

THE POLITICS OF TEACHING ANCIENT HISTORY IN CONTEMPORARY INDIA, PAKISTAN AND MYANMAR

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Abstract

Education systems throughout Asia have their origins in processes of state formation aimed at countering imperialism, or furthering post-colonial nation-building. State elites across Asia have sought to popularise powerful visions of nationhood, to equip these visions with a historical 'back-story', and to endow these with sentimental charge. The history curriculum and textbooks construct the myths of origins and draw geographical, ideological, and affective boundaries to distinguish the nation from 'others'. This article focuses on how the teaching of history – particularly ancient history in India, Pakistan and Myanmar – has been used as a political tool to underpin contemporary political discourse. It argues that the inclusion or exclusion of certain parts of history and the angle taken by the curriculum and textbooks is to ensure that children learn about the unbroken and ancient heritage of the dominant religious and ethnic group of the country. In creating this purity of self, history becomes the justifying vehicle for the routine discrimination of others, mainly ethnic and religious minorities.

Keywords

Teaching history; Ancient History; nationhood; India; Pakistan; Myanmar.

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Resumo

Os sistemas de educação em toda a Ásia têm suas origens em processos de formação de Estado destinados a combater o imperialismo ou promover a construção nacional pós-colonial. As elites estatais em toda a Ásia procuraram popularizar visões poderosas de nacionalidade, equipar essas visões com uma “história de fundo” histórica e dotá-las de carga sentimental. O currículo e os livros didáticos de história constroem os mitos das origens e traçam fronteiras geográficas, ideológicas e afetivas para distinguir a nação dos “outros”. Este artigo se concentra em como o ensino de história – particularmente a história antiga na Índia, Paquistão e Mianmar tem sido usado como ferramenta política para sustentar o discurso político contemporâneo. Ele argumenta que a inclusão ou exclusão de certas partes da história e o ângulo tomado pelo currículo e livros didáticos é para garantir que as crianças aprendam sobre a herança ininterrupta e antiga do grupo religioso e étnico dominante do país. Ao criar essa pureza do eu, a história torna-se o veículo justificador da discriminação rotineira dos outros, principalmente das minorias étnicas e religiosas.

Palavras-chave

Ensino de História; História Antiga; nacionalidade; Índia; Paquistão; Mianmar.

Introduction

One of the primary aims of education systems in modern states is, and has always been, the political socialisation of the young. Whereas much rhetoric surrounding education policy, whether emanating from the 'East' or the 'West', nowadays increasingly focuses on the importance of schooling in generating 'human capital', the role of education as a political tool remains as important as ever.

Education systems throughout Asia have their origins in processes of state formation aimed at countering imperialism, or furthering post-colonial nation-building. State elites across Asia have sought to popularise powerful visions of nationhood, to equip these visions with a historical 'back-story', and to endow these with sentimental charge. In most states, particularly those that can trace their roots back to a pre-colonial past, the national narrative has tended to be explicitly or implicitly ethno-cultural and primordialist in character (Lall and Vickers 2009).

One can argue that education has been used as a political tool throughout the ages and across the whole world to define national identity and underlie the political rationale of governments. There is nothing peculiarly Asian about the politicisation of schooling. However, the role of education, and in particular history education in promoting nationalism and underpinning political legitimacy in many Asian countries, is a contemporary phenomenon that demands academic attention. This article discussed the issue looking at the teaching of history – in particular ancient history in India, Pakistan and Myanmar.

History as a political tool

Education is viewed by many as the most logical entry point for the process of change in society. For a long time governments have used education or the curriculum amongst other vehicles to disseminate their political ideology in order to achieve the desired change in societies (Apple, 1993, Lall and Vickers, 2009). This has been done both covertly and overtly. In all societies, but perhaps especially in post-colonial countries, emphasis has been placed by political elites on the role of education – and particularly schooling – as a tool for shaping and sustaining political systems. This is evident in both the official knowledge that is imparted to students through textbooks and tested in examinations, as well as in subtler ways through what is often termed the hidden curriculum. The choice of the material

taught in schools is picked to fit in with the political ideology of the day and the elites who construct the dominant ideology are also those who select the corresponding curriculum content. Apple's work underlines how curriculum and political ideology are intertwined and involved in the construction and reproduction of hegemony i.e. how they support systems and structures of class domination (Apple, 1993).

