

**Politicizing the Past:**

**Depictions of Indo-Aryans in Indian Textbooks from 1998-2007**

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5/3/2013

HIS 679HB: Honors Tutorial Course

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**TABLE OF CONTENTS**

<u>SECTION</u>	<u>PAGE</u>
ABSTRACT .....	3
CHAPTERS	
CHAPTER I – Introduction .....	4
CHAPTER II – Politicization of Textbooks in India .....	8
CHAPTER III – Textbook Culture .....	12
CHAPTER IV – Historiography of the Aryan Debate .....	15
CHAPTER V – Textbook Analysis .....	29
CHAPTER VI – Public Reaction .....	49
CHAPTER VII – Conclusion .....	65
APPENDICES	
Figure 1 – The Indo-European Language Tree.....	69
BIBLIOGRAPHY .....	70

### **Abstract**

Schools across the world strive to instill national pride in students by presenting a shared history of the nation's development – a common past. Yet, in the case of India, there is no consensus on the common past, leaving students without a clear understanding of Indian history. From 1998-2007, Indian schools employed three different sets of history textbooks, each with radically different ideas on ancient Indian history concerning Indo-Aryans (peoples considered to be the founders of the Hindu faith). This paper endeavors to show that these textbook changes were clearly politicized; different political parties promoted conflicting ideas on Indo-Aryans due to incompatible religious beliefs. To provide context, there is also a discussion of the different historical issues regarding Indo-Aryans, such as the mystery of their origins and their relation to the Indus Valley Civilization. Additionally, this paper attempts to explain how the textbook changes were uniquely important to Indian national identity.

To accomplish these ends, I use direct quotes from all three sets of textbooks, as well as newspaper articles from *The Times of India*. An analysis of the textbook quotes shows that the ruling political party could dictate its own views on the culture, identity, and society of Indo-Aryan peoples. Furthermore, an analysis of newspaper articles reveals the public's reaction to textbook changes, showing that India is uniquely prone to such changes because its history is so ancient and ambiguous. Indians do not have the knowledge or clarity about the ancient past to pass down stories to future generations. As a result, students learn about their ancestry and identity through the material provided in textbooks, but that material is at the whim of political parties. This project reveals how political parties tamper with history to achieve their own ends, and the effect it has on the public's conceptions of history and national identity.

## I - Introduction

In nearly all nations, the school itself is “one of the principal agents of socialization” and a place for forming social identities in a child’s intellect.<sup>1</sup> School curriculum plays a key role in building national identities by instilling values and a common past in children. Specifically, students must take history classes as a mandatory component of the curriculum. These classes essentially play a homogenizing and nationalizing role by delivering a common past to students, one that presents the story of the nation’s development. Since this story of development is approved by the state, history classes often serve to advance students’ nationalism by painting a rosy picture of the nation’s “official” history.<sup>2</sup> After all, history is required to inculcate pride in the progress of the nation over time and its former triumphs. By learning about the common history they share with other citizens of their nation, students develop a love for their country and their countrymen. But how exactly is this common past determined? How can the state decide upon a particular version of history to impart to students? Because of these issues, history textbooks in particular are often controversial. Although this thesis focuses on Indian history textbooks, problems with deciding a common past are widespread. As recently as 2010, there was an uproar over textbook curriculum right here in Texas.

From January 2009 to August 2010, a formal revision of history curriculum in Texas took place. Social conservatives and liberals hotly disputed seemingly straightforward issues like the inclusion of Cesar Chavez in history books, and the separation of church and state.<sup>3</sup> The entire process became religiously charged, as expert witnesses with no training in history or education

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<sup>1</sup> Sylvie Guichard, *The Construction of History and Nationalism in India: Textbooks, Controversies and Politics* (London: Routledge, 2010), 1.

<sup>2</sup> *Ibid.*, 32.

<sup>3</sup> Keith A. Erikson, “Culture War Circus: How Politics and the Media Left History Education Behind,” in *Politics and the History Curriculum: The Struggle over Standards in Texas and the Nation*, ed. Keith A. Erikson (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2012), 4.

were drawn from the ranks of influential evangelists. Within the new standards, the negative effects of religious fervor, such as persecution of other faiths, were not mentioned at all. Similarly, crucial groups in American history like Native Americans were ignored.<sup>4</sup> Obviously, this is not everyone's version of the common past. There are many liberal groups and minority groups who would promote a different version of the past for textbooks. Who then, decides the common past? From a position of power, the representatives of the state have the authority to decide which version of the past is found in textbooks. In India, political parties have used this power to change textbook curriculum each time a shift in party alignment occurs. The issues in India are the same as in Texas – religious fervor, a multicultural populace, and differing versions of national identity.

From 1998-2007, a battle for influence over history textbook curriculum raged on between the two main political parties of India. In 1998, the right-wing Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP) won a majority of seats in Parliament, beating out the dominant left-wing Congress party. The Congress party was secular, but the BJP, which stayed in power until 2004, emphasized the importance of religion and saw India as a nation for Hindus. To redefine India as a Hindu nation, the BJP hoped to change common conceptions about the Indo-Aryan peoples, widely regarded as the founders of the Hindu faith. The party consequently changed textbook curriculum to include alternative viewpoints about the Indo-Aryans and other issues in Indian history.

My topic deals with the depiction of Indo-Aryans in Indian history textbooks in the period from 1998-2007. The textbook changes concentrated on a historical issue essential to Indian identity. This issue concerns the relationship between the Indo-Aryan peoples who composed India's earliest literature and the Harappan people who created India's first urban

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<sup>4</sup> Ibid., 10-13.

civilization. Indo-Aryan is the name of a language group that includes Sanskrit, the language of India's oldest religious texts, the Vedas. The Indo-Aryan-speaking peoples created the Vedas in ancient India from 1500 BCE onward, thereby laying the foundations of modern Hinduism. The Indo-Aryan peoples' connection to Hinduism's first sacred texts makes their identity important for Hindus in India today. The geographical origin of Indo Aryan-speaking peoples is still unclear, but most scholars identify them as nomadic migrants to India from upper Central Asia or possibly even Eastern Europe. These Indo-Aryans brought both Sanskrit and a new religious culture to the region.

The Harappans on the other hand, created the Indus Valley Civilization (IVC), one of the world's first river valley societies. The IVC, first excavated by archaeologists in the 1920s, was advanced beyond its time in terms of architecture and city planning, and engaged in trade with Mesopotamian societies in the Middle East. In contrast, the Aryans were supposedly a simple, pastoral people that came from outside India. The key question is whether the two peoples interacted at all. Did the Aryans destroy the IVC? Were they a part of it? Did they learn from it? These questions force scholars and political parties into two polar sides of a great Aryan debate.

The BJP considers Indo-Aryans fundamental to the party's conception of Hindutva, or "Hindu-ness": India is a nation of and for Hindus only. Only those who consider India their holy land should remain in the nation.<sup>5</sup> From the BJP's point of view, the Indo-Aryan peoples were indigenous to India, and therefore were the first 'true Hindus'. Accordingly, an essential part of 'Indian' identity in this point of view is being indigenous to the land.<sup>6</sup> Writing this version of history into the textbooks, however, involves ousting the Aryan migration theory, supported by

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<sup>5</sup> Edwin F. Bryant, *The Quest for the Origins of Vedic Culture: The Indo-Aryan Migration Debate* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2001), 275.

<sup>6</sup> Romila Thapar, "The Theory of Aryan Race and India: History and Politics," *Social Scientist* 24 no. 1 (1996): 15. <http://www.jstor.org/stable/3520116>.

scholarly consensus. It also involves explaining how Harappans and Indo-Aryans would have coexisted if they were both indigenous to the subcontinent. Conversely, the Congress party endorses the migration theory, and believes the Aryans and Harappans formed two separate societies at two separate times. The Congress party accordingly does not place as much importance on the Hindu character of Indo-Aryans when defining Indian identity as a whole.

Somewhat predictably, then, the battle over textbook curriculum also involved debates over Indian identity. The Congress party's version of curriculum took religion out of the equation, and asked Indians to see all religious groups in a "positive light."<sup>7</sup> This meant perceiving them as rightful citizens of India, key to its heritage and culture. The BJP's version of curriculum asked students to be proud of Hindu heritage because their ancestors had developed Hindu religion indigenously. What was less predictable was the BJP's ability to push aside an entire scientific consensus, putting politics at the forefront of Indian education.

In this thesis, my primary goal is to illustrate how clearly the content of history textbooks in India is determined by political ideology. I also plan to explain why these textbook revisions concerning Indo-Aryans are related to Indian national identity. To accomplish these ends, I study and analyze two sets of primary source materials. The first set includes selected textbook passages that highlight how three sets of English-language Indian textbooks differed from each other in depicting Indo-Aryans. The textbooks are crucial in proving how drastically the history curriculum changed from 1998 to 2007. For the second set of primary source materials, I analyze selected English-language Indian newspaper articles to gain a sense of public reaction to the textbook controversy. Studying these articles provides insight into the Indian public's conceptions of history and identity.

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<sup>7</sup> Guichard, *Construction of History and Nationalism*, 48.

Before analyzing these primary sources, however, I will need to introduce the reader to the Aryan debate and how it affects the Indian public. First, I explain the politicization of textbooks in India, and how the accepted understanding of the past shifted from year to year based on the political party in power. Second, I further elaborate on the Indian case of textbooks by explaining that students in India are highly dependent on textbook learning. Third, I expose the reader to a summary of historiography on the Aryan debate; this should provide the reader with the knowledge to understand why certain textbook changes were made. Then, I delve into the aforementioned primary sources to address the main points of this thesis.

In analyzing the newspaper articles and textbook changes, I will explore issues of Indian identity that this textbook controversy raises. Why does the religion or location of ancient Aryans matter to modern Indians? How do Indians identify themselves with the past, and how do they value different versions of the past? These questions understandably have complex answers that may not be answered within the confines of this paper. The goal, then, is to provide readers with an appreciation and understanding of why textbook changes matter in the context of India. With this understanding, the reader should be able to better analyze curriculum reforms happening in Texas, California, or anywhere else.

## **II – Politicization of Textbooks in India**

Nationalism has been a key facet of Indian history curriculum, but different political parties have disagreed on which national values to imbue through textbooks. After gaining independence from the British in 1947, Indians wanted to establish a centralized system for curriculum creation and reform. NCERT, the National Council for Educational Research and Training, was established in 1961 towards this end. The NCERT body was entrusted with establishing nationalism through textbooks that were framed within a rational and modernist



mindset. NCERT is thus in charge of determining curriculum standards for the whole of India: public schools are required to use textbooks published by NCERT, and many private schools follow the same paradigm. Through these books, nation-building became a key aspect of education policies throughout the course of independent India's history. National Curriculum Frameworks (NCFs), written by NCERT as guidelines for national education, always maintained the importance of nation-building, regardless of which political party was in power.<sup>8</sup> The 1988 NCF, written when the Congress party (India's dominant liberal party) was in power, stated that "At this point of our history, the most urgent need is to consciously develop national spirit and national identity."<sup>9</sup> Similarly, the 2000 NCF, written when the Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP – India's dominant conservative party) was in power, stated that "The school curriculum must inculcate and nurture a sense of pride in being an Indian."<sup>10</sup> Evidently, both the 1988 and 2000 frameworks promote the importance of developing national pride as an educational goal. However, the methods for increasing national pride differ sharply between the BJP and Congress.

Depending on which party is writing the curriculum, the way the nation is represented changes greatly. The liberal Congress party has dominated Indian politics since Independence by spreading across the nation and finding support from the lower classes. Ideologically, the party believes in concentrated power at the center, minority rights, secularism, and economical intervention when needed.<sup>11</sup> The BJP, on the other hand, has risen swiftly to power since the

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<sup>8</sup> Guichard, *Construction of History and Nationalism*, 33-34.

<sup>9</sup> "National Curriculum Framework: 1988," *National Council for Educational Research and Training*, accessed 3/15/13, [http://www.ncert.nic.in/oth\\_anoun/NCESE\\_1988.pdf](http://www.ncert.nic.in/oth_anoun/NCESE_1988.pdf), 8.

<sup>10</sup> "National Curriculum Framework: 2000," *National Council for Educational Research and Training*, accessed 3/15/13, [http://www.ncert.nic.in/oth\\_anoun/NCF\\_2000\\_Eng.pdf](http://www.ncert.nic.in/oth_anoun/NCF_2000_Eng.pdf), 12.

<sup>11</sup> Zoya Hasan, *Parties and Party Politics in India*, (New Delhi: Oxford University Press, 2002), 8-9.

1990s through coalitions with regional governments. Ideologically, the party believes in economic nationalism (less foreign investment), decentralized power, and the spread of Hindutva ideology across government institutions.<sup>12</sup> Hindutva is a term coined by Veer Savarkar in 1923 that roughly translates to “Hindu-ness.” It is the notion of Hindus, sharing common blood and culture, keeping India to themselves as a land of and for Hindus.<sup>13</sup> Thus, Hindutva blatantly opposes the secularism of Congress and pushes the adoption of conservative Hindu practices in law, education, and other fields. Most importantly for the purposes of this paper, Hindutva endorses a view of the past that glorifies and prizes Hindu achievements, while Congress ideology tends to downplay religious importance.<sup>14</sup>

Predictably, the respective political beliefs of the two parties shape their views of what is desirable in textbooks. The 2000 National Curriculum Framework (NCF), written under BJP influence, places a much greater emphasis on celebrating India’s achievements, claiming that not enough Indians understand their nation’s contributions to the world.<sup>15</sup> Thus, the content of textbooks changes depending on the political party in power. This is especially true because the party in power decides who is appointed to key posts in charge of creating the education policy and curriculum. Thus, when the dominant party changes, the nation’s educational mission changes. For example, the BJP altered the curriculum upon coming to power in 1998, and Congress rewrote it again after regaining power in 2004 (by creating a new NCF in 2005).<sup>16</sup> Due to this shifting nature of Indian education, each new NCF stirs controversy over what values are

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<sup>12</sup> Ibid., 14-16.

<sup>13</sup> Veer Savarkar, “Essentials of Hindutva”, *Savarkar.org*, accessed April 7, 2013, [http://www.savarkar.org/content/pdfs/en/essentials\\_of\\_hindutva.v001.pdf](http://www.savarkar.org/content/pdfs/en/essentials_of_hindutva.v001.pdf), 3-5.

<sup>14</sup> Guichard, *Construction of History and Nationalism*, 48.

<sup>15</sup> “National Curriculum Framework: 2000,” *NCERT*, accessed 3/15/13, [http://www.ncert.nic.in/oth\\_anoun/NCF\\_2000\\_Eng.pdf](http://www.ncert.nic.in/oth_anoun/NCF_2000_Eng.pdf), 12.

