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February 16, 2006

Glee Johnson  
State Board of Education  
1430 "N" Street, Room 5111  
Sacramento, CA 95814

Cc: Jack O'Connell, Superintendent  
California Department of Education

Dr. Thomas Adams, Director  
Curriculum Frameworks and Instructional Resources Division  
California Department of Education

Dear Ms. Johnson and Members of the Board of Education,

I am writing to you as a scholar in South Asian studies to register grave concern with the Curriculum Commission's decision to accept many of the recommendations proposed by the Hindu Education Foundation (HEF) and the Vedic Foundation (VF). While I am disturbed in general that a majority of the edits proposed by the three member faculty committee consisting of Michael Witzel (Harvard), Stanley Wolpert (UCLA), and James Heitzman (UC Davis) were rejected, I am especially concerned with those that relate to the relationship between men and women in ancient India.

As someone who has taught for many years on gender issues I am deeply disturbed by the way in which the proposed recommendations by HEF and VF suggest to alter the passage of Glencoe/McGraw Hill textbook (p. 245), which at the moment reads as "Men had many more rights than women" to the following: "Men had different duties (dharma) as well as rights than women." This characterization of men and women's rights as 'different' elides the reality that women had less power than men in ancient India, could not own property, and commonly suffered physical violence in socially approved ways. The imbalance of power had very real and significant consequences for women.

Our effort through education must be to foster conscious citizens that participate in the improvement of society, and hence we need to understand history rather than deny it. It is important that school children learn about imbalances in power among men and women if we are to understand today's society as well as to learn how much women have gained rights through conscious and continuous struggle.

While the textbooks under review are not perfect, we are happy to note that attempts have been made to highlight the unequal status of women in different civilizations in the ancient world, which far from "denigrating" these civilizations, only underlines the need for societal change today and recognizes the importance of the ongoing struggles for gender justice throughout the world. For instance, in the McGraw Hill/Glencoe publication (*Discovering our Past. Ancient Civilizations (2006)*) the imbalance of power between women and men is well document in diverse civilizations. For example the differing power between men and women is characterized in Egypt as, "*In ancient Egypt, the father headed the family*" (p. 164); among ancient Israelites as, "*Sons were especially valued because they carried on the family name*" (p. 218). In China it is represented as, "*Men were respected because they grew the crops. They went to school, ran the government... Chinese women could not hold government posts*" (p. 287); in Sparta, Greece as, "*Wives lived at home while their husbands lived in the barracks*" (p. 346); and women in Athens as "*For Athenian*

*women, life revolved around home and family. Girls married early --at 14 or 15-- and were expected to have children and take care of household duties. .... they could leave the house only if a male relative went with them”* (p. 362) and so on. We would welcome such an open approach to dealing with the Ancient Indian Civilization as well.

HEF and VF's proposed changes are motivated by a mis-guided cultural protectionism stemming from a misplaced sense of cultural pride. Hinduism and Ancient India have made many remarkable contributions to the World, which stand on their own, without needing any support from an elision of the gender inequalities that have been fostered throughout the centuries.

As a faculty member of one of the most diverse urban college campuses and one with over seventy percent women, I understand the educational and pedagogical responsibility of teaching accurate while difficult concepts in a manner that fosters respect and clarity of thinking.

I believe it to be the responsibility of educators to not hide behind false history bolstered by false claims of cultural protection. I hope that the State Board will take what I say here in the context of the other faculty letters that have preceded mine.

I thank you for your consideration.

Sincerely,

Rupal Oza  
Associate Professor and Director