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South Asia Area Center Title VI Report on California Textbooks

Introduction

This document is submitted to the California Board of Education in the hope that our review of Grade 6 textbooks can provide a further scholarly perspective even though it may come late in the editorial process. As South Asia faculty, many of whom work at Title VI Resource Centers throughout the country, we wish to offer our expertise and resources as textbook adoption happens in California and other states. As you may know, Title VI Centers were established by the U.S. Department of Education to create and foster research and teaching in area studies. Outreach to K-12 classrooms is an important mandate of these centers. As Title VI South Asia Research Centers, our mission is not to serve as advocates of any particular religious or intellectual tradition, but to present historical and social facts as they emerge from refereed scholarship on these issues in a balanced and objective manner to insure the highest degree of accuracy possible.

On January 31, 2006, three Title VI Directors, James Brow at the University of Texas, Austin, Suvir Kaul at the University of Pennsylvania and Raka Ray at the University of California, Berkeley, wrote to the California Department of Education (CDE) asking for permission to review Grade 6 Social Studies textbooks. UC Berkeley, UT Austin and U Penn received textbooks to review from Holt-Reinhart and Winston, Houghton-Mifflin, MacMillan-McGraw-Hill, Glencoe-MacMillan, Prentice-Hall, Oxford University Press, and the Teachers Curriculum Institute.

A faculty committee chaired by Title VI Directors Suvir Kaul (UPenn) and Raka Ray (UCB) with representation from Title VI and other institutions was formed (see attached) to review the textbooks and a reduced set of edits suggested by the Ad Hoc committee chaired by retired Cal-State Northridge Professor, Shiva Bajpai, and the CFIR/CRP advisory committee chaired by Professor Michael Witzel at Harvard University. We wish to express our appreciation for the intensive work of these committees during a long and arduous editing process.

Due to severe time constraints, and the fact that this process began at the start of the semester, not all of the faculty on this committee had the opportunity to read the textbooks in full. Ideally, we would have liked to have had six to eight weeks to review all the texts, and to have seen the 6th grade textbooks in conjunction with the 10th (or other grade level textbooks) that also contain social studies material on South Asia, to get a better sense of what material to parse over different grade levels. Some of us who teach college level courses on the subjects discussed in the textbooks are struck by the volume and density of material that 6th graders are expected to learn about either “Ancient India” or “Hinduism.” Some of the textbooks are quite ambitious in the amount of content they try to introduce and may be more appropriate for an advanced grade level.

On the whole, we find the California textbooks we reviewed thoughtful and competent in several respects, and troubling in others. We are concerned that Hinduism receive both a scholarly and respectful treatment, and feel there is considerable room for improvement in terms of how Hinduism is taught and conceptualized. We are troubled however, by the continued comparison of Hinduism to other major religions, in particular to “religions of the Book,” which makes it more difficult to understand the emergence of Hinduism on its own terms, as a religion filled with different and often conflicting tendencies over time. The attempt in these textbooks to make “great books” definitive of Hinduism is one such tendency. While the Ramayana is indeed a “great book,” which version of it should be presented in the textbooks? The Jain version, the Kamba version, the Tulsidas or Valmiki version? Moreover, many practicing Hindus do not reference the Vedas or Vedic ideals when thinking of their daily religious practices, and it is possible to be a devout Hindu and to visit Muslim darghas, Sikh or Christian shrines, as well as a range of faith healers as part of daily religious practice. In our view, there is little need to continually compare Hinduism with other faiths, and worse, to try and mould its conceptions and practices in the image of other religions. Hinduism should be appreciated on its own terms, and in the terms provided by its historical evolution. In our view, the very process of comparison risks distorting some of the most important tenets and practices of contemporary Hinduism. We address those concerns in more detail below.

Finally, one of the difficulties with discussing Hinduism today is the attempt by the Hindutva (right wing Hindu Nationalist) movement to make Hinduism definitive of being “Indian,” and the Vedic period, along with later notions such as “Sanatana Dharma” definitive of Hinduism as a whole and through all historical periods. In India, this has resulted in the attempt to introduce “Vedic Science” into the college curriculum, and to widely decried changes to state textbooks and NCERT (National Council of Educational Research and Training) curriculum. It is now taking a great deal of effort to undo the damage wrought by those changes. The idea that Sanatana Dharma is a basic belief of Hinduism ignores both changes in the historical usage of the term to connote an array of notions and ritual practices, and its tendency since the late nineteenth century, to be associated with Hindu Nationalist groups in whose usage it has become a monolith and acquired a narrow and exclusively Sanskritic connotation. Such groups have since the time of the founding of the first Hindutva organization in 1925 been associated with violence and destruction. They have often drawn upon (or invented) militant interpretations of Hindu beliefs and practice to wield against groups they define as alien to their conception of a Hindu-centric India.

