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Full Text

'Palpable Falsehoods'

'Some members of the Indian American community are, we should recognize, seeking to push through changes in textbooks which no serious group of scholars of Indian history would view as anything other than palpable falsehoods.'

VINAY LAL

Full text of the letter by Professor Vinay Lal to the President, California State Board of Education

27 January 2006

Ms. Glee Johnson
President, California State Board of Education
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Dear Ms. Johnson and Members of the State Board of Education,

I write to you in as a professor of Indian history at UCLA, as an Indian American presently resident in California who, as the father of two school-going children, is also heavily invested in the quality of education offered in state schools, and -- last but not least -- as a Hindu who is keenly aware of the immensely diverse strands of belief, religious practice, and history that have gone into the making of what is today called "Hinduism". I am at this moment concerned with a review, commenced by the California State Board of Education a few months ago, of those portions of school textbooks pertaining to ancient India, and wish to affirm, in the most unequivocal terms, my unstinting support of the three member faculty review committee (or content review panel) comprised of Michael Witzel (Harvard), James Heitzman (UC Davis), and Stanley Wolpert (UCLA). I understand that the Hindu Education Foundation and the Vedic Foundation, whose views have largely been endorsed by Professor Shiva Bajpai of California State University (Northridge), have agitated for certain changes with which the Content Review Panel (hereafter CRP) is not in agreement, and I should like to bring to your attention my views, which closely correspond with those of the CRP, on some disputed matters.

Before proceeding, however, to a brief discussion of some of the proposed changes, I would like to alert you to some extremely significant features of this debate. First, though I speak as an Indian-American, Hindu, resident of California, and a concerned citizen, in this matter I would like to be viewed in the first instance as an historian of India and a scholar of Indian studies more broadly. I find it admirable that the State Board of Education should permit citizens of the state to weigh in with their opinions about school textbooks, and it is the procedures allowed by the State Board and under state law that have permitted so many Indian Americans, whether Hindu or otherwise, as well as those who are not Indian Americans, to express their views on the content of school textbooks. This is, after all, what it means to work under a democratic system and to allow citizens a significant voice in matters that touch upon such vital domains as education, schooling, family, and religion. By the same token, I believe it incumbent upon the State Board to recognize that not all opinions are equal, and that ultimately the decision about the text to be incorporated in any textbook is best left to the determination of those scholars who have devoted their working lives to a study of the subjects in question. Not only does the CRP consist of three senior scholars at leading American universities, but their views were endorsed in a letter to the Board signed by over 140 members of the profession, many of them senior scholars at leading research

universities around the world, including the United States and India, who specialize in the study of India and South Asia. As far as I am aware, the Hindu Education Foundation and Vedic Foundation and their supporters do not number among their ranks any academic specialists in Indian history or religion other than Professor Bajpai himself. It is a remarkable fact that, in a state which has perhaps the leading public research university system in the United States, these two foundations could not find a single professor of Indian history or religion within the UC system (with its ten campuses) to support their views. Indeed, it would be no exaggeration to say that they would be hard pressed to find a single scholar at any research university in the United States who would support their views.

Secondly, I would urge you to reject the attempt among some members of the Indian American community to project themselves as Hindus who, by virtue of being Hindus, are entitled to have their views given precedence over the views of scholars who may not be Hindus. Their view that as practitioners of Hinduism they know best is, I regret to say, indicative of the fact they understand little the religion of which they claim to be authentic specimens. The genius of Hinduism resides precisely in the fact that it is a polycentric, extraordinarily diverse, and decentered faith, and there are more kinds of Hindus than one could conjure even in one's most fanciful moments. As a Hindu, I do not recognize many of their claims as valid. It is also a fact that, like every other religion known to us in the world, Hinduism has practiced its own forms of discrimination, and I can say with certainty that the views of those who have been marginalized by upper-caste Hinduism do not correspond with the views of many members of the Indian American community who have written to you and other state officials. To admit all of this is not in the least to deny the fact that there were egregious, even offensive, errors in the India units of the textbooks, but the CRP did, of course, agree with many of the proposed edits. My own work, and that of most scholars presently working on Indian history and religion, is informed by the understanding that Hinduism and ancient Indian history were often grossly misrepresented in scholarly works in the past, but the whole endeavor of the last three decades has been to avoid these kinds of mistakes. In the present controversy, it would be highly misleading to suggest, as the Vedic Foundation and Hindu Education Foundation and their supporters have done, that their opponents have a derogatory view of India or of Hinduism or that their views are somehow intrinsically prejudiced. Nothing could be further from the truth.

