

National Front for Tribal Self Rule

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January 2, 2006

Dr. Thomas Adams
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Curriculum Frameworks and Instructional Resources Division (CFIR)
State Board of Education
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Dear Dr. Adams

We are writing to you today on behalf of the National Front for Tribal Self-Rule (NFTSR), regarding the changes proposed in the representation of Hinduism in the sixth grade textbooks currently under review by the California State Board of Education. NFTSR is a coalition of diverse mass organizations of adivasis (indigenous/original) peoples of India for the right to self-governance and to the autonomy that we are entitled to under the Constitution of India. A key part of our work recently has been fighting the efforts of right wing Hindu organizations to co-opt adivasis into their agenda for a "Hindu state", which often involves cultural "assimilation" through coercion or with tacit state consent. It is our belief that this amounts to ethnocide.

In this context, we are concerned about reports that the representatives of such right wing organizations in the US, such as the Hindu Educational Foundation (HEF) and the Vedic Foundation (VF), have been pushing for changes in California textbooks. It is our understanding that the proposed changes would essentially be an egregious attempt to rewrite history and to deny our identity and history as India's indigenous peoples.

We would like to make the following two arguments against the adoption of changes suggested by the HEF and the VF:

1. Without getting into detailed academic debates on the subject, we would like to note that the proposed curriculum depict so called "Aryans" as the indigenous people of India, and Hinduism as the "original" religion of India. At the very least, such claims are controversial and based on spurious history. Moreover, this effectively denies the legitimacy and rights of the real indigenous people of India, the adivasis, who have been suppressed and discriminated against for centuries by those claiming "Aryan" heritage (i.e. the upper castes). We ask you to not support such a partisan and racist effort at re-writing Indian history. We would like to emphasize that such an erasure would be analogous to the denial by white supremacist groups of the presence of Native Americans in North America prior to the arrival of European settlers.

We understand that our position on this subject is coherent with that of the two groups of academic experts who have previously written to the Board, namely, a first letter that was signed by about 50 Indologists and a second letter that was signed by over 130 South Asia faculty based in the U.S. We hope that the Board will take note of the congruence of opinion between respected academics and adivasi grassroots organizations, two groups whose understanding of Indian history and of adivasi rights cannot be lightly dismissed.

2. A second problem with the changes is that they collectively seek to redefine Hinduism as a monotheistic religion, in stark contrast to its lived character as a set of extremely diverse forms and pluralistic practices. We would like to point out, in particular, that adivasis are not Hindus, and that our identity and culture is distinct and separate from so-called “mainstream Hinduism” – in practice the Hinduism of the upper castes. The changes proposed by the HEF and the VF imply that adivasis are simply Hindus who “have lost their way” – a racist and chauvinist expression used frequently by Hindu right-wingers in India. It should be remembered that, since the day they were founded, these right-wing Hindu organizations have tried to ensure that every version of Hinduism or Indian identity that does not conform to their narrow high caste definitions should be repressed, marginalized or even wiped out. Hence their drive to deny, marginalize and erase all historical traces of the cultures of Adivasis, Dalits, Buddhists, Muslims, Christians, and the myriad others whose collective contributions have made India the vibrant multicultural democracy that it is.

We find it particularly ironic that even as the HEF and the VF deny minority histories in India, they nevertheless claim minority status within the North American context in order to exploit sensitivities towards multiculturalism among thoughtful and concerned school officials.

To summarize, the "history" that the HEF and the VF seek to incorporate into textbooks is part of a specific and recent movement among right-wing Hindus to promote the superiority of their religious beliefs. Their brand of Hindu fundamentalism aims to strengthen the very caste privilege that Adivasis have fought against for centuries. We urge you therefore to deny the changes proposed by the Vedic Foundation and the Hindu Education Foundation and to reject their brand of violent and exclusivist history.

Sincerely,

Pradip Prabhu
National Convenor