There has been much analysis of the role of textbooks and the curriculum in the West. Michael Apple, Christine Sleeter and Pauline Lipman have in many of their publications questioned the role of the state with regard to education and drawn connections between education and the political. Vickers and Jones (2005) focus in particular on history textbooks and curricula in East Asia and Lall and Vickers (2009) looks more broadly at how education is used by Asian governments for differing aims. The manipulation of historical narratives for the purpose of bolstering state legitimacy by imposing very specific perceptions of the past is as old as history itself, in Asia as well as elsewhere. In modern nation states however, history serves as a tool to politically socialise the masses, and the process is driven by the priorities, visions and perceptions of the elite of the day and the perpetuation of hegemony. School textbooks have become a primary vehicle through which societies transmit these national narratives (Hussain and Safiq, 2016). They depict a society's ideology or ethos and impart values, goals or myths that the society wishes to transmit to new generations (Bourdieu, 1971). Textbooks also explain historical conflicts and present political parties in a particular light (Naseem and Stober, 2014). School history serves thus the dual function of transmitting historical knowledge and creating a shared national identity (Carretero et al., 2013). It constructs the myths of origins and draws geographical, ideological, and affective boundaries to distinguish the nation from 'others'. Textbooks are 'authoritative accounts' of 'real' information representing specific constructions of 'reality' through their 'content' and 'form' (Apple, 1993, p.15). They also provide an authoritative pedagogic version of received knowledge by positioning people differently in hierarchical relations of power (Chris, 1994).

This article engages first with the teaching of history – in particular ancient history – in India, Pakistan and Myanmar to conclude the inclusion or exclusion of certain parts of history and the angle taken by the curriculum and textbooks is to ensure that children learn about the unbroken and ancient heritage of the dominant religious and ethnic group of the country. In creating this purity of self, history becomes the justifying vehicle for the routine discrimination of others, mainly ethnic and religious minorities.

India's focus on the Vedic 'Golden Age'

For any Indian government, the question of national identity has always been problematic because of the many differences on the basis of caste, language and religion that have traditionally divided Indian society. Since independence in 1947 India had presented itself as a multi-religious country with a secular government.² However it is true to state that this understanding was largely confined to the elite, while religion continued to play a major role in the daily life of Indian society (Adeney and Lall, 2005). From the time of Indira Gandhi onwards (late 1960s to 1984), religion began to play a greater role in politics as the traditionally secular Congress party tried to expand its voter base beyond lower casts and Muslims by attracting more middle class Hindus who were starting to support other political parties. However, since officially there was still a separation of religion and state, it did not impact upon education policy and the curriculum which retained their secular outlook. This all changed in 1998, when a Hindu nationalist party - the Bhartiya Janta Party (BJP) came to power for the first time (Lall, 2009).

This section discusses the use of textbook changes to form a particular national identity and create the 'other' in order to suit the ideology and politics of the day under BJP rule. The BJP, leading India between 1998 and 2004 and again since 2014, recognised that education was an effective vehicle to promote and spread its nationalist ideology. After assuming power, they replaced key people in the education department and changed curriculum and textbooks (Taneja, 2003, Lall 2008). The aim was to inculcate future generations of Indian citizens with the ideology of 'Hindutva'. Hindutva is based on the premise that India is fundamentally a Hindu nation, and that therefore any non-Hindus in the country should either accept the majority's domination or leave. This intolerant view means that all non-Hindu communities in India, but especially the Muslim community are seen as separate, second-class citizens, often portrayed as politically suspect since their loyalties may lie outside of India (either to the Islamic world in general, or Pakistan in particular) (Blom Hansen 1999). This rigid and exclusivist interpretation of Hinduism arguably stands in total contradiction with that faith's traditionally inclusive and tolerant approach to adherents of other religions, differentiating it from the historically more intolerant and doctrinaire 'religions of the book' (Lall 2009). Visible signs of the spread of intolerance in education started to emerge in 2003 when

²The meaning of secularism in India is hotly debated and generally defined as the equal respect of the state for all religions. Arguably the BJP led government in power since 2014 and re-elected in 2019 no longer lays claims to secularism.

