny (1992, p. 2). The emergence of a single political identity, which is implied in this shift from Harappa and Vedic to Indian, hints at the development of the idea of nationalism which “stitched together”, forms groups that formerly “would not have considered themselves a single people” (Kaviraj, 1992, p. 3).

## Women in History

Women and culture have often been placed as adjacent and overlapping categories. An extension of the description of Indian culture is the description of the manner in which society was structured. I have tackled the illustration of the caste system in a later subsection. In this subsection, I seek to highlight what role the textbooks posit women played in society in the past and the implications it has on the Indian nation today. Before going into specific examples from the text, it is important to observe that the 1966 book does not use gender neutral language while the 2006 book does. This could be a result of the convention of the times these books were written in. The difference between the 1966 book and the 2006 book is evident in the tables of contents. The former has two chapters called “Early Man” and “Man Takes to City Life” while in the latter, a similar chapter is called “On the Trail of the Earliest People”. In these chapters, Thapar rarely mentions women when noting an important discovery or invention. They merely help the men in activities like farming (1966, p. 25), or wear ornaments made for them by the Chalcolithic man (1966, p. 25). Thus, a case can be made that it portrays women not as actively involved in the civilization but merely accessories to it. This is in contrast with the 2006 book which employs language that portrays women as doers – hunters, craftspeople, farmers etc. It also urges the reader to think whether men and women did the same tasks or were there certain practices done exclusively by men or women. The 2002 book does not encourage such critical thinking. Although it usually employs gender neutral language [barring a few instances where the word craftsmen is used instead of craftspeople (Lal et al., p. 94, p. 96)], women and their achievements are mostly absent from the text.

Thapar says that society was patriarchal in the Vedic period but women were “held in respect” and educated sometimes (1966, p. 45). Women become passive objects who are deified (respected as Thapar claims) without being included in decision making. The 2002 book makes no mention of the patriarchal system but claims that women were well-respected, and active as their husband’s partners in social and religious ceremonies (p. 90). However, the question that arises is whether the glorification of womanhood translate into a better position for women in the public domain. The 1966 and 2002 textbooks always situate women in either a private or religious setting. They are never shown as active participants in the political or economic domain of life. In the 2002 book, after the author establishes that women were well treated, the very next sentence reads, “the father’s property was equally divided amongst all his children” (Lal et al., p. 90). No mention is made of the mother’s property or if she had any at all, which signifies an exclusion from the economic realm of society.

The 2002 book places value on the institution of marriage and the unit of the family, stating that “child marriage was unknown” (Lal et al., 2002, p. 90) during the Vedic period. Such a statement can be viewed as a deliberate counter-representation or “reverse stereotyping” or an attempt to

create an idealized image (Sippy, 2012). Child marriage is a grave concern in India. The book, I argue, attempts to negate this negative image by replacing it with a positive image (Sippy, 2012). The book discusses these ideas in the chapter on the Vedic civilization, which is implicitly indicated to be the beginning of Indian civilization (Lal et al, 2002, p. 91), thereby idealizing the very foundation of the nation itself.

The 2006 book explains that women were grouped together in the same category as *shudras* and not allowed to study the Vedas (NCERT, 2006, p. 56). Apart from this one reference, to apply Chakravarti's (2020) criticism of the practice of social history to this textbook, there is no attempt to "analyse the way gender, structures, ideologies and social and economic power structures intersect" (p. 15). Marriage alliances between kingdoms are mentioned in the 1966 and 2002 books as a tactic which was often used to consolidate power. Thus, women are merely presented as a pawn in the larger narrative of power and empire building. In the context of these marriages, Thapar discusses how Cambodian princesses married to Indian rulers were persuaded to adopt Indian customs, which were soon followed by the nobles of her land (1966, p. 135). This highlights the role of women as carriers of culture. Partha Chatterjee (1989) identifies that this burden of culture makes the women a field for the reproduction of the "national culture". If the women can be a carrier of culture, it is within them that the culture is purest. Even though she is not an agent in creating that culture, she is an important transmitter. For the perpetuity of the nation and its sanctity, the regulation of women therefore becomes imperative (Chatterjee, 1989).

### **Understanding of Hinduism**

In recent times, debates about Hindutva and Hinduism have become prominent while defining the nation of India. Many proponents of Hindutva, when making claims about the glory of ancient India and the subsequent darkness of Mughal rule, adopt the periodization of Indian history into Hindu, Muslim, and British, as set by colonial historians (Bose & Jalal, 2004). Therefore, it is useful to explore how these textbooks, written in post-colonial India, portray Hinduism and its position in ancient society.

