

YOUTH SOLIDARITY SUMMER

TO: Rhonda Gruska, Legislative Assistant

FROM: Youth Solidarity Summer

SUBJECT: California Textbook Edits

FAX NUMBER: (916) 319-2122

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February 21, 2006

Glee Johnson
California State Board of Education
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(916) 319-0175

Cc: Rhonda Gruska
Legislative Assistant
Assistant Speaker Pro Tem Assemblywoman Sally Lieber
State capitol Building, Room 3091
Sacramento, CA 95814
(916) 319-2122

Dear Ms. Johnson and Ms.Gruska:

We are writing to you as members of Youth Solidarity Summer (YSS), a New York-based collective providing alternate education for South Asian American youth since 1997, to indicate our deep concern about the recent decision by the California Curriculum Commission to accept many of the recommendations proposed by the Hindu Education Foundation (HEF) and the Vedic Foundation (VF). As active and concerned members of the diverse South Asian community in this country, we urge you to reconsider the edits accepted by the Commission on the grounds that they are ideologically-driven, historically inaccurate, and do not provide students living in a multicultural environment with the critical tools to recognize and challenge oppression in all its forms.

YSS was born out of our concern over the growth of conservatism in South Asian American communities and of the limited avenues for young, progressively minded South Asian Americans. We are therefore very disturbed by the Commission's decision to allow a small group of self-identified Hindu-Americans– with demonstrable ties to violent and hate-mongering right-wing organizations in India– to determine how students in this country's most populous state will learn about India. Within the United States, these groups are linked to Hindu extremist organizations like the Vishwa Hindu Parishad of America and the Hindu Swayamsevak Sangh, which have consistently taken reactionary positions on issues such as gender justice, immigrant rights, and rights of queer Indians. As second generation youth at the forefront of these struggles, we do not believe that reactionary and extremist organizations like the VF and the HAF are in any way representative of Indians or Indian Americans.

Most of us grew up in the United States with a far older set of textbooks and we certainly welcome the initiative to revise what were often stereotypical and condescending representations of South Asian culture in these textbooks. However, correcting negative stereotypes cannot be achieved by whitewashing history and presenting false visions of the

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present and the past. The edits suggested by the HAF and the VF are centered on erasing references to the ugly realities of caste- and gender-based oppression in ancient and present-day India. As second generation youth we have learnt from the long history of struggles for equal rights in the United States and we recognize that the struggle for the rights of over 160 million Dalits or “untouchables” in India cannot be overlooked. In a context where well-documented violence against Dalits continues across India, it is unacceptable for Californian schools to teach students that the caste system no longer exists simply because the Indian Constitution guarantees equal rights for all its citizens, as suggested by the VF’s proposed edits to the text on page 229 of the Houghton Mifflin /McDougal Littell Grade 6 text book.

We value India’s multicultural multiethnic composition and think its greatest strength lies in its diversity. The edits recommended by the VF and the HAF, with their emphasis on sanitizing deep social inequalities and denying the polytheistic and pluralistic nature of Hindu religious practices, threaten this vision of India and seek, instead, to create the image of India in the narrow mold of upper-caste Hinduism. We do not think that acknowledging inequalities and the long struggles against gender and caste oppression in any way diminish the significant contributions of ancient and modern India to global history. To gloss over these divisions and justify their erasure in the name of “minority rights” of Hindus in the U.S. is to deny historical realities.

As educators trying to build a progressive and politically active South Asian community, we believe that it is the responsibility of educators to reject false histories bolstered by spurious claims of cultural protection. We sincerely hope that the State Board will accept our concerns.

Thank you for your consideration.

In solidarity,

Anjali Kamat.
(On Behalf of the YSS Collective)

The YSS Collective (2005-2006):

Ayaz Ahmed, Anmol Chaddha, Miabi Chatterji, Robindra Deb, Anjali Kamat, Biju Mathew, Ali Mir, Nrinder Nindy Kaur Nann, Sam Quiah, Ashwini Rao, Prerana Reddy, Shrenik Sanghvi, Ashwini Sukthankar, Amita Swadhin, Saadia Toor