<sup>16</sup> Guichard, *Construction of History and Nationalism*, 34.

promoted within. Additionally, official history cannot aid in nation-building if the state cannot decide upon which version of history to present. In the period from 1998 to 2007, Indian textbooks portrayed three entirely different versions of the common past.<sup>17</sup> Though this NCERT controversy of the early 2000s received much media attention, it was by no means the first of its kind in India.

Textbook curriculum in India since 1961 has been ruled by the National Council for Educational Research and Training (NCERT). From 1961-1998, NCERT was under the indirect control of the Congress party, except for minor changes in party alignment during the 1970s. The only previous period of radical change in textbook content occurred while Congress was out of power in the late 1970s. After the Janata Party (a precursor of the BJP) came to power in 1977, it banned the circulation of certain history books like *Ancient India*, by R.S. Sharma, for being too secular in their discussion of history. The party even fired some members of the Indian Council for Historical Research (ICHR) in order to replace them with scholars sympathetic to Hindutva ideology. After another election in 1979, Congress returned to power and movements to edit textbook curriculum were shut down.<sup>18</sup> In the late 1990s, a similar change in political power (with the BJP leading a national coalition government) brought about another period of textbook revisions. In 1998 elections, the National Democratic Alliance (NDA - a party coalition headed by the BJP) rose to power and ordered NCERT members to rewrite textbook curriculum. These NDA<sup>19</sup> textbooks altered references to Aryan migrations and cultural customs.<sup>20</sup>

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<sup>17</sup> Ibid., 34-35.

<sup>18</sup> Ibid., 53-54.

<sup>19</sup> Throughout this thesis, BJP and NDA will be used interchangeably to refer to the coalition party (NDA) headed by BJP from 1998-2004.

<sup>20</sup> Ibid., 5.

Historians disagreed about the changes made in the curriculum. BJP scholars argued that the previous secular textbooks did not emphasize Hindu achievements or instill Hindu pride in students.<sup>21</sup> In the perception of opposing scholars, the new curriculum sacrificed accuracy for nationalist goals and used history as a tool for propaganda.<sup>22</sup> But in 2004, Congress regained power under the United Progressive Alliance (UPA – a coalition government headed by Congress) and remodeled the curriculum once again. New textbooks were published between 2005-2007, based on a 2005 NCF that stressed unbiased and accurate history. These new UPA textbooks presented a neutral view, preserving historical accuracy while borrowing ideals from both political parties. These books were able to allay the textbook controversy.<sup>23</sup> Still, the politicization of Indian textbooks does not indicate whether textbooks have a crucial role within the big picture of Indian education. To understand the role of textbooks, an overview of the education system is necessary.

### III – Textbook Culture

In essence, the entire NCERT controversy was exacerbated by the structure of Indian education. The importance placed on textbooks in the Indian education system gave potency to the curriculum changes wrought by different political parties. One of India's most prominent scholars on education, Krishna Kumar, has written on India's education system over several decades. He coined the term "textbook culture" to describe the essentiality of textbook material

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<sup>21</sup> Ibid., 48.

<sup>22</sup> Mushirul Hasan, "The BJP's Intellectual Agenda," *Will Secular India Survive?* (Gurgaon: Imprint One, 2004), 165-66.

<sup>23</sup> Guichard, *Construction of History and Nationalism*, 5.

in Indian classrooms.<sup>24</sup> Understanding Kumar's views provides additional insight into the importance and severity of the NCERT controversy.

Kumar explains plainly that there are two types of education systems. In the first type, teachers are free to mold their own curriculum for students, using whatever resources are available. In the second type, teachers are bound to the textbook and have minimal freedom in changing curriculum or choosing resources. Teachers are expected to precisely teach students the textbook material, in anticipation of exams that are based solely on textbooks.<sup>25</sup> India's education system follows the second type. Kumar lists four factors that are a result of the textbook culture:

1. Teaching in all subjects is based on the textbook prescribed by state authorities.
2. The teacher has no freedom to choose what to teach. She must complete the prescribed syllabus with the help of the prescribed textbook.
3. Resources other than the textbook are not available in the majority of schools, and where they are available they are seldom used. Fear of damage to such resources (e.g., play or science equipment) and the poor chances of repair or replacement discourage the teacher from using them.
4. Assessments made during the year and end-of-year examinations are based on the textbook.<sup>26</sup>

This quote summarizes the situation in most Indian classrooms. Apart from all this, Kumar also describes textbooks as a sign of bureaucratic authority. Teachers who strayed from teaching the textbook would not be rewarded or hired like those who were willing to sacrifice their academic freedom.<sup>27</sup>

Studying the four factors listed by Kumar, it is clear that educators were forced to teach the version of history presented in Congress or BJP textbooks, even if they did not agree with

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<sup>24</sup> Krishna Kumar, "Origins of India's "Textbook Culture," *Comparative Education Review* 32 no. 4 (1988): 452. <http://www.jstor.org/stable/1188251>.

<sup>25</sup> Ibid., 452.

<sup>26</sup> Ibid., 453.

<sup>27</sup> Ibid.

that version. Small changes in curriculum could have determined the answers to exam questions, so students had to memorize a certain view of history. Historically, exams required students to reproduce and summarize facts from memory in an essay form. These essays would test the student's knowledge of specific textbook material instead of checking his comprehension of general concepts.<sup>28</sup> Even if the textbooks were conceptually wrong, the answer written in the books would be correct for examinations. Additionally, examinations for higher classes cause a great deal of pressure because admissions to higher institutes of learning are dependent on these exams. Overall, according to Kumar, India seems to suffer from a confusion between understanding material and memorizing it for an exam.<sup>29</sup> Yet, given this emphasis on exams, the textbook has become an infallible source of knowledge for Indian students and teachers.

Within this interplay of examinations, textbook material, and lack of teacher freedoms, we must also discuss how history is treated as a subject. Borrowing from Sylvie Guichard's book, *The Construction of History and Nationalism in India: Textbooks, Controversies and Politics*, it is clear that the study of history suffers even more as a result of textbook culture. In modern-day India, certain "hard science" disciplines are valued more for their importance to society, while social sciences are perceived to be secondary. This prejudice of sciences is reflected in parent, teacher, and student attitudes toward learning the "soft" sciences. According to Avijit Pathak, the current trend is to label students gifted in mathematics as intelligent, while those inclined towards the arts are treated less positively. Students perceive "hard science" as the path to a career while social sciences do not add value.<sup>30</sup>

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<sup>28</sup> Ibid., 458.

<sup>29</sup> Guichard, *Construction of History and Nationalism*, 36.

<sup>30</sup> Ibid., 38.

The Indian style of teaching history also prevents students from pursuing it at the university level and becoming passionate about the subject. History textbooks tackle the subject in a “linear and uniform manner.”<sup>31</sup> The same importance is given to each period in history, and students are expected to memorize dates and figures without understanding the interdependencies and nature of history. As a result, students find history to be boring, and their understanding is compromised by the nature of the textbooks.<sup>32</sup> If students are taught to memorize instead of question, then changes in textbook curriculum would not faze them. If BJP textbooks say that the Aryans never ate beef, they will memorize that answer as fact for the sake of exams. Since history is a “boring soft science” they will not bother to research this information themselves. Textbooks thus become powerful as the primary source of historical knowledge for most children. In turn, the manipulation of NCERT by both Congress and the BJP can have a serious effect on the nation’s youth. After understanding the importance of Indian history textbooks within the education system, the next step is to study the actual history that has been written in these textbooks. Thus far, I have provided a general overview of Indian textbooks and the education system, but it is time to detail the specifics of the Indo-Aryan issue. Next, I discuss the historiography of the Aryan debate – how thoughts on Indo-Aryans have changed over time to reach their current status.<sup>33</sup>

#### **IV – Historiography of the Aryan Debate**

Questions concerning the Indo-Aryan speaking peoples have been an integral part of historical debates on India for centuries. The person who launched the study of Aryan language and history was Sir William Jones. Jones was a British administrator who founded the Asiatic

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<sup>31</sup> Ibid.

<sup>32</sup> Ibid., 39.

<sup>33</sup> Indo-Aryans are widely regarded as the founders of the Hindu faith.

Society in modern-day Kolkata, India to study Indian culture and history. Jones discovered in 1786 that Sanskrit, the language of the Vedas (Hinduism's first sacred texts), resembled Latin and Greek. This led him to theorize that Sanskrit and the languages similar to it dated back to a common ancestral language and peoples, which is now termed Proto-Indo-European (PIE).<sup>34</sup> The people who spoke this ancestor language supposedly branched out to different parts of the world and developed separate families of Germanic, Slavic, Romance, Iranian, Indic, Albanian, and Greek languages.<sup>35</sup>

However, the origins of the PIE people themselves remain a mystery. Scholars have fought for years over where the homeland of this society was located. Archaeologists like Colin Renfrew have posited a PIE homeland in Anatolia (modern-day Turkey) circa 7000 BCE, but J.P. Mallory and others have placed the PIE homeland a few thousand years later near modern-day Kazakhstan.<sup>36</sup> The one point of scholarly agreement is that the PIE peoples split into two factions and spread out of their initial homeland. One group headed to the west and formed an Indo-European language family consisting of most of Europe's modern-day languages. The other group headed east and formed an Indo-Iranian family that eventually developed the Iranian and Indo-Aryan languages, including Pashto, Iranian, and others.<sup>37</sup> In Jones's time, Sanskrit itself was deemed to belong to a branch of the Indo-Iranian family, and the first Sanskrit-speaking people were generally referred to as Indo-Aryans, who moved into India from regions further

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<sup>34</sup> William Jones, "Indo-European," in *The Aryan Debate*, ed. Thomas Trautmann (New Delhi: Oxford University Press, 2005), 3.

<sup>35</sup> Carl C. Lamberg-Karlovsky, "Archaeology and Language: The Case of the Bronze Age Indo-Iranians," in *The Indo-Aryan Controversy: Evidence and Inference in Indian History*, ed. Edwin F. Bryant and Laurie L. Patton (London: Routledge, 2005), 142.

<sup>36</sup> *Ibid.*, 143.

<sup>37</sup> *Ibid.*, 142.



west.<sup>38</sup> Thus, Sanskrit seemed to be the primal language of India, a language that spread across the land and created an encompassing Indo-Aryan culture. Further discoveries would reshape this theory.

As early as 1816, Francis Ellis – the British Collector for Madras – published an essay announcing the discovery of the Dravidian (literally, "southern") language family. He argued that the South Indian languages of Tamil, Telugu, and Kannada shared common roots and grammar that could not have been derived from Sanskrit. Thus, Indo-Aryan speakers coming into India may have encountered indigenous natives who spoke a language belonging to an entirely different family of languages, which linguists refer to as Proto-Dravidian.<sup>39</sup> Scholars hypothesize that Proto-Dravidian was spoken throughout all of India before Indo-Aryans migrated into the northern half of the subcontinent.<sup>40</sup> For the purposes of this paper, we shall refer to the natives who spoke Proto-Dravidian as Dravidians. The Dravidian discovery again changed the landscape of Indian historiography. Whereas the discovery of Proto-Indo-European suggested an overarching ancient Indian culture comprised solely of Sanskrit-speakers, the discovery of a separate Dravidian family showed that Indian civilization had always been a fusion of cultures with different linguistic identities.<sup>41</sup>

This difference in linguistic cultures would eventually be extrapolated to show other differences. In the early 1800s, conceptions of racial identity in Europe assumed that speakers of different languages belonged to different racial groups. Scholars like Max Müller stated that

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<sup>38</sup> See Figure 1.

<sup>39</sup> Thomas R. Trautmann, *The Aryan Debate* (New Delhi: Oxford University Press, 2005), xxiii.

<sup>40</sup> David W. McAlpin, "Proto-Elamo-Dravidian: The Evidence and Its Implications," *Transactions of the American Philosophical Society* 71, no. 3 (1981): 16-18.

<http://www.jstor.org/stable/1006352>.

<sup>41</sup> Trautmann, *Aryan Debate*, xxiii.

language presented a more reliable marker for race than complexion.<sup>42</sup> According to Müller, only at the point of origin were racial and linguistic identities assumed to be congruent. From this point of view, all people who spoke Proto-Indo-European, the ancestor language to Latin and Sanskrit, were of the same race. When they split up and migrated to different areas of the world, however, they no longer shared the same racial identity even though their languages shared many similarities.<sup>43</sup> Others like Arthur de Gobineau, in the 1850s, added to the racial view of history by claiming that the white race was responsible for all ancient civilizations, but over time whites mixed with native populations and sent ancient civilizations into decline.<sup>44</sup>

These conceptions of race allowed Europeans of the nineteenth century to think that the linguistic difference between Aryans and Dravidians must have been a racial difference as well. Additionally, they believed that the original Indo-Aryans were a “pure white race” prior to their interactions with Dravidians. In keeping with nineteenth-century paradigms of colonization and Gobineau’s views, historians naturally believed that the original “white” Aryans started ancient Indian civilization by invading and civilizing the “darker-skinned” Dravidians.<sup>45</sup> From the perspective of Western scholars, the Aryans had “established” Indian civilization by composing influential Sanskrit works like the Vedas, the foundational texts of Hindu religion. In fact, the notion of dark-skinned Dravidians comes from passages in the Rig Veda, the oldest of the four Vedas, which describe the conquest of dark-skinned enemies inhabiting the same area as the Aryans. Over time, it has become apparent that these passages were ambiguous at best and can only be interpreted with certainty to say that the Dravidians had a separate language and religion

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<sup>42</sup> Ibid., xxx.

<sup>43</sup> Max F. Muller, "Address to the Anthropological Section of the British Association at the Meeting Held at Cardiff in August, 1891," *The Journal of the Anthropological Institute of Great Britain and Ireland* 21 (1892): 178-82. <http://www.jstor.org/stable/2842283>.

<sup>44</sup> Trautmann, *Aryan Debate*, xxx.

