

Review of
Discovery Education Social Studies Techbook

Hindu Education Foundation USA (HEF)

July, 2017

This is a review of Discovery Education Social Studies Techbook, (hereafter called the 'Discovery Techbook') which is one of the programs being considered for adoption for teaching in California public schools.

The textbook drafts being considered have several instances of adverse reflections on Hinduism and India in the textbook which violate the Californian Law and Educational standards. We see that the narrative in textbook draft reflects many Orientalist biases.

It is important to note that the Evaluation criteria for Instructional Material require the textbooks "to project the cultural diversity of society; instill in each child a sense of pride in his or her heritage; develop a feeling of self-worth related to equality of opportunity; eradicate the roots of prejudice; and thereby encourage the optimal individual development of each student". They also prohibit any "descriptions, depictions, labels, or rejoinders that tend to demean, stereotype, or patronize minority groups."¹ Our review shows that the drafts do not completely adhere to these provisions.

The Discovery techbook offers several instances of Orientalism spread all over the draft - in images, in vocabulary, and in activities they have for the students.

¹*Education Code* Sections 51501, 60040(b), and 60044(a). Also see 'Standards for Evaluating Instructional Materials for Social Content, 2013 Edition', page 5 and page 9 of 19.

1. Orientalism - A Brief

By Orientalism, scholars refer to patronizing depictions of cultures and people that were part of an imagined geographical entity called the 'Orient' an area including India, China the Middle East and the South East Asia. Dr. Edward Said, a founder of the academic field of postcolonial studies, defines Orientalism as "a style of thought based upon an ontological and epistemological distinction made between "the Orient" and (most of the time) "the Occident."" It is based on an underlying assumption that there is an "absolute and systematic difference between the West, which is rational, developed, humane, superior, and the Orient, which is aberrant, undeveloped, inferior."²

Said writes that since antiquity, the 'Orient' has had a special place in European Western experience, as a place of "romance, exotic beings, haunting memories and landscapes". Orientalism started off as "a way of coming to terms" with these strange and mysterious people. With many European nations becoming colonisers of these places, asymmetric power equations ensured that this way of understanding the colonized and their cultures, became the only legitimate way of understanding and creating knowledge about these people. As Said points out, Orientalist biases are not just manifested in many genuine works of Western scholarship but that "racial ideas too came from the same impulse." Needless to say, that the narratives based on them are often at variance with what the people of those cultures experience about themselves and also with empirical evidence.

Orientalists often see India as defined by primitive hierarchical structures of "caste" and outdated rituals. They conflate and essentialize Hinduism and Indian civilization into these structures and objectify Hindus ignoring their diversity, aspects of culture such as philosophy, aesthetics and art as also other achievements of the civilization.

Politically, colonialism might have ended in the last century, but many scholars have shown that its remnants are well entrenched in many different ways and that Orientalist biases still exist in the narratives about many of these cultures although they may not be ubiquitous at all times.

