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Changing Concepts of Identity in the Indian Textbook Controversy

Abstract

One of the traditionally central goals of historical instruction is to convey a feeling of national identity. This is why history teaching often becomes a subject of political controversy. Since the last change of government in India in 2004, curriculum designers have attempted to focus on the development of students' judgements rather than on the presentation of ready-made views of the past and collective identity. Even an innovative curriculum of this kind must be embedded in society's processes of communication and self-understanding, in which ideologies of continuity and preservation and those of change and improvement contend with each other. Whatever the outcome of these debates is, the new form of historical instruction, based on a critical appropriation of the past, will seek to enable students to come to their own understanding of Indian identity and thus make their competence enrich public discourse and democratic culture.

1. History teaching as a means of identity politics

One of the central tasks of history teaching in schools and colleges is to convey consciousness of national identity. It is generally agreed in India, among both politicians and historians, that the appropriation of the past should give pupils and students an idea of who they are and what it means to be Indians. Many people consider this to be the essential purpose of all historical instruction.¹ The reason for this derives from the institutionalisation of history as a school subject during the phase of emerging nation-states.² But even in the “post-national” age of globalisation, history teaching focuses on strengthening the sense of community and thus contributing to political stability.

Of course, how India and its identity should be understood was always a highly controversial issue. As early as the freedom struggle there existed quite different ideas about the Indian nation, state and society, and these ideas continued to

1 Even for someone who does not accept this description the political relevance of textbooks cannot be overlooked: “The books children read, especially textbooks, and the images they imbibe are the grammar of national identity, ideology and politics” (B.G. Verghese, “Myth and hate as history”, *The Hindu*, 23 June 2004).

2 “Historical consciousness could become almost identical with national consciousness” (Karl-Ernst Jeismann, “Geschichtsbewusstsein”, in: Klaus Bergmann et al. (eds), *Handbuch der Geschichtsdidaktik*, 3rd rev. and enlarged edition, Düsseldorf: Schwann, 1985, pp. 40–43, here 41).

diverge after independence in 1947. The Indian Constitution of 1950, which was largely influenced by the programme of the Congress Party, describes India as a democratic, and later (after the 42nd amendment of 1976) as a secular and socialist Republic. The Directive Principles of State Policy aim at social justice and the overcoming of traditional practices of discrimination. This includes safeguards for cultural and religious minorities. The unity of the nation is seen as “unity in diversity”. Others imagined India’s identity as that of a Hindu nation, which generally implied a conservative attitude to social issues. Hindu communalists had hoped for a strengthening of Indian tradition after the end of foreign rule. Thus they felt challenged in their idea of India by Nehru’s policy of social reform and modernisation as much as by what they called “minority appeasement”, the concession of special rights to non-Hindu religious groups.

“Communalism” and “secularism”, which were opposed to each other in post-colonial India as the main political ideologies, can be seen as two different ways of incorporating the experience of foreign rule and social change into a conception of collective identity. While communalists sought to cleanse the nation of all alien influence and defend Hindu tradition against its critics, secularists relied on the proven ability of Indians to include the Other and move beyond existing boundaries. This seemed to be more appropriate to the multicultural character of Indian society and more promising for the future of the nation. It was not only a matter of emphasis on specific aspects, but the very concept of identity on which both sides differed: fixed vs open identity, the invocation of origin vs orientation towards future goals, static vs dynamic, essentialist vs historical. If communalists relied on traditional values and assumed a privileged form of belonging, secularists were oriented towards the development of a modern society with equal chances of participation. Instead of postulating an Indian nation existing from time immemorial, secularists imagined “a nation in the making”.

The views of Indian identity in the competing political camps were reflected in the respective school and education policies. The Education Commission of 1964–1966 directed school instruction towards the end, “to bring about social and national integration, cultivation of social, moral and spiritual values and acceleration of the process of modernisation”. And it seemed that the “study of history can help a great deal in achieving these aims.”³ Accordingly, the National Policy on Education (NPE) aimed “to promote national progress, a sense of common citizenship and culture, and to strengthen national integration”.⁴ An “urgent need” was also felt among textbook designers “to develop a well integrated society that could be receptive to new ideas”.⁵

For the main opposition party, the Bharat Jana Sangh, the task of school education was quite different. In a “Resolution on Indianisation” (December 1952) it was stated: “Education should be based on national culture and tradition.” What this meant for the curriculum could be concluded from a listing of important texts:

3 NCERT, *Preparation and Evaluation of Textbooks in History. Principles and Procedures*, New Delhi: NCERT, 1972, p. 10.

4 National Policy on Education – 1986, New Delhi: Government of India, Ministry of Human Resources Development, 1986, 1. The quotation refers to the previous NPE of 1968.