<sup>45</sup> Christopher M. Hutton, *Race and the Third Reich* (Cambridge: Polity, 2005), 85-87.

than the Indo-Aryans.<sup>46</sup> However, that did not stop earlier Western scholars from believing that the caste system in India was originally a result of Dravidians being subordinated by Indo-Aryans. James Kennedy, writing for the Royal Asiatic Society of Great Britain and Ireland in 1920, claimed that the Aryans developed a caste system to prevent mixing with native Dravidians. Kennedy believed that Aryans had “pure blood,” and needed to prevent “contamination” by union with Dravidians.<sup>47</sup>

A third discovery would again change perspectives on Indian history. During excavations in the early 1920s, R.D. Banerji found inscribed seals in an unknown script at Mohenjo-Daro in Sindh, near the Indus River (present-day Pakistan). Sir John Marshall, then director of the Archaeological Survey of India, published these findings as proof of the discovery of a new urban civilization, called either Harappan (after one of its main sites) or the Indus Valley Civilization (IVC) due to its proximity to the Indus River.<sup>48</sup> The cities Harappa and Mohenjo-Daro were structurally advanced, with organized networks of streets and baths, surpassing Mesopotamian or Egyptian equivalents.<sup>49</sup> A great deal of writing was found on steatite seals, but could not be deciphered for lack of a bilingual piece of writing like the Rosetta Stone. Internal trade, as well as external communications with Mesopotamian civilizations, seemed the norm.<sup>50</sup> All archaeological signs pointed to a high civilization existing around 2500 BCE – much prior to the widely accepted date of circa 1500 BCE for the Rig Veda, the oldest Sanskrit text. This destroyed the earlier Western thesis that Indo-Aryans had been responsible for starting Indian

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<sup>46</sup> Trautmann, *Aryan Debate*, xxxii.

<sup>47</sup> James Kennedy, "The Aryan Invasion of Northern India: An Essay in Ethnology and History," *The Journal of the Royal Asiatic Society of Great Britain and Ireland* 1 (1920): 34-37. <http://www.jstor.org/stable/25209574>.

<sup>48</sup> Trautmann, *Aryan Debate*, xxvi-xxvii.

<sup>49</sup> Bryant, *Quest for the Origins*, 158.

<sup>50</sup> Johnathan M. Kenoyer, "The Indus Valley Tradition of Pakistan and Western India," *Journal of World Prehistory* 5 no. 4 (1991): 346-54. <http://www.jstor.org/stable/25800603>

civilization amidst the barbarian natives. The notion of Indo-Aryan racial superiority had to be tossed aside upon the discovery of the Indus Valley Civilization, since it was clear that an advanced civilization had emerged in India long before the supposed advent of Indo-Aryans. Race would henceforth become inconsequential in theories of Indian history. New questions arose instead. How were these IVC peoples related to Vedic peoples? Did any parts of the IVC continue on to become parts of Vedic culture?

The relationship between the Indus Valley and Vedic societies is the crux of the current Aryan debate. The debate hinges on several factors but the first point of discussion is the question of when (and if) the Aryans migrated to India. When Marshall publicized the discovery of Mohenjo-Daro in the 1920s, it was widely believed that the Indus Valley Civilization had collapsed around 1500 BCE, which coincided with the date when Indo-Aryans might have come to India. This began what was known as the Aryan Invasion Theory (AIT). The AIT claimed that bands of nomadic Aryans had come to India and destroyed Indus Valley cities like Harappa. Archaeological evidence in the form of seemingly chaotic and damaged skeletal remains was interpreted as a sign of hostile battles that brought the IVC to ruin. This thesis was especially popular because the Vedas portrayed Indo-Aryans as having a nomadic culture, incompatible with the organized city life seen in IVC ruins.<sup>51</sup>

However, when radiocarbon dating became available, the Aryan Invasion Theory became untenable. The new dating showed that the mature or urban phase of the IVC had extended from 2600 to 1900 BCE.<sup>52</sup> This meant there was a significant time gap before Aryan settlement in the subcontinent, and thus no invasions need have taken place for the IVC to lie in ruins. New interpretations of archaeological evidence also provided difficulties for the Aryan Invasion

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<sup>51</sup> Trautmann, *Aryan Debate*, xxxvii.

<sup>52</sup> *Ibid.*, xxvii.

Theory. Jim Shaffer, who studied the excavation sites, suggested in 1974 that trade with western shores and gradual migrations of pastoral groups changed or ended the Indus Valley Civilization. He states that there is a lack of evidence for hostile invasions in the area. Most signs of hostile warfare or evacuation, such as skeletons in odd positions and family treasures thrown around, could instead be attributed to natural causes like floods.<sup>53</sup> As such, the archaeological evidence that we have today denies the likelihood of a large-scale, destructive, Aryan invasion that destroyed the Indus Valley Civilization. How then, might we now understand the relationship, if any, between the people who inhabited the Indus cities and those who produced the Rig and other Vedas?

This question has led to two differing schools of thought. I will label these the migrationist school and indigenist school. The migrationist school believes that Indo-Aryans gradually migrated to the subcontinent from an ancient Proto-Indo-European homeland, most likely located in central Asia or Eastern Europe. Most migrationists take it as granted that Sanskrit speakers (whose descendants created the Vedas) moved into India after the decline of the Indus Valley Civilization, so that the two peoples had little to no interactions.<sup>54</sup> In contrast, the indigenist school thinks that Aryan society was indigenous to India – that the Proto-Indo-European homeland itself could be India. This side claims that Aryan society naturally evolved over time in India and thus existed in the subcontinent much prior to the usual date of 1500 BCE assigned to the oldest layer of the Rig Veda. Indigenists interpret the archaeological record to say there were no changes large enough to indicate a rupture in civilizational patterns (that is, the rapid replacement of one material culture by another). Accordingly, they accept that Vedic

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<sup>53</sup> Jim G. Shaffer, "The Prehistory of Baluchistan: Some Interpretative Problems," *Arctic Anthropology* 11 (1974): 225-226. <<http://www.jstor.org/stable/40315818>>.

<sup>54</sup> Bryant, *Quest for the Origins*, 3-5.

society interacted with the IVC. The two could have been separate civilizations inhabiting the same area, or the Vedic society could have been a continuation of the IVC (after the latter had fallen into ruin). Continuity thus becomes a keyword for explaining the indigenist side of the debate, just as migration is a keyword for the other side.<sup>55</sup> With this short introduction to the two schools of thought on this topic, we can now discuss how each side interpreted the relevant evidence, which consists primarily of archaeological findings at IVC sites on the one hand, and linguistic evidence on the other.

Linguistic evidence came through the dating of the Rig Veda. The Sanskrit of the Vedas is closely related to ancient Iranian, and the oldest Iranian text (known as the Avesta) dates to circa 1000 BCE. The forms of the languages are so similar, more than among any other branch of the Indo-European family, that the Vedas could not have been much older than the Avesta.<sup>56</sup> Additional similarities were found in a treaty of 1360 BCE made between the Hittites and the Mittani people, the latter of whom likely arrived in the Near East between 1741 and 1600 BCE. Several Aryan deities found in the Rig Veda are mentioned as witnesses to this treaty of 1360 BCE. Cognizant of these dates and the fact that only minor differences existed between the Mitanni language and Sanskrit, scholars have concluded that the Mittani Aryans split off from a larger group of Aryans. The remaining Aryans eventually moved into Iran and India, with the Indian group becoming the Vedic Indo-Aryans.<sup>57</sup> Thus, since the Indo-Aryans separated and moved into India after the Mittanis, and since Sanskrit is so similar to the Avestan language, it has been established by migrationists that the Vedas could not be much earlier than around 1500

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<sup>55</sup> Ibid., 192-96.

<sup>56</sup> M. A. Mehendale, "Indo-Aryans, Indo-Iranians, and Indo-Europeans," in *The Aryan Debate*, ed. Thomas R. Trautmann (New Delhi: Oxford University Press, 2005), 51.

<sup>57</sup> Ibid., 52-53.

BCE.<sup>58</sup> This gap in time between the Indo-Aryans (1500 BCE) and IVC people (2600 – 1900 BCE), negates the possibility of indigenous Aryans.

However, scholars like B.B. Lal who support the indigenist view interpret the treaty in a contradictory manner. According to Lal, since Vedic deities are not mentioned outside India except in the Mittani treaty in Mesopotamia, there is a greater chance that those deities were imported from India. This would mean Aryans were in India before the Mittanis arrived in the Near East, and thus could have been contemporary with Harappans.<sup>59</sup> This view also suggests that the Indus Valley Script was actually recording a form of Indo-Aryan language. Accordingly, indigenists might also claim that all Indo-European languages spread out from India and that India should be accepted as the new birthplace for the Proto-Indo-European language family.

Although indigenists like to push back the dates for the Vedas, migrationists point out that since Sanskrit cannot be assigned a date earlier than 1500 BCE,<sup>60</sup> it is highly unlikely that the Indo-European languages spread out from India. This holds especially true if groups like the Mittani in Mesopotamia had used Aryan words prior to 1500 BCE. Moreover, there is the problem of retroflex consonants. Sanskrit employs certain consonants in its vocabulary, likely borrowed from Dravidian languages, which do not exist in other Indo-European languages. If the Indo-Europeans originated in India, then they should all exhibit signs of the retroflex consonants as well.<sup>61</sup> These consonants provide a strong case for migrationists to say that Sanskrit came from outside India and was influenced by local Dravidian tongues.

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<sup>58</sup> Trautmann, *Aryan Debate*, xxvii.

<sup>59</sup> B. B. Lal, "It Is Time to Rethink," in *The Aryan Debate*, ed. Thomas R. Trautmann (New Delhi: Oxford University Press, 2005), 154.

<sup>60</sup> See previous paragraphs on migrationist view.

<sup>61</sup> Trautmann, *Aryan Debate*, xxxiv.

Indigenists like Lal use additional literary evidence from Vedic verses to support their side of the debate. He claims that the Vedic texts describe structures and experiences that match those possessed by the IVC. Lal uses the example of verses that describe forts built of iron walls, sea voyages for trade, and political administration. He argues that the Indo-Aryan lifestyle was thus similar to the Harappan lifestyle and the two could have been the same.<sup>62</sup> Again, Lal attempts to push back the date of the Rig Veda to align it with that of the mature Indus Valley Civilization. Migrationists, however, believe that Vedic verses used by scholars like Lal, to show signs of sea voyages and city forts, have been taken out of context and could be interpreted very differently. In the next paragraph, we will discuss the corresponding archaeological evidence for urbanity in Rig Vedic times.

In addition to deductions from historical linguistics, archaeological research on the Indus Valley Civilization also sheds light on the relationship between Indo-Aryans and Harappans.<sup>63</sup> Archaeological finds such as drainage systems, granaries, and other planned structures imply a sophisticated urban lifestyle for the IVC. On the other hand, the Rig Veda makes very little mention of great towns or forts, and the Vedic lifestyle seems decidedly pastoralist.<sup>64</sup> Migrationists have highlighted this discrepancy between the two lifestyles. If a pastoral Aryan society migrated to India after the IVC fell, then its people would have been unaware of cities and thus continued their simpler lifestyle.<sup>65</sup> In the migrationist point of view, the archaeology meshes with the linguistic evidence, because the Rig Veda does not make much mention of brick

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<sup>62</sup> Lal, "Time to Rethink," 151-52.

<sup>63</sup> In discussing these findings, I draw heavily on Edwin Bryant's *The Quest for the Origins of Vedic Culture*. Bryant's book is a crucial work in Indo-Aryan historiography and marks an important step in unbiased Aryan history by presenting several strengths and weaknesses of both sides of the argument. The archaeological research categories provided by Bryant include: urbanity, geography, religion, and horse remains.

<sup>64</sup> Bryant, *Quest for the Origins*, 183-84.

<sup>65</sup> *Ibid.*, 186-87.



structures or city building. Indigenists claim that both civilizations could have coexisted, although with different lifestyles; that is, Indo-Aryans could have been pastoralists living on the fringes of Harappan cities. This is especially true of Vedic poets, because they needed respite from city life in order to compose hymns, and accordingly did not mention cities in the Vedas. Additionally, using certain interpretations of the words found in the Vedas, one can identify references to pillared forts and other urban characteristics.<sup>66</sup>

Furthermore, recent archaeological discoveries provide some support for indigenist positions along geographical grounds. In the writings of the Rig Veda, the Saraswati River is mentioned as one of the most majestic rivers in the land.<sup>67</sup> In the present day, no such river exists in the space described by the Vedas; however, a massive dried riverbed was found in that location through satellite photography. In modern days it is known as the Ghaggar-Hakra River. Along this dried riverbed, several hundred archaeological sites have been found that exhibit commonalities with the Harappan discoveries in form and in dating. If the Vedas describe a river at its prime, during the fourth or third millennium BCE, then Vedic society would have flourished concurrently with these Ghaggar-Hakra cities associated with the IVC.<sup>68</sup> The question then becomes: were the Vedic people describing a “majestic” river at its prime, or during its decline around the second millennium B.C.E., after the Harappan cities had declined? It is difficult to draw conclusions because Vedic hymns concerning the Saraswati River can be interpreted very differently. Some verses mention fluctuations in the course of the Saraswati River that could have later caused it to turn barren and dry. Additionally, dating of the

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<sup>66</sup> Ibid., 189-90.

<sup>67</sup> Ibid., 166.

<sup>68</sup> Ibid., 166-68.

archaeological sites along the riverbed is an unsure process. The geographical data is thus inconclusive, just like the evidence relating to urbanization.

The third category of archaeological findings concerns religion. Some scholars have posited a continuity of religious ideas between the IVC and later Indian religion. The foremost evidence for this continuity is derived from stone seals discovered at Harappan sites. Seals were generally found to depict a certain animal in the center, accompanied by Indus script along the top edge; however, some seals did not depict normal animals. One particular seal known as the Pasupati seal depicts a seemingly three-headed figure in yogic posture, wearing a horned headdress while surrounded by animals. Early interpreters assumed this was a “proto-Shiva,” because of its resemblance to modern depictions of the Hindu god Shiva.<sup>69</sup> Migrationist scholars believe that this is an anachronistic assessment. For them, the presence of a yogic figure does not necessarily indicate a deity.<sup>70</sup> Also, at Kalibangan, an IVC site along the Ghaggar-Hakra River, several raised platforms were excavated that contained a series of systematically placed clay pits. These pits exhibited traces of ash, bovine remains, charcoal, and other materials, which were linked to the Vedic notion of religious fire sacrifices. Nevertheless, many migrationist scholars claim that fire pits could have simply been used for cooking, just as they are in modern-day India.<sup>71</sup> Vedic rituals were often highly complex, which creates difficulties in decoding possible similarities to Harappan archaeological findings.

Horse remains are another important piece of the Indus Valley puzzle. In any study of the relationship between Harappans and Indo-Aryans, if archaeological evidence from the IVC does

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<sup>69</sup> Ibid., 162.

<sup>70</sup> Johnathan M. Kenoyer, "Cultural Change During the Late Harappan Period at Harappa," in *The Indo-Aryan Controversy: Evidence and Inference in Indian History*, ed. Edwin F. Bryant and Laurie L. Patton (London: Routledge, 2005), 21-22.