² Said, Edward W. 1978. *Orientalism*. New York: Pantheon Books

2. Visual Imagery

Consider the pictures below

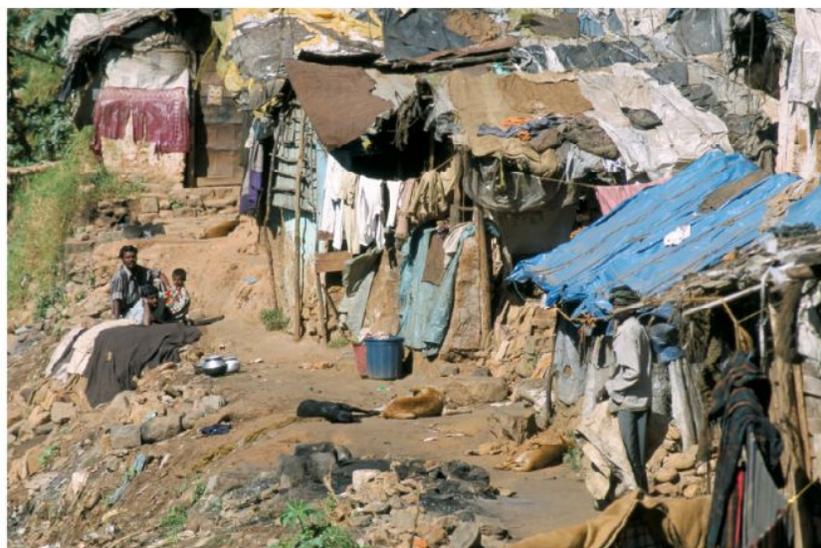


A Picture of Cows and Trash in sixth grade textbook draft

What is glaring in the above picture of the 'cows and trash' is not just that it conflates a people with trash and dirt or that it betrays stereotypes about India and Hinduism ("caste, cows and curry" stereotypes as scholars call them), but that it exhibits a sense of callous anachronism in using a contemporary picture of cows eating trash to represent an ancient period as if the people being referred to are frozen in time. Similar is the case with pictures of children carrying manure used to illustrate "caste system" and the picture of slums and shanties in India. No other section on ancient civilization has such images depicting them.



A picture of children carrying manure in the textbook drafts



A picture of slums in the textbook drafts

Visual imagery has been one of the most important manifestations of the Orientalist discourse. European paintings have very often portrayed an Orient that was abnormal, backward and inferior. As Edward Said points out, paintings of artists as eminent as Eugene Delacroix depicted Orient in a way that was completely disparate from what the people themselves experienced about themselves and their culture. It may not be a coincidence then that modern day Orientalism as represented in the textbook drafts too is manifested in its pictures as much as its vocabulary and the questions it asks. In fact many ideas about India that underlie the discourse in textbook drafts have for long existed in the Colonial Europe's imagination of the Orient. They all are based on an imagination of an India that is frozen in time - where the descriptions of the ancient and the present are easily interchangeable. This is a violation not only of Category 1.10 which prohibits adverse reflection but also Education Code Sections 51501, 60040(b), and 60044(a) of 'Standards for Evaluating Instructional Materials for Social Content.

Incidentally, in the State Board of Education (SBE) hearing on July 14, 2016, many Hindu students had raised concerns about the denigrating pictures of trash and pigs being used in the section on Hinduism. Board member Trish Boyd Williams had thereafter sought to know from the Instructional Quality Commission (IQC) if these concerns were being addressed adequately. Thereafter, Tom Adams, the then Executive Director of IQC had assured that the new History Social Science framework which was being adopted, would address these issues that existed in the old textbooks. One wonders as to what makes these biases durable as to recur with such consistency? Are these biases so deeply entrenched so as to reinforce the Orientalist discourse every time, disallowing even the slightest amount of doubt and sensitivity while dealing with India and Hinduism?



Aesthetic paintings with religious themes like the above are used in the section on Christianity

3. Usage of Colonial Ethnographic texts as “primary sources”

The History–Social Science Framework narrative, adopted by the California’s State Board of Education (CDE) on July 14, 2016 talks of shifting from “teaching Western Civilization, a narrative that put Western Europe at the center of world events in this period, to teaching world history.”³ This indeed is a commendable intent, not just because California now has children from cultures all over the world but because the Orientalist view of history has been identified to have serious limitations.

But the next sentence of the framework narrative possibly sums up more accurately the current predicament of this endeavor - “Decentering Europe is a complicated process, because themes, periods, narratives, and terminology of historical study was originally built around Europe.” Nowhere is this predicament more clearly visible than in the Discovery Techbook drafts which are supposed to be based on this framework narrative.

Consider this: The History–Social Science Adoption Program Evaluation Map of the California Department of Education (CDE) seeks that the publisher include “sufficient use of primary sources appropriate to the age level of students so that students understand from the words of the authors the way people saw themselves, their work, their ideas and values, their assumptions, their fears and dreams, and their interpretation of their own times.” So what would one expect to be the primary sources to be used in the sections on ‘Ancient India’ and Hinduism in sixth grade? A few verses from the ‘Bhumi Sukta’ (Vedic hymns about Mother Earth) as suggested by the 2016 History Social Science Framework?

Discovery Techbook uses a text from a colonial era ethnographic material on the “castes” and “tribes” in India named “Excerpts from The Tribes and Castes of the Central Provinces of India” written by a colonial administrator named R. V. Russell and published in 1916. It is almost as if the colonial material is the primary voice of the colonised. Other religions and cultures are spared from colonial ethnographic material, instead the only ones used as primary sources are religious texts. But that is not all. This text is said to serve as a primary source for ‘Ancient India’, not even an India of colonial period where the source originates. This blatant anachronism is not completely out of the blue. In fact they are instances of what scholars of colonialism have understood as Orientalism. They are based on an imagination of an India that is frozen in time - where the descriptions of the ancient and the present are easily interchangeable.

