

## **Learning History: What is the Alternative?**

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In the ongoing debate about Social Studies textbooks for schools, it should be remembered that there are alternatives to what NCERT is offering. This report is based on my experiences using an alternative series of Social Studies textbooks for Classes 6-8 brought out by the Bhopal based NGO, Eklavya.

Imagine a Social Studies class in which the desks have been pushed together to make groups of about 5 students. In each group the students are busy discussing with each other, peering into atlases, searching through an index, and noting down their friends' opinions. Some groups are using atlases to find out the names of the present day countries and cities that Ibn Battuta travelled through, given a map that shows the places as they were 800 years ago. Other groups are analysing passages from Ibn Battuta's writing, and trying to decide which of his statements may be exaggerated or untrue. Other groups are examining pictures made in Ibn Battuta's time in different parts of Asia and Africa in order to compare the kinds of clothes people in different places wore at that time. And then there is one more group that is writing a poem that consists of questions they think Ibn Battuta may have wondered about during his travels.

The classroom is by no means quiet. But there is also no shouting and no sense of disorder – all the students are very busy. There is not a single student sitting bored in a corner. There is not a single student misbehaving. The class is full of children's voices. The teacher is silent – she has joined one of the groups and is herself making a list of the countries Ibn Battuta passed through.

Needless to say, this class is quite different from the normal history classes in which the teacher reads and explains the textbook and then writes the answers to the questions for the students to copy and memorise for homework.

Some time back, I was conducting such a class (for Class 6 students), when one of the senior history teachers stopped by (upon the Principal's request) to see what was going on.

I also showed her some questions these students had been answering for exams. There were questions like:

“Look at the following rock painting and list the things it tells you about the stone age people who drew it.”

“You have been given three different, contradictory accounts of how Alexander died – from a textbook, an encyclopaedia, and an internet site. Compare these three accounts and tell which one you think is the most plausible and why.”

“Compare a war between two Aryan janas with a war between two modern countries.”

After observing for some time, the teacher told me what she thought about the class. She was hemming and hawing – obviously there was something she didn't like about the class. Finally she got to the point. “Well, it's all very well,” she said, “but the problem is, what will happen when these students come to the upper classes? They'll be questioning everything!”

I couldn't help smiling.

Maybe it is time that we step back and consider what are we teaching and why are we teaching. The objective of putting “knowledge” into students brains so that they can regurgitate it on exams sounds too simplistic, old-fashioned, and impossible. Wouldn't a more realistic goal be to prepare students to think for themselves, analyse, and solve problems? These are skills that will be useful not only in competitive exams, but also in varied situations that will arise throughout their lives. How about encouraging the students to be interested in the subject and to want to find out more, and helping them learn the skills necessary to find out more? After all, however you define it, knowledge is infinite and it is impossible to know everything. Rather than trying to “learn” (i.e. remember) everything, wouldn't it be better to learn to keep investigating? And yes, to

keep comparing past and present, and to keep analysing and questioning - even questioning what authorities in books and elsewhere tell you! Isn't that one of the most important reasons to study history?

One of the biggest problems with the teaching that is currently going on in typical classrooms is that social sciences are presented as a series of facts to remember. There is hardly a hint that social sciences may actually consist of contradictory ideas and hypotheses about places, past events, and present situations. What I think is interesting about social sciences - and what I know children also find interesting - is how and why we form these ideas, and the arguments and evidence people present to discuss, form, defend, and change their ideas.

For example, I have heard Class 6 students having an excellent animated discussion about what a "good king" is, and whether there has ever been such a thing as a good king. A Class 5 student in my class has asked probing questions about whether people from certain religions eat certain kinds of meat and how and why such customs are formed. Recently small groups of Class 7 students came to interesting and different conclusions when discussing whether various countries and kingdoms in the past and in the present are sovereign states.

The other big problem with history teaching is the point of view that is used. Should students be expected to merely hear, remember, and repeat the stories of past leaders and dynasties and conquests and their dates? And should these be the stories as told through the eyes of those leaders? Or these leaders? Or their enemies? Or through the eyes of an ordinary person who lived in the past? (or in the present?)

It is inevitable that the stories will be different depending on who is telling them. There is no such thing as an objective account of history. It is impossible to present all points of view without emphasising some and de-emphasising others, making some sound more reasonable, and others less reasonable.

The best we can do is to try to acknowledge and understand our point of view and consider whether we are correct or whether we should change. We can try to understand other points of view and support those that after rational analysis we agree with. If history textbooks were written with this objective, perhaps they could help us to both understand ourselves and change ourselves and our society.

My idea of a really good textbook would be one in which students are presented with a lot of primary evidence, data, maps, charts, figures, and pictures. Wouldn't it be exciting to analyse illustrations from the Akbarnama in order to understand something about the people during Mughal times? How about asking students to compare maps to find out how things changed instead of just telling them? And most important, the material should be selected from a people's point of view.

But what has the NCERT presented us with instead? It seems they are trying to bend the students' psyche towards a certain point of view by filling their brains with a series of (often self-contradictory) "facts" and moralistic statements. They seem like self-defeating, insecure players in the world's latest game for global capitalism, trying to proclaim that their vision of India (as a Hindu Rashtriya) is and always has been the greatest.

In the new textbooks there is not a single question that goes beyond the level of merely asking students to remember something that has been stated in the text. There is not a single question that asks students to analyse or compare or think for themselves.

One of the first things that the NCERT tried to remove from the classroom was a discussion about why Guru Tegh Bahadur had been killed by Aurangzeb. They did not want students to see that different people have differing opinions and that it is difficult to find out what has happened and why things have happened. They did not want students to see that there may be more than one point of view.

Is the NCERT afraid that if they ask students to think they will end up questioning the official point of view, questioning the status quo, and questioning authority? It almost seems like the NCERT is trying to prevent people from becoming too smart!

Isn't there a better way to make truly great Indian citizens? What if history was presented from a people's point of view? What if students were encouraged to question, examine, analyse, and evaluate? This is what could empower the people of India to become truly educated and able to make a meaningful place for themselves in history.