<sup>71</sup> Bryant, *Quest for the Origins*, 160-61.

not match the information from Vedic literature, this is an indication that the two cultures did not merge or coexist. In the case of horses, Vedic texts talk at length about the importance and use of horses.<sup>72</sup> At the same time, there is a lack of archaeological evidence from the IVC for the presence of horses. While many animal bones were found in excavations, very few matched the correct species of the Indo-Aryan steeds. Most horse bones in the IVC actually belonged to donkeys or half-breeds.<sup>73</sup> Additionally, though the unicorn was depicted frequently on IVC seals, there was an utter lack of horse seals. Indigenists argue that an absence of horse seals does not mean an absence of horses. Certainly, no one would claim that an animal such as a unicorn existed simply based on its presence on the seals, and cows were not even shown on seals (although bulls were).<sup>74</sup> Indigenists claim that archaeological proof of horse bones dates back to the fourth millennium BCE, but the migrationists counterclaim that equine bones are ambiguous at best for differentiating between species of horse-like animals. They cannot be employed as positive proof of Indo-Aryan influence on, or coexistence with, the IVC.<sup>75</sup>

We have seen that the archaeological evidence is subject to conflicting interpretations on both sides of the Aryan debate. The linguistic evidence can also be understood in very different ways. Because both sets of evidence often clash, it can be difficult to draw conclusions. However, the seals of the Indus Valley Civilization provide a rare combination of archaeological and linguistic evidence. Scholars have given diverse interpretations of the script as encoding a form of Indo-Aryan, Dravidian, or other language, but it remains a mystery. If a decisive

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<sup>72</sup> Ibid., 170.

<sup>73</sup> Ibid., 171.

<sup>74</sup> Ibid., 173.

<sup>75</sup> Ibid., 171-72.

decipherment of the Indus script were achieved, then we might clearly answer the most difficult problems of ancient Indian history.<sup>76</sup>

Now, given our knowledge of the Aryan debate between migrationists and indigenists, it is important to see where modern political parties take sides in this debate. Hindutva supporters of the BJP assert that today's Indian Hindus are descendants of the Vedic Indo-Aryans. If Indo-Aryans originated as a people within the Indus Valley civilization, then they would have ancestral right to the subcontinent for settling it first. India could claim to have the longest continuous civilization in the world, a status that today is generally attributed to China instead. From the Hindutva point of view, it follows that Christians or Muslims are not proper citizens of India, because their ancestors migrated to the land after the IVC was established. However, the concept of Hindus having ancestral rights to India would be negated if the migration or invasion theories were true. If the original Hindus (i.e., Indo-Aryans) migrated to or invaded the land, they would not have been native inhabitants of India. Indo-Aryans would be similar to other non-Hindu peoples who invaded India, like the British, since neither would have been the first to settle the land. Thus, there would be no basis for the "Hindu character" of India propagated by the BJP.<sup>77</sup> The importance of Aryan identity and origins to the BJP's Hindutva ideology is likely what drove them to make textbook changes from 1998 – 2004 when they were in power. In order to legitimize their call to define India as a Hindu nation, they needed to alter the historical consensus of the time. As such, the BJP and scholars affiliated with it are nearly all indigenists.

On the other hand, the Congress party is not adamant about the religious identity of Aryans, and in fact strives for an India that is secular. For Congress, Indo-Aryan identity does not automatically define modern Indian identity. Accordingly, the Congress party and scholars

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<sup>76</sup> Ibid., 195.

<sup>77</sup> Guichard, *Construction of History and Nationalism*, 73-75.

affiliated with are nearly all migrationists. These party differences are reflected plainly in the subsequent textbook analysis section. Books published by the BJP have a distinct style and message from those published when Congress was in power.

### V – Textbook Analysis

At this point, having covered the background of the Aryan debate and Indian education, we can delve into the crux of this thesis – textbook evidence. By visiting the NCERT Library in New Delhi, India, I was able to study Indian history textbooks published throughout the decades since independence. I focused on three separate sets of textbooks that reflected different political ideologies and dealt specifically with the issue of Aryan and Harappan civilizations. I will be comparing these three sets of books, from different time periods, to demonstrate the varying levels of politicization within history curriculum in India. These books encompass different levels of detail and difficulty, but all share in common a discussion of Vedic-Harappan relations, Indo-Aryan migrations, and ancient Indian society in general. In this thesis, I only study the English-language versions of these textbooks published by NCERT. There are regional variants throughout India using different languages, but for the most part they conform to the same NCERT curriculum. The earliest book I use, titled *Ancient India*, was written by Romila Thapar in 1966 for Classes VI-VIII. Then, from 1977, I study a book by R.S. Sharma titled *Ancient India* as well. This book was for Class XI, and thus contained more detail for an older audience. Then, the two NDA-sanctioned<sup>78</sup> books I employ are *Ancient India* for Class XI, and *India and the World* for Class VI, both written by Makkhan Lal and released in 2002. Finally, I add two books

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<sup>78</sup> NDA, or National Democratic Alliance, is the term for the coalition government led by the BJP that was in power from 1998-2004. I will use this term interchangeably with BJP.

from 2007, when the UPA coalition<sup>79</sup> published new books: *Our Pasts* (for Class VI), and *Themes in Indian History* (for Class XII), both written by Neeladri Bhattacharya.

To organize my analysis of the textbook material, I use three distinct categories. First, I introduce a section concerning the origins of Hindu society. This entails differing ideas on the chronology and migration (or lack thereof) of the Indo-Aryans. Next, a section on cultural continuities will cover differences of opinion on the diet and religion of ancient Indian peoples as compared to modern Indians. Lastly, a section on the NDA's desire to glorify ancient India and Hindu ancestry shows how NDA textbooks portrayed India's past in a more favorable manner than Congress textbooks.

I begin my analysis with textbook passages on Vedic society and its similarity to the Indus Valley civilization. We have acknowledged in a previous section that BJP and Congress scholars differ greatly in their acceptance of Indo-Aryan migrations as a historical fact. Those divergent views are reflected in school lessons, as attested by the textbooks under consideration. I begin by studying the 2002 books *Ancient India* for Class XI, and *India and the World* for Class VI, both written by Makkhan Lal.<sup>80</sup> After a discussion of Lal's NDA-sanctioned books, I will go on to contrast their views with those of earlier Congress-sanctioned books. But first, I study select quotes from Lal's books to cast light on his views regarding Indo-Aryan migrations.

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<sup>79</sup> United Progressive Alliance, or UPA, is the term for the coalition government led by Congress that won elections in 2004 and ousted the NDA from power.

<sup>80</sup> Makkhan Lal was renowned for teaching archaeology and ancient Indian history in Banaras Hindu University and Aligarh Muslim University. He was also the founder and director of the Delhi Institute of Heritage Research and Management. However, Lal is much less eminent than the other authors I study, and his political ideology is much more obvious in his writings.

### Indo-Aryan Origins in Textbooks

Lal does not mince words when discussing the possibility of Indo-Aryan migrations to the subcontinent. In the beginning of his chapter on Vedic civilization,<sup>81</sup> he lays out his point clearly:

In fact, there is no archaeological or biological evidence for invasion or mass migration from west or central Asia to the Indus or Saraswati valleys between 5000 and 800 B.C. All skeletons found during this period belong to the same group of people.<sup>82</sup>

Lal is blatantly disregarding the abundance of evidence brought up by liberal scholars and others who claim the likelihood of a migration during that very period from 5000 to 800 B.C. “West or central Asia” refers to the most commonly noted areas of origin for Indo-Aryans who eventually came to India, according to migrationist scholars. Lal tries to establish Vedic and Harappan similarities based on the physical similarity of skeletons during the time – evidence that can be highly inconclusive. Ultimately, Lal is stating that the Vedic civilization could not possibly have been different from the Indus Valley peoples, since they all lived in the same area and had the same physical characteristics. Lal’s inclusion of “Saraswati” in this quote also shows his adherence to geographical evidence for continuity between Harappans and Indo-Aryans.<sup>83</sup> He wholly believed that both societies inhabited and treasured sites near the Saraswati River and thus were not two separate entities. Lal furthers this point throughout his books.

In further discussing the nuances of the Vedic and Harappan peoples, Lal continues to mention the Saraswati River and its role in the continuity debate. He details:

The geographical distribution of the Harappan sites can be seen in the light of RigVedic geography also... Among all the rivers in the *RigVeda* the Saraswati is considered to be

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<sup>81</sup> Civilization is usually used to refer to human societies that are complex in hierarchy, urbanity, and technology. However, Lal refers to the Vedic society/peoples as a civilization, even though they lacked in urbanity and technology. Hence, I will use Lal’s term (for consistency’s sake) to refer to Vedic culture as well.

<sup>82</sup> Makkhan Lal, *Ancient India* (New Delhi: National Council for Educational Research and Training, 2002), 80.

<sup>83</sup> As discussed earlier in section on Indus Valley Civilization evidence.

the most important and sacred and the areas around the Saraswati and its tributaries were the core culture areas. As we have seen earlier, the main area of Harappan civilization is the Saraswati valley where more than 80% of the Harappan settlements are located. Thus the RigVedic and the Harappan geography are the same.<sup>84</sup>

In this selection, we see that Lal starts out by making fairly neutral statements. As we saw earlier, it is acknowledged by most that the Saraswati River is given a special place in the Rig Veda for its holiness and usefulness. Yet, he then jumps to conclusions by saying that both civilizations shared the same geography. Lal makes a subjective judgment by saying that the “core culture areas” of the Vedic peoples surrounded the Saraswati River. Much of the Vedic culture in fact developed during the course of an eastward expansion towards the Gangetic Valley.<sup>85</sup> Additionally, it is entirely possible that two different civilizations could inhabit the same areas within a few centuries of each other – Indo-Aryans could have moved in after Harappans abandoned the area.

Juxtaposing Lal’s views with those of liberal historians reveals the stark contrast in perceptions of continuity between Harappans and Indo-Aryans. Romila Thapar provides a good example of such contrast in an earlier history book written for NCERT in the 1960s.<sup>86</sup> Her book for Classes VI-VIII, titled *Ancient India*, also deals with Vedic and Harappan civilizations but in less detail than Class XI books because it is aimed at younger students. In her book, Thapar states, “The Aryans came from outside India, from north-eastern Iran and the region around the

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<sup>84</sup> Ibid., 89-90.

<sup>85</sup> Jim G. Shaffer and Diane A. Lichtenstein, “South Asian Archaeology and the Myth of Indo-Aryan Invasions,” in *The Indo-Aryan Controversy: Evidence and Inference in Indian History*, ed. Edwin Bryant and Laurie Patton (New York: Routledge, 2005), 93-94.

<sup>86</sup> Romila Thapar is a prominent historian on the subject of ancient India who mainly taught at Jawaharlal Nehru University. She has been recognized across the world for her contributions to history with various prizes and awards.



Caspian Sea. Those that came to India are called the Indo-Aryans.”<sup>87</sup> Thapar is clearly endorsing the migration theory here. Her book differs from Lal only in the outcome of their interpretations. Both Lal and Thapar assert their views as if no other possibility exists. They both have access to the same overall collection of evidence. Yet, they completely contradict each other. Thus, the role of perception becomes very important. Scholars offer different interpretations based on their historical and political ideologies.<sup>88</sup> When both interpretations are offered with such confidence as well, it is apparent that student learning depends heavily on the political party in power. I will continue to show this pattern as I analyze all the different textbooks. But first, I return to providing further evidence from Lal.

Coming back to Lal, we can again study his determination to dispel the migration theory. He and other conservative scholars have interpreted the Rig Veda to be more in line with indigenist sentiments. For example, Lal states:

The oldest surviving records of the Aryans is the *RigVeda*. The *RigVeda* does not give even an inkling of any migration of Aryans from any other area. It does not even have a faint memory of any such migration. It does not have any knowledge even of the geography beyond the known boundaries of Ancient India.<sup>89</sup>

Lal is insisting that Vedic poets would have written about migration and surrounding areas if they had knowledge of such things. Yet, if Lal believes that Aryan and Harappan people were the same, there is a contradiction in his words. It is clear that Harappans engaged in trade with other parts of the world and thus would have knowledge “beyond the known boundaries of Ancient

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<sup>87</sup> Romila Thapar, *Ancient India* (New Delhi: National Council for Educational Research and Training, 1966), 43.

<sup>88</sup> Though Thapar’s writings on Indo-Aryans are not necessarily driven by political ideology (unlike Lal’s writings), other sections of her books have been shown to exhibit biases toward class struggles and other issues.

<sup>89</sup> Lal, *Ancient India*, 88-89.

India.”<sup>90</sup> And if Aryans and Harappans were the same peoples, then the Vedic poets would have had some knowledge of the outside world. Thus, Lal’s assertion becomes unfounded: Vedic poets writing religious texts would not necessarily have to reflect their knowledge of the outside world in hymns. Lal would essentially have to believe that even Harappans had no knowledge of the outside world for his assumption to work. It becomes apparent that Lal is forcing a certain interpretation into his textbook. This interpretation is different from that found in books by left-leaning historians like R.S. Sharma, who wrote history books for NCERT in the 1970s and 80s.

In Sharma’s book, titled *Ancient India*, for Class XI, he implies a different interpretation of the Rig Veda than Lal.<sup>91</sup> He claims, “On their way to India the Aryans first appeared in Iran, where the Indo-Iranians lived for a long time. We know about the Aryans in India from the *Rig Veda*, which is the earliest specimen of the Indo-European language.”<sup>92</sup> I believe Sharma is implying that studying the Rig Veda only provides knowledge of Indo-Aryans after they migrated to India. The Rig Veda cannot tell us details about Aryans before they came to India (such as whether they migrated to India or not), because the Vedas were written in the context of Indian habitation. This contrasts with Lal’s view that the absence of migration in the Rig Veda means that it did not occur at all.

Adding to Lal’s different views on the Rig Veda is his insistence on pushing back the dates of the Rig Veda. This is a common trend among many Hindutva scholars, as I detailed in an earlier section. Making the Rig Veda older allows such Hindutva scholars to match up the

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<sup>90</sup> The IVC seals we discussed earlier have been interpreted as markers for trade and commerce.

<sup>91</sup> Ram Sharan Sharma was an eminent historian on the subject of ancient India who taught mainly at Patna University and Delhi University. He was also the founding chairman of the Indian Council for Historical Research, and published over 100 books in his lifetime.

<sup>92</sup> Ram S. Sharma, *Ancient India* (New Delhi: National Council for Educational Research and Training, 1977), 45.