Thirdly, it is important to stress the fact that the changes proposed by the Hindu Education Foundation and Vedic Foundation, and endorsed by Professor Bajpai, were also sought to be introduced into history textbooks in India itself when the Bharatiya Janata Party, known for its outspoken advocacy of Hindu supremacy, came into political power and started working closely with avowedly Hindu supremacist organizations such as the Vishwa Hindu Parishad (VHP) and Rashtriya Swayamsevak Sangh (RSS). These "debates" on Indian history textbooks have gone through many rounds in India. The Hindu nationalists in India sought to introduce, indeed sometimes with success in certain states as Gujarat, which has been governed by Hindu nationalists over the last several years, changes that can only be described as reprehensible. It is a well documented fact that, in the history school textbooks in Gujarat, Hitler is upheld as an example of a leader who was disciplined and valiantly lifted the country out of its torpor, just as these history books conveniently forget to mention the fact that Mahatma Gandhi, the greatest Indian of the day, was assassinated by a Hindu nationalist. No one, needless to say, is suggesting that these are the changes sought by members of the Indian American community. But it is worthwhile remembering that the same history textbooks try to suggest to students that the caste system was never oppressive, that women in India were endowed with equal rights as men, that Hinduism is inherently tolerant while the Semitic faiths are inherently intolerant, and that India is the origin of all the great accomplishments in human civilization. These are precisely the changes, among others, which the Hindu Education Foundation (HEF) and Vedic Foundation (VF) are keen to implement. The textbooks created a scandal in India, besides introducing havoc into the educational system, and it is worthwhile pondering what the consequences might be of introducing ill-founded claims in history textbooks in California. I may add that I have treated this subject at considerable length in my book, *The History of History: Politics and Scholarship in Modern India* (Oxford University Press, 2003), and I am prepared, if asked, to furnish you with as many citations as you might require about the nature of debates over history textbooks in India.

While it is not possible for me to dwell at any great length on the changes recommended by Prof. Bajpai and disputed by the CRP, it would be instructive, I believe, to look briefly at three such changes, pertaining to the role of women in ancient India, the nature of the caste system, and the early history of Aryans in India. On the question of women, one of HEF's proposed edits, approved by Prof. Bajpai, would alter the passage in the Glencoe/McGraw Hill textbook (p. 245), which presently reads as "Men had many more rights than women" to the following: "Men had different duties (dharma) as well as rights than women. Many women were among the sages to whom the Vedas were revealed." The *Upanishads* mention not "many" women sages, but only a couple -- indeed, only one whose name appears constantly, Gargi. More importantly, all scholars of ancient Indian history are agreed that the position of men and women in ancient Indian society was vastly unequal. The view of someone such as D. N. Jha, a formidable authority on ancient India who has taught at the University of Delhi for some decades, can reasonably be considered as representative. Writing in his recent work, *Early India* (Delhi, 2004), Jha states of ancient India that "the Brahmanical thinkers defined the duty of each caste, and imposed social, economic, and political disabilities on the shudras; they also laid down injunctions undermining the position of women" (p. 92).

Characterizing women as having different (rather than fewer) rights than men cannot be viewed other than as a gross attempt to whitewash the history of patriarchy in ancient India. It is instructive that Mahatma Gandhi, who has often been criticized by secular and Marxist scholars in India as having a romantic conception of ancient Indian civilization, wrote with sadness and characteristic bluntness the following in 1926: "What can women have done that even men like Tulsidas [a renowned saint] have used insulting epithets for them? Whether it was the fault of Tulsidas or of the times, the blemish is nevertheless there." He adds, referring to an earlier period, "The ancient laws were made by seers who were men. The women's experience, therefore, is not represented in them." (Raghavan Iyer, ed., *The Moral and Political Writings of Mahatma Gandhi*, Oxford [1987], Vol. 3, pp. 393-94; emphasis added) Should we then, following the logic of the HEF and the Vedic Foundation, view Gandhi as a self-hating Hindu hostile to his own religion and culture? It would, of course, be absurd to do so, but his views on this matter are precisely those which the CRP and South Asian academics are supporting. Stressing difference rather than inequality, as the HEF and Prof Bajpai propose, would be rather like saying that African Americans and white Americans in Jim Crow South had different rights. We all know that "difference" here is only a way of disguising the brutal truth that white Americans exercised dominance over African Americans in virtually every domain of life.

