

May 17, 2016

State Board of Education  
 California Department of Education  
 1430 N Street, Room 1101  
 Sacramento, California 95814

Dear Members of the Board of Education,

We write to register our acceptance in the main of the last round of edits approved at the March 24, 2016 meeting. However we also want to reiterate some of the central concerns that underlie the specificity of our recommendations in the event that the History-Social Science Project/Instruction Quality Commission is tasked with a reconsideration of edits.

1) **There is no established connection between Hinduism and the Indus Civilization.**

The Rg Veda contains numerous mentions of horses and chariots but there is no conclusive material or fossil evidence for either at any Indus valley archeological site.<sup>1</sup> We urge you to reconsider our rejected edit on page 211, lines 805-809 and replace with either our initial edit, or with the following: “Some of the terracotta figurines and narrative images on seals show motifs that were used in later South Asian religious traditions, such as female figurines that may represent fertility deities of mother goddess images. However, it is not possible to definitively link specific Indus figures to specific deities in later religious traditions, though there may be continuities in the use of symbols that have been appropriated by various historical and modern religious communities.” Some have noted that a male figure in a seal resembles the Hindu God Shiva in a meditative posture, an interesting speculation for which we have no convincing evidence of continuity. Sitting in a meditative posture is not an exclusive Hindu practice and is also something historically practiced by Jain, Buddhist, and other groups around the world.

2) **It is inappropriate to remove mention of the connection of caste to Hinduism.** The Rg Veda, the text described in the curriculum framework, describes a varnic system of social organization which is likely the progenitor of the modern caste system. It is true that Christian and Muslim groups also share features of caste organization in South Asia, but Christian and Muslim groups in other parts of the world do not display such caste-like features. The presence of caste-like features among Indian Christian and Muslim groups arises from their proximity to the Hindu caste-system.

---

<sup>1</sup> There are no horse bones from Indus Valley sites that have been identified conclusively by multiple trained zooarchaeologists. There is no consensus about when the true horse made an appearance in what is now Pakistan and Northwestern India. See *Upinder Singh, A History of Ancient and Early Medieval India from the Stone Age to the 12th Century* (Dorling Kindersley [India], 2008) pp. 157-158 and P.P. Joglekar and Pankaj Goyal *Animal Husbandry and Allied Technologies in Ancient India: From Prehistorical to Early Historical Times* (Pentagon Press/Indus-Infinity Foundation [New Delhi], 2105) pp. 154-156.

- 3) **The geographic location of the Indus Civilization lies in what is now contemporary India, Pakistan and Afghanistan.** The use of "South Asia" to describe this shared civilizational heritage is thus entirely appropriate in some places of the framework, even though South Asia is a modern term, and some source materials use the term 'Ancient India.' In some places where we recommended the use of "South Asia" we also suggested that "East Asia" be used instead of "China" for the sake of consistency, but the CHSSP did not recommend this change. In other places where we recommended replacing India with South Asia, the CHSSP found an acceptable compromise by using both designations. Instead of choosing one over the other, South Asia was written in parentheses immediately after India. Students will see a mention of India, while noting that it is, in some cases, equivalent to what is now modern day South Asia, which is the term used today to refer to the entire subcontinent. Although we worry that students may think that "South Asia" is the same as modern India, we consider that the instances in which this compromise was reached can remain as "India (South Asia)" in edits 2436, 2441, and 2454. There is no conflict with telling students in class that large swaths of South Asia are historically part of the heritage of Hinduism. We have no objection to changing "Indus Civilization" (the more accurate descriptor of the spread of archeological sites across India, Pakistan, and Afghanistan, to "Indus Valley Civilization" (at no. 2443), although most of the Indus River *valley* lies in contemporary Pakistan.

In closing, we wish to alert you to the fact that the Rashtriya Swamamsevak Sangh (the National Volunteers Association), a Hindu nationalist ("hindutva") organization that was implicated in the assassination of M.K. (Mahatma) Gandhi and which has been banned three times in India for its role in fanning religious conflict, has issued a press release on March 29, 2016 congratulating the Board of Education for rejecting some of our key edits and lauding its sister-organization, the Hindu Education Foundation (HEF)<sup>2</sup> for foiling a bid to "undermine India's glory. <http://indianexpress.com/article/india/india-news-india/rss-hails-us-agency-for-retaining-india-in-textbooks/> You may not also be aware that Mihir Meghani, co-founder and current Board Member of the Hindu American Foundation (HAF) is also the one-time author of a paper called "Hindutva: The Great Nationalist Ideology" <http://www.frontline.in/navigation/?type=static&page=flonnet&rdurl=fl1502/15021100.htm>.<sup>3</sup> The Chair of the Uberoi Foundation, Ved Nanda is also the President of the Hindu Swamamsevak Sangh (HSS) another RSS sister-group in the U.S. <http://www.hssus.org/content/view/289/1/> Our response to edits proposed by a new group calling itself the "Social Science and Religion Faculty Group" led by Shiva Bajpai of the Uberoi Foundation is attached below.