Vedic civilization with the Harappan civilization, in terms of chronology. Thus, BJP-sanctioned books will try to explain how the Rig Veda can be put in a Harappan context. Lal states:

A critical consideration of the evidence of the Rig Veda will lead to the conclusion that references it contains about people and their civilization may be taken to refer to the Harappan civilization. The reference to RigVedic deities in Boghaz-Koi inscription of fourteenth century B.C. would indicate that the *RigVeda* existed earlier and the culture migrated from India to Asia Minor in that early age. As has been explained in the chapter earlier, the age of the *RigVeda* in its final form should be placed not later than about 3,000 B.C.<sup>93</sup>

Here, Lal is confident that Indian culture spread outward and influenced locales as far west as Asia Minor.<sup>94</sup> In addition, he believes that the Rig Veda dates back prior to the Mature Harappan Period (2600-1900 B.C.E.). Both assertions are highly contradictory to the migrationist view, which tends to assume that other cultures influenced India instead of Indian culture spreading outward, and also assumes a Rig Veda date after the decline of the Harappan civilization. Lal, by placing the Rig Veda before 3000 B.C.E., dispels any possibility of a Vedic society that displaced or destroyed the existing Harappan society. If the Rig Veda dates that far back, then both the Indo-Aryans and Harappans co-existed as one people.

Lal tries to legitimize his claim for an earlier Rig Vedic people by citing other scholars who have thought the same. This is rare for Lal, who does not mention other academics frequently throughout his textbook. Such an exception for Lal perhaps indicates that he is less confident about this assertion and wants to give further proof. He elaborates by saying:

Bal Gangadhar Tilak, on astronomical grounds, dated RigVeda to 6000 B.C. according to Harmon Jacobi Vedic civilization flourished between 4500 B.C. and 2500 B.C. and the Samhitas [collections of Vedic hymns] were composed in the latter half of the period. Famous Sanskritist, Winternitz felt that the RigVeda was probably composed in the third millennium B.C. R.K. Mookerjee opined that ‘on a modest computation, we should come

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<sup>93</sup> Lal, *Ancient India*, 89.

<sup>94</sup> This parallels the views of another Lal, B.B. Lal, who I introduced in the earlier historiography section (the two Lals are not to be confused).

to 2500 B.C. as the time of RigVeda'. G.C. Pande also favours a date of 3000 B.C. or even earlier.<sup>95</sup>

In a cluttered paragraph, Lal tries to convince student readers that others also endorse dating the Rig Veda in line with the Harappan civilization. He even offers evidence “on astronomical grounds.” Chronology is a point of contention between liberal and Hindutva scholars. Both groups are highly convinced about their perception of dates because they are crucial in determining whether Indo-Aryans are equivalent to Harappans or not. Lal’s method is to disprove the usual Rig Veda date (around 1500 B.C.E.) and then provide his own. On the other hand, liberal scholars provide the common date of 1500 B.C.E. and do not bother to mention any inconsistencies in dating. They are confident that earlier mentions of Rig Vedic material do not necessarily mean that Vedic civilization in India started earlier. An example is R.S. Sharma’s writing on the topic.

In his *Ancient India*, R.S. Sharma talks about Aryans splitting into Iranian and Indian civilizations. He even claims that the Rig Veda and the Avesta, the oldest text in Iranian language, are very similar in their naming of gods and social classes. Sharma claims:

Some Aryan names mentioned in the Kassite inscriptions of 1600 B.C. and the Mitanni inscriptions of the fourteenth century B.C. found in Iraq suggest that from Iran a branch of the Aryans moved towards the west. A little earlier than 1500 B.C. the Aryans appeared in India. We do not find clear and definite archaeological traces of their advent.<sup>96</sup>

This quote shows many differences between the Sharma and Lal’s approaches to textbook writing. First of all, according to Sharma, inscriptions found near the Middle East that are similar to Vedic texts are evidence of Aryans moving there from other places like Iran. This is especially viable given the theory of a Proto-Indo-European civilization that eventually came to India. Lal,

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<sup>95</sup> Ibid., 84.

<sup>96</sup> Sharma, *Ancient India*, 45.

on the other hand, who does not believe in such a theory, assumed that Vedic names found in the Middle East indicated the wide dissemination of Indian culture. Second, Sharma clearly says Aryans appeared in India a little earlier than 1500 B.C. He does not try to back this up with the testimony of other scholars but rather presents it as the common consensus. Third, and perhaps most importantly, Sharma qualifies all his statements in this passage by saying there is no clear and definite evidence. He conveys to students an uncertainty about the whole issue of ancient India and the difficulty of making assumptions. He thus says something about the nature of history to students, who might not have a good understanding of the study of history.<sup>97</sup> These differences are important in considering how students in India are given information, and what information they are given. Further analysis of textbooks will expose disparities in other categories.

The differences between BJP and Congress textbooks mentioned above are crucial because the migration debate is central to liberal and Hindutva ideologies. The next category of textual evidence concerns cultural attitudes that differ in both sets of books. These cultural attitudes involve differing viewpoints on the religious practices and diet of the Harappans and Indo-Aryans. These variations are much less complex than those concerning the central debate between migrationists and indigenists. Because they do not involve wholly different academic theories, the distinctions will be obvious through fairly straightforward descriptions of diet and religion. In general, it is apparent that Hindutva textbooks propound a view of Vedic diet that is highly pure, rejecting alcohol and other problematic substances. Additionally, Hindutva scholars advocate a view of Harappan religion that conforms closely to later Hindu practices. By endorsing this view of religious similarities between Harappans and Indo-Aryans, Hindutva

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<sup>97</sup> The later UPA books do an even better job of explaining this ambiguity to students.

scholars try to bolster the indigenist argument. Thus, this matter of cultural continuity is intertwined with the above discussions on chronology and migrations. I introduce this next category by detailing Lal's views on Harappan religion.

#### Diet and Religion of Indo-Aryans in Textbooks

Lal tries to prove a religious continuity between Harappan people and Indo-Aryans by listing elements of religion that are also present in modern Hinduism. This could be seen as anachronistic because some features of modern Hinduism, like the worship of Siva, developed only after the Vedic period.<sup>98</sup> In his *Ancient India*, Lal notes:

From the available evidence we may say that the religion of the Indus people comprised: (i) the worship of the Mother Goddess (ii) the worship of a male deity, probably of Siva: (iii) worship of animals, natural, semi-human, and fabulous... These characteristics suggest that this religion was mainly of an indigenous growth and 'the lineal progenitor of Hinduism', which is characterized by most of these features.<sup>99</sup>

After insisting that Hinduism is very much characterized by the aforementioned features of Harappan religion, Lal includes a follow-up question at the end of the chapter. Lal asks the student to "mention some of the characteristic features of Harappan religion which are still continuing."<sup>100</sup> This question essentially necessitates that the student agree with Lal's view when answering the end-of-chapter exercises. By equating Harappan religion to modern Hinduism, Lal strengthens his main contention, that there was continuity between the Indus Valley and Vedic cultures. He likely uses vague categories like "worship of animals" to make his assertions subtler.

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<sup>98</sup> Doris M. Srinivasan, "Vedic Rudra-Siva," *Journal of the American Oriental Society* 103, no. 3 (1983): 544. <<http://www.jstor.org/stable/602035>>.

<sup>99</sup> Lal, *Ancient India*, 77.

<sup>100</sup> *Ibid.*, 81.

Yet, in Lal's textbook for Class VI, *India and the World*, he blatantly states that "people also worshipped Siva in the form of *linga* which is done today also."<sup>101</sup> For the younger classes, Lal tends to make bolder statements, as he is not allowed to be so complex in his language. Students are then learning precisely the Hindutva agenda: Harappan religion is the same as modern Hinduism, so Harappans are the same people as the Indo-Aryans, the supposed founders of Hinduism. Even if there were evidence of *linga* worship in the Indus Valley Civilization, it is highly unlikely that any *linga* was identified with a god Siva. We know for sure that the Rig Veda does not even emphasize Siva, and moreover there are no decipherable texts about religion left behind by Harappans.<sup>102</sup> Despite a lack of reliable historical evidence, Lal is confident in conveying the Hindutva theory on religious continuity to students.

This is interesting because most scholars agree on the ambiguity of Harappan religion. There are few certain markers of religious practices that have been found from that period. This uncertainty is actually reflected in the contents of earlier textbooks. In Romila Thapar's *Ancient India*, we are given an entirely different picture of Harappan religion. Thapar clearly states that "Harappans have not left any inscriptions describing their government, their society, and their religion. We can only guess at what their religion may have been."<sup>103</sup> She also mentions that Harappans buried their dead, which directly contradicts some claims by Lal on Harappan cremations. These quotes again show how liberal textbooks have a completely different methodology than Hindutva books. Thapar does not try to better her point of an Aryan migration by saying Harappan religion is very different than Vedic religion. She instead insists on not drawing conclusions from limited evidence. Since the Harappan religion is uncertain, Thapar

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<sup>101</sup> Makkhan Lal, *India and the World* (New Delhi: National Council for Educational Research and Training, 2002), 84.

<sup>102</sup> Srinivasan, "Vedic Rudra-Siva," 544.

<sup>103</sup> Thapar, *Ancient India*, 40.

also does not devote much space in her book to the matter. The lack of concrete evidence outweighed any attempts to define the religion. Again, it is evident that Thapar conveys to students something about the nature of historical evidence and its uncertainty. This attitude of Congress books is obviously contrasting to Lal's Hindutva-oriented attitude.

Similar contrasts can be seen in studying the viewpoint of different authors on the diet of Vedic peoples. Though diet comprises a very small part of the textbooks (one or two paragraphs at most), the changes in wording between textbooks are most striking. Additionally, diet as a subject is easily understood and easily debated, so it has been the subject of great attention throughout the NCERT controversy. It is generally acknowledged in the scholarly community that Indo-Aryans sacrificed and ate meat. The point of contention revolves around what "meat" comprises. Hindutva scholars stick to the belief that Vedic peoples never ate beef, and that the cow was highly sacred then, just as it is now in modern India. In fact, they even claim that people would have been punished in Vedic times for eating cow. Liberal scholars claim that this is an example of projecting the present into the past – they insist that beef was a special part of the Vedic diet because cattle were killed in Vedic sacrificial rituals.<sup>104</sup> The liberal side believes Hindutva scholars are playing to modern sentiments about the cow by insisting on its sanctity in Vedic times as well as in the present. The debate also extends to whether or not Vedic peoples enjoyed intoxicating drinks. The Hindutva side again claims that people would have been punished for such actions, but liberal scholars disagree. These differing opinions are reflected clearly in the textbooks.

Returning to Lal's *India and the World*, we can observe the author's further insistence on a Hindutva agenda when discussing the place of the cow in Vedic society. He asserts:

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<sup>104</sup> Mahadev Chakravarti, "Beef-Eating in Ancient India," *Social Scientist* 11, no. 7 (1979): 51-52. <<http://www.jstor.org/stable/3516533>>.



Among the animals the cow was given the most important and sacred place. Injuring or killing of the cow was prohibited in the Vedic period. The cow was called Aghnya (not to be killed or injured). The Vedas prescribe punishment for killing the cow by expulsion from the kingdom or by death penalty, as the case may be.<sup>105</sup>

Not only does Lal say eating cow was socially prohibited, he claims that the Vedas “prescribe punishment” for those who kill cows. We have already seen that Hindutva scholars endeavor to show Vedic society as the pure, perfect progenitor of modern Hinduism. By describing such extreme punishments for eating beef, Lal tries to prove the more disciplined religious nature of early Hindus. This portrays the Vedic Age as a type of golden age. Yet, Lal does not offer any explanation for why the cow was valued above other animals. He does not draw any connection between the agricultural importance of cows and their sacred connotation.<sup>106</sup> With Lal’s writing, students must take it for granted that cows were sacred in ancient times as well as in the modern day. This augments the disparities between books published by BJP and Congress.

Since Lal’s quotes on diet were pulled from his textbook for Class VI, I will compare it to a Congress-sanctioned textbook for the same class. Thapar’s book *Ancient India* contains radically different views on beef consumption. She explains, “The cow held pride of place among the animals because the Aryans were dependent on the produce of the cow. In fact, for special guests beef was served as a mark of honor.”<sup>107</sup> Here, we see that Thapar tries to explain why cows were held in high regard, whereas Lal offers no such explanation. Additionally, she goes so far as to say that eating beef was a mark of honor. This is contradictory to Lal’s earlier claim that eating beef was punishable by death. Again, both parties have access to the same historical evidence (the Vedas), but they have chosen to interpret texts very differently based on their historical viewpoints (and in Lal’s case, his political ideology).

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<sup>105</sup> Lal, *India and the World*, 89.

<sup>106</sup> Ibid.

<sup>107</sup> Thapar, *Ancient India*, 45.

R.S. Sharma supports Thapar's views in a later textbook, when he also discusses consumption of cattle. Sharma explains that "Sacrifices involved the killing of animals on a large scale and especially the destruction of cattle wealth. The guest was known as *goghna* or one who was fed on cattle."<sup>108</sup> Here the author goes so far as to include cattle as an important facet of sacrifice – the major religious ritual of Vedic times. Thus, Sharma implies that the Vedas endorse and even require cattle consumption. The cow was recognized as special in both liberal and Hindutva textbooks, but in utterly different ways. Just as Lal described cow as *Aghnya* (not to be slain), Sharma described the guest as *goghna* (one fed on cattle). Such a blatant contradiction stemming from the same religious text is hard to fathom. More likely than not, one side of the argument is taking Vedic text out of context when citing it as evidence. These contradictions are mirrored in the textbooks' discussions of intoxicants.

Back to Lal's *India and the World*: in purifying the Vedic peoples, Lal also expounds on the punishments and customs surrounding liquor and *soma*, a hallucinatory drink. He says:

They also drank *madhu* and an intoxicating drink *sura*. *Soma* was drunk during special occasions. However, drinking of *soma* and *sura* were disapproved and discouraged because it caused ugly behaviour of people.<sup>109</sup>

Evidently, Lal is not trying to deny the consumption of liquor as he did with beef. He acknowledges the existence of liquor and *soma*, but then says they were condemned. Again, he tries to purify Vedic society by removing notions of Indo-Aryans drinking freely for fun. He hopes to send a message to students that alcohol has always been discouraged in India, just as he wants to send that message about cow-killing. Additionally, historians have acknowledged that *soma* was largely used in religious ceremonies, but Lal removes it from that context in this

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<sup>108</sup> Sharma, *Ancient India*, 58.

<sup>109</sup> Lal, *India and the World*, 90.

quote.<sup>110</sup> Instead, by mentioning its use in “special occasions,” he gives the impression that *soma* was drunk in a secular context, in the presence of guests or during festivals. This contributes to the purification idea by separating drinks from religious ceremonies. Thapar, on the other hand, painted a different picture in her textbook.

