

Fun with history? | Mint

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It was in the early 1980s that I read E.H. Carr's "What is history?". While I didn't understand it much, the book was still important for me. The basic idea that there could be different histories was a relief. It helped reconcile the multiple narratives that I would hear. One of them was about how the small princely state of Sarangarh had an inalienable right not to join the Indian union, but how it was bullied in 1948 and had to join. The story's most riveting episode was the climactic face-off with Sardar Patel.

I would hear these things in the heat of the summer vacation in Sarangarh. Then I would return to Bhopal, and the nationalistic texts of the history books in my Kendriya Vidyalaya. The books painted a diametrically opposite narrative of the events of 1948. There was, of course, not even a mention of the story that was central to the identity of Sarangarh.

There were many other such omissions, competing histories and muddled-waters in the histories that we heard of and read; e.g., about the various dargahs in Bhopal, the origins of the Bhopal Lake, the occupation of the Gond lands. So, Carr did me a great favour. Later, while still at school, I watched *Rashomon* and started reading Latin American magical realism. It was this, with the backdrop of Carr, that let me really enjoy history.

I have watched with interest and admiration as the history books that NCERT publishes have improved steadily. The books are very good, and they draw from the very thoughtful National Curriculum Framework, 2005, (NCF).

Many of the people involved with these improvements were there at one meeting. This is an annual meeting of our friends, partners, and other invitees working in education. It's perhaps described better as a retreat; we call it the forum. We usually hold it at the Centre for Learning in Bangalore, which is perhaps one of the very best schools in this country. The theme of the forum in December 2010 was history. It was a fascinating three days of discussion with some of the most insightful people working on history and history education. It was also an explanation of how and why history education has moved in a progressive direction at the curricular level.

However, these improvements have left most of our schools, their textbooks and approaches untouched. History in our schools continues to be a dreary list of dates and varnished mono-narratives. Children are right to detest the history they are made to study.

My daughter is methodical and organized. In February 2011, two months after the elevating forum on history, she methodically made me go through with her, a series of gender discriminatory narratives in the history portion of her social studies textbook. She was 11 then, and so she used a simpler phrase "girl hating". In Bangalore or in the village schools that I am so often in, I have found history the quickest litmus test for the kind of education that is really happening in a school.

History brings to life the entire range of politics, prejudices and possibilities of education, in a few sentences and moments. So, I was very intrigued when on a dry, warm winter afternoon in Surpur two months ago, the gathered Cluster Resource Persons (CRP) said they wanted to talk about history. CRPs are government school teachers, placed in a role in which they are supposed to provide academic support to a group of 8-12 schools. This system is there across most states in the country. Surpur is in Yadgir district, which figures in all lists of Karnataka's most disadvantaged districts.

There were 12 CRPs and they had a 90-minute discussion. Most of it would have warmed the hearts of the people gathered at the forum in December 2010. They started by talking about the methods of history, and the importance of different sources of history. They were most intense about the importance of the local history of Surpur, its alternative narratives and how the curriculum actually enables the integration of local history in the classroom, despite it not being available in textbooks. Then they drifted to how geography has shaped Surpur's history, and the inter-linkages of what are often considered completely distinct subjects in schools. We ended with the discomfort they felt about recent history, because of its politics being still alive. The possibilities in history, which we stunt, seem to be blooming with the 12 CRPs in Surpur. I am confident that the schools they work with will also discover how to wander around in the labyrinths of man through the doors of history.

Learning and teaching history can be an exciting adventure, full of surprises. Instead we often reduce it to a monotonous drill, or worse still, a tool of propaganda. The group at Surpur showed the good that's possible, with thoughtfulness and use of imagination. But then, all this is true of education overall.

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