We outline below some of our concerns about the teaching of Hinduism in U.S. classrooms. It was not possible to address them in the edits we submitted, but we submit them here in the spirit of informing future discussions about school textbooks. Our remarks are provisional, and we would welcome the opportunity to submit more detailed suggestions on the texts to the Board of Education. To begin with, we would like to note that the comparative focus on the teaching of religions from different parts of the world itself derives its model of what constitutes “religion” from Latin and Christian theological contexts, in which the term *religio* has come to signify a normative paradigm for understanding the idea of “religion.” Yet what is meant by the term “religion”—its

social, spiritual, philosophical, ethical and historical manifestations—does differ across traditions and practices, and between scholars and adherents. We thus offer a balanced and scholarly assessment of some of the difficulties present in the discussion of Hinduism in California state textbooks.

Broad Concerns in the Teaching of Hinduism

1) Problems in Identifying Hinduism with Ancient India: Hinduism is a plural tradition

One of the problems we found in reviewing the Grade VI Social Science materials on teaching India as an “ancient” civilization stems from the laudable attempt to bring the ancient period in line with what we currently know about India. However, this has resulted in the origins of “Hinduism” being located in the ancient period, whereas most of the traditions that went into the making of what we know as Hinduism today emerged in the centuries immediately before and after the onset of the Common Era (C.E.).

“Hinduism” does not even emerge as a term of reference until the colonial period in the 19th century.

Second, the identification of Hinduism with the Brahmanism of the Vedic period makes this period foundational to contemporary Hinduism in a way that is not congruent with how the religion is currently understood and practiced. It also results in an identification of “India” as “Hindu” when there are several other important religious and spiritual traditions that not only make up South Asia’s cultural mosaic but also help define the vibrant syncretic traditions of Hinduism developing over a period extending beyond “Ancient India.” NONE of the textbooks make any mention of other religious formations such as Sikhism, Christianity or indeed the many Sufi and other Islamic traditions of South Asia that are influenced by Hinduism, and in turn shape local Hindu practices in the subcontinent, because they fall outside the historical period known as “Ancient India.” We also noted that many Hindu traditions of worship, of rivers, for example, are shared in common with adivasi communities, but these find no mention in the textbooks either. The tendency in many of the textbooks to illustrate Hinduism primarily with photos of Brahmins at prayer, or as sources of knowledge and folklore, thus tends inadvertently to equate Hinduism with one sector of society. *However, a large number of Hindus practice what is often called village Hinduism in which goddesses are worshipped and low caste men and women serve as priests.*

Finally, the equation of “Ancient India” with Hinduism means that other texts, which are not strictly about “Hinduism”, but important to South Asia’s intellectual heritage, such as the Sanskrit grammar by Panini or the Tolkappiyam of classical Tamil, are completely sidelined.

One solution would be to present Hinduism in textbooks at a historical period when a more accurate reading of its contemporary formation in relation to other religions can be undertaken (that is, during the medieval and modern periods). Another solution would be to contrast the nascent beliefs systems of Ancient India with the emergence of

contemporary Hinduism (as some of the textbooks try to do) with a section on “Contemporary Legacies.”

2) Problems identifying Ancient India with Sanskrit: Dual classical traditions

The textbooks present ancient India as a monolithic unity, rather than as a plurality of traditions and ideas. There are two classical languages of ancient India: Sanskrit and Tamil. While Sanskrit and Prakrit were in wide use in ancient India, there was also a strong Tamil literary tradition of the Sangam era (300BCE-300 CE) that existed alongside the Sanskritic tradition which has been almost entirely ignored by the texts we reviewed. The most important work of classical Tamil, the “Tirukkural” by Tiruvalluvar, is never mentioned. Only one textbook, that by Mark Kenoyer and Kimberly Heuston (Oxford University Press), even discusses one of the most famous epics of classical Tamil, the Silappadikaram, “The Tale of the Ankle Bracelet.”

