

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: Comments regarding proposed sectarian edits to California State textbooks,  
particularly those relating to the Hindu caste system.**

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

Greetings! I write to you to commend the California State Board of Education for being receptive to the views of the non-academic community on the academic curriculum in school textbooks. Looking at your latest edits, I realize that you have sought to strike a balance between conflicting voices. Your recourse to neutrality is understandable, but as Archbishop Desmond Tutu said: *If you are neutral in situations of injustice, you have chosen the side of the oppressor. If an elephant has its foot on the tail of a mouse and you say that you are neutral, the mouse will not appreciate your neutrality.* Archbishop Tutu's comments in the context of apartheid are very relevant for the textbook issue, for in your desire to be neutral, you have effectively (though unintentionally) sided with supporters of the caste system – a form of descent-based discrimination no more benign than apartheid.

I write to you not as an expert, but as a direct witness to the barbarity of the caste system. I come from a village in the state of Tamil Nadu in South India, and have seen from close quarters the daily dehumanization of Dalits. As a child, I saw Dalits

- being given tea in coconut shells<sup>1</sup>,
- make reverential bows to their upper caste employers and Brahmins and respectfully address them as “saami” (God in Tamil) even as the latter treated them with contempt,
- endure daily beratings from their employers (and oftentimes, also from the kids in the employers' family).

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<sup>1</sup> This was one of the many markers of the low status of Dalits. I vividly remember it was big news when after a local body election, the (upper-caste) winner gave them tea -- for once -- in stainless steel cups (which were meant for the exclusive use of the upper castes)! The two-tumbler system, as this discrimination is now called, still persists in Tamil Nadu and several other states.

- being indispensable when it came to cleaning upper-caste toilets (for the upper castes can't take the stench of shit and urine), clogged ditches and filled septic tanks<sup>2</sup>.
- form an overwhelming majority of the landless agricultural workers laboring in the adjacent farm of an absentee (upper-caste) landlord.

In my village, this is how things had been for several years, and no one raised an eyebrow about caste and its daily manifestations. It was not a coincidence that none of the agricultural laborers was a Brahmin, nor did any Brahmin ever have to clean upper-caste shit for a living. The reason being that the caste system defined Brahmins to be the purest of the lot (and who couldn't pollute themselves by coming in proximity with dirty shit), while the Dalits, as outcasts of the Hindu caste system, were assigned what the upper castes deemed to be dirty jobs<sup>3</sup>.

My village was hardly an exception in its treatment of Dalits, and there is ample evidence to show that even today upper castes continue to regard Dalits in much the same way as before<sup>4</sup>. However, as the Dalits started asserting their rights, in their quest to maintain their hegemony the upper castes began orchestrating native versions of Abu Ghraib everyday<sup>5</sup>. Some of the recent atrocities against Dalits covered by the Indian media include – Dalits being forced to eat human shit<sup>6</sup>, the burning alive of Dalits<sup>7</sup>, collective punishments of Dalits who dared to challenge upper-caste hegemony<sup>8</sup>, destruction of Dalit homes and their means of livelihood<sup>9</sup>, and numerous physical assaults on Dalits and sexual abuse of Dalit women<sup>10</sup>. Only last month, two hands and a leg of Bant Singh Inquilabi (a Dalit leader of agricultural workers) were amputated by henchmen of upper-caste landlords<sup>11</sup>.

While prudence would dictate giving in to the upper-caste demands, the Dalits continue to valiantly fight back despite often being economically dependent on the upper castes.

<sup>2</sup> As Human Rights Watch observes, “*manual scavenging is a caste-based occupation*” restricted to Dalits. See <http://www.hrw.org/reports/1999/india/India994-09.htm>

<sup>3</sup> If anything, the Dalits were doing a service to all of us by keeping our environs clean, but the caste system is not amenable to such logic.