---

<sup>2</sup> Shiva Bajpai of the Uberoi Foundation has also been linked to the HEF in edits it submitted to the California Board of Education in 2006. See Sylvie Guichard, *The Construction of History and Nationalism in India: Textbooks, Controversies and Politics* (Routledge, 2010), p. 82.

<sup>3</sup> See also Prema Kurien's study, *A Place at the Multicultural Table: The Development of an American Hinduism* (Rutgers University Press, 2007) pp. 145-6, 159, 191, 246 which discusses Mihir Meghani's essay and its influence.

**Textbook edits driven by Hindu nationalist concerns in India and the U.S. may well reflect the will of many Hindu-Americans, but they should not determine California educational policy.** Members of this committee have been publicly harassed, subject to threats, personal attacks, and concerted negative publicity campaigns by Hindu nationalist and linked organizations in an effort to discredit our scholarship and recommendations. We have not bowed to this public campaign of defamation. We hope that the Board of Education and members of the Instructional Quality Commission, in considering the *qualified scholarly* submissions before it, will honor the diversity of the state's population and decide for the right of ALL California students to have factually correct and balanced instructional materials. We thank you for considering our submissions and for all the work you and CHSSP staff do to ensure appropriate textbooks for California students.

Yours Sincerely,

1. Chris Chekuri, Associate Professor, History Department, San Francisco State University
2. Shahzad Bashir, Lysbeth Warren Anderson Professor of Islamic Studies, Department of Religious Studies at Stanford University
3. Robert Goldman, Catherine and William L. Magistretti Distinguished Professor of South and Southeast Asian Studies, University of California, Berkeley
4. Stephanie Jamison, Distinguished Professor of Asian Languages and Cultures and of Indo-European Studies, University of California, Los Angeles
5. Jonathan Mark Kenoyer, Professor of Anthropology at the University of Wisconsin, Madison. (Field Director and Co-Director of the Harappa Archaeological Research Project since 1986)
6. Gurinder Singh Mann, former Kundan Kaur Kapany Chair in Sikh Studies and Professor Emeritus, University of California, Santa Barbara
8. Vijaya Nagarajan, Associate Professor in the Department of Theology and Religious Studies, University of San Francisco
9. Shailaja Paik, Assistant Professor of South Asian History, University of Cincinnati
10. V. Narayana Rao, Visweswara Rao and Sita Koppaka Professor in Telugu Culture, Literature and History, Emory University
10. Ramnarayan Rawat, Professor of History, University of Delaware
11. Sudipta Sen, Professor of History, University of California, Davis
12. Banu Subramaniam, Professor of Women, Gender, and Sexuality Studies, University of Massachusetts, Amherst
13. Thomas R. Trautmann, Professor Emeritus of History, University of Michigan
14. Kamala Visweswaran, Professor of Ethnic Studies, University of California, San Diego
15. Rita P. Wright, Professor of Anthropology, New York University, and member of the NYU Center for Human Origins

#### Consultants

Asad Q. Ahmad, Associate Professor of Arabic and Islamic Studies at the University of California, Berkeley

Kathleen D. Morrison, Neukom Family Professor and Chair of the Department of Anthropology and the Committee on Southern Asian Studies, University of Chicago

Luis González-Reimann, Ph. D. South Asian Studies, University of California, Berkeley

## SAFG Response to the “Social Science and Religion Faculty Group” (SSRFG)

We are aware of a new group calling themselves the “Social Science and Religion Faculty Group” (SSRFG) led by Shiva Bajpai, who has made his views known in numerous Uberoi Foundation submissions to the IQC we have reviewed. While we never claimed to represent the “corpus of scholarship on India and Hinduism” we have labored long and hard to produce a balanced assessment of a deep and complex corpus of material, and at this writing, have in fact been deliberating these issues for the last eight months. This does not seem the case for the SSRFG, which is indeed making a last minute submission.

The South Asia Faculty Group concentrated its review on the curriculum framework dealing with the teaching of Hinduism and India; a comprehensive review of other religions in different parts of the framework was outside of its scope, although our committee members did also review sections on Sikhism and Islam, and made recommendations to insert material on Jainism and Buddhism. Nor was it under our purview to undertake a comparison of the representation of women in other ancient or premodern societies discussed in the curriculum framework. We find it surprising that the SSRFG claims to have undertaken such a systematic review of these issues in the group’s short period of existence within which it framed a submission. Nevertheless, a comparative review may be useful and result in useful adjustments. We do note however, that the one edit we submitted that does contain possible evidence of women’s high status in the Indus Civilization on page 211, lines 805-809, with regard to “mother goddess” images (see p. 1 above) was rejected by the Uberoi Foundation and several other organizations.