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books and textbooks critical of certain aspects of Hinduism or Indian history started to be removed from the shelves and academics, foreign as well as Indian, with dissenting views, found themselves threatened by members of right wing radical groups.³

In 2000 the government issued a National Curriculum Framework for school education under the slogan of 'Indianise, nationalise and spiritualise'.⁴ The framework called for the purging of all foreign elements from the curriculum in state schools. These included the British legacy as well as aspects of Indian culture which were seen as having been introduced by the Mogul invaders. The policy engendered a massive textbook revision that justified an anti-minority outlook (Lall 2009). In these textbooks, Muslims across history were homogenised, described as invariably antagonistic, perpetual aggressors and violators of the sacred Hindu land, women, cows and temples. The BJP appointed scholars to re-write the history textbooks because the old textbooks were secular (as well as out of date), and did not focus on Hindu achievements (Guichard, 2010). The aim was that children were to see India as solely a 'product' of Hinduism. The revisions were contested by a petition to the Supreme Court brought by three activists who argued that the NCERT had not followed the correct procedures of consultation with the states and that it was attempting to introduce religious teaching, which is forbidden by the Constitution. However, the petition was rejected by the Supreme Court.⁵

This was the start of a political project, which aimed to mobilize cultural resources to produce recognition for every Hindu. This process of awakening was also associated with pride. The BJP hoped to give the Hindus their rightful place in Indian history and society, starting with the school textbooks. The education system was adapted to legitimize the new notion based on a religious interpretation of the past, which established the Hindus as the rightful Indians. As a part of this, Indian history was changed to show continuous strife between Hindus and non-Hindus, and non-Hindu communities were identified as foreigners and often as

³In India, education is both a State and a Central subject, meaning that different types of textbooks can co-exist across different States, depending on which political party is in power, regardless of the government in Delhi.

⁴ The changes to education went beyond schooling by trying to push for research into what was seen as traditionally Hindu or Vedic 'science'. State universities and colleges received big grants from the government to offer post graduate degrees, including PhDs in astrology; research in (...) meditation, faith healing, cow-urine and priest-craft was promoted with substantial injections of public money. (Nanda, 2005).

⁵ Judgement by Justice M.B. Shah, D.M Dharmadhikari, and H.K. Sema in Writ Petition (Civil) No. 98 of 2002, Ms. Aruna Roy and others vs. Union of India and others.

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enemies of the nation (Lall, 2008). Starting with ancient history, there were attempts to prove the indigenous origins of the Aryans in order to establish historical legitimacy for a Hindu nationhood. Part of this was also the claim that the four strata varna (caste) system⁶ had existed in the Vedic society, meaning that the caste system and the Hindu social structure that comes with it were essentially represented as having been in existence since time immemorial as no dates are supplied for the Vedic era (Roy, 2003)⁷.

India's ancient history and the Vedic Golden Age

Hindutva started an obsession with the Vedic Golden Age. Presenting Vedic society as the true cradle of a Hindu Indian society not only ignored the pluralistic roots and the contributions of the Muslim and other minorities to the Indian heritage, but was also a total reversal of the inclusive, secular Nehruvian roots that underpinned Indian education for over 50 years (Lall 2005). The Vedic civilisation started to be used to depict Hindu cultural superiority (textbooks of class VI, VII, X and XII). In class VI the description of the *Upanishads* as “the works of most profound philosophy in any religion” (p. 91) and as “the greatest works of philosophy in the history of humankind” (p. 134) establishes Hinduism as the ‘best’ of all world religions. Similarly,

“... Indian and Chinese civilisations are the only ones which have survived right from the time they came into existence till date... All other early civilisations have disappeared and the present people/civilisations have no connection with the past ones.” (Class VI: India and the World (2003) by Makkhan Lal, Sima Yadav, B.K. Banerjee and M. Akhtar Hussain: 58)

These statements want the pupils to believe that the Hindu civilisation was greater than all others, including the later Mughal civilisation which was essentially Muslim.⁸ In Class VII ancient India is again portrayed as an ideal society with the oppression of women having been imported in the middle ages as the result of Muslim invasion and oppression: ‘with Muslim contact there began the purdah system.’⁹(p.99) This is a clear oversimplification as during the Mughal rule Hindi and Muslim customs were combined with each other. On p.88 there is another example of the

⁶ Varna refers to the Indian caste system.