Thapar’s 1966 textbook similarly talks about liquor consumption in Vedic times, but a few key words change the message entirely. She states:

The Aryans also drank intoxicating drinks such as *sura* and *madhu*. There was another very special drink called *soma* which was drunk only during a religious ceremony, for it was difficult to prepare. The Aryans were fond of life and lived well and were a cheerful people.<sup>111</sup>

The differences are blatant – all the more so because the wording and content are otherwise so similar. Thapar also acknowledges the consumption of *madhu* and *sura*, with no difference from Lal’s words. Then, instead of vaguely saying “special occasions,” Thapar explains that *soma* was specifically for religious ceremonies. Though she does not directly say it is intoxicating, the student reader will pick up that message from the surrounding context. The following sentence claims that the Aryans were cheerful people. This seems cursory, but Thapar actually conveys that the Aryan lifestyle was enjoyable. She implies that drinking and being “fond of life” were entirely permissible. In contrast, Lal places a sentence about the disapproval of *sura* right after acknowledging its consumption. Students would obtain two entirely different messages from the subtle changes in word choice.

Overall, the issue still lies in how much continuity is valued. We have seen that Hindutva scholars emphasize religious connections between Harappans and modern-day Hindus, in order to endorse an India only for Hindus. Then, for Hindutva scholars, the continuity of Hindu culture

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<sup>110</sup> R. Gordon Wasson, “The Soma of the Rig Veda: What Was It?” *Journal of the American Oriental Society* 91, no. 2 (1971): 178. <<http://www.jstor.org/stable/600096>>.

<sup>111</sup> Thapar, *Ancient India*, 50.

is key to Indian identity. At the same time, liberal scholars emphasize the various migrations, invasions, and changes that have shaped India into its modern image. Congress-affiliated scholars accordingly value diversity as key to Indian identity. The first category of textbook evidence, on the relation between the Harappan and Vedic peoples, revealed that Hindutva scholars want to emphasize continuity along the lines of geography and chronology. Liberal scholars disagree with the indigenist thesis based on their interpretations of archaeological and linguistic evidence, which (to them) is insufficient to draw any conclusions on continuity. The second category of evidence showed that Hindutva textbooks emphasize continuity along the lines of religion and diet (both of cultural importance). Liberal scholars disagree with that assertion as well due to their differing interpretations of Vedic texts.

The last category of evidence concerns the glorification of the Vedic past. Hindutva scholars generally attempt to exalt Vedic society as the golden age of Hindu India. They believe that Hinduism is descended from Vedic ideas and, as such, they portray Vedic India in the best light possible. Sometimes, attempts to glorify the past can go beyond patriotism when inaccurate statements are made. In a section on public reactions to the textbook revisions later in this thesis, I will describe how liberal scholars and the general public responded to attempts at glorifying the Vedic past in NDA textbooks. First, however, I discuss the textbook evidence for glorification of the past.

#### Glorification of the Vedic Past in Textbooks

In Lal's *India and the World*, the author makes certain claims about Vedic science that serve to glorify the intellectual achievements of Indo-Aryans. Lal claims:

Vedic people knew the methods of making squares equal in area to triangles or circles, calculate the sums and differences of squares. The Zero was known and due to this large calculations could also be recorded. Also the positional value of each number with its

absolute value was known. Cubes, cube roots, square roots and under roots were also known and used.<sup>112</sup>

Concentrating on Lal's sentence about the "Zero," we can say that this quote is simply inaccurate. While Indian mathematicians were the first to use the zero, most scholars agree that the use of zero only started in the first millennium C.E.<sup>113</sup> The same notion applies to "positional values" and other mathematical discoveries made in India. The Hindutva desire to push back these discoveries to Vedic times is compelled by a desire to praise Hindu ancestry. If Vedic people discovered the zero, that means the original Hindus were scientifically advanced before any influence from outsiders. Since the Vedic people were the originators of Hinduism, Hindutva scholars want to afford them the greatest praise possible. In thinking about how this contrasts with liberal textbooks, it will suffice to say that liberal books mention nothing of such scientific discoveries made in the Vedic period. Any discoveries that were made were not impressive enough to be considered appropriate for school textbooks. Lal, however, continues his efforts by talking of other sciences mastered by Indo-Aryans.

On the same page in his *India and the World*, Lal extols the Vedic civilization for their expertise in astronomy. He explains:

In the Vedic period, astronomy was well developed...They also knew that the earth moved on its own axis and around the sun. The moon moved around the earth. They also tried to calculate the time period taken by bodies for revolution and distances among heavenly bodies from the Sun. These calculations are almost the same as achieved by the modern scientific method.<sup>114</sup>

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<sup>112</sup> Lal, *India and the World*, 91.

<sup>113</sup> The use of zero as a symbol is not seen in India until the 6<sup>th</sup> century CE.

<sup>114</sup> Ibid.

Here, Lal claims Vedic ownership of astronomical discoveries made in post-Renaissance Europe.<sup>115</sup> Lal's Indo-Aryans apparently knew before anyone else that the solar system ran on a heliocentric model. This is highly unlikely, given the evidence in scientific histories. Again, this cannot be contrasted with a similar passage from a Congress textbook, because there are no such claims made by liberal authors. In fact, R.S. Sharma, in his *Ancient India*, writes realistically about the drawbacks of Vedic society. He plainly says that "it was not an ideal society. There were cases of theft and burglary, and especially we hear of the theft of cows. Spies were employed to keep an eye on such unsocial activities."<sup>116</sup> Sharma admits that Vedic society, just like any society of its time, had pitfalls and troubles. This is not to say that he concentrates on these. Sharma mentions many positive aspects of Vedic society and claims that the people lived well, but does not shy away from listing such problems as theft either.

The fundamental difference between Sharma and Lal is here manifested simply as truth vs. fiction. Though many of Lal's earlier claims could be debated, it is highly clear that his statements about Vedic scientific achievements were false. As such, we see that Hindutva scholars are happy to pride their Hindu heritage over historical fact. Nationalism and religious sentiments have outweighed an appreciation for historical uncertainty in all of Lal's aforementioned textbook quotes. The differences between the two sets of books have ranged from subtle to obvious, but the rationale behind the differences has stayed mostly stagnant. Both sides are adamant in pushing their particular stance on controversial issues. Hindutva scholars will not back down from their nationalist agenda. Liberal scholars will not soften their writings to protect modern Hindu sentiments. The natural solution came in the form of United Progressive

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<sup>115</sup> Copernicus has been credited for discovering the heliocentric model of the universe in the early 1500s CE.

<sup>116</sup> Sharma, *Ancient India*, 48.

Alliance (UPA) books, published around 2007, that were able to present a sophisticated view of history without leaning too heavily towards one side or the other.<sup>117</sup> Next, I examine how these newer books found a middle ground.

### Compromises in UPA Textbooks

The newest history books, edited by Neeladri Bhattacharya,<sup>118</sup> were released in late 2006 to early 2007. The pertinent books for our discussion are the Class VI book titled *Our Pasts* and the Class XII book titled *Themes in Indian History*. Both books manage to present a mainstream view of Indian history while minimizing assumptions and presenting multiple interpretations of history. When it comes to difficult subjects like the consumption of beef in ancient India, these UPA books omit any discussion of such topics. At the same time, they provide a more detailed account of other historical topics, such as urbanity in the Indus Valley Civilization (IVC), and an understanding of how we develop the study of history. Accordingly, the UPA books provide a more complete discussion of history on the whole than any of the earlier textbooks. Next, I show Bhattacharya's method for history books by analyzing some quotes.

In *Our Pasts* for Class VI, Bhattacharya starts by clearly telling students the nature of history. In explaining historical differences, Bhattacharya states “We have used the word ‘pasts’ in plural to draw attention to the fact that the past was *different* for different groups of people.”<sup>119</sup> This type of qualifying statement, telling students to take history with a grain of salt, was completely absent from earlier books. We see that newer textbooks are softening the effects of “textbook culture” by advising students to think outside the box. More importantly, Bhattacharya

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<sup>117</sup> UPA is a coalition party led by Congress that came to power after 2004.

<sup>118</sup> Neeladri Bhattacharya is a renowned history professor at the Centre for Historical Studies at Jawaharlal Nehru University in New Delhi, India. He is chief advisor for the UPA books on history.

<sup>119</sup> Neeladri Bhattacharya, *Our Pasts – I* (New Delhi: National Council for Educational Research and Training, 2007), 6.

proceeds to omit discussion of topics that earlier books focused on. For instance, in a chapter on the Rig Veda, the author explains some basic facts about the Vedas and Indo-Aryan society but leaves out any mention of their diet. He mentions cattle but does not detail whether or not they were eaten. Bhattacharya also clearly states that Soma was a “plant from which a special drink was prepared.”<sup>120</sup> Thus, we see that the newer books avoid controversy by simply not mentioning dietary practices, which are hotly debated among scholars and laymen. Additionally, the book states that the Rig Veda was composed around 1500 BCE, but makes no mention of Indo-Aryans migrating to the subcontinent.<sup>121</sup> Thus, mainstream views on chronology are upheld, but the book avoids the tensions of the migration debate altogether. Thus, a compromise is reached that leaves both migrationists and indigenists without cause for uproar.

The new, conciliatory methods of the UPA books are accentuated in the book for older students, titled *Themes in Indian History*. Bhattacharya again emphasizes the subjective nature of history by explaining the problems of interpreting archaeological evidence. In discussing archaeological finds of the IVC, he states:

Many reconstructions of Harappan religion are made on the assumption that later traditions provide parallels with earlier ones. This is because archaeologists often move from the known to the unknown, that is, from the present to the past. While this is plausible in the case of stone querns and pots, it becomes more speculative when we extend it to “religious” symbols.<sup>122</sup>

The author clearly expresses reluctance for assigning religious meaning to artifacts found at IVC sites. This fully opposes the indigenist tendency to insist on the religious significance of a proto-Siva seal and its relation to the modern Hindu god Siva.<sup>123</sup> In fact, Bhattacharya goes on to

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<sup>120</sup> Ibid., 43-46.

<sup>121</sup> Ibid., 43.

<sup>122</sup> Neeladri Bhattacharya, *Themes in Indian History: Part I* (New Delhi: National Council for Educational Research and Training, 2007), 23.

<sup>123</sup> As discussed in the earlier historiography section.



mention the proto-Siva seal and explain that it carries no resemblance to the Vedic version of Siva (known as Rudra). Therefore, he further defeats the indigenist viewpoint on the Siva seal and reminds students that there are still many questions to be answered about the IVC.<sup>124</sup> In the chapter following his discussion of Aryans, Bhattacharya completely skips over Rig Vedic society, thereby avoiding controversy just as in his book for Class VI.

Bhattacharya and others who contributed to the authorship of the newest textbooks had a different vision in mind than previous authors. The new authors disregarded their political views and concentrated on teaching the mainstream view of history. Sometimes this view favors migrationists, and sometimes it favors indigenists, but the books only reflect facts. Accordingly, unclear topics that can't be discussed without drawing partisan lines (like beef consumption) are left out altogether. The books also explain the processes of studying history and the difficulties therein. They are still in use today and are a testament to the need for accommodating conflicting political agendas for the sake of students. But this compromise might come at a price. When controversial topics are simply left out, it greatly undermines the learning of students who should be exposed to academic debates (in an unbiased manner). Perhaps the narrative of India's common past cannot yet be perfected.

### **VI – Public Reaction**

Having now understood the present-day compromises within UPA textbooks, it is time to again delve back into times of controversy. The actual textbooks themselves only provide one angle for understanding the curriculum changes that took place. To further analyze the consequences of changing public histories, it is important to gauge the reactions of the public. One way to assess Indian society's overall reaction is to study the media coverage. Despite the

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<sup>124</sup> Ibid., 23-24.

time period from 1998-2007 containing other political battles over nuclear testing, a war between India and Pakistan, and inflation troubles, the curriculum battle still appeared frequently in newspapers.<sup>125</sup> Newspapers play an important role in Indian popular culture today: most people in India continue to get their news from national or regional newspapers, as opposed to watching the evening news on television. Of the many national newspapers, the *Times of India* is the largest English-language newspaper (by circulation) in India.<sup>126</sup> Thus, I have chosen to study the *Times of India* in the period from 1998-2004 (when the BJP was in power) as an important primary source in understanding how Indian identity was affected by changes to the NCERT books as those changes were taking place. As with the textbooks, I am unable to analyze the regional-language variants of newspapers, but the *Times of India* is representative of the Indian populace as a whole because of its widespread circulation.

Like most English-language papers in India, *The Times* leans to the left on political issues. As such, many of the articles found in its pages detail Congress-affiliated views on the NCERT controversy. However, I have also uncovered several *Times of India* articles that contain objective interviews with members of the BJP – these interviews provide a helpful understanding of the other side of the debate. In analyzing the *Times of India* articles, I develop three categories to organize my discussion. One category covers articles that address the NDA's appeals for social cohesion amongst a diverse Indian populace. The following category includes articles that

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<sup>125</sup> Devesh Kapur and Pratap B. Mehta, "India in 1998: The Travails of Political Fragmentation," *Asian Survey* 39, no. 1 (1999): 164-66. <http://www.jstor.org/stable/2645606>.

<sup>126</sup> Ken Auletta, "Citizens Jain," *The New Yorker*, October 2012, [http://www.newyorker.com/reporting/2012/10/08/121008fa\\_fact\\_auletta](http://www.newyorker.com/reporting/2012/10/08/121008fa_fact_auletta). As of 2012, India is one of the few countries where the newspaper market had been growing.

question the NDA textbooks' glorification of the Vedic past.<sup>127</sup> Lastly, I study a set of articles that show the reactions of professional historians to NDA textbooks.

### Reactions to Appeals for Social Cohesion

The first category of articles covers reactions to the NDA's attempts at pleasing a diverse Indian populace through "impartial" textbooks. It is immediately apparent upon reviewing newspaper coverage of the issue that regular journalists and renowned historians alike were surprised by the NCERT body's decisions to publish NDA-sanctioned textbooks.<sup>128</sup> Many articles took for granted that the "saffronization" of NCERT (saffron is the color of the BJP) was responsible for this change in course.<sup>129</sup> Use of this term implies that the NCERT body was biased toward the BJP's view on history and wanted to publish books that aligned with that view.<sup>130</sup> The first article I analyze demonstrates how journalists felt about the new NDA textbooks' attempts at promoting social cohesion for India. A news report from December of 2001, shortly before the NDA textbooks went into circulation, states that Murli Manohar Joshi, head of the government's Human Resources Department (HRD),<sup>131</sup> agreed to a "priestly veto" on all religious matters in NDA books. Essentially, religious leaders of all backgrounds in India

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<sup>127</sup> Glorification of the past was just discussed in the section on textbook quotes.