4. Using ‘South Asia’ over ‘India’

³ History Social Science Framework www.cde.ca.gov/ci/cr/cf/documents/socialcontent2013.doc, (2016 Framework, chapter 11, lines 57-61)

Consider the following lines from the subsection 'Civilization in the Indus Valley'

"Lapis lazuli, a blue stone from South Asia was exported to the Akkadian, Assyrian, and Babylonian empires."

While all other entities in the above paragraph are mentioned by their proper nouns, only India is represented using an 'area'. This usage is prevalent throughout the section on Ancient India. This violates the HSS adoption Category 1.2 that seeks adherence to the framework. The framework uses the words India in most cases. This issue of what the ancient Indian civilization be called had come up for debate in the History Social Science Framework adoption cycle in 2015 and 2016 where IQC had decided to retain the word 'India' and rejected attempts to replace it to 'South Asia' by a group named South Asia Faculty Group (SAFG). But the Discovery techbook continues to use the word term 'South Asia' in place of India in 71 places in the section on Ancient India.

'South Asia' is a recent moniker that owes its origins to the Area Studies departments set up in Universities across US during the cold war to gather data of geopolitical significance in these 'areas'. The discipline of Area Studies has come up for a lot of scholarly criticism. As many scholars have pointed out the Area Studies approach objectifies the cultures and people there and only focuses on the Area's faultlines.

As scholars note

"Area is shorthand for an expanse that is spatially distinct from the academic researcher or scholar....Thus, non-Western is inevitably a cognate, or synonym of area....The general political criticism of area studies points to the coincidence of its rapid growth and the interdependence of its knowledge claims with the US national – governmental interests in the Cold War era....[Edward] Said had described US area studies as a contemporary form of Orientalism....The point that knowledge confers power to the knower has never been disputed and, indeed, has always been underscored as an important justification of area studies. Simply put,...places that can only know themselves as areas can never attain genuine self-consciousness and self-determination."⁴

The Orientalist approach itself is pretty evident in the Discovery Techbook's overall treatment of India and Hinduism too and the influence of 'Area Studies' and reducing Indians into a geography only serves as an instance of this objectification of Indians that the textbook draft presents. For example, it may seem remarkable that the 'Harappan civilization' is included as part of the section on 'Geography of India' in the Discovery Techbook, as if the study of ancient Indians is somehow a part of geography. But this is approach of seeing no distinction between talking about the territorial description of land, the flora and fauna and about the people residing there, all in a single breath is consistent

⁴ Revathi Krishnaswamy and John Charles Hawley, eds., *The Postcolonial and the Global* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2008), 54-55

with nineteenth century Eurocentric ethnography⁵.

It is imperative that any approach that patronizes students' cultures, heritage and religion should be avoided in the textbooks. Such a view violates the spirit of Education Code sections of 'Standards for Evaluating Instructional Materials for Social Content, that prohibit any "descriptions, depictions, labels, or rejoinders that tend to demean, stereotype, or patronize minority groups."⁶ It also runs contrary to the stated goal of the History Social Science framework of shifting from Eurocentrism towards teaching world history.

5. India = Caste

The 'India's rulers and society' subsection within the 'Ancient India' section opens with a complete page on "The Responsibilities of the Classes" where we are told that "power helped shape the culture and society of India then and now." The "essential question" that the textbook wants students to think while studying Ancient India is "What effects did power and social class have on the lives of the ancient Indian people?" Contrast this with the 'essential question' of the section on Ancient Hebrews and the disparity becomes completely visible - "In what ways did the ancient Israelites influence religions and societies in ancient and modern times?"

The section on Ancient India and Hinduism has the word 'caste' appearing 316 times in a matter of a few pages. The subsection 'India's rulers and society' has a 'Source library' for engaging further on the topic which contains 26 documents and videos in total. 20 out of these 26 sources are on the topic of "caste". Even the later chapters including the page that is supposed to speak on Mahabharata primarily discusses 'caste'. What explains this excessive obsession with caste and social system of India? And why only the social structures in India? Why such emphasis on social structure and the relation of power and social class is not other sections? It is because of the all pervasive Orientalist narrative that continues to essentialize India into 'caste'.