<sup>4</sup> I will be glad to provide more details, if you so desire. I will also be glad to send you two recent books that deal with the brutal manifestations of caste, *Dalits in Dravidian Land* and *India Stinking*, both published by Navayana Publishers [<http://www.navayana.org>]. *India Stinking* addresses the still-prevalent practice of manual scavenging, and in the words of a renowned journalist who has spent several years covering Dalit issues for the India media, *Nearly 15 years after the Union Government brought in the Employment of Manual Scavengers and Construction of Dry Latrines (Prohibition) Act, 1993, manual scavenging, one of the most degrading and dehumanising of the occupations 'assigned' to Dalits under the hierarchical Hindu caste system, remains not the least affected by the legislation.* See <http://www.frontlineonnet.com/stories/20060224000808000.htm>

<sup>5</sup> [http://news.nationalgeographic.com/news/2003/06/0602\\_030602\\_untouchables.html](http://news.nationalgeographic.com/news/2003/06/0602_030602_untouchables.html)

<sup>6</sup> <http://www.imadr.org/project/dalit/alert.2002.no.1.html>

<sup>7</sup> [http://www.outlookindia.com/pti\\_news.asp?id=91152](http://www.outlookindia.com/pti_news.asp?id=91152)

<sup>8</sup> <http://www.countercurrents.org/hr-hrf280803.htm>

<sup>9</sup> <http://www.hindu.com/2005/09/06/stories/2005090604211000.htm>

<sup>10</sup> <http://www.hrw.org/reports/1999/india>

<sup>11</sup> [http://www.tehelka.com/story\\_main16.asp?filename=Cr021806inquilab.asp](http://www.tehelka.com/story_main16.asp?filename=Cr021806inquilab.asp)

And the Hindutva (Hindu supremacist) forces have taken upon themselves the mantle of protecting upper-caste interests by muzzling public criticism of casteism and creating fictitious enemies (primarily, Muslims and Christians). As part of this nefarious agenda, Hindutva fronts in the U.S. like the Hindu Education Foundation (HEF), the Vedic Foundation (VF) and the Hindu American Foundation (HAF) have sought to minimize mention of caste and present it as a benign social structure. I commend the CDE/SBE staff for throwing out some of the egregious Hindutva edits<sup>12</sup>, but am deeply distressed that the Hindutva forces have managed to slip in many of their edits<sup>13</sup>.

Whitewashing caste and sex-based discrimination (another issue that the Hindutva forces would rather not talk about) also raises uncomfortable questions on the relatively low level -- measured by conventional standards -- of past accomplishments of women and the lower castes. If the real history of casteism and patriarchy is not taught, what is to stop school children from attributing this (the relatively low level of achievements of women and the lower castes) to their inherently low intellect? When Larry Summers, the president of Harvard university, could fall a prey to grave misconceptions about women being inherently unsuitable for science careers (as evidenced by their small numbers in scientific research!), and when racist theories such as those propounded in *The Bell Curve* still abound, what is to stop from dangerous stereotypes (about women and the lower castes being inherently deficient in intellect) gaining ground in young impressionable minds? In contrast, the real history of the struggle against patriarchy and caste-based oppression, alongside the struggle against slavery and anti-Semitism, would be as uplifting as educational. Such history would be uncomfortable only for those wanting to cling on to unearned privileges at the cost of others.

Several years ago Dr. Babasaheb Ambedkar, a revered leader of the anti-caste movement, had commented: “The anti-Semitism of the Nazis against the Jews is in no way different in ideology and in effect from the Sanatanism (orthodoxy) of Hindus against the untouchables (Dalits)”. Caste is a brutal lived reality of millions in India, and we cannot simply wish it away. I urge you to reject the VF/HEF edits that seek to whitewash caste-based oppression.

Thanks very much for your time. I appreciate your reading through this letter.

Yours truly,

Ra Ravishankar

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<sup>12</sup> These include edits 17, 19, 80 & 86 recommended by the Hindu Education Foundation, and edits 39 & 61 recommended by the Vedic Foundation.

<sup>13</sup> These include edits 31, 34, 35, 36, 45, 51, 52, 62, 69, 79, 81, 82, 83, 84, 85 & 93 recommended by the Hindu Education Foundation, and edits 21, 62, 63 & 76 recommended by the Vedic Foundation. I strongly urge the CDE/SBE staff to revert to the original text in all these cases, and to use “caste” in parenthesis alongside every mention of “varna”.