⁷ What is not mentioned is that the only evidence for this is a single verse from a single hymn that some historians regard as a later addition to the Rigveda

⁸ The same books present Mughal history as the history of invasions and destruction of the Hindu Golden Age.

⁹ Purdah refers to the segregation of women from men in society.

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glorification of Hinduism in the context of a discussion of South East Asia. Buddhist and Islamic influences are marginalised, leading students to ignore the historical significance of other religions in the wider region. The Class X textbook again over-glorifies certain aspects of the Indian past, especially those connected with the Vedic tradition and Hinduism. The Vedic people are depicted as having extensive scientific knowledge – in certain cases knowing things which were discovered much later (p. 100):

‘Vedic people knew the methods of making squares equal in area to triangles, circles and calculate the differences of squares. The Zero was known in the Rig Vedic times itself (...) Cubes, cube roots, square roots and under roots were also known and used. In the Vedic period astronomy was well developed. (...) They also knew that the earth moved on its own axis and around the sun.’ (Class XI: Ancient India by Makkhan Lal: 100)

The first set of changes to the textbooks happened in 2000 as part of the BJP’s ‘Indianise, nationalise and spiritualise’ campaign (Lall 2009). In 2004 the BJP lost the elections and only came back to power a decade later during which time some Indian states changed the textbooks, removing some of the Hindu nationalist content.¹⁰ When the BJP came back to power in 2014, much of the changes to textbooks were left to the Indian state governments. Recent research (Jairam, 2021) into these regional textbooks since 2014 show that the India’s Vedic history is again depicted as the ‘Golden Age’ that lasted ‘from the beginning to 1206 – when Islam engendered the ‘age of invasions’.¹¹ The Golden Age starts with the Aryan population and maintains that the Aryans were indigenous and not invaders from outside India -focusing on the ‘unbroken’ lineage of Hindus from ancient common Aryan ancestry. Part of the narrative is mixed up with the Harappan (Indus Valley) civilisation. According to Pradyumna Jairam

‘The idea of a Golden Age therefore rests on the notion that society was free from conflict, people were aware of the roles they had to perform in society, which increased the possibility of more cohesion and cooperation, thereby giving the impression of a time when divisions were hardly prevalent among the inhabitants of the country’ (Jairam: 113).

The Golden Age also includes the Mauryan Empire (323-185 B.C), class X stating that “*it inspired the Republican and Constitutional values present in the*

¹⁰ In India education is both a Central and a State level matter, with states allowed to decide which textbooks they use.

¹¹ *Swarnim Bharat in Saamajik Vigyaan*, A Social Science Textbook for Class X, Rajasthan State Textbook Authority, Jaipur, 2017, pp.1 cited in Jairam 2021.

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constitution today".¹² Although the emperor Ashoka is studied in detail, his conversion to Buddhism is not mentioned. Jairam explains how by ignoring this conversion the textbooks can continue with a linear progression of history, keeping Hindus at the centre of the narrative.

Hindutva ideologues have contended that:

[G]ood history" is one that can produce a "healthy nation", while critical historians are guilty of "self abuse". The past is simply a resource to build a positive (the opposite of self-abuse) self-image for Hindus. This involves two elements. The first is work on Hindu Nationalism (...) the second and complementary element is that of willed forgetting. Any detail that disturbs the positive self image of Hindus must be jettisoned." (Datta, 2003)

It is clear that India's current Hindu nationalist government is set to use ancient history to entrench its conception of Indian national identity as being a Hindu identity, resulting in the exclusion of India's Muslims and other religious minorities.

Pakistan's erasure of ancient history

Pakistan's experience of history education has been the exact opposite of India's glorification of ancient history. In Pakistan ancient history was sacrificed to develop a national identity based on Islam as Pakistan tried to distance itself as much as possible from any historical linkages to Hindu majority India.

