

# Rewriting history: The ongoing controversy over textbooks in India

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Last month saw yet another controversy over censored history textbooks, as schoolbooks in Rajasthan were reported to have omitted India's first Prime Minister (among others). **Eviane Leidig** discusses the background to the latest incident and argues that it is reflective of the current government's pro-Hindutva agenda that is becoming increasingly visible in the international spotlight.



Controversy was sparked in May as headlines revealed that the BJP-led state government in Rajasthan had censored key historical facts in school textbooks. According to the [Indian Express](#), this 'curriculum re-structuring' omits figures such as first Prime Minister Jawaharlal Nehru and other Congress leaders, as well as neglects mention of Mahatma Gandhi's assassination by former RSS and Hindu Mahasabha member Nathuram Godse. Government officials responded by claiming that textbook material is decided by an autonomous body and has no state oversight.

But even aside from this recent incident, educational censorship has precedence in India. Hindu nationalist advocates have had a historical influence in setting academic standards and pedagogy. The agenda of rewriting history goes back to [Hindu revivalist movements during the British colonial period](#), with a nostalgic yearning for a glorified Vedic period, or Hinduism's 'Golden Age'. Representing 'tyrannical Muslim rule' under the Mughal empire continues to serve as effective us versus them propaganda for Hindu nationalists today.

Over the years, the BJP has wielded influence in government by appointing a number of its supporters to various educational bodies and committees. In 2002, the Delhi Historians' Group published a [report](#) entitled 'Communalisation of Education', responding to a similar history textbooks controversy. At the time, the BJP, in coalition with the NDA, led a policy shift to change school textbooks through a new National Curriculum Framework in order to raise a pro-Hindu profile. The Delhi Historians' Group highlighted that despite previous intervention efforts by the RSS and BJP in cultural activities, this was the first significant 'attempt to use government institutions and state power' to promote a Hindutva agenda.

The same mentality guided the BJP's platform during the 2014 election, with its [manifesto stating](#): 'India is the most ancient civilization of the world and has always been looked upon by the world as a land of wealth and wisdom... BJP recognises that no nation could chart out its domestic or foreign policies unless it has a clear understanding about itself, its history, its roots, its strengths and failings'. This brand of emotive politics steeped in ethno-nationalist fervour drove BJP victory as Hindu cultural nationalism became synonymous with Indian nationalism. Any claim otherwise was deemed to be 'anti-national'.

During Modi's first year in office, the Sangh Parivar (a family of Hindu nationalist organisations founded by RSS members) pushed for [substantial changes in curriculum content](#) that reflect a pro-Hindutva agenda in the name of cultural nationalism. Other associations, some student-led, simultaneously organise 'historical' events with a Hindutva narrative that glorifies and exaggerates accomplishments of past [Hindu 'martyrs' whom embody Indian patriotism](#). By fabricating historical myths in simplistic terms of Hindu-Muslim conflict (originally a British colonial construct), this neglects the rich and deep interactions of India's religious communities. It aggravates communal violence as a natural, divisive phenomenon.

State censorship, including the [infamous banning](#) of acclaimed scholar Wendy Doniger's books *The Hindus: An Alternative History* and *On Hinduism*, constitutes [part of a broader movement of 'saffronisation'](#). Art, writing and performances fall privy to a 'religious sensitivities' clause in the constitution, and are thus [revoked on the basis of being potentially offensive](#) to Hinduism. The media and press have also [faced legal action](#) for presenting dissenting

views of the current government. In short, the BJP exploits any attempt that threatens to portray India (read: Hindu identity) in a negative light.

Hindutva efforts extend beyond India's borders, as diasporic Hindu organisations lobby local school boards abroad. An ongoing case concerning the portrayal of caste (or lack thereof) in [Californian textbooks](#) exemplifies the ability to weave a one dimensional narrative. The power of these conservative associations to influence educational content in classrooms should not be underestimated. Hinduism is quickly rising as the [fourth largest religious group in the United States](#), whilst Hindus are one of the most [highly educated demographics](#) and hold among the highest average household incomes.

Fortunately, initiatives such as [Partitioned Histories: The Other Side of Your Story](#) reveal how textbooks in India and Pakistan narrate their nations' history. Created by a partnership of universities, schools, and NGOs, the aim is to encourage students 'to identify and question bias' by presenting both sides of the story. Doing so has engaged students in dialogue around what is an extremely complex account. By critically analysing the subjectivity of each version, we can better understand differences and commonalities between a shared past.

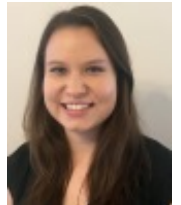
The BJP has created its own backlash as the effects of its Hindutva agenda are becoming increasingly visible in the international spotlight. Despite attempts to shut down its critics, the result has been a proliferation of voices. Sooner or later, Modi's government will need to face the consequences of its censored reality.

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## About the Author

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