First, I will discuss the origin of the word Hindu as described by the three textbooks. The 2006 textbook states that Arabs and Iranians used the word Hindu to "refer to the people who lived to the east of the river Indus and to "their cultural practices, including religious beliefs" (NCERT, 2006, p. 108). Thus, the term Hindu refers to not only a geographic space but is also a marker of culture and most importantly, religion. If the cultural and religious beliefs of the people living east of the Indus can be classified as "Hindu", then what implication does this have for Buddhism and Jainism, which also had a considerable number of followers at the time? It could be inferred that such a statement suggests that these religions are considered as sects which are critical of some Hindu practices, but largely fall within Hinduism. A similar idea can be inferred in the 2002 book, which attributes the rise of Buddhism and Jainism to a "gradual moving away

from ritual sacrifice to intellectual salvation” (Lal et al., 2002, p. 96), hinting that these are critical traditions complementary to Hinduism. It is mentioned that the “philosophical tradition of Upanishads and six philosophies in Hinduism quest for salvation through knowledge” gave rise to Jainism and Buddhism (p. 135).

In a similar vein, the 2006 textbook mentions the term “later Hinduism” (NCERT, p. 107) to discuss the popular Bhakti movement. The Bhakti movement is portrayed as a subversive form of individual worship under Hinduism which is more accessible to non-Brahmins (NCERT, 2006, 107). Hinduism itself is presented as self-critical, fostering Bhakti as well as philosophical treatises such as the Upanishads (NCERT, 2006, p. 67; Thapar, 1966, p. 50). As Hinduism forms a basic kernel of Indian culture, at least according to Thapar (1966, p. 108), this presents the image of ancient India as an accommodating civilization.

Hinduism is mentioned in Thapar’s textbook first in the context of the of the Gupta empire and is regarded as a “powerful religion” (1966, p. 108). She says that “Hindus were worshippers of Shiva, Shakti and Vishnu” (p. 108). The religion of the Aryans is called the Vedic religion and not referred to as Hinduism. However, a number of similar practices such as the Varna system (p. 63, p. 106) and religious sacrifices (p. 108) such as the Ashvamedha are mentioned in both sections. This presents a rather unclear image of whether Vedic religion is synonymous with Hinduism and leaves the origins of the religion unclear. In contrast, other religions such as Buddhism (p. 65), Jainism (p. 63), Christianity (p. 89), Zoroastrianism (p. 121) and Islam (p. 139) are all given a clear origin and pattern of spread. In tandem with the observation that India is presented as an inherently coherent cultural unity, this could imply that Hinduism in some form or the other, with an undetermined starting point, is organic to India. The 2002 book is clearer about this and calls Hinduism “Sanatana Dharma, i.e., the Eternal Spiritual Tradition of India” (Lal et al., p. 132). Unlike Thapar’s book, it traces the beginnings of Hinduism to the Harappan civilization which it claims elsewhere is the origin of Indian civilization (p. 133). Thus, Hinduism assumes the place of the original religion of the people of the land.

Apart from the inaccessibility of Sanskrit and the excessive ritualization of Vedic/Hindu religion, a feature of Indian society showed in a somewhat negative light in the 1966 and 2006 textbooks is the *varna* system. I say somewhat because the material and economic repercussions of caste are barely discussed. Caste is viewed as mostly harmonious (Thapar, 1966, p. 107) with one shortcoming being “unkindness” (Thapar, 1966, p. 107) towards the *shudras* and untouchables. The Varna system is described as having become progressively more rigid and irrational (p. 61) in the chapters on the Vedic Age (p. 45), the Mauryas (p. 61) and finally the Gupta period (p. 107). This can be inferred as a partial legitimization of the *varna* system as an inherently neutral system of classification which was later adulterated. The 2002 book is the least critical of the varna system, a claim supported by the absence of any negative words used except “discriminatory” while referring to the caste system. Further, the book makes a distinction

between *varna* and *jati*. *Varna* according to the book is based on worldly occupation not birth, while *jati* was a result of these occupations becoming more rigid and hereditary in nature. It acknowledges that the *varna* and *jati* system became rigid and discriminatory after the 600 B.C, i.e., in the post-Vedic period (Lal et al., 2002, p. 94) but does not elaborate on the nature of the discrimination or which people it affected the most. It even mentions that each individual “irrespective of caste” was to follow the *varnashram dharma*, or four stages of life as a student, householder, hermit and wanderer prescribed by Hinduism, which neglects the fact *shudras* and outcastes were not allowed to follow this practice (Lal et al., 2002, p. 134). Like in the case of child marriage, this is also a deliberate attempt to replace negative notions of caste discrimination in Indian society with a more positive image (Sippy, 2012).