Pakistan was born out of the partition from India in 1947 at the end of British rule. The role of religion was central in the Muslim League's demand for an independent state, which resulted in major trauma for both Hindus and Muslims. Partition left over a million dead in religious riots in both countries. Islam has always been seen as a central tenet of Pakistani national identity as its role was to unify the Muslim minority of the subcontinent. In line with the Two Nation theory, which maintained that British India was the home of two nations and had to be divided into two countries along religious lines – Islam and Hinduism, religion has been invoked for the purpose of national integration (Saigol, 2003). Islam was seen as having an important role to play in Pakistan's education system as

¹²Saamajik Vigyaan, A Social Science Textbook for Class 10, Rajasthan State Textbook Authority, Jaipur, 2017, pp.1 cited in Jairam 2021.

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the binding force which would keep the different provinces united and give the Pakistani people a sense of national unity.

The secession of Bangladesh in 1971 demanded a revisiting of the role played by religion in Pakistan's national identity, especially since Islam had failed to keep the Eastern province attached as Bengali nationalism triumphed over the unifying power of religion. This resulted in the introduction of Islamiyat (the study of Islam) as a separate subject in schools during the presidency of Zulfikar Ali Bhutto.¹³ What was at first just an exercise in cementing national unity became a fundamentalist project after the military coup of 1977, when a further intensification of islamisation of social life in general, and schooling in particular, was pursued by General Zia-ul-Haq (Lall, 2008).

Zia's first drive was the islamisation of all sections of Pakistani society. This included the introduction of Islamic law, an overhaul of the education system to emphasize an Islamic and more particularly Sunni national identity, and generally anti-minority policies targeting both non-Muslim and non-Sunni communities (Lall, 2010). This was first to justify his political legitimacy as a military dictator who had removed the democratically elected leader from power. But in part the islamisation programme and quest for a radical Islamic national identity for Pakistan were also to bind together a nation which was still being torn apart by internal issues of regionalism as well as being influenced by foreign policy challenges emanating from Iran and Afghanistan. Zia wanted to bring the legal, social, economic and political institutions of the country in conformity with the Islamic principles, values and traditions in the light of the Quran and Sunnah¹⁴ to enable the people of Pakistan to lead their lives in accordance with Islam. This was a totally new concept of Pakistani national identity, a 180 degree turn from Jinnah's original vision of a secular and democratic state (Lall, 2010).

Zia's textbooks fostered a particularly anti-Indian and anti-Hindu outlook through historical distortions. Congress, for instance, is portrayed as a Hindu organisation intent on subjugating the Muslims of the subcontinent. Gandhi's role in the independence movement is minimised and he is portrayed as a Hindu leader. Further back in time Aurangzeb, a Moghul emperor of the 17th century CE known for his brutal anti-Hindu policies, is

¹³ Zulfikar Ali Bhutto served as the President of Pakistan from 1971 to 1973 and as Prime Minister from 1973 to 1977.

¹⁴ Quran is an alternative spelling for Koran and the Sunnah are the way or deeds of Muhammad which have been validated by the consensus of companions of Prophet.

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portrayed as an orthodox and pious Muslim (not mentioning his fratricide), whilst Akbar's liberal policies are decried as being responsible for spreading faithlessness (Akbar was a Moghul emperor in the 16th century CE who was known for his religious tolerance). Hindus are described as backward and superstitious (Lall, 2008).

Most importantly history teaching eradicated the pre-Islamic period and started with the advent of Islam. Arab Commander Muhammad Bin Qasim (695-715 CE) became 'the first Pakistani'.¹⁵ In the chapter entitled 'Imprints of the Past', the Pakistan Studies textbook of 1991 used for the preparation of GCSE exams ignored the Indus Valley civilisation completely. The indigenous Indian Culture (sic) mentions peasant culture, caste, and some fragments on Hinduism. Islam is depicted as having had a positive social impact:

Islam lives in the tranquil and inconspicuous harmony of village life. It is a sacred, yet private matter for the individual who feels that the communal spirit of tolerance, fellowship and mutual help, so integral to the cohesion of village life, is endorsed by the teachings of Islam. (Qasir, 1991 p.165)

In fact, two important eras were simply erased – first the Bronze era Indus Valley civilisation (2500-1300 BCE), so glorified in India's Golden Age. This civilisation showcased urban planning, brick housing, drainage systems and water supply as well as metallurgy of copper, bronze, lead and tin. Two of the major sites - Mohenjo-daro and Harappa that housed up to 60,000 inhabitants are on Pakistani soil.