3) Hinduism and the Caste System

It is important to note that Hinduism is not just a religious or philosophical system, but also the basis for a complex system of social organization. To treat it simply as a set of beliefs is to ignore its implications for the division of labor. The tendency to equate Hinduism with religion in some of the textbooks conflicts with the necessity to show how it is also a hierarchical cultural and social system of castes. We found much (understandable) confusion in the textbooks about how to discuss the caste system and its implications because of the primacy given to the four varna classification found in the Vedas. While some of the roots of the caste system are to be found in the four-fold system of Varnic classification, it is distinct from the modern caste system of jati divisions and multiple hierarchies.

The emphasis on the four varnas also tended to elide discussion of a fifth group of peoples outside the varnas, the so-called “untouchables,” although a subsection of these, the “Chandalas,” may serve that function in the Vedic texts. *It is, in any case, inappropriate to eliminate reference to the existence of this fifth group of people outside the caste system who form a substantial percentage of the population and face heavy discrimination in India.* Discussion of this issue should reference Dr. B. R. Ambedkar’s use of the term “dalit” (“oppressed”) to refer to this group. This term is now in wide circulation in contemporary India, and has been embraced by members of this group themselves.

4) Women and Hinduism

There is considerable evidence that Hindu women had (and continue to have) fewer rights and opportunities than Hindu men, and that this was sanctioned by Sanskritic religious texts. Sanskritic Hindu laws describe women as impure and unfit for

scholarship, as lacking judgment and capability, of being the carriers of caste purity, as being entitled to lesser property and inheritance than men, etc. The “Laws of Manu,” for example, referred to innocuously in one textbook as a source for modern Hindus to consult on “dharma,” specifically insist on the life-long subordination of a woman to men, first to her father, next to her husband, and last to her son, because “A woman never merits independence.” We do not think that this information should be ignored. The omission of such information provides students with an incomplete understanding of Hinduism. However, it is also the case that while some forms of Hinduism did not allow women much room for spiritual leadership, bhakti or devotional forms of Hinduism, and Buddhism did result in distinct forms of empowerment for women. The significance and interest of the medieval bhakti movement is another compelling argument for not locating the origins of Hinduism exclusively in the ancient period. *In the spirit of introducing students to a comprehensive understanding of Hinduism, we recommend that they be given more information both of the strictures against women’s participation in public and religious life, as well as more information about women sages and bhakti poets, who played a prominent and important role in pre-modern South Asian social and religious life.*

5) Other Important Beliefs of Hinduism: “Ahimsa” (non-violence)

Hinduism is often thought of as a tolerant religion, and tolerance is certainly a core value for many, if not most Hindus. Yet, there have been well-documented times of intolerance within Hinduism, especially during the ancient period when Hindu sects attacked and sought to undermine the bases of Buddhism and Jainism, which arose as major challenges to the hierarchy and discrimination of the caste system. *While the Upanishads make mention of the notion of ahimsa, it does not become important to Hinduism until after Buddhism and Jainism make it central to their conception of life.* In other words, there was no prior ‘Hindu’ support for ahimsa; it is only when Hinduism became more like the Hinduism we know today that it took over ahimsa from Jainism and Buddhism. To the extent that “ahimsa” has also emerged as an important concept within Hinduism, we urge a more thoughtful and well-informed presentation and illustration of it in the textbooks. Such attention will also make clear to students the historical evolution of some philosophical ideas crucial to different Hindu belief systems.

Non-standard use of terms

We found a high degree of confusion across the textbooks that we were often not able to remedy in the edits, as we entered the discussion at the end of a long editorial process. We therefore simply note that the following areas still need clarification with the aim of eventually standardizing usage across texts.

1) Our review of the scholarly literature based on the archeological and linguistic evidence shows the theory of “Aryan migration” is the most accurate at this point in time.

Human genetics studies at this moment are inconclusive. We therefore recommend that “invasion” be replaced with “migration” across texts.

2) There is considerable confusion around usage of the terms “varna,” “caste” and “jati” and a standard distinction should be employed in the texts. We note that defining “varna” as “class” as some edits suggest, may not resolve the issue, as the varnic system is a source of the modern caste system. It should be made clear that while four Varnas are described in the Vedas, other groups such as “Chandalas” and “Mlecchas” also existed outside the fourfold division. The Vedas also describe a group of people known as “Dasas” or slaves. In particular, the texts should show the historical emergence of a fifth group of “outcastes” or “untouchables.” Wherever possible, the term “Dalit” (oppressed) should be used to refer to “Untouchables,” and the word “Harijan” eliminated as the former term is preferred as a form of self-identification by this group.