5 NCERT, *Preparation and Evaluation of Textbooks in History*, p. 10.

“Knowledge of the Upnishadas, Bhagvad Geeta, Ramayana, Mahabharata and the literature and literary figures of the modern Indian languages who have contributed towards revival and preservation of Indian cultural traditions. “6 The cultural heritage as it was outlined here was exclusively that of the Hindus, other cultural traditions of India were not mentioned.

It was in order to prevent the dissemination of conflict-laden legends, stereotypes and distorted facts through history teaching that the National Council of Educational Research and Training (NCERT)⁷ was charged with the preparation of textbooks for schools run by the central government which were also to act as models for the textbooks used in schools under the supervision of the various State Governments. Reputed scholars as authors were seen as a guarantee for the scientific quality and objectivity of these books. The scientific standards, in the eyes of secularists, did not only include accurately examined experience as a fundament of historical knowledge. They also stood for the general aim of creating a “scientific temper”, a spirit of enquiry and innovation. The teaching of history at school, in fact, was understood as an occasion to further the chances of rational orientation in practical life. A guiding interest in the process of modernisation could be easily noticed in the textbooks. Thus in *The Story of Civilization. A History Textbook for Class X*, it was said about the emergence of Indian nationalism that “political unification of the country, destruction of India’s old social and economic system, the beginning of modern trade and industry and the rise of new social classes laid the basis of nationalism.”⁸ The goal of the national movement was to establish a new India over the ruins of the old system and “to reconstruct our society on the basis of democracy and social equality”. Moreover, after independence there remained “an even greater struggle of building a new prosperous India with a just social order”.⁹

With the change of power in 1977, when the Congress, after three decades of uninterrupted rule, was substituted by the Janata coalition (1977–79),¹⁰ the teaching of history became an object of open controversy. Historians attached to conservative positions had denounced works with a critical approach to tradition as un-Indian or Marxist for a long time. The new government, led by Morarji Desai, threatened to withdraw some of the textbooks from circulation, including Romila Thapar’s *Medieval India* (1967) and Bipan Chandra’s *Modern India* (1970).¹¹

6 Bharat Jana Sangh, “Resolution on Indianisation” (December 1952). Annex in: Balraj Madhok, *Indianisation? (What, Why and How)*, Delhi S. Chand & Co., 1971, pp. 98–9.

7 The NCERT was founded in 1961 with the purpose “to assist and advise the Central and State Governments on academic matters related to school education” (Website NCERT: www.ncert.nic.in).

8 *The Story of Civilization. A History Textbook for Class X*, vol. 2, New Delhi: NCERT, 1978, p. 338.

9 *Ibid.*, p. 370.

10 The Janata coalition was formed in opposition to Indira Gandhi and her emergency rule; one of its constituents was the Jana Sangh.

11 Thapar’s book did not show enough enthusiasm for Hindu tradition and failed to condemn Muslim invasions, according to critics; in the case of Chandra some did not appreciate his critical treatment of nationalists such as B.G. Tilak and Aurobindo Ghosh whom he held responsible for creating disunity between Hindus and Muslims. For details of the controversy see L.I. and S. Hoerber Rudolph, “Rethinking Secularism: Genesis and Implications of the Textbook Controversy, 1977–79”, *Pacific Affairs* 56 (1983), p. 15–37.

The duration of the Janata government was too short to allow for a fundamental reorientation of historical education. Before syllabuses could be changed and new textbooks introduced, the Congress was back in office. But when the Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP), which continued the Jana Sangh's political agenda, attained a majority in 1998/99,¹² a new round in the textbook controversy was opened.¹³ A National Curriculum Framework was submitted in November 2000 which was characterised by a strongly Indo-centric interpretation of history. "Strengthening national identity and preserving cultural heritage, as well as integrating indigenous knowledge and India's contribution to mankind"¹⁴ were announced as important aims. The NCERT textbooks were planned to be completely rewritten. To begin with, some passages of the existing editions were deleted on the grounds that they were allegedly hurting the religious sentiments of Sikhs and other minorities. In 2003, a series of fundamentally revised books appeared.¹⁵

2. A new approach – collective and personal identity

Even today, efforts in favour of the "Hindu view" of history have not had a lasting impact on the education system. After the Congress' surprising electoral success in May 2004, the new government was determined "to remove the communalisation of the school syllabus that has taken place in the past five years".¹⁶ Nevertheless, there was no reinstatement of the earlier textbooks either, as demanded by some. The practice of setting political targets for historical education met increasingly with criticism; professional historians doubted whether "the main 'purpose' of history in schools [was] to inculcate 'correct' values, stimulate national unity, integration, pride: a special burden imposed on no other subject."¹⁷ As a result, an attempt was made to find a completely new approach to the teaching of history.