The discussion above can be related to three conceptions of the Indian nation based on the two categories of nature of constituents and ordering of constituents. Nature of constituents, as the name suggests refers to the units which make the nation – its people and their culture. Ordering of constituents refers to the ways in which these units are arranged to form certain social and political structures. Together, they produce the overall image of the nation.

In the 1966 book, the people are heterogeneous but they interact and gradually form a coherent whole, which is evident from the underlying ‘unity in diversity’ theme found in the book. Indian culture is described as dynamic, and a result of “mosaic of civilizations and cultures” (Thapar, 1966, Preface) to “enrich Indian culture” (Thapar, 1966, p. 99). Therefore, it can be said that the collective entity of the nation is formed because of a gradual morphing of diverse people under one umbrella, most clearly stated in the explanation of how Central Asian “foreigners” (Thapar, 1966, p. 93) not only “added to” or “influenced Indian culture” but also “became a part of the population” (p. 99, p. 93). The nation remains singular but reaches this singularity through reciprocal interactions between diverse groups. Further, because of the hierarchical representation of society in this textbook, one group often overshadows the contributions of other groups in the understanding of the nation.

In the 2002 book, there is only one constitutive element, i.e., one people and one culture. The nation is an organic result of this uniformity. The ordering is strictly hierarchical like in the 1966 book, but the source of this unity is cultural, as opposed to the primacy of political life in the 1966 book. The latter distinction between the two books is most clearly seen in the period to which they trace the origin of Indian culture – to 3000 BC or Harappan civilization in the case of the 2002 textbook and to the 4<sup>th</sup> century BC or Mauryan civilization in the case of the 1966 textbook. In the 2006 textbook, heterogeneous people and cultures co-exist without necessarily undergoing combination and reconfiguration which might change their character. They are ordered in no particular hierarchy, which represents an understanding of society from below, and an emphasis on everyday lives and histories.

## **Conclusion**

In my analysis, I have identified six broad and often overlapping themes of 1) the importance of the study of history, 2) names used to refer to the region, 3) the use of the categories of country, nation and state as natural entities, 4) understanding of Indian culture, 5) focus on the contributions of women and 6) the understanding of Hinduism. It is clear that the textbooks take different approaches towards history writing: the 1966 textbook adopts a fairly secular but nationalist position (Thapar, 1966), the 2002 textbook a religious (Hindu) nationalist position (Lal et al., 2002) and the 2006 book attempts to highlight everyday narratives (NCERT, 2006). Consequently, there are differences in the representation of the nation apparent in each textbook. According to Ashis Nandy, history always has a “frame of reference” as it seeks to uncover realities of past times (Nandy, 1995, p 48). He identifies themes such as “return”, “progress” or “stages” (Nandy, 1995, p. 48). The 1966 textbook combines the themes of progress and stages, as it represents a gradual evolution into the nation of India which is diverse yet cohesive. Meanwhile, the theme of return is emphasized in the 2002 book as it invokes ideas of the continuity of Indian civilization since ancient times. It is difficult to place the 2006 book in any of these categories. This is not to argue that the book does not have a frame of reference. However, its frame of reference is more dispersed than the other textbooks making it difficult to define accurately. It documents alternative histories, but these histories contribute to the idea of the nation.

Dipesh Chakraborty argued that, “history’ as a knowledge system is firmly embedded in institutional practices that invoke the nation-state at every step.” (1992, p 19). Similarly, I have shown, by engaging in a close reading of the three textbooks, that through omission, inclusion and emphasis on certain narratives, they embody different representations of the history of the nation. These varying representations highlight the points of disjuncture and similarity in their representation and understanding of the Indian nation at different points of time in independent India. These textbooks are meant for eleven-year-old children and can influence their mental image of the nation. The way history is recounted in these textbooks is important because by virtue of being sanctioned by the state, they claim authority over the nation’s past. But perhaps, it is most important because they have the capacity to shape young minds on a large scale.

## **Acknowledgements**

\* I wish to thank Vaidyanatha Gundlupet who supervised this research project for his guidance, encouragement and feedback at every stage of the process. I am grateful to Radhika Seshan, Alok Oak, Suchetana Banerjee, Maanvi Khurana, Qandeel Qazi and Nayantara Bharteeya for reading my paper and providing useful comments. I also thank the anonymous reviewers for their helpful comments.

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