3) There is some disagreement about the usage of the terms “God,” “gods,” “goddesses,” and “deities” that needs to be resolved. We provisionally recommend the use of the term ‘deity’ in all cases, except when used a preface to the name of an actual deity, thus for instance, “Goddess Lakshmi.” We also recommend that “images” or “figures” be substituted for “sculptures” and “statues” when appropriate.

4) Several of the photos and illustrations in the textbooks were either misleading or appeared in the textbooks in a decontextualized way. We urge that more attention be paid to achieving representational balance among different forms of Hindu practice and ritual, between different sectors of society, and between men and women.

Notes on other sources

We note that the teachers’ sections of several texts ask students to go online to learn about Hinduism. We would like to caution teachers that a number of websites that purport to be about the fundamentals of Hinduism are set up by Hindu nationalist organizations, and encourage them to use on-line resources that have been vetted or set up by scholars. The Outreach Centers of Title VI institutions for example, offer many on-line resources. For example, UC Berkeley has developed an innovative teaching unit for 6th and 9th grade students that introduces them to the Ramayana through the tradition of Mithila painting of the Madhubani region of Bihar where Sita is said to have been born:

<http://ias.berkeley.edu/orias/Mithila/OverviewMithila>

Title VI institutions also have lists of recommended reading for teachers and students. Over the next few years, many of the Title VI resource centers will be developing more teaching units like this as part of their K-12 outreach programs and we urge the Board of Education and textbook publishers to make use of these web-based materials.

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***James Brow**, Acting Director of the South Asia Institute and Professor of Anthropology and Asian Studies, University of Texas at Austin. James Brow received his Ph.D. in Anthropology at the University of Washington in 1974. He has taught at the University of Texas at Austin since 1979, and served as Chair of the Anthropology Department from 1995 to 2003. His research has focused on Sri Lanka, and particularly on issues of agrarian change, rural development, ethnicity and nationalism. He is the author *Vedda Villages: The Historical Anthropology of a Community in Sri Lanka* (University of Washington Press, 1978), *Demons and Development: The Struggle for Community in a Sri Lankan Village* (University of Arizona Press, 1996), and numerous scholarly articles. His research has been funded by grants from the Smithsonian Institution, the National Science Foundation, the Wenner-Gren Foundation, the National Endowment for the Humanities, the Social Science Research Council and the American Council of Learned Societies.

***Lawrence Cohen**, Associate Professor of Anthropology and South Asian Studies, UC Berkeley, is a cultural anthropologist whose primary field is the study of medicine, health, and the body. He received his Ph.D. from Harvard University in 1992. His book, *No Aging in India*, won the 1998 Victor Turner Prize and the First Book Prize from the American Ethnological Society. *The Other Kidney* (written with colleague Nancy Scheper-Hughes) engages the nature of immunosuppression and its accompanying global traffic in organs for transplant.

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***Robert A. Hueckstedt**, Professor of Sanskrit, University of Virginia. Hueckstedt earned his Ph.D. in Sanskrit and Indian Studies at Harvard University in 1984. He has taught at Brown University, the University of Manitoba, and currently at the University of Virginia. He has authored *The Style of Bana: an Introduction to Sanskrit Prose Poetry*, and *Nearness and Respective Correlation: a History of the Interpretations of Astadhyayi*. He also translates contemporary Hindi literature. He is the recipient of a Shastri Indo-Canadian Institute Research Fellowship, 1995, the Rh Award in Humanities, University

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***Suvir Kaul**, Professor of English and Director, South Asia Center, University of Pennsylvania (Committee Co-chair). He received his Ph.D. in English from Cornell University in 1986. He is the editor of *The Partitions of Memory: The Afterlife of the Division of India* (Permanent Black, 2001; C. Hurst, 2001; Indiana University Press, 2002), and co-editor of "On India: Writing History, Culture, Post-Coloniality," special issue of *Oxford Literary Review* (1994). He has also written books on eighteenth-century English poetry, and essays on a variety of topics in contemporary Indian literature and culture.