Many years earlier, some of those with a more profound interest in didactical issues had asked themselves what the teaching of history was actually about. Did it only mean the presentation of specific information about the past or was the students' capacity to handle them autonomously not also important?¹⁸ Aware of the dangers of political manipulation, the history lessons at school were seen as an op-

12 The BJP, led by Atal Behari Vajpayee, was the major constituent of the National Democratic Alliance.

13 For details see Michael Gottlob, "Geschichtspolitik in Indien: Von der kulturellen Vielfalt zur nationalen Einheitskultur", *Internationale Schulbuchforschung* 23 (2001), pp. 465–476.

14 National Curriculum Framework for School Education: www.nic.in/vseducation/ncert/cs1.htm. One of the controversial steps taken was the introduction of Astrology and Vedic Mathematics as university subjects.

15 See Vishwa Mohan Jha, "A new brand of history", *Frontline*, 15 Februar 2003; Michael Gottlob, "Arbeit am Feindbild", in: *Indien 2003. Politik, Wirtschaft, Gesellschaft*, ed. by Werner Draguhn, Hamburg: IFA, 2003, pp. 171–195.

16 This was laid down in the "Common Minimum Programme" of the United Progressive Alliance consisting of the Congress, the Communist Party of India and a few other parties: *The Hindu*, 28 May 2004.

17 Sumit Sarkar, "History textbooks: the need to move forward", *The Hindu*, 6 July 2005.

18 "It has been a matter of debate among curriculum designers and textbook writers for middle schools whether the emphasis on history teaching should be on providing processed information or upon developing a critical attitude among children." C.N. Subramaniam, "Handling of the Communal Question in School History Textbooks", *Revolutionary Democracy*, Vol. II, No. 2, September 1996 (www.revolutionarydemocracy.org/rdv2n2/index.htm).

portunity to inculcate young citizens with the competence to judge. The classroom was supposed to be a site where critically controlled identity formation could and should take place.¹⁹ Especially a concept susceptible to ideological misuse like national identity requires the student's skills of observation and analysis. In the long run, this could contribute more to political stability than rote learning.

Accordingly, in the new textbooks which were brought out in 2006 the focus on specific contents was largely replaced by an emphasis on cognitive skills. "The issue is not", a commentator observed with approval, "what particular politics or history you teach, but whether students can learn to think. The ambition is not to preach dull dogma, but cultivate thought itself." The outcome of the learning process, instead of being pre-determined, is left open here; in the end it may even result in unforeseeable new insights. "In the new books, exercises are framed in a way that the student's critical acumen can turn upon the book itself. Books must provoke discussion, incite new questions and point to ways of finding answers."²⁰

In the public debate about the new approaches to curriculum design and textbook production, the stress which is laid on genuinely pedagogical aspects is frequently referred to. What is appreciated is "the NCERT's efforts to evolve, for the first time, a 'child-centric' syllabus, ... its objectives being to guide the student to arrive at her own understanding".²¹ Previously, the subjects of History as well as Social Studies and Civics "have been state-centric and status quoist in their approach", denying young children "any agency and tools to refashion this world." Now it was proposed: "An alternative critical pedagogy of civics and social studies has to be committed to the struggle for restoring humanity as individuals and as members of groups. It has to recognise that personal identity during the teaching-learning process and in classroom relationship [*sic*] matter to children."²²

Of course, questions of personal identity do not matter here for pedagogical reasons only; it is from the individual context that the use of the identity concept for the self-understanding of a society is ultimately derived. And even if collective and personal identity have to be well distinguished from each other, they are nevertheless inter-related in their respective developments. As regards the evolution of moral consciousness, identity has been described as "that remarkable ability ... of an individual to remain identical with itself even in profound changes of the personality structure as a response to contradictory situations". A basic requirement for the development of personal identity is the acknowledgment by others and the belonging to the symbolic reality of a group. "The child becomes a person by learning to locate itself in its social lifeworld."²³ A crisis generally occurs in an adolescent's development when the conventional identity, based on the given

19 Cfr. Klaus Bergmann, "Identität", in: *Handbuch der Geschichtsdidaktik*, pp. 29–36, here 33.

20 Pratap Bhanu Mehta, "Dull dogma doesn't a syllabus make", *Indian Express*, 22 August 2006. This can also be seen as a critique of the demonstrative certainty, which often accompanied the claim to scientific standards.

21 Editorial, *Economic and Political Weekly*, 26 August 2006.

22 Manish Jain, "Social Studies and Civics. Past and Present in the Curriculum", *Economic and Political Weekly*, 7 May 2005.