This obsession with caste in the narratives on India and Hinduism is very much a product of Colonialism. Nicholas Dirks, the former Chancellor of the University of California, Berkeley and one of the foremost scholars on colonialism in India writes in 'Castes of Mind: Colonialism and the Making of Modern India' that "caste", as we know it today, as a basic expression or essence of Indian tradition and as a designation that exhausted the totality of

⁵ Balagangadhara, S. N , 1994, "The heathen in his blindness"-- : Asia, the West, and the dynamic of religion, Leiden ; New York; p 67

⁶Education Code Sections 51501, 60040(b), and 60044(a). Also see 'Standards for Evaluating Instructional Materials for Social Content, 2013 Edition', page 5 and page 9 of 19.

Indian social forms is "the product of a concrete historical encounter between India and Western colonial rule."⁷

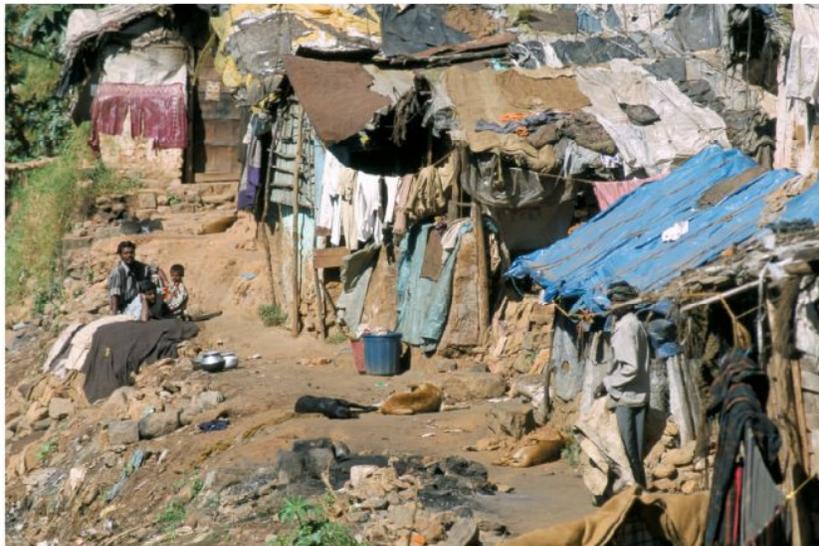
6. Roleplay on caste system

The subsection on 'India's Rulers and Society' in Discovery techbook contains a role play named "Life in My Caste".

It asks the students to

"imagine that it is 200 BCE and you are a member of a specific Indian caste. Write a diary entry depicting the duties, responsibilities, and characteristics of your daily life as a member of this caste."

It shows the poverty stricken slums and shanties and asks the students to identify which caste resides there.



A picture of slums in India

At the outset, the textbook adoption guidelines clearly state that roleplaying is prohibited, especially in matters related to religion (Category 1.10). This activity violates the category, specifically because Discovery techbook clearly ties caste system to religion and then goes on to include a role-play on it. For example a video segment named 'The Caste System' as

⁷ Nicholas B. Dirks, 2001, *Castes of Mind: Colonialism and the Making of Modern India*, Princeton University Press

part of the 'Explore' in section 'India's Rulers and Society' in the Discovery Techbook says "The caste system which developed at the time of the Rig Veda **has also been part of the Hindu faith.**" (emphasis added)

But that is not the only problem with this activity. The activity starts with saying it is of 200 BCE but uses modern pictures. It betrays the Orientalist bias that sees India (as a piece of Orient) that is frozen in time and undeveloped. Anachronism seems to be compulsive problem with Orientalists that it keeps recurring all the time in the narration of India.

7. Some Other Inaccuracies

7.1 The section on Mohenjodaro claims that "Mohenjo-daro, located in modern-day Pakistan, was the largest city of the Indus Valley civilization."

Violation: Category 1.4 which mandates historical accuracy.

Details: In 2015 Rakhigarhi in Northern Indian State of Haryana replaced Mohenjodaro as the largest city of Harappan civilization.