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the Tablighi Jama`at as a Transnational Islamic Movement for Faith Renewal ed. Muhammad Khalid Masud (Leiden, 2000).

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Parama Roy, Associate Professor of English, University of California, Riverside. Parama Roy teaches postcolonial, particularly South Asian, theory and literatures, Cultural Studies, Victorian studies, and feminist and gender theory. She received her

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Sudipta Sen, Associate Professor of History, University of California, Davis. Professor Sen received his Ph.D. in History from the University of Chicago in 1994. Sen focuses on late medieval and modern India and the British Empire. He received the Fulbright-Hays Faculty Research Abroad Program Grant in 2001-2002. Publications by Sen include: *Ganges: The Many Pasts of an Indian River* (Yale University Press, forthcoming); *Distant Sovereignty: National Imperialism and the Origins of British-India*, (London: Routledge, 2002) and *Empire of Free Trade: The East India Company and the Making of the Colonial Marketplace*, (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 1998).

Debaroja Singh, Assistant Professor of Women's Studies, William Paterson University of New Jersey. She earned a Ph.D. from Rutgers University in 2004 in the field of Comparative Literature. Her research was/is on the social issues of and writings by Dalit women in India in the states of Tamilnadu and Andhra Pradesh, subject to gender, class and caste discrimination. Singh has published articles in the *Dalit International* newsletter, in *SAGAR* (South Asian Graduate research Journal) and the *Cambridge Scholars' Press* (forthcoming). She is currently working on her manuscript on the gender identity among women in rural Tamilnadu and Andhra Pradesh. Apart from teaching, Singh is actively involved in rehabilitation programs in India, in promoting social and economic viability in specific rural communities in Tamilnadu.

***K. P. Singh**, Lecturer, Asian Languages and Literature, University of Washington-Seattle. He received his Ph.D. in 2000 from the University of Wisconsin, Madison, an M. Phil. and an M.A. from Jawaharlal Nehru University in New Delhi. Singh teaches courses on modern standard Hindi and Urdu, modern Dalit literature, race, caste and ethnicity, South Asian diaspora, and modern Indian social thought. His publications include: "Vancouver and Beyond" in *The International Dalit Newsletter* (Connecticut 2003); "The Vancouver Vision on Diversity" a theme paper for the International Dalit Conference (Vancouver, 2003); "Negotiating Dalit-hood in USA: Analysis of Identity Formation," in *The Dalit* (Chennai, March-April 2003); "Dalit Liberation Movements in Comparative Perspective: A Case Study of Indian Dalits and American Blacks" in S.M. Michael (ed.) *Dalits in Modern India: Vision and Values* (Vistaar-Sage Publications, 1999).

Banu Subramaniam, Associate Professor of Women's Studies, University of Massachusetts-Amherst. Subramaniam received her Ph.D. in Zoology/Genetics and a graduate certificate in Women's Studies from Duke University in 1994. Her primary research interest lies in the relationships between gender, race, colonialism and science. Primarily trained as a biologist, she is interested in building bridges between the natural sciences and the social sciences and the humanities. Her publications include: *Feminist*

Science Studies: A New Generation, Maralee Mayberry, Banu Subramaniam, Lisa Weasel eds. (Routledge, 2001); "Imagining India: Religious Nationalism in the Age of Science and Development," in *Women, Culture and Development: Towards a New Paradigm* (Zed Books, forthcoming).

***Alexander Von Rosspatt**, Professor of South and Southeast Asian Studies, UC Berkeley. Alexander v. Rospatt received his M.A., Ph.D and Habilitation, all University of Hamburg, 1988, 1993 and 2000 respectively. Alexander v. Rospatt is a Professor of Buddhist Studies. He specializes in the doctrinal history of Indian Buddhism, and in Newar Buddhism, the only Indic Mahayana tradition that continues to persist in its original South Asian setting (in the Kathmandu Valley) right to the present. His first book (Stuttgart, 1995) sets forth the development and early history of the Buddhist doctrine of momentariness, a doctrine that is of pivotal importance not only for the understanding of doctrinal Buddhism, but also because much of the debate between Buddhists and their Brahmanical opponents came to center on this issue. His most recent book deals with the periodic renovations of the Svayambhu Stupa of Kathmandu. His current research project is on life cycle rituals of old age among the Newars. On the basis of texts and fieldwork he examines how these rites evolved differently in a Buddhist and Hindu Shaiva context.

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