23 Jürgen Habermas, "Können komplexe Gesellschaften eine vernünftige Identität ausbilden?", in: idem, *Zur Rekonstruktion des Historischen Materialismus*, Frankfurt/M.: Suhrkamp, 1976, pp. 92–126, 93, 94.

norms of a community, is confronted with contending norms. A possible solution then is to refer to more general principles, according to which the reasonableness or approvability of the norms can be determined.²⁴

The tendency in the development of personal identity towards the adoption of universal principles, as described here, is in a certain tension with the forms of collective identity attached to the particularity of a people or state. And the ongoing social and economic evolution continues to bring about new challenges to our capacity of moral judgement. Given the current experience of rapid global change, confronting individuals with more rather than less cultural difference, they must be equipped with appropriate abilities to cope with otherness. From here follow the new tasks for historical instruction today. The National Focus Group (appointed by the NCERT) proves responsive to the demands when it expects the social sciences to “provide the social, cultural, and analytical skills required to adjust to an increasingly interdependent world, and to deal with political and economic realities.”²⁵ Even an innovative curriculum of this kind, however, cannot be introduced through technocratic planning alone. Just as curricula can hardly still be based on a given set of moral conventions or cultural self-evidences, they can hardly prescribe new ones simply by administrative means.²⁶ The curricular concern for a consciousness of identity must be embedded in the processes of communication and self-understanding of a particular community which, in the case of India, not only is challenged by the effects of globalisation but also has to cope with a long experience of colonisation and alienation.

3. Components of Indian self-understanding

In an elementary sense, what is at stake in a community’s quest for identity is the assertion of self against the other and its durability or continuity in view of change. The boundaries of a group (tribe, people, nation etc.), however, are not given from the outset; on the contrary, the notion of collective self is brought about only through the long experience of interaction with others. It is not fixed once and for all, but remains subject to alterations. Actually, it is only in the course of time and the occurrence of change attached to it that a sense of continuity is created. The quest for identity is articulated above all in times of crisis and loss such as the revolutionary period in late eighteenth century Europe which has also seen a new interest in the past and the emergence of historical research as an academic discipline. Recollecting what had once been, people hoped to recover a lost or threatened identity.

Nevertheless, continuity cannot be reduced simply to the holding on to tradition, just as awareness of collective self does not mean the strict exclusion of the

24 Ibid., p. 95.

25 NCERT, Teaching of Social Science, 2005, 1. Website NCERT: http://ncert.nic.in/sites/publication/schoolcurriculum/Position_Papers/NCERT_Teaching_of_Social_Science1.pdf; *National Curriculum Framework 2005*, New Delhi: NCERT, 2005, p. 1.

26 Habermas, “Können komplexe Gesellschaften eine vernünftige Identität ausbilden?“, pp. 119, 117. Science, according to Habermas, cannot assume the erstwhile role of religious or metaphysical world views.

other. The members of a group or community can follow quite different traditions; to some, a crisis may even appear as a chance to free themselves from certain constraints and improve their living conditions.²⁷ Instead of equating identity with tradition, a historically reflective attitude to the past allows us to evaluate social or political conditions and developments and deliberate on whether or not to continue them. In the formula of “a nation in the making”, a fundamental insight is implied about the identity of social groups: “A society, in a way, creates its identity; it is its own achievement, if it does not lose its identity.”²⁸ This does not mean that collective self in all its aspects is exchangeable at any time; nor is identity simply a question of choice or planning. Even those who accept the chances of the New do so on the basis of conditions which have grown over centuries. And in the face of threatening alienation they too seek to assure themselves of their culture’s particularity and achievements. For the authors of the National Policy on Education of 1986 both factors were closely connected: “De-culturation, de-humanisation and alienation must be avoided at all costs. Education can and must bring about the fine synthesis between change-oriented technologies and the country’s continuity of cultural tradition.”²⁹

On the other hand, those who relate to the origins and claim eternal values do not abstain from interfering in the passing-on of tradition either; rather, they try to design a past suitable for their political aims. The Hindu nation is a construct of the present, Savarkar’s concept of Hindutva is the result of reflecting on current needs for political action.³⁰ But its constructedness is not admitted, since this would contradict the assumption of givenness and unchangeableness to which its persuasive power is owed. Instead of engaging in open discourse about continuity and change and exposing established conventions to continual revision, the followers of Hindutva rely on the assumption of an authoritative set of traditions which is not negotiable. Fundamentalism becomes particularly evident in the textbooks of those schools, which are operated by the Rashtriya Swayamsevak Sangh (RSS – literally: National Volunteer Corps). Here the antiquity of the country is emphasised – “Bharata is the most ancient country in the world” – and its holy character is highlighted: “Every atom of Bharata is sacred to us.”³¹

Emphasising one’s own group’s particularity and tradition is by no means illegitimate.³² But it is problematic if it is accompanied by a complete rejection of the

27 In fact, the “right to one’s past” is accompanied by the right to disown it. See Council of Europe, *Recommendation 1283 (1996) on history and the learning of history in Europe*: <http://assembly.coe.int/Documents/AdoptedText/ta96/erec1283.htm>.

28 Habermas, “Können komplexe Gesellschaften eine vernünftige Identität ausbilden?”, p. 92.

29 *National Policy on Education – 1986*, New Delhi: Government of India, Ministry of Human Resources Development, 1986, pp. 20-1, 28.