7.2 The section 'Life in Ancient India's Major Cities' claims that "Historians and linguists have only partially decoded the language, which consists of 250 to 500 characters. Many scholars are beginning to connect the language to the Dravidian language family (which includes the modern language of Tamil spoken in southern South Asia).

Violation: Category 1.4 which mandates historical accuracy.

Details: This is inaccurate. Historian Edwin Bryant, American Indologist, currently, professor of religions of India at Rutgers University says "Despite dedicated efforts spanning almost seventy years (which have included the use of sophisticated computer techniques), the script remains tantalizingly resistant to be being deciphered" He notes that "it is unlikely that the script is Dravidian, since it uses a numbering system with a base ten. Dravidian uses base eight."

See Bryant, Edwin, 2001, The Quest for the Origins of Vedic Culture, Oxford University Press.

7.3 The video segment 'Indus River Valley: Early Innovation' claims "The scholars living in Harappa and Mohenjodaro, cities established nearly 5 thousand years ago, were

responsible for a number accomplishments in the Arts, Science and Mathematics".

Violation: Category 1.4 which mandates historical accuracy.

Details: There is no evidence to suggest that the achievements of Harappan civilization were limited to these two cities. In Fact the civilization was spread across vast expanses of North and NorthWest and Western Indian subcontinent and hundreds of sites have been discovered along the Indus and Sarasvati river banks as also the area surrounding them.

7.4 Video Segment Migrants and Aryan Nomads says "Dravidians moved to South to protect their language and traditions." and uses words like "dark skinned and light skinned people".

Violation: Category 1.4 which mandates historical accuracy.

Details: There is no evidence to suggest that Dravidians were driven to the South. This is contentious speculation that is thin on evidence. It is sad that such blatant racial theories based on thin evidence are being used in the textbooks.

7.5. In the section on 'Mauryan Empire - Ashoka and Buddhism' it is claimed that "At the end of war against the Kalingas, Ashoka converted to a religion of peace: Buddhism."

Also in section 'Warrior who embraced peace' it is claimed that "What is certain is that soon after his conquest of Kalinga, Ashoka became a Buddhist. He renounced war and began a reign of peace and nonviolence."

Violation: Category 1.4 which mandates historical accuracy.

Details: The position that Ashoka converted to Buddhism after the war with the Kalinga is a myth and has absolutely no evidence. Ashoka's army invaded Kalinga in 262 BC but it is evident from Ashoka's minor rock edicts that he had embraced Buddhism more than two years before the war⁸. Charles Allen writes in 'Ashoka: The Search for India's Lost Emperor' that from the minor rock edict it is evident that Ashoka embraced Buddhism in or about 265 BC⁹, which is years before the Kalinga war in 262 BC.

⁸ See Sanjeev Sanyal, 2016, The Ocean of Churn, How the Indian Ocean shaped Human History, Penguin.

⁹ Charles Allen, 2012, 'Ashoka: The Search for India's Lost Emperor', Abacus

Consequently the whole sub-section named ‘The Warrior Who Embraced Peace, Why did Ashoka convert to Buddhism?’ as the name of the title itself suggests is based on a false premise. Similarly also the next subsection. ‘A Religious Revolution, How did Ashoka’s conversion to Buddhism change India?’ which is also based completely on the inaccuracy that Kalinga war happened before Ashoka embraced Buddhism.

7.6 The section on Gupta Empire says “Both the Guptas and the Cholas were Hindu, and so they supported Hinduism over all other religions. Because of this, Buddhism began to decline during the Gupta and Chola ages”.

Violation: Category 1.4 which mandates historical accuracy.

Details: This is inaccurate. Both Guptas and Cholas supported Buddhism and there is enough evidence that they gave grants for building Buddhist temples. The Cholas, for example reconstructed the Buddhist temples, and expanded some of them such as Velgam Vihare also known as Sadda Vihare in the present day district Trincomalee in Sri Lanka¹⁰. Similarly the Buddhist sculptures in Ajanta caves were built during the Gupta period.

Conclusion

The textbook has many serious problems in the portrayal of Hinduism and India as detailed above. These violate the California laws as also the criteria for instructional material as mandated by CDE. Hence it is imperative that these problems be addressed, failing which the textbook not be adopted for teaching in California public schools.

¹⁰ K.A. Nilakanta Sastri, K.A (2000) [1935]. The Cōḷas. Madras: University of Madras.