The second one is the Gandhara civilisation (1200 BCE to 5th Century CE), located in Pakistan's North-West (and Afghanistan's North-East) around the Peshawar and Swat valleys, extending at the height of the kingdom to Taxila, close to today's Islamabad (and Kabul and Bamiyan across the Afghan border). Gandhara's art was heavily influenced by classical Greek styles, especially after the invasion of Alexander the Great in 327 BCE. Buddhism thrived there till the 8th or 9th century when Islam arrived in the region, with Mahmud Ghaznavi's conquest of 1001 signalling the end of the Indo-Greek civilisation.

Zia's legacy of Islamisation and the eradication of Pakistan's ancient roots was never entirely reversed, even in the years of non-military rule between 1989 and 1999. Haroon Khalid writes in Pakistan's newspaper Dawn how a book written by a Pakistani politician on the Indus Valley civilisation and Pakistan tries to show that the Harappan era was quite

¹⁵<https://www.dawn.com/news/1429490>

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separate from the Gangetic Valley civilisation that emerged later and concludes: "the message is clear – Islamic history is acceptable as long as it is separated from Hindu influence."¹⁶

Under General Musharraf's government (1999-2008) the Education Sector Reforms Action Plan 2001-2004 engendered a major curriculum review – the first one since Zia's Islamisation process in the late 1970s/ early 1980s. Musharraf's call for the de-Islamisation of the curriculum early 2000 did not have had the support of the religious parties and was widely seen as a policy implemented on US orders. The issues of education for development and education for greater secularisation or democratisation were blurred by the US intervention in Afghanistan, for which Pakistani support was required. The textbook and curriculum reform became embroiled in a debate on the role of religion in national identity and westernisation from above. It is however important to remember that a textbook and curriculum reform also became necessary because of out of date or inappropriate content. Both the curriculum and the textbooks had been re-copied and re-printed since the Zia era with only minor changes (Lall, 2009b).

Overall the Musharraf reforms did not yield a complete de-islamisation of the Pakistani textbooks and curriculum. Nevertheless, the changes in the history curriculum were significant as the Indus Valley civilization and the Aryan era were re-instated, covering the period between 1500 BC and 1500 AD albeit briefly¹⁷. This means that Hinduism, Buddhism, Jainism, the Gandhara Civilization, Alexander's invasion, the Mauryas (Emperor Ashoka) and the Guptas are now again taught as apart of Pakistani history. This is a great improvement as since Zia's time children used to learn about the start of history with the Mughal invasions, despite the ruins of MohenjoDaro being located in Sindh. Most of the curriculum will nevertheless still focus on what is the Muslim era and later the freedom movement against the British, however the broader background of South Asian civilization are after almost 30 years reinstated at their rightful place (Lall, 2009b).

¹⁶<https://www.dawn.com/news/1429490>

¹⁷ This has been verified as I hold a copy of the first draft curriculum 2006 of History classes 6-8 and Pakistan studies 9-10.

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Myanmar's Burmanisation from the Pyu to the Great Kings¹⁸

Myanmar is another case in point where history education has been used for identity construction. Burma, as the country was known at independence from Britain in 1948 had like India and Pakistan the challenge to unite a diverse country with multiple languages, ethnicities and religions. Education has been marked by a process of Burmanisation – a belief that the country needed a unifying national identity based on one culture, one language and one religion – in this case the national identity of the majority Bamar, with Burmese as the unifying language and Buddhism as the state religion. Given that Myanmar is made up of around 60% Bamar and 40% ethnic minorities¹⁹, this has not been without controversy. The military governments (1962-2011, and again after the 1st of Feb coup 2021) have been a propagator of Burmanisation, fuelling ethnic conflict with 20+ ethnic armed groups around the country. After the 1962 military coup, schools had to serve as an aid for the realisation of the revolutionary government's socialist goal. This is when schools were nationalised, Burmese was made the official language of instruction, Buddhism the national religion, and minority languages were removed from state schools. The aim was to force a unitary Bamar dominated national identity across all ethnic groups, no matter what their language, religion or culture.