30 Vinayak Damodar Savarkar, *Hindutva. Who is a Hindu?* 6th edition. (Delhi: Bharti Sahitya Sadan, 1989 [1923]). See Suresh Sharma, “Savarkar’s Quest for a Modern Hindu Consolidation”, *Studies in Humanities and Social Sciences* 2 (1995), pp. 189–215.

31 Vidyharati Karnataka, *Sanskrit Jnana Parichaya* (Bangalore, n.d.), 8th Standard; *Sanskrit Jnana Parichaya*, 9th Standard (Bangalore, n.d.). Savarkar too had spoken of India as his “holy land”. *Hindutva*, p. 111.

32 Even Marxist authors like D.D. Kosambi laid emphasis on continuity in Indian history. See his *The Culture and Civilization of Ancient India in Historical Outline*, New Delhi: Vikas Publishing House, 1991[1964]. Sheldon Pollock, in an advertisement for a Masterclass on Comparative Intellectual His-

experience of change and the ignoring of the chances possibly connected to it for a substantial part of the population. Communalists seek to derive a higher claim to authenticity from holding on to the origins as against secularists with their idea of development and progress. It is not conceded that critique of tradition may be as much an expression of authentic Indian life as its defence.

With a demonstration of “evidence”, the defenders of tradition also claimed modern scientific rationality and the objectivity of history (the hard facts) for their reading of the past.³³ But the “lessons” taken “from history” can be deceitful. They can even be intended for the purpose of manipulation. Since Eric Hobsbawm’s and Benedict Anderson’s works about the imaginative elements of national consciousness, at the latest, insight into the constructedness of traditions and identities has gained wide acceptance. What is maintained to be “given”, often prove to be modern inventions.³⁴ And in fact, the “evidence” of communalist history campaigns was mostly based on highly selective source material. The claim to the truth of history and tradition, by which the contending conceptions of identity are sought to be legitimised, must therefore always be examined and rendered transparent with regard to the underlying subjective motives. Anyone who postulates the givenness of identity today, exposes himself to the suspicion of masking his intentions and interests and thus evading the criteria of argumentative historical reason.

Secularists, rather than placing identity against change, conceive it as being itself part of historical processes: a product and agent of change. This enlarges a society’s potential experience and range of options beyond a narrow cultural determinism and relaxes, they argue, the relationship between the self and other. Instead of opposing identity and alterity, the other’s experience can be seen as an enrichment of the self.³⁵ Even the modern, historicised constructions of identity, however, came under suspicion of serving ideological purposes. And not only from the side of the self-appointed guardians of indigenous tradition. Under the influence of post-colonial theory, critics reproach secularists for their close orientation towards the West and its hegemonic concept of universal history. Looking back from 2005 at “the efforts made in the past to create an ideal social studies curriculum”, the National Focus Group recalls how the Education Commission had already “emphasised that India should not be seen simply in terms of a developmentalist approach. The problem with this approach has been that it treated poverty, illiteracy, and casteism as obstacles to national progress, and also ignored gender issues. This mode of thinking may suggest that the common ‘illiterate’ masses have failed the

ories of Early Modern Asia (Leiden 2006) asks: “How to understand the logic of an intellectual order founded upon ideologies of continuity and preservation, rather than ideologies of improvement and obsolescence?” (www.ias.nl/ias/show/id=41332).

33 As an example from the row over the Babri Mosque in Ayodhya, see *History Versus Casuistry. Evidence of The Ramajannabhooni Mandir presented by the Vishva Hindu Parishad to the Government of India in December–January 1990–91*, New Delhi: Voice of India, 1991.

34 Eric Hobsbawm, “Inventing Traditions”, in: Hobsbawm / Terence Ranger (eds), *The Invention of Tradition*, Cambridge, 1983, pp. 1–14; Benedict Anderson, *Imagined Communities: Reflections on the Origin and Spread of Nationalism*, London: Verso, 1983.

35 “Once difference is brought in the interior realm of identity, the concept is freed of the problematic connotations of homogeneity and totality, substance and organicity. Conceived in this way, identity wouldn’t be the opposite of alterity anymore but a practice of difference.” (Aleida Assmann and Heidrun Friese (eds), *Identitäten*, Frankfurt/M.: Suhrkamp, 1998, p. 23).

nation.” What had been asked at that time was no less than “an epistemological shift in reorienting/redesigning the curriculum so as to accommodate the multiple ways of imagining the Indian nation”.³⁶

An epistemological shift in a similar direction has been pursued since the 1980s by the authors of *Subaltern Studies*, who criticise elitist-nationalist historiography for ignoring or, in any case, undervaluing the historical experience of the Indian lower classes.³⁷ Even if they did not question a certain analytical potential of the western interpretations of history for the understanding of the Indian reality, they nevertheless rejected the assumption of a general function of orientation of western historical experience or modern science, for that matter, in the identity formation of non-western societies.³⁸ Especially in view of the conflicts between the different cultural traditions, post-colonial critics insist on the particular Indian experience of religious tolerance, which could itself serve as a model of identity without suppression of alterity and, in any case, refute the secularists’ monopolistic claim to a modern form of political community.³⁹ The western model of national identity has proved, according to Gyanendra Pandey, too narrow for the multiplicity (regional, local, social) of traditions and identities in India and must be regarded as a cause of today’s forms of communalism and ethnic strife.⁴⁰

