



February 21, 2006

Ms. Glee Johnson, President and
Ms. Ruth Green, Mr. Jonathan Williams, Mr. Joe Nunez, and Mr. Ken Noonan
Members of the History-Social Science Committee
California State Board of Education
1430 N Street
Sacramento, California 95814

cc: Mr. Roger Magyar, Executive Director and Mr. Tom Adams, Director, Curriculum
Framework and Instructional Resources Division

Subject: Edits to Ancient Indian History and Hinduism in Grade 6 Text Books, especially those regarding caste and gender inequalities in Ancient India

Dear Ms. Johnson and Members of the History-Social Science Committee:

Organizing Youth! (OY!) is a San Francisco-based organization of South Asian activists that seeks to empower South Asian youth through political education and training. As an organization focused on South Asian youth, we have been actively following the debate around the edits proposed by some Hindu-American groups (HEF/VF) for sixth grade CA textbooks. We have reviewed the latest **Edits and Corrections List** recommended by the State Board of Education (SBE)/ California Department of Education (CDE) staff, which is under consideration for the upcoming meeting on February 27th, 2006 and wish to offer our comments on some issues.

OY! celebrates the struggles of historically marginalized groups in South Asia and in the US, and believes that an accurate portrayal of their histories is an important achievement in their fight for justice and equality. We are, therefore, concerned by the various edits proposed by HEF/VF which seek to obscure histories of oppression of lower castes, untouchables and women in India. We reject this attempted sanitization of Ancient Indian history, which only perpetrates the centuries of injustice and discrimination against these socially underprivileged communities.

We are sensitive to concerns of overly negative portrayals of any one religion/culture/civilization in textbooks, but feel that the rich, vibrant traditions of Hinduism and Ancient South Asian culture, which represent many different strains of philosophies, ideologies and practices, do not need to be propped up through falsehoods in order to win the respect of sixth graders. The affirming features of Hinduism are not revealed by glossing over the inequities perpetrated under its rubric, but in studying the many reform movements and struggles of resistance that also flourished under its umbrella and derived inspiration from various religious and local philosophies.

We note that in several instances, the CDE/SBE staff have rejected the HEF/VF's attempts to distort history, and restored a modicum of historical accuracy to the depictions in Ancient Indian society in the texts. We appreciate these efforts on the behalf of CDE/SBE staff, but we would like to point out that there are still other HEF/VF edits, which downplay the role of gender and



caste discrimination, which have indeed been accepted by the CDE/SBE staff. These are detailed in the attached Tables 1 and 2, and we urge the History-Social Science Committee to reject these edits by the HEF/VF and restore the texts to their original form.

And finally, we note that many of the texts incorrectly label the section on Ancient South Asian history as that on Ancient Indian history. The geographical area spanned by the various civilizations and empires of Ancient South Asia cover at least seven different countries in the current political context—India, Pakistan, Bangladesh, Afghanistan, Sri Lanka, Nepal and Bhutan. To continually refer to the history of this area as only Ancient Indian history gives students the erroneous impression that Indian history subsumes that of other regions in the area, and is contrary to the ideals of inclusivity and pluralism enshrined in the Curriculum Framework adopted by the California Board of Education.

Thank you for your consideration,

Jhumpa Bhattacharya and Ramkumar Sridharan

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[Attachments: Table 1 and Table 2](#)



Table 1: Position of OY! on edits relating to gender and caste inequalities proposed by HEF