<sup>128</sup> NDA is National Democratic Alliance, the coalition government led by the BJP from 1998 – 2004.

<sup>129</sup> Saffron has been adopted by the BJP because it is the traditional color of clothing worn by Hindu ascetics and priests.

<sup>130</sup> "NCERT Plans to Rewrite Textbooks to Reflect Changing Demands," *Times of India*, Oct. 5, 2001.

<<http://search.proquest.com/hnptimesofindia/docview/755330791/13DA37054A2474F9462/1?accountid=7118>>.

<sup>131</sup> The HRD is mainly in charge of overseeing education policy in India. The aforementioned NCERT falls under the HRD.

were encouraged to scan textbooks for anything disagreeable and send feedback to NCERT.<sup>132</sup>

The anonymous author of this short article paraphrases Joshi by stating that if any “community was offended by instances in textbooks, it could create prejudices in young minds.”<sup>133</sup> We then see the author’s viewpoint come through, as he expounds on the practical consequence of such a “priestly veto.” He claims that Joshi’s announcement “will lead to a large number of sadhus, maulvis, padres... and rabbis going through school textbooks with a toothcomb.”<sup>134</sup>

The author also mentions the view of historians regarding the consultation of religious leaders, by saying that the “BJP-led government is opening a Pandora’s box.” Specifically on Aryans, he quotes the historian Romila Thapar saying that the next step is for “people to demand the arrest of those who say... Aryans came from outside India.”<sup>135</sup> The use of this seemingly sarcastic language by the author gives a clue as to his feelings on the matter. Though not a historian himself, he presented the fact that giving veto power to religious leaders with conflicting agendas would make it difficult for the BJP to ensure each community was pleased. The article writer goes on to detail the problem of sects: Sunni and Shia religious leaders might have opposing viewpoints about the same history.<sup>136</sup> In addition, the Aryan question would also lead to conflicting viewpoints, and as mentioned in the article (quoting Thapar), there is obvious hostility between the opposing parties. It would be very hard not to “offend” one or the other.

This is an issue of religious diversity – India’s populace has widely different viewpoints on religion and history, so there are widely different viewpoints on what should be written in

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<sup>132</sup> “Joshi Agrees to Put School Textbooks to ‘Holy Test’,” *Times of India*, Dec. 9, 2001. <<http://search.proquest.com/hnptimesofindia/docview/741299557/13DA370F88358493ED2/1?accountid=7118>>.

<sup>133</sup> Ibid.

<sup>134</sup> Ibid.

<sup>135</sup> Ibid.

<sup>136</sup> Ibid.

textbooks. Another author in October of 2001 states the views of J.S. Rajput (the NCERT director at the time) that NCERT will “give precedence to social cohesion over facts in its textbooks.”<sup>137</sup> This quote is almost juxtaposed with the following paragraph, which details Sikh protests over the old textbooks. The author states that Sikhs (a religious group) in Delhi burnt an effigy of Joshi, the head of the HRD, and demanded an immediate ban on the NCERT books for describing their gurus in an objectionable manner. Rajput’s call for social cohesion was said to be in response to the Sikh protests in Delhi.<sup>138</sup> The NCERT body was using tangible events to show that their new NDA books, which would be published in the year after this article, could please all communities. At the same time, the protesters burnt an effigy of Joshi, who was in full support of the social cohesion idea. Even though his intentions were good, protesters hated him because he represented the existing NCERT textbooks in their minds. This raises a question as to whether the new books would be able to avoid this level of revolt, even with their good intent of fostering cohesion.

Interestingly, the author started out that very article by saying Rajput was refuting charges of saffronization and violation of the national education policy.<sup>139</sup> Essentially, he shows that Rajput was on the defense because attacks came from various academic and public interest bodies. If historians and others objected to the new NDA books, then social cohesion would not truly be achieved. Some communities would surely be offended by injecting “priestly veto” and other measures into the textbook process. It is apparent that the BJP’s concern for social cohesion mainly relates to religious identities, and not groups who identify themselves on different bases. For example, in India, identity is often defined along boundaries of region, language, caste and

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<sup>137</sup> “NCERT Plans to Rewrite,” *Times of India*, Oct. 5, 2001.

<sup>138</sup> Ibid.

<sup>139</sup> Ibid.

other designations. These groups and those who value historical accuracy or secularism could be highly hurt by the saffronization process, because saffronization only concerns itself with religious identity and feeling. Though the BJP had a valiant objective, the article suggests that they were bound to still offend people. Even if the BJP protected those who defined their identity along religious lines, they marginalized those who identified differently. Appealing to religious background can thus be risky.

### Reactions to Glorification of the Vedic Past

On the other hand, the BJP representatives do sometimes appeal to other aspects of Indian identity. In studying the rhetoric of people like Joshi, we see how the BJP made appeals to the public through nationalist avenues as opposed to religious means. The second category of articles concerns glorification of the Vedic past in NDA textbooks. In a *Times* interview during early 2002, Joshi<sup>140</sup> argued that liberal historians place too much emphasis on India's failures; he believed its successes must also be celebrated.<sup>141</sup> He wants to paint a wholly "true picture of history" by teaching both strengths and weaknesses. When asked why not consult those who would have grievances with his views, he stated that the opposition had gone about changing syllabi "stealthily, surreptitiously" and therefore no longer deserved a monopoly on history. In response, Joshi was told such an attitude would lead to constant changes in history curriculum whenever new parties came to power in government. Joshi answered by saying that the "masses

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<sup>140</sup> To reiterate, Joshi is head of the Human Resources Department (HRD) in India. The HRD is mainly in charge of overseeing education policy in India.

<sup>141</sup> Mahendra Ved, "Take Hiss From History," *Times of India*, Jan. 25, 2002.

<<http://search.proquest.com/hnptimesofindia/docview/855933106/13DA371803444707EAF/1?accountid=7118>>.

at large and the academic community have accepted the changes.”<sup>142</sup> This is a surprising assessment, since many of India’s historians were in uproar over the proposed revisions.<sup>143</sup>

In asking about constant changes to the curriculum, Joshi’s interviewer, Mahendra Ved, likely echoed the feelings of the Indian public. If political parties can change history at will, then it would be difficult for the public to obtain an accurate view of history and pass it down. Distrust of the government could also result from such a quagmire. Even Joshi himself said that there are always people willing to oppose the government, no matter what it does.<sup>144</sup> The public might become unsure of the nature of historical research, and rely on other means to understand history. I will return to this point later on.

The beginning of Joshi’s interview appealed to a nationalist desire to glorify the nation’s past. By associating his view on Aryans with a greater belief in teaching India’s successes, he appeals to Indians’ desire to feel pride in their ancestry and country. In essence, by saying that he wants to “teach successes” as well, he boils the academic debate down to a simple issue. A continuous Aryan civilization would be more in line with his idea of “success,” because it means that India was not invaded or changed by outsiders. He claims that he would like to emphasize cultural achievements over military defeats, which in his view have too often been the focus of Indian historical writing. Thus, by removing the possibility of an invasion or migration, he can focus his books on cultural achievements. In his view, this will make textbooks more accurate, but many historians disagree.

We know from our discussion of NDA books that scientific achievements were erroneously attributed to India. In studying newspaper reactions to this issue, we see that authors

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<sup>142</sup> Ibid.

<sup>143</sup> “‘Holy Test’,” *Times of India*.

<sup>144</sup> Ved, “Hiss From History.”

tried to expose some glaring inconsistencies in the books that liberal historians had pointed out. In a September 2001 article by Minwalla and Majumder, the authors quoted a BJP spokesperson saying that “secularists . . . have an in-built hatred for everything Indian – be it astrology, Vedic studies or Sanskrit.” Another representative goes on to say that “secularism has been misconstrued as negating everything to do with the Hindu identity of this land.”<sup>145</sup> The authors choose to specifically detail how the textbooks describe the caste system as a “precious gift of the Aryans to mankind.” Additionally, Minwalla and Majumder start this article by saying that information in textbooks is laden with ideology and prejudice. Another journalist, Mojumdar, wrote in October of 2001 on the same topic. She starts out strongly, saying that the NCERT’s new curriculum “seems set to replace critical evaluation, historical evidence, and even plain unpleasant facts with a laudatory view of the past.”<sup>146</sup> Mojumdar wrote in the context of NCERT revealing its new syllabus, with new books set to debut within a few months. Though she believes instilling nationalism is important in early schooling, she worries about the consequences of glorifying the past. She argues that pride can only be nurtured if the people are willing to live with uncomfortable facts from the past, and students are allowed to distinguish the truth for themselves.<sup>147</sup>

Fast-forward to 2003, and articles criticizing the NCERT’s biased view of historical events are still appearing. Pranava Chaudhary wrote on NCERT books in April of 2003,

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<sup>145</sup> Shabnam Minwalla and Abhijith Majumder, “Liberal Lobby Battles Spin Doctors for Textbook Terrain,” *Times of India*, Sep. 9, 2001.  
<<http://search.proquest.com/hnptimesofindia/docview/755291573/13DA36D9B1861B2D824/1?accountid=7118>>.

<sup>146</sup> Aunohita Mojumdar, “NCERT Agenda May Impair Holistic Learning,” *Times of India*, Oct. 7, 2001.  
<<http://search.proquest.com/hnptimesofindia/docview/609678776/13DA36ED03E5008E89D/1?accountid=7118>>.

<sup>147</sup> Ibid.



following a review of the NDA curriculum by prominent Indian historians like Romila Thapar and Irfan Habib. Chaudhary reports on finding “glaring factual errors” in statements that heliocentric astronomy, the zero, and the decimal were all discovered in the Vedic civilization. The author continues by stating when these actual discoveries were made in India (much later than Vedic times) and showcasing the anti-NDA views of Thapar and Habib. These historians claimed that the BJP was trying to ensure the purity and superiority of Indo-Aryans as opposed to giving credit where it is due.<sup>148</sup>

By analyzing aspects of these articles, it is apparent that the authors were increasingly against the BJP’s attempts to construe a glorified Hindu past in textbooks. The author of the first articles I examined in this section (Joshi’s interview) was just skeptical about the appropriateness of politicized textbook revisions. The next few articles, however, blatantly attacked the notion of revising history to suit nationalist needs and provided evidence of factual errors from the books while quoting liberal historians who also disapproved. This is also reflective of political swings, as the BJP would soon be out of power in 2004. Thus, we see that public attitude toward NDA books and the party itself is mirrored in the newspaper sentiments about the textbooks. Journalists’ methods and views changed by this time, reflecting the public’s shift from doubting the NDA books to simply condemning the rewriting of history. Still, why did the public put up with this shifting history for as long as it did? Through the third category of articles, newspapers still have something to tell about the way history as a discipline is perceived in India.

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<sup>148</sup> Pranava K. Chaudhary, “ ‘NCERT Texts Try to Disallow Tainting of Brahmanical Systems’ ,” *Times of India*, Apr. 27, 2003.  
<<http://search.proquest.com/hnptimesofindia/docview/916541381/13DA372D12B72D94950/1?aaccountid=7118>>.

### Reactions of Professional Historians

The last set of articles from the *Times of India* concerns the opinions of professional historians regarding the NDA textbooks. These commentaries provide an intriguing look at what historians wanted to communicate to the Indian public about the nature of history. Romila Thapar, a distinguished historian herself, wrote in 2001 about the role of professional historians in the midst of the NCERT controversy. She starts by saying that what is really at stake is “the right of the professional historian to assert the pre-eminence of history over myth and fantasy.” History in India has often been regarded as a “soft option” – anyone who reads several books on a subject is considered a historian, without considering how professional historical research must be carried out these days.<sup>149</sup> The author details the importance of a historical method, which involves analyzing the context of a scripture or text, and the generally high degree of analysis that goes into historical writing.

Thapar expounds on the fact that the public and most politicians do not perceive this difficulty in history. As such, history should be left to the privy of historians, not religious leaders or those who might be biased in their interpretations. She thinks that her critics are only interested in the political message of history and not in the methods that underlie serious research.<sup>150</sup> This historian’s angst is something to consider when analyzing the Indian public. It is apparent that the public does not understand the scrutinizing nature of historical writing – historians must repeatedly evaluate evidence and establish reliability before publishing their

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<sup>149</sup> Romila Thapar, “History vs. Propaganda: The Past as Political Instrument,” *Times of India*, Dec. 10, 2001.

<<http://search.proquest.com/hnptimesofindia/docview/741813454/13DA372391E5793B8A2/1?accountid=7118>>.

<sup>150</sup> Ibid.

views. We have even seen in our discussion of textbook culture that students are not pressured to undertake critical thinking. This begs the question: how do Indians think about history?

An interview in 1997 with Kesavan Veluthat, historian at Mangalore University in India, provides some insight into the popular views of Indian history. He expounds on the fact that “history can be dangerously misused; nothing is more useful than history in the construction of political ideology.” Heroes like Chanakya,<sup>151</sup> are picked for a purpose, because “he is useful in perpetuating the myths created by revivalist parties.”<sup>152</sup> Veluthat continues by giving evidence of the TV serial *Chanakya*, saying that Chanakya is given credit for driving away the Greeks, though that is wholly inaccurate. Yet, this point finds its way into NDA textbooks later on.<sup>153</sup> Veluthat also says that Hindutva parties are promoting the image of Muslims as temple-desecrators. However, many Muslim rulers gave donations for temples, and many Hindu rulers looted temples for want of gold.<sup>154</sup>

The truth of history is always more complex than what popular history allows. Yet, it seems that popular history in India has become prevalent as a means of making political inroads and justifying ideologies. The examples of Veluthat and Thapar, as historians in India, particularly resonate here. Their work as astute researchers is not valued on the same level that an inaccurate TV show is. Although Veluthat talked about Chanakya and Muslim rulers, these examples extend very naturally to Aryans. The Indian public could also be susceptible to

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<sup>151</sup> Chanakya served as a chief advisor to rulers of the Maurya empire c. 4<sup>th</sup>-3<sup>rd</sup> centuries BCE. He was the author of an important political treatise named the *Arthashastra*.

<sup>152</sup> Radha Rajadhyaksha, “ ‘History Can Be Dangerously Misused’ ,” *Times of India*, Mar. 2, 1997.

<<http://search.proquest.com/hnptimesofindia/docview/741725355/13DA37515A62B246B7D/1?accountid=7118>>.

<sup>153</sup> Chaudhary, “ ‘Brahmanical Systems’ ,” *Times of India*, Apr. 27, 2003.

<sup>154</sup> Rajadhyaksha, “ ‘History Can Be Dangerously Misused’ .”

believing inaccurate popular history about the Vedic Aryans discovering the heliocentric system, or other scientific theories.<sup>155</sup>

### Examining Indian Society

To summarize, these newspaper articles have provided a few insights into Indian society. Public reaction to the NCERT books can be explained by the fact that: 1) the Indian populace is highly diverse, 2) glorification of the past outweighs historical accuracy, and 3) history is not valued as a discipline by the general public. First, we can look at how the diversity of Indian identity affected the NDA textbooks.