The chances that indigenous traditions have to develop autonomously on the basis of their own experience can be seen as a critical instance, in the face of which views of global historical progress must legitimate themselves, lest their claim to universality be seen as a subtle form of colonialist ideology. The authors of the new NCERT textbooks prove sensitive in this regard when, for instance, explaining the situation of contemporary pastoralist communities and their fight for existence instead of simply dismissing their way of life as unmodern and anachronistic.⁴¹ On the other hand, some critics with a post-modern leaning, while privileging the Non-modern, ignore or underestimate the fact that not all forms of modernisation during colonial times occurred against the will and without the participation of

36 The demand for a paradigm shift was explicitly renewed by the National Focus Group: “The social science curriculum has hitherto emphasised developmental issues. These are important but not sufficient to understand the normative dimension, like issues of equality, justice, and dignity in society and polity.” NCERT, *Teaching of Social Science*, New Delhi 2005, p. 3. (Website NCERT)

37 For the inaugural statement of *Subaltern Studies* see Ranajit Guha, “On Some Aspects of the Historiography of Colonial India”, *Subaltern Studies* 1 (1982), pp. 1–8.

38 Dipesh Chakrabarty, “Postcoloniality and the Artifice of History: Who Speaks for ‘Indian’ Pasts?”, *Representations* 37 (1992), pp. 1–26, 21.

39 Secularists, too, appreciated the Indian experience in this field, but mostly, as in the case of Jawaharlal Nehru, claimed it as a phenomenon of proto-secularism. See Michael Gottlob, “India’s Unity in Diversity as a Question of Historical Perspective”, *Economic Political Weekly*, 3 March 2007, pp. 779–789.

40 Gyanendra Pandey, *The Construction of Communalism in Colonial North India* Delhi: Oxford University Press, 1990; “In Defense of the Fragment: Writing about Hindu-Muslim Riots in India Today”, in: Ranajit Guha (ed.), *A Subaltern Studies Reader, 1986–1995*, Delhi: Oxford University Press, 1998, pp. 1–33.

41 “Pastoralists rarely enter the pages of history textbooks. When you read about the economy – whether in your classes of history or economics – you learn about agriculture and industry. Sometimes you read about artisans; but rarely about pastoralists. As if their lives do not matter. As if they are figures from the past who have no place in modern society. In this chapter you will see how pastoralism has been important in societies like India and Africa. You will read about the way colonialism impacted their lives, and how they have coped with the pressures of modern society.” (“Pastoralists in the Modern World”, in: *India and the Contemporary World*, New Delhi: NCERT, 2005, p. 97).

Indian actors. For many old social conflicts, often caused by traditional forms of discrimination, secularists offered new solutions which, while meeting with harsh resistance of some, found acceptance with others. There were Indians who apparently showed more confidence in the possibility of creating a new (overarching, transcultural) identity than in the capacities of accommodation within the traditional cultures. If one is to insist – as post-colonial critics in general do – on the autonomous agency of the colonised instead of confronting active colonisers and passive victims, even the option for modern solutions or values must be acknowledged as an authentic voice of Indian self-understanding.

4. Identity and history in a post-colonial society

In India, as in many other non-western countries, the long experience of colonialism has restricted in considerable measure the acquisition of confidence in a society's capacity of shaping the processes of change and with it a conception of a genuinely historical identity. Not only foreign rule as such but also the perception of a stark contrast between the self and other, by which it was often accompanied. Both the dichotomy of spiritual vs materialistic and that of tradition and modernity made India's development towards an industrial society often "appear like a struggle against herself".⁴²

Among Hindu nationalists, the reality of modern India was usually not understood as a result of a process of change and innovation; the emerging Indian nation was rather conceived as a revival of an original political community of ancient times. This is problematic, if only because one thus ultimately fails to recognise the colonial impact in its complete extent, as the very raising of the national question is witness to western influence.⁴³ But it is also problematic because it essentialises identity and dehistoricises the nation. Decolonisation (or recovery of self) can then be imagined only as a reassertion of a particular culture, devoid of its integrative capacities across cultural borders as much as a self-determined, free anticipation of the future.