On the nature of the caste system in India, the edits proposed by the HEF and endorsed by Professor Bajpai, if accepted into the textbooks, would convey to students the exceedingly erroneous impression that caste should simply be viewed as another form of social stratification, similar to class distinctions that have existed in every society known to human beings, when in fact the caste system - particularly if we understand it through the categories of *varna* and *jati* - was, and is, distinct to the Indian subcontinent. Much worse, the proposed edits seek to convey the idea, to which students are alerted by the bland assertion of the fact that in modern India *untouchability* is outlawed by the Constitution, that the caste system did not entail systematic forms of discrimination. All the evidence points to the contrary fact, namely that the caste system condemned millions of people to permanent and relentless servitude, and though legislation forbids such discrimination today, the position of many Dalits remains substantially unaltered. The list of authorities here is long enough that it would take several pages, but for ancient India, one could turn to the works of D. N. Jha, Romila Thapar, Uma Chakravarti, D. D. Kosambi, J. H. Hutton, B. R. Ambedkar, and P. V. Kane; for modern India, one could turn to B. R. Ambedkar, Gail Omvedt, Kancha Ilaiah, Dipankar Gupta, Andre Beteille, among many others. It is astonishing that the word "Dalit", which derives from the root "dal", meaning scattered, split, and broken up (thus referring to people whose worldviews and experiences were scattered to the wind, people so abused that they could not remain whole) which is correctly used in one of the present textbooks to refer to the lowest strata of Indian society, should have been deleted by Professor Bajpai with the observation that only a small strata of the lower castes in Maharashtra call themselves as such. Dalit is, in fact, the word with which the people formerly known as the "Untouchables", and now numbering something in the vicinity of 15-20% of India's population,

prefer to designate themselves. If we cannot even do them the simple dignity of allowing them to name themselves - and there is almost no greater power than the power to name - how can we expect that we will do their history justice?

This brings me to the final point. At various places the HEF and Vedic Foundation have submitted that the narrative of Aryan migrations to India, which is about as established a fact as any that one can encounter in the human sciences, is erroneous. The Aryans came to India most likely from a place somewhere in the vicinity of present-day Georgia and the Ural Mountains, more broadly from Central Asia, and scholars, including Indians, Europeans, Americans, as well as those who are designated as "liberal", "Marxist", or "positivists", all accept this as a fact which has been the foundation of huge amounts of scholarship in such areas as comparative religion, comparative and Indo-European linguistics, mythology, and history. The scholars who are best qualified to deliver an opinion on this matter are those who have devoted a lifetime of study to this subject, who are conversant with at least a couple of ancient languages and skilled in reading ancient texts and inscriptions, and I do not believe that the alleged evidence of some unknown geneticist, or the strong sentiments of a community some of whose members would like to believe that Aryans left India for other parts of the world, should be viewed as constituting evidence of the need to overturn the long established view on this matter. If the Curriculum Commission and the State Board of Education find themselves torn by the appeals of both sides, it would be easy enough a matter to consult specialists in Indo-European studies who are not Indianists by profession and can therefore be viewed as impartial. I would be pleased to furnish the names of some such specialists.

In conclusion, it is understandable that Indian Americans, and in particular the Hindus among them, should view themselves as concerned about representations of their history and religion which they find to be inaccurate and offensive. No one, least of all members of the CRP or specialists of South Asian studies who for years have been engaged in combating such representations in scholarly and popular books, journals, and the media, is disputing the fact that history textbooks should reflect the history, culture and religion of a people as accurately as possible, and with the cultural sensitivity to which every group is entitled. *But that, we should be clear, is no longer the issue.* To understand the present objectives of the Hindu Education Foundation and Vedic Foundation and their supporters in the community, it is necessary to recognize the fact that they are inspired by the similar Hindu nationalist agenda which has gained a significant political voice in India since the early 1990s and which has created severe disruptions in India's educational system. The history that such nationalists would impose upon students is invariably a sanitized one, cleansed of unpleasant facts about systematic forms of discrimination and exploitation which are as much a part of human history as the aspiration for freedom and liberation from oppression. Moreover, the achievements of Indian civilization are great enough that we should not have to manufacture evidence and pretend that the Aryans originated in India and showered the gift of civilization on all other peoples. Emboldened by the economic rise of India, the growing awareness in the world of India's present and past role in world history, and their own growing numbers in the United States as well their extraordinary affluence, some members of the Indian American community are, we should recognize, seeking to push through changes in textbooks which no serious group of scholars of Indian history would view as anything other than palpable falsehoods.

This matter has now gone well beyond California, and people in the US, India, and wherever there are significant Indian communities will be looking to see how a resolution is achieved. I am afraid that California's school system will, among such people, fall into considerable ill-repute if the changes sought to be imposed by the Hindu Education Foundation and Vedic Foundation are accepted by the State Board of Education. I very much hope that the State Board will not be swayed by the consideration that the demands, even when wholly unreasonable, made by an ethnic and religious community should be acceded to merely because failure to do so will be viewed by some members of that community as injurious to their sentiments. In the last analysis, if the purpose of the textbooks is to impart as accurate a view of the past as is possible, and if we should wish to do our students justice and turn them into citizens capable of reflecting about such matters as equality and inequality, justice and injustice, then it becomes imperative that the State

Board of Education, the Curriculum Commission, and other bodies should only be guided by considerations of what constitutes a true body of knowledge.

I am available to answer any further queries you may have, to furnish evidence on behalf of the arguments advanced in this letter and by members of the CRP, or to otherwise make myself available to you for further consultation if you should so desire. Please do not hesitate to contact me. And I thank you for indulging me for so long.

Yours sincerely,

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