

Multiple histories and a common past

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“The primary objective of the history curriculum at the higher secondary level is to inculcate a historical sensibility about our past. While at the secondary level, students learn history as a part of the larger conglomerate of social science, they are not exposed to the disciplinary foundations, methodological tools, and comparative frameworks that mark a historical consciousness.” – National Curriculum Framework, 2023 (preliminary draft version)

Anubhuti: The national curriculum framework refers to “historical sensibility about our past” which seems to imply we have a common past. But the history curriculum has more emphasis on the history of their own state, with passing reference to other states. My parents are from Tamil Nadu, but I grew up in Maharashtra, so I learnt about Maharashtra’s history. I know practically nothing about Tamil Nadu, as we had one chapter in 8th grade that referred to Cholas and Pandyas. Now I live in Bangalore, and my memory of this region from history is Adilshah and Kutubshah who were conquered by the Maratha empire. How do I identify as being one with these three regions that were historically in conflict with each other!

Moreover we are also supposed to develop *historical consciousness* by teaching them about the discipline, methodology, which is practically nonexistent in the textbook. How do we cover so much content and understanding of the discipline in so little time? Does it mean we have never been doing this until now?

Amrita: You are right, teaching history is not easy especially in our country where diverse cultures, ethnicities, religions, and languages complicate things even more. Each of them has their own history. I have many students whose parents are from other states. I am worried I might be guilty of excluding them in the classroom.

Most of our effort goes in drawing children’s attention to the importance of history through enacting plays and performances, screening movies. Our students probably learn more about acting and historical fiction, than history *per se*. Who knows we might be developing antagonism towards each other more than solidarity. We leave it to political science to deal with solidarity through constitutional values.

Ira: I read an essay by Gurpreet Mahajan in which she makes an interesting point which might be of help. She says Indians have a dual political identity – as individual citizens of the nation, and as members of the group they belong to – because groups have rights the same as individuals. She was referring to minority rights in the Indian Constitution. Remember we were discussing that history is an important part of political education. Were we saying something similar to what Mahajan says?



Illustration: Sunil Chawdiker

Anubhuti: You are right. This helps a lot. If every citizen is part of a group – be it religion, ethnicity, or region – they do have the right to learn the history of their original region as much as the region they live in. This will also help other children in the class learn the history of a region different from theirs. Which in turn will coax them to see these children as different and yet Indian. Even if it is one chapter in one class, I see its importance for all children in the class. The issue is not the amount of history one learns, but the way one learns and what they learn from it.

I would definitely feel a sense of pride when I learn the history of the region my ancestors were part of; that would create a sense of belonging to that region. Learning history of the region I inhabit today, will help me identify with this place better too. It is confusing, but real too.

Is that why Mahajan also says, we need to educate diversity as a social fact in India?

Ira: Yes, she was referring to religious and cultural diversity being a social fact of India. But it applies as much to regional diversity too. Cultures do vary across regions. Doesn't this turn the entire idea of teaching history upside down? Now you teach history as stories of the past that are narrated to them. Now you will have to see children as coming from a different historical narrative that you the teacher will have to elicit and experience what it is to belong to a different history.

From a political education point of view I would be happy with this difference, as it will also build a sense of fraternity in them.

Amrita: Hmm, I am still trying to assimilate all this. The history textbooks during our school time were such that teachers had no choice but to teach them in the form of stories. We learnt that and continued to teach history in the same manner. We have to

alter the way we see the textbook content. No wonder in 2006 the name of the NCERT model history textbooks was changed to “Our Pasts”. This continues very well from EVS in primary school where they already learn about different ways of living in India.

Anubhuti: This creates an interesting possibility. What if we ask children to write history themselves? We could ask them to talk to old people in their homes, their localities and find out about their pasts. If they spoke to their parents and grandparents they would know about the history of the region they originally come from. If we do this, we will also be introducing them to the process of identifying archives and creating a narrative.

It would be even better if we form groups of children from different backgrounds to do this together. That way they will also learn how different the histories of other people who live in the same community are. It would also create a sense of fraternity that Ira was concerned about.

Amrita: The history textbooks speak of archives like inscriptions, ruins, and monuments. This will also introduce them to stories, folklore, and memories as archives. They will learn to interpret these and form a rigorous historical narrative. That will be so exciting; far richer than the performances we get them to do today.

Ira: I think you should retain the performances also. When they enact something, they are adding interpretation and emotions to the historical narrative. It is very important for us not to reduce learning to cognition alone. The accompanying excitement, the emotions that come from learning about the past from their grandparents, should be translated into performances, posters, or slideshows. That would be so wonderful. I would want to be in your class.

I also struggle to bring in the conscious emotional component of learning constitutional values in my class. I could learn from your experience.

Anubhuti: This seems to take care of diverse histories and learning the historical method. What about the common history we all share as people of a single nation? We have to find a way to progress from knowing about others to being together in one nation – the sense of fraternity that Ira spoke about earlier.

Amrita: I am sure some of the parents and grandparents would share about their own parents who might know of the freedom struggle. We know for a fact that people from different religions, castes, and even indigenous communities fought together across the nation during the struggle for freedom. There is a lot of fraternity that developed at that time. That is why we have chapters of leaders from different communities and regions in our history textbooks. That was a demonstration of how even though we are diverse, we form a nation together.

When we ask them to collect stories of the past, we should include the political questions into it. For e.g., what did people of their region think of being Indian? How do they identify with people of other regions? How do they feel moving to a different part of the nation now?

I am sure this will also bring some conflicts and issues, but that would be important. When they are shared with other students in the class, we can manage the event such that students develop a sense of empathy for how difficult it is for people who have migrated to different regions.

Anubhuti: Yes that is right. We seem to be dealing with both objectives of history education – historical consciousness and multiple pasts – by this change in the way we teach history. This will also bring a different carefulness in interpreting an archive. We do not want them to think of the oral archives from people as being the same as historical fiction. We need to teach them that all stories are not history. Stories tell us what people thought about themselves and about others.

This fine distinction between historical fiction, fiction as an archive, and historical facts is very important to develop historical consciousness. We don't want to start a war of young historians in our classroom.

Ira: Please do that, or else you will make my political science classes even more difficult.

Amrita: It is important we work together on this; lest we create three factions within the social science teachers group. 😊

References

1. "India – Political Ideas and the making of a Democratic Discourse" – Gurpreet Mahajan
2. "Young Historians" – Documentary film on a History teacher, directed by Deepa Dhanraj

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