According to post-colonial critics instead, who do not deny the difference between modern India and the ancient Hindu empires, the concept of the nation is a colonial import and for this very reason, at least in the eyes of some, to be rejected.⁴⁴ Important is the argument that the redefinition of the community as a nation has rendered the coexistence of cultures in South Asia more difficult. But this criticism does not completely elude the criticised western categories either. After all,

42 Krishna Kumar, *Political Agenda of Education. A Study of Colonialist and Nationalist Ideas*, New Delhi: Sage, 1991, 160. The role of education then was mostly "that of a pain killer in the context of an unpleasant experience". Ibid. The experience of the colonised included the impression that modernity was something alien, that it "meant the abandoning of part of themselves". Amin Maalouf, *In the Name of Identity. Violence and the Need to Belong*, New York: Arcade Publishing, 1996, 72. It was not only a question of how to modernise. "More complicated questions inevitably arose. 'How can we modernise ourselves without losing our identity?'" Ibid., p. 79.

43 "Colonialism has transformed the identities of the colonized, so that even claims to precolonial national identities are products of colonialism." Arif Dirlik, "Rethinking Colonialism. Globalization, Postcolonialism, and the Nation", *Interventions* 4:3 (2002), pp. 428–448, 428.

44 For the arguments in this debate see Partha Chatterjee, *Nationalist Thought and the Colonial World – A Derivative Discourse?* London: Zed Books, 1986.

without the idea of the sovereign nation there would not have been the concept of colonisation, defined once as “political control by one nation of another nation or of a society striving to become a nation”.⁴⁵ Moreover, if one failed to view the nation as the dominant form of political community shaping the modern era, then the interference of western actors in the affairs of South Asia might not be understood adequately in the context of the expansion of capitalist economy.

Post-colonial critique, it has been observed, often stresses the orientalist binaries rather than overcoming them.⁴⁶ This is true also and in particular of the contrast perceived between historical and non-historical cultures which implies a static concept of Indian society and detracts from self-consciously opening up to the opportunities and potential of change. It hampered the assessment of the modern Indian nation-state as an institutional basis for the democratic negotiation of contending views of identity. Certainly, those who object to the excesses of nationalism (and there are enough and good motives for this position), will not be persuaded by the mere reference to the fact that the liberation from colonialism was achieved by Indians imagining themselves as a nation. But it should not be obscured that the idea of the nation was closely connected with those of liberty and self-determination, equality and solidarity – ideas which, even if they have also been misused for ideological purposes, are perhaps not yet exhausted in their potential for collective self-understanding and the formation of identity.⁴⁷

The world-historical experience of colonial exploitation, alienation and denied acknowledgment, which is also one of threatened or destroyed identity, has a lasting impact and constitutes one of the legitimacy deficits of the present processes of globalisation. It must inevitably have a central place in the Indian consciousness of history and identity (and it should do so also in that of former colonisers), and it must be sufficiently represented in textbooks. But instead of insisting on an ultimate confrontation of coloniser and colonised, foreign and indigenous, the historical and temporal dimensions of the relationship should not be overlooked.⁴⁸ Arif Dirlik proposes to conceive of the colonial confrontation as a phase in a succession of developments, in which inner relations of alienation and exploitation are not separable from those between states. The colonial denial of equal rights and chances then becomes a historical and social issue instead of an essentialist and culturalist one.⁴⁹ In view of the ongoing global change, the concept of colonialism is to be revised and historically redefined as a phenomenon of transnational or transcultural history.

45 Dirlik, “Rethinking Colonialism”, p. 430.

46 See Bodhisattva Kar, “Review of *Beyond Nationalist Frames: Relocating Postmodernism, Hindutva, History* by Sumit Sarkar, Delhi, 2002”, *Seminar* 522, 2003.

47 The static concept of the self is perhaps no less an effect of colonialism than the modernisers’ uncritical adoption of western patterns of development.

48 It is, after all, the specific task of instruction about history to highlight the temporal character of identities and thus free the struggle for self-determination from unfruitful, manichean oppositions. On the appropriation of the “deadly” view of tribal identity by the new “global tribes” see Maalouf, *In the Name of Identity*, pp. 87ff.

49 Considerations like these are employed also by Indian historians, whose critical attitude to colonialism is beyond doubt. In connection with the new textbooks Sumit Sarkar observes: “It is no longer helpful to look upon modern Indian history simply in terms of colonial *versus* anti-colonial.” Sumit Sarkar, “History textbooks: the need to move forward”, *The Hindu*, 6 July 2005.