Number	Group's Edit/Correction (Hindu Education Foundation)	SBE/CDE Staff Recommendations	Position of OY!
17	Page 238, <u>Third</u> bullet under "Focusing on the Main Ideas": "The Aryans created a caste system..." Replace with, "During Vedic times, people were divided into different social groups (varnas) based on their capacity to undertake a particular profession. Membership in a group was not hereditary. In medieval times the varna system crystallized into a more rigid caste system."	Defer to the original text	Agree with the CDE/SBE staff edit. Caste system was an oppressive regimentation of society and not a benevolent division of labor like the HEF edit seems to suggest.
19	Page 245, second paragraph: "Men had many more rights than women." Replace with, "Men had different duties (dharma) as well as rights than women. Many women were among the sages to whom the Vedas were revealed."	Defer to original text.	Agree with the CDE/SBE staff edit. It is necessary to highlight patriarchy in Indian and other civilizations in order to sensitize children to gender inequalities. Ancient Indian women had very limited access to education, were denied inheritance or property, and were excluded from positions of authority.
31	Page 151, "The Caste System", third paragraph: remove entire paragraph.	Approve edit as written.	Disagree with the SBE/CDE edit—the original text should remain unchanged. This paragraph contains important description of untouchables (now referred to as Dalits)—a large class of individuals that exists outside the caste system and has faced systemic discrimination and inhumane treatment through the centuries. This edit is consistent with HEF's attempt to remove all discussion of untouchability and the (oppression of the) caste system) from these texts.
35	Page 154, "Hinduism and Women": current text, "However, Hinduism also taught that women were inferior to men. As a result, Hindu women were not allowed to read the Vedas or	Make edit as directed. Deletion leaves only one sentence under	Disagree with the SBE/CDE edit—the original text should remain unchanged. As in HEF edit #19 above, we feel it



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	other sacred texts." Delete these sentences.	"Hinduism and Women". It might be better for flow to just add this remaining sentence to the end of the previous section, or remove it altogether.	is important to openly discuss patriarchy in ancient societies and reflect upon how it exists in communities even today.
36	Page 164, "Gupta Society", second and third paragraphs. Delete these paragraphs.	In the second paragraph, delete the word "strict". Delete the entire third paragraph.	Disagree with SBE/CDE edit—the original text should remain unchanged. The second paragraph deals with the existence of a strict hierarchical structure due to the caste system, and the third paragraph deals with the unequal status of women. As discussed above, we think these add a crucial dimension to study of history and should remain in the text.
45	Page 244, second paragraph: current text, "Men had many more rights than women. Unless there were no sons in a family, only a man could inherit property. Only men could go to school or become priests." Replace first sentence with, "Men had different rights and duties than women," and add after last sentence, "Women's education was mostly done at home."	Change to read, "Men had many more property rights than women. Typically, only sons could inherit property, and only men could go to school or become priests. Women's education was mostly done at home."	Disagree with SBE/CDE staff edit—do not change original text. By alluding to only property rights, it appears as if men's and women's rights were comparable in other spheres. This was clearly not the case—women had limited access to education and almost none to any legal or social rights.
51	Page 252, picture: remove picture of the "Untouchable."	Remove picture.	Disagree with SBE/CDE staff edit—do not remove picture. The picture is part of a series of five, where all the castes of Ancient India are shown. As in HEF edit #31 above, its removal is part of an attempt to



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			remove all mention of untouchability.
52	Page 252, last paragraph: "There was one group that did not belong to any varna. Its members were called untouchables. They performed work other Indians thought was too dirty, such as collecting trash, skinning animals, or handling dead bodies." Delete.	Replace text with, "There was one group that did not belong to any varna. Its members were called untouchables because they performed dirty work such as skinning animals or handling dead bodies."	Disagree with SBE/CDE staff edit—do not change original text. The original edit by HEF is again part of their attempt to remove all mention of untouchability and the oppression of the caste system. The CDE/SBE staff is correct in maintaining a description of the untouchables (now referred to as Dalits), but errs in assigning a spurious reason for their being untouchables. The Dalits did not choose to perform dirty work—they did it because that was the only work the caste society assigned them.
62	Page 229: depicts untouchables as the fifth Varna. Remove this.	Approve edit as written. The text at the bottom of p.228 will also have to be edited.	Disagree with SBE/CDE staff edit—do not change original text. As in edit #31 above, this is another attempt at removing mention of untouchables (now referred to as Dalits) in the text.
79	Page 181, "Main Idea": current text, "The social structure known as the caste system was an important characteristic of Aryan society." Replace with, "The social structure known as the Varna system was an important characteristic of the ancient Indian society."	Approve edit as written. Replace "Varna" with "class (Varna)" in the new sentence.	Disagree with SBE/CDE staff edit—do not change original text. While the four divisions in Ancient Indian society are technically called the Varna system, we note that these divisions are conceptually the same as caste divisions. Identifying Varna as the class system is not only confusing, given the variety of ways in which social classes are understood, but also misleading in that it glosses over the hierarchical and rigid social order that castes denote.
80	Page 181, second paragraph: current text,	Defer to the	Agree with SBE/CDE staff