In the claims for social cohesion advanced by members of the BJP, we see how the NDA portrayed its textbook mission. The words “social cohesion” shed a positive light on the changes, suggesting that the BJP is trying to fight communal issues plaguing India. However, the authors of the *Times* articles manage to contradict these claims. They follow the statements of the NCERT and HRD heads with examples of how cohesion will not hold true.<sup>156</sup> In my opinion, these comments by the newspaper commentators explain a key characteristic of the Indian populace: it is too diversified to define easily. Religious statements will always offend one group or the other, so it is futile to try for social cohesion in textbooks. In fact, textbooks that do try for social cohesion will end up contradicting themselves, because of the problem of sects: two different communities will believe wildly different things about the same event. Additionally, communities that define themselves along regional, caste, or other boundaries accentuate the natural diversity of India. The fact that newspapers from the time often mention protests or riots shows that diversity is a contested issue in India.

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<sup>155</sup> This point was discussed in previous paragraphs on glorification of Vedic astronomy and mathematics.

<sup>156</sup> “‘Holy Test’,” *Times of India*, Dec. 9, 2001.

Additionally, a key part of this diversity is religious diversity. The BJP tries to define India along religious lines. The whole ideology of Hindutva says that a person's natural allegiance was to the sacred land of his religion, and not necessarily the land he was born in.<sup>157</sup> Why this insistence on the original homeland of one's religion as a marker of identity? If one's identity were determined by birth in India, then the Aryan question would not be nearly as large of an issue. All manner of people in India could lay claim to the land as their motherland. Yet, religious ancestry has become very important in defining the individual in India. With this emphasis on religious ancestry, a logical extension is an emphasis on glorifying the individual's ancestry.

This leads to my second point, on how idealizing the past outweighs historical accuracy in India's current political discourse. Joshi and other BJP representatives appeal to a nationalist identity that desires to glorify India's past. By simplifying the academic debate to a battle over national pride for Aryans, the BJP pushes a point that is hard for people to disagree with. Americans similarly glorify figures like George Washington and Thomas Jefferson who had very human misgivings. But in India, this desire for glorifying the past is coupled with the aforementioned diversity of Indian identity. Who do Indians glorify – their Muslim rulers, their colonial lords, their regional princes, or ancient civilizations? The answer is not always clear. However, the BJP is a Hindu party elected to power in 1998 by a Hindu majority. To them, the answer is clear. Therefore, it was logical for the party to appeal to the sentiments of its constituency and glorify the Vedic past.

Indians were ruled by outsiders for centuries, and many Indians might still harbor resentments about this fact. The resentments spill over into the divisions between the

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<sup>157</sup> Savarkar, "Essentials of Hindutva."

communities of Hindus, Muslims, and Christians. The public sees the latter two as the religions of “outsiders,” because they originated outside the Indian subcontinent<sup>158</sup> So, by choosing to glorify the Aryans' indigenous past, the BJP provides a sense of pride to the Hindu majority, representing at least 75-80% of the population.<sup>159</sup> By saying that the Aryans were indigenous, Indian Hindus can claim a continuity of achievements by their ancestors. This is opposed to a secular view of India's achievements that would pool the accomplishments of many communities.<sup>160</sup> We have seen how the BJP attributes many substantial scientific discoveries to the Vedic Aryans. By placing the achievements this early, the BJP removes any doubt that external influences contributed to these ideas. In this view, Hindus alone came up with great scientific discoveries. Although such attempts at altering history might not affect academic circles, popular history can be easily twisted through textbooks and the like. For the sake of pride, many Indians might believe this new popular history.

This, in turn, segues into the third point I wish to make concerning Indian society. Even according to Indian historians, historical accuracy is not valued in India because history as a discipline has not been highly regarded. As mentioned earlier in the discussion on textbook culture, history is often seen as a “soft option.”<sup>161</sup> In recent years, history has evolved to become a very data-driven discipline. Historians analyzing texts must attempt to gather as much data as possible about the context of a text in order to make a satisfactory interpretation. However, NDA politicians and the general public that elected them did not necessarily understand this in the period from 1998-2007. Politicians were more concerned with the political message a certain

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<sup>158</sup> Minwalla and Majumder, “Textbook Terrain,” *Times of India*, Sep. 9, 2001.

<sup>159</sup> The Hindu demographic represented 80.5% of the population as per the 2001 Census of India.

<sup>160</sup> Mahendra Ved, “Historical Baggage,” *Times of India*, Feb. 19, 2002.

<<http://search.proquest.com/hnptimesofindia/docview/855969273/13DA375EF805FF0DA7D/1?accountid=7118>>.

<sup>161</sup> Guichard, *Construction of History and Nationalism*, 38.

view of history sends.<sup>162</sup> But what about the public? From the news articles mentioned above, we can surmise that the public values romanticized views of history over accurate scholarly views. In our earlier analysis, we saw that Veluthat described how Chanakya, an advisor to rulers of the Mauryan Empire, was overvalued in textbooks and in TV. Understandably, imagined history and folklore passed down by non-academics form crucial parts of a community's overall history, apart from the history written by scholars. Yet, as aforementioned, the diversity of India prevents its society from finding a common imagined history of the Indian community as a whole.

Given the lack of emphasis on historical accuracy, it is easy to see how the Indian public would react favorably to NDA textbooks that glorify the past. If a greater part of the population realized the difficulties in finding and interpreting actual historical facts, there might not be such a willingness to glorify the past. For convincing change to happen in India, the public must start realizing the greater value of history as a discipline. But in the period from 1998-2007, religion and history definitely belonged together in the public eye. In fact, the BJP was playing to the public's interests while they were in power.

Though these points concerning Indian identity may seem unique and extraordinary at first, they are not so different from the facets of Texan identity that have caused the recent textbook controversy in Texas. Though Texas might not be as religiously diverse as India, it is definitely ethnically diverse. Thus, there was disagreement in Texas over the importance of figures like Cesar Chavez in the grand scheme of Texas history. Additionally, there were attempts at sugarcoating the American past by leaving out information about Native American troubles.<sup>163</sup> The Texas debates reveal the declining authority of professional historians, as non-academics increasingly interpret history on their own. In fact, in America the "history discipline's

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<sup>162</sup> Ibid.

<sup>163</sup> Erikson, "Culture War Circus," in *Politics and the History Curriculum*, 11-12.

share of [all] degrees earned in 2011 declined to the lowest level in 10 years.”<sup>164</sup> So while the earlier points made about Indian society are important, they are evidently not uncommon throughout the world. The difficulty of finding a common past arises in all diverse nations. What, then, is different about the NCERT controversy? It is the ambiguity of Indo-Aryan identity.

In this thesis, the ambiguity of Indo-Aryan identity has already been explained. Aryan origins and their relations to Harappan civilization are the crux of the Aryan debate and there are still no clear answers to Aryan questions. Furthermore, in India, religious diversity is a key issue and religious ancestry becomes important to most communities. The textbook changes are particularly pertinent to Indian identity because most Indians are unsure what to think about the complex and disputed Indo-Aryan history. By placing certain viewpoints in textbooks, the government influences the next generation of Indians. Political parties thus develop a public consensus about Aryans through the books. In other locales like Texas, much of the general public would most likely already have a strong opinion about topics like the founding fathers, Cesar Chavez, evolution, etc., and pass that on to their children. Most Indians, on the other hand, would probably not have an extensive knowledge of Indian history reaching back 4,000 years and thus do not form strong opinions about Indo-Aryans to pass on to their children. Therefore, India’s struggles with the history curriculum are unique because its civilization is so ancient and its history is still unclear.

To reiterate, analyzing the public reaction to the NCERT controversy has revealed that conceptions of national identity are affected by changes in the way that textbooks represent Indian history. This is because of the religious diversity of the Indian populace, the tendency to

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<sup>164</sup> Robert B. Townsend, “Data Show a Decline in History Majors,” *American Historical Association*, accessed April 22, 2013, <[www.historians.org/Perspectives/issues/2013/1304/Data-Show-a-Decline-in-History-Majors.cfm](http://www.historians.org/Perspectives/issues/2013/1304/Data-Show-a-Decline-in-History-Majors.cfm)>.



glorify the Vedic past at the expense of historical accuracy, and the lack of regard for history as a discipline. Thus, the diversity of the Indian populace leads different communal groups to concentrate on and glorify their ancestry. When Hindutva scholars glorify the Vedic past in NDA textbooks, they sacrifice historical accuracy in order to paint the best picture about their ancestors.<sup>165</sup> Accordingly, since history is no longer a highly valued discipline in India,<sup>166</sup> few people scrutinize and study history at the academic level and cannot assert the importance of historical accuracy over the aforementioned glorification. The history material in textbooks thus becomes very important to the general public, as young students form their ideas about the unclear Indo-Aryan history and identity through textbooks. Depictions of Indo-Aryans in NCERT textbooks therefore relate to Indian identity because they form a basis for the public to understand Indian history and ancestry. This sets India apart from other societies who may have more clear-cut popular narratives about their country's past.

## VII – Conclusion

How do we decide on a common past? The question posed at the beginning of this thesis remains unanswered. In nations like India, that question will remain unanswered due to the amalgamation of different narratives of the past. The diverse experiences of various social groups combine to create a collective history that is impossible to fit within one textbook. Choices have to be made about which histories to present. The newest UPA books have chosen to present the history that most serves students while minimizing potential for controversy. Yet, we do not know how long these books may last if the BJP comes to power again and decides to change the curriculum. The solutions found by UPA books might be good solutions, but they

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<sup>165</sup> We have seen that even the discovery of heliocentric astronomy was attributed to Vedic society.

<sup>166</sup> As evidenced in earlier section on Textbook Culture.

will be temporary in the long run because they omit discussion of the truly difficult issues. The saying goes “history repeats itself”: a new NCERT controversy is bound to happen. When faced with a new controversy, we will have to consider what we have learned from the recent struggle of 1998–2007.

Over the course of this paper, the reader has been exposed to various categories of information that explain the context and importance of the 1998–2007 NCERT controversy. First, I introduced the role of the school in nation building and how history curriculums have been challenged all over the world for the messages they instill. Texas has recently undergone its own issues with history curriculum; it should now be apparent that the conservative, religious nature of those Texas educators matches the nature of the Bharatiya Janata Party members almost exactly. Learning about textbook controversies in the context of India should enable us to better draw parallels across the politics and beliefs of other societies with textbook issues. After discussing the intersection of history and nationalism, I explained the specific Indian case of history textbooks. The National Council for Educational Research and Training (NCERT), in charge of publishing textbook curriculum for all of India, has had a troubled history, shifting to obey the differing demands of BJP and Congress over the course of its existence since 1961. As such, the ruling political party has considerable influence over the formation of curriculum in India. Factors like this allowed the NCERT controversy to happen.

After examining the politicization of textbooks, I further delved into why textbooks matter. The educational culture of India is highly restricted, with teachers rarely being encouraged to innovate in the classroom. The importance and content of standardized tests pushes teachers to teach solely by the textbook. This means students are inclined to memorize, rather than question and analyze, textbooks and curriculum changes. Students who were in Class

VI during 2002 when Lal's books were published would have memorized a completely different set of history books (and therefore ideologies) by the time they came to Class XII and the UPA books were in circulation. Following the particulars of the Indian education system, the next topic concerned the actual historiography of the Aryan debate. In a chronological manner, we were able to examine how a racial understanding of Indian history was replaced by new questions about the geographic origins of the Aryans. Then, I analyzed the changes made in NDA textbooks that reflected Hindutva ideology and the indigenist side of the debate. The changes were clear across three distinct categories of the chronology and migration of Aryans, their diet and religion, and finally their societal achievements. Through considering the textbooks, it was apparent that Makkhan Lal (the BJP-affiliated author) clearly reflected his political ideology in his writings. Thapar and Sharma, the liberal textbook authors, showed little influence of politics in their writings on Indo-Aryans, and instead presented migrationist viewpoints as the common historical consensus of the time.

Lastly, I studied how the Indian public and press reacted to the news of the NCERT controversy. Analysis of news articles allowed me to extrapolate possible answers to how and why Indians received the changes in their official history. I postulated that Indians are highly diverse, and a great emphasis on religious identity makes it difficult to define a common past that satisfies everyone. With this emphasis on religious identity, there is also a tendency to glorify one's religious ancestry, which the BJP especially emphasized by claiming the superiority of their Hindu ancestors (Indo-Aryans). Additionally, glorification of the past outweighs historical accuracy, which is not highly valued. The tendency of non-academics to pass down a community history has undermined the role of scholarly history, which the public does not understand or appreciate for its rigorous research. These conclusions initially seemed similar to the Texas

education controversies I introduced at the beginning of this thesis. Yet, the antiquity of Indian history, combined with its ambiguity, has resulted in a population without a popular narrative to tell about ancient India. The material in textbooks is thus incredibly important for students who are forming an opinion of their nation's ancient past solely through textbooks. Depictions of Indo-Aryans are thus crucial to Indian identity because the majority of students understand their ancestry through studying Indo-Aryans.

In fact, textbook material on Indo-Aryans is so important that curriculum changes concerning this enigmatic group have even reached the U.S. In the summer and fall of 2005, BJP-affiliated organizations attempted to shape textbook curriculum in California in order to present a better image of Hinduism. These changes included representing Aryans as indigenous to India and the core essence of Hinduism as the Vedas. Professor Kamala Visweswaran of UT Austin wrote that supporting the textbook revisions made by right-wing organizations "creates a setting in which social intolerance and injustices against minorities can be justified."<sup>167</sup>

Eventually, these textbook changes were shut down by other Hindu organizations organized along caste lines, which promoted divergent views of Indian identity.<sup>168</sup> This is a testament to my earlier point that the diversity of Indian identity prevents a common historical narrative from forming. The problem of textbooks and Indian identity, halfway across the world from California, still had a direct impact on the state's education. It is up to the reader to appreciate the fact that different versions of the official history create enough fervor to spread across the world. Visweswaran even suggests that the effects of this spread of ideologies, especially a Hindutva ideology that undermines Muslims and other groups, can be dangerous when considering post-

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<sup>167</sup> Kamala Visweswaran, et al., "The Hindutva View of History: Rewriting Textbooks in India and the United States," *Georgetown Journal of International Affairs* (2009): 102.

<sup>168</sup> *Ibid.*, 106-7.

9/11 mores. We may not be able to decide on a common past, but rewriting history surely has its consequences.



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