Freed from the constraints of essentialist and deterministic frameworks of interpretation, local and regional identities, which had been absorbed by that of the nation for a long time, can be better articulated again. The National Curriculum Framework of 2005 states in this regard: “In a pluralistic society like ours, it is important that all regions and social groups be able to relate to the textbooks. Relevant local content should be part of the teaching-learning process, ideally transacted through activities drawing on local resources.”⁵⁰ For Kumkum Roy, the challenge in the end is “to evolve strategies for both selecting and discussing historical themes, taking into account a context in which learners are not seen as a monolithic, undifferentiated community”. And, more importantly, one should not try “to convert them into such a community, but to address issues of difference in imaginative ways.”⁵¹ The overcoming of restrictive concepts then perhaps also allows for a new approach to conflicts between and within the other countries of South Asia. When, after the 2004 elections, the NCERT textbook revision was initiated, B.G. Verghese proposed to see it in a wider perspective: “Maybe it is time to endeavour to produce a composite history of the sub-continent as a common South Asian reader. Could the Minister support such a non-official project through the Indian Council of Historical Research acting in concert with objective Pakistani and Bangladeshi historians?”⁵²

However one responds to the quest for identity in concrete terms, there is no way of by-passing, in historical instruction, its fundamentally controversial nature, which excludes final answers and the simple distinction between correct and false. Identity is no longer available in the form of certainties, neither by referring to tradition or primordial truths nor by adopting universally valid models of development. It may be seen as “a point of departure for a voyage without guarantees, and not a port of arrival.”⁵³ History teaching today must help students become capable of living with this lack of certainty which, on the other hand, also means openness and freedom.

That does not mean that history teaching in India has to be reinvented from scratch. The scientific standards remain just as binding for factual knowledge as the political values of the Indian Constitution continue to serve as guidelines for a reasonable identity. But if the goals of school education were obvious for much of the post-Independence period, the new curriculum for social and political science now complements them with a strong plea for “lived experience” and a “participatory teaching practice”. As it has been appreciated in the media, the NCERT committee drafting the syllabus apparently “was guided by the greater pedagogical issue of ‘empowering’ students, [*sic*] to foster a sense of inquiry, to enable them to analyse critically, so as to eventually become informed citizens in their own right.” Accordingly, the new textbooks “by moving from the student’s immediate and personal world to wider and more abstract issues” and “by recognising the chang-

50 NCERT, *National Curriculum Framework* 2005, New Delhi: NCERT, 2005, p. 50.

51 See Kumkum Roy, “The future of history in schools”, *The Hindu*, 7 September 2005.

52 B.G. Verghese, “Myth and hate as history”, *The Hindu*, 23 June 2004.

53 Ian Chambers, “History after humanism: responding to postcolonialism”, *Postcolonial Studies* 2 (1999), pp. 37–42, 40.

ing base of learning”, are helping “the student to become an active participant”.⁵⁴ With this, the NCERT seems to pass from the prescription of ready-made forms of identity to creating competence among students to arrive, through a critical appropriation of the past, at their own understanding of Indianness, and thus enrich public discourse about contending views and interests. It is on this competence that the future development of Indian identity will depend.

Zusammenfassung

Die Geschichtserziehung strebt unter anderem traditionellerweise die Vermittlung eines nationalen Identitätsgefühls an. Deshalb wird Geschichtsunterricht oft zum Gegenstand von politischen Kontroversen. Nach dem letzten Machtwechsel in Indien, im Jahre 2004, haben Curriculum-Entwickler den Versuch unternommen, den Akzent auf die Förderung des Urteilsvermögens von Schülern und Schülerinnen, eher als auf die Darstellung von vorgefertigten Ansichten über die Vergangenheit und die kollektive Identität zu setzen. Aber auch ein solch innovatives Curriculum muss in die von gegensätzlichen Ideologien der Kontinuität und des Wandels geprägten, mit Bewältigungsstrategien der Kolonialvergangenheit verbundenen, gesellschaftlichen Prozesse der Kommunikation und des Selbstverständnisses eingebettet werden. Wie diese Debatten auch ausgehen mögen, setzt sich diese neue Form der Geschichtserziehung auf jeden Fall zum Ziel, die Schüler und Schülerinnen zu befähigen, anhand einer kritischen Aneignung der Vergangenheit ihr eigenes Verständnis der indischen Identität zu bilden, und hierdurch zu einer Bereicherung des öffentlichen Diskurses und der demokratischen Kultur beizutragen.

Résumé

L'éducation historique a traditionnellement entre autres pour but la transmission d'un sentiment d'identité nationale. C'est pourquoi l'enseignement de l'histoire fait souvent l'objet de controverses politiques. Après le dernier changement de pouvoir en Inde, en 2004, les concepteurs du programme d'enseignement ont tenté de mettre l'accent sur le développement du jugement chez les élèves, plutôt que sur la présentation de vues toutes faites sur le passé et l'identité collective. Mais même un tel programme d'enseignement novateur doit s'intégrer aux processus sociétaux de communication et de conscience de soi, marqués par des idéologies opposées de continuité et de changement et liés à des stratégies de travail de mémoire sur le passé colonial. Quelle que soit l'issue de ces débats, cette nouvelle forme d'éducation historique vise en tout cas à rendre les élèves capables de forger leur propre conception de l'identité indienne au moyen d'une appropriation critique du passé, et à enrichir ainsi le discours public et la culture démocratique.

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⁵⁴ Editorial, *Economic and Political Weekly*, 26 August 2006.