It is however important to note that Bamar centred nationalism didn't suddenly appear after 1962. Nationalism had been historically linked with the majority Bamar, both under the Bamar kings in pre-colonial and later during the anti-colonial pre-independence periods. Thant Myint-U (2001) and Michael Charney (2006) have described the formation of a 'myanma' identity centred around Buddhism, Burmese language, and Burman ethnicity during the Konbaung Dynasty (1752-1885). This identity was spread by itinerant monks in what was later described as a process of 'Burmanisation', in which non-mymanma people were given incentives or pressured to adopt mymanma customs (Houtman, 1999). Because *lu-myò*²⁰ was more flexible than 20th century conceptions of ethnicity, people could 'become' *myanma* by changing their political allegiance or behaviour - the

¹⁸ The focus here is on the pre-2012 history textbooks. Myanmar started an education reform process in 2012, rewriting much of its curriculum between 2015 and 2019. The COVID 19 pandemic and the 2021 military coup have interrupted this process and not all new books have been finalised or deployed at the time of writing.

¹⁹ Myanmar's ethnic minorities reject this terminology and prefer to be referred to as ethnic nationality or simply ethnic.

²⁰ Roughly translates as a mix between ethnicity and identity.

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category *myanma* was capable of retaining its purity while incorporating other groups (Charney, 2006). The 1930s nationalist Dobáma ('*We-báma*') organisation took as its slogan a series of phrases that can be translated as: '*Báma country, our country; báma literature, our literature; báma language, our language*' (Khin Yi, 1988, 5). Although this 'Burmanisation', as it was called, was primarily an attempt to combat the dominance of 'foreign' English and Hindi languages (Khin Yi 1988), it also served to exclude non-Burmese speaking ethnic groups from nationalists' conception of báma/myanma (Metro, 2011).

In post-independence times the conflict between ethnic armed groups and the Burmese military (Tatmadaw) arose largely because of unequal rights as well as the forced assimilation process of Burmanisation, best exemplified by the requirement that only Bamar language was allowed as the language of instruction in schools and for official transactions. The history that was taught was that of the dominant Bamar. This excluded the culture and languages of the more than 100 ethnic groups that comprised modern Burma. In essence though this was nothing new – the history of the Mon, Shan and Arakanese kingdoms were not part of the monastic curricula that dominated education for hundreds of years (Salem-Gervais and Metro, 2012), nor did they appear in post-independence textbooks.

The State Peace and Development Council (SPDC)²¹ used school textbooks to reinforce links between the military regime and Myanmar's past, creating the myth that the Bamar kings defeated ethnic minorities and ruled supreme. Metro (2011: 56) shows that what she calls a '*trinity of activities – national unification, economic development, and religious patronage*' were carried out by the SPDC and by the kings who are 'heroised' in the textbooks. This relegated anti-colonial nationalists to the second rung of heroes, behind the Great Kings. The prioritisation of the Great Kings meant that almost all of the history sections of history and geography textbooks were dedicated to kings Anawratha (1044-1077 CE), Kyansittha (1030-1112/3) Bayinnaung (1551-1581 CE), and Alaungpaya (1752-1760 CE). In textbooks the actions of these Kings mirrored the actions of the SPDC, lending a spurious legitimacy to the military regime (Metro 2011). The kings and heroes of the other ethnic groups are only mentioned in relation to the Burman kings, so that the Mon, whose history is more closely related to the Burmans than is other ethnic groups, received more textbook space than other ethnic historical figures.

²¹ Previously known as SLORC and in power from 1990-2011.
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Whilst the kings rule supreme in the Myanmar textbooks, the Burmanisation process actually starts with ancient history. The Pyu entered the Irrawaddy valley from present day southern China in 2nd century BCE. Buddhism came to the Pyu through trade with India, converting most of the population that lived in city states such as Halin, Beikthano and Sri Ksetra. The Pyu dominated the area until the advent of the Pagan empire in the 11th century CE. The Pyu settlements were then absorbed into the expanding Burman empire, their language becoming extinct in the late 12th century CE and Pyu histories being absorbed by the Bamar. The textbooks project Burman identity back onto the extinct Pyu culture – presenting them as ‘proto-Burmans’ (Salem Gervais and Metro 2012). Whilst the textbooks did acknowledge the non-Burman early cultures such as the Mon (entered today’s Myanmar in the 6th century CE) and the Rakhine kingdoms (in existence since BCE, but notable kingdoms such as Vessali starting in 327 CE), the emphasis remained on the Burmans. According to Rose Metro, the 5th class history textbooks covered the Stone Age, calling it ‘Upper Burman’ culture – ‘although how they would know that these people identified as Burman is obviously unclear’.²²