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	“Once their society had merged with the local population, a late hymn of the <i>Rig Veda</i> described the four castes.” Replace with, “A late hymn of the <i>Rig Veda</i> describes the interrelationship and interdependence of the four social classes.”	original text	edit. Castes should not be replaced with classes. The Purushasukta hymn of the Rg Veda describes the hierarchy of the castes, not their interdependence, which again is an attempt to gloss over the inequities of the caste system.
82	Page 181, table, “The Caste System”: replace table header with, “The Varnas”.	Replace “Caste” with “Class”.	Disagree with SBE/CDE staff edit—do not change original text. See edit #79 above.
83	Page 181, table, last row (“Sudras”): current text, “Native peoples; performed services for members of the three higher castes.” Replace with, “Performed services for all classes and did more labor-intensive work.”	Change to read, “performed services for all four classes.”	Disagree with SBE/CDE staff edit—do not change original text. Caste should not be replaced by class, see edit #79 above. Also, hierarchy implicit in the different castes is elided in the HEF edit.
85	Page 182, third paragraph: current text, “At the bottom of the caste system stood the native peoples known as Sudras.” Replace with, “At the bottom of the caste system stood the Sudras.”	Approve edit as written. Change “caste” to “class.”	Disagree with SBE/CDE staff edit—do not change original text. See edit #79 above.
86	Page 182, fourth paragraph: current text, “In modern India, these people are now called Dalits, and treating someone as an untouchable is a crime against the law.” Replace with, “In modern India, treating someone as an untouchable is a crime against the law.”	Defer to original text.	Agree with SBE/CDE staff edit. Dalits is the term-of-choice by which the erstwhile “untouchables” choose to identify themselves. It is important that the students be made aware of this term.
93	Page 145, last paragraph: “The caste system is just one example of how Hinduism was woven into the fabric of daily life in India.” Delete this part.	Change to, “The class system is just one example of how Hinduism affected the fabric of daily life in India.”	Disagree with SBE/CDE staff edit—do not change original text. See edit #79 above.



Table 2: Position of OY! on edits relating to caste inequalities proposed by VF

Number	Group's Edit/Correction (The Vedic Foundation)	SBE/CDE Staff Recommendations	Position of OY!
21	Grade 6, p. 229: "Indian society divides itself into a complex structure of social classes based particularly on jobs. This class structure is called the caste system ." This sentence, written in the present tense in a textbook describing ancient history, is out of place. It presumes that the caste system is present in India today. According to the Indian Constitution, under the section, Fundamental Rights, the Right to Equality is guaranteed to all citizens, just as the U.S. has enacted Equal Employment Opportunity Laws to prevent discrimination.	Change "divides" to "divided."	Disagree with SBE/CDE staff edit—do not change original text. Caste system is a reality today, as it was in the past. The Constitution of India, while guaranteeing equal rights to all its citizens, also recognizes the reality of the caste system and has categorized the erstwhile Untouchables under the umbrella term "Scheduled Castes." Violence against the Dalits and the lower castes is rampant, and it would be quite disingenuous to claim that there is no caste system today.
39	p. 143: "Hinduism...has affected how people worship, what jobs they do ,... And it has helped to determine the status of people in Indian society." Remove.	Defer to original text.	Agree with SBE/CDE staff edit. This is another attempt by the VF to deny the truth of casteism as it occurs today.