Post 2012 Myanmar started a profound, yet incomplete reform process, including education reforms (Lall, 2016). At the time of writing is unclear how much of the post 2015 reformed textbooks will have altered the space given to non-Burman histories (Lall, 2021). The role of the Pyu as the origins or Buran culture is likely not to have been changed, allowing for the myth of a continuous Bamar culture for several millennia to continue. What did change as part of the wider education reforms was the development of local curricula to support the language and culture of ethnic groups in ethnic states. Whilst the future of these local curricula is unclear at the time of writing, the locally developed books include more information on non-Burman history, such as the Mon or Shan. Unlike in the main history textbooks, ancient cities such as Thaton, are the topic of specific lessons (Salem Gervais and Raynaud, 2020).

Myanmar’s use of history as a political tool is similar to that of India, however the focus remains on the post Pagan era – i.e. after the 11th century CE, which is depicted as a Bamar Golden Age. The little bit of ancient history that is taught is suitably adapted to underpin a continuous

²² Email Dr Rose Metro 13th April 2021 – She also pointed out that outside of history books, in state newspapers, there has been the claim, with little evidence, that humans originally evolved in Myanmar, not Africa.

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Bamarculture from antiquity to the modern day, supporting the ideas of ethnic and cultural superiority vis-a-vis other ethnic groups.

Conclusion

In *Educating the "Right way"*, Apple (2001) describes how social movements and the state can interact to create certain conditions in which conflicts arise over official knowledge and its control. Whilst every state attempts to perpetuate itself through the transmission of culture (Pai and Adler 2001), in India, Pakistan and Myanmar the education policy and matching textbooks are used to transmit an interpretation of majority culture which divides society into majority and minority segments with effects reaching well beyond the classroom. In India's case mainly Muslims, but also Christians, have been vilified as having loyalties outside India. This division of Indian society has been reflected in violent communal clashes, not least in Gujarat where between 1000 and 2000 Muslims lost their lives in 2002 (Human Rights Watch, 2002 and Engineer, 2003). In Pakistan Hindus and Christians have been discriminated against, often threatened by Pakistan's blasphemy laws (Curtis 2016) and in Myanmar the ethnic nationality population are treated differently from the majority Bamar resulting in six decades of ethnic conflict (South and Lall 2017). What is interesting in all three cases is the obsession with the unbroken and pure lineage of a particular ethnic and or religious group for centuries or even millennia: for Hindus in India since the Vedic Golden Age, for Burmans since the Pyu and for Pakistanis, an Islamic identity since Muhammad Bin Qasim, cutting them off from any previous non-Islamic roots, to make sure there are no links to Hinduism. None of this has much to do with historical facts, that would have seen ethnic and religious groups mingle across the ages.

Re-writing history is in itself part of the growth of historical knowledge. However, while the pursuit of historical objectivity is a noble ideal, the writing and rewriting of history are always informed by political and ethical concerns, not to mention prejudices. It is thus always advisable to approach historical accounts with a healthy dose of skepticism. In some cases the politicization of history is more flagrant than in others. When certain facts are altered, the motives for such changes have to be questioned and analysed. Cleansing history of those that are to be disowned, smacks of politisation. It should be remembered 'that history is taught to open the minds of school children not to politicize or socialize them' (Bhargava, 2003).

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The religious nationalist use of the history textbooks in India, Pakistan and Myanmar are part and parcel of the contemporary political elites to put the dominant ethnic and religious groups at the centre of the nation. For their historians, revisiting history, including ancient history is not simply about differentiating the other, but finding the 'self' that is present in the culture of the country and has been for centuries or even millennia.

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