We do share our colleagues’ and the Hindu community’s concern for an “equitable treatment of India and Hinduism” but note too, that Dalit, Sikh, Christian, and Muslim communities also have stakes in how “ancient India” or premodern South Asia is taught. The use of the designations “India,” “South Asia,” “Indian Subcontinent,” “ancient India” and “Indus Civilization” elicited a response that seems to assume some kind of purposeful attempt to deny Hindu children a feeling of pride in their heritage. Nothing could be farther from the truth.

The SSRFG suggests the elimination of the mention of Vyasa and Valmiki as non-Brahmins. But the fact is that their respective texts, the *Mahabharata* and the *Ramayana*, refer to them as Brahmins. Vyasa is called a Brahmin sage in the *Mahabharata* at, for example, 1.1.53 (Critical Edition). While it is true that, according to the *Mahabharata*, Vyasa’s mother was a fisherwoman, his father, Parashara, was a reputed Brahmin (Mbh 1.57.62) descended from the famous Brahmin Vasishtha (Mbh 1.164.10-11). As for Valmiki, the god Brahma calls him a Brahmin at 1.2.30 (Critical Edition) of the *Valmiki Ramayana*, And later, at 7.88.2, Rama addresses Valmiki as “O Brahmin.”

Contrary to what the SSRFG letter states, Valmiki is not called a highway robber in the *Valmiki Ramayana*. It was only centuries later that some retellings of the *Ramayana* did so. The British scholar, Julia Leslie, has written an entire book on the matter, and she confirms that the story of Valmiki as a robber is a late addition to the narrative. She considers that the widespread popularity of that notion today is due, at least in part, to the immense popularity of the Indian

comic book series *Amar Chitra Katha*, which first published an issue devoted to Valmiki in 1973 (published in several languages, including English). Leslie's study is also relevant here because it discusses how the members of the caste of the Valmiki consider it offensive to call Valmiki a robber when, to them, he is God. The Valmiki community in Britain filed a formal protest against a radio station in Britain over this matter. Leslie's book revolves around the dispute, for which she was called as an academic expert.<sup>4</sup>

It is, of course, true that many bhakti poet saints were not Brahmins, as the SSRFG letter notes. It is also relevant to keep in mind that many of them actually reacted against the social class/caste system, especially the nirguni bhakti saints, while others, the sagunis, generally accepted it.

Caste (whether varna or jati) is an important issue. There is no question that Hinduism is much more than caste, but the reality of caste cannot be ignored. Stating bluntly that belonging to a particular varna, or social class, is not related to birth is patently incorrect. That is why we suggested changing edit 2511, a change accepted by the board. The SSRFG, however, would like a return to the previous statement, affirming that caste is only a matter of good conduct and professional excellence. Returning to the earlier statement would imply giving students a completely distorted view of reality.

The SSRFG writes that the *Bhagavad Gita* links varna to "the personal characteristics of an individual." However, it is equally true that the text states that one's own conduct, dharma (which is linked to one's varna) is better, even if imperfect, than someone else's, even if well practiced. It is better to die in one's own dharma. (BhG 3.35). This is not the place to discuss in more detail the doctrines of the *Bhagavad Gita* or its historical context. There is no doubt, however, that varna and caste have exerted a very strong influence on Hinduism, to the point that different groups have reacted against it. There would be no need for a strong refusal of varna/caste if it were not a salient element of society. Such is the rejection seen, for instance, in the nirguni bhakti poets, as noted above, as well as in early Buddhism. The *Manava Dharma Shastra*, an influential text roughly contemporaneous with the *Mahabharata* puts in clearly, at 1.100, by declaring that Brahmins are entitled to the world because of their "eminence and high birth."

To attempt to disengage caste entirely from religion does not address the social equity issues faced by the Dalit community. The interconnectedness between social and religious elements in the history of Hinduism is undeniable. As Mikael Aktor reminds us in a scholarly article about untouchability (a practice clearly present from late Vedic literature onwards), textual sources "do not recommend themselves to a limited focus on social facts alone, but rather direct us to be more sensitive to the subtle ways in which religious, ritual, political, and economic concerns are inextricably intertwined."<sup>5</sup>

---

<sup>4</sup> Leslie, Julia. *Authority and Meaning in Indian Religions: Hinduism and the Case of Vālmīki*. (Ashgate [Aldershot, Hants, England], 2003)

<sup>5</sup> Aktor, Mikael. 2002. "Rules of untouchability in ancient and medieval law books: Household, competence, and inauspiciousness." *International Journal of Hindu Studies* 6 (3):243-74.

We believe that avoiding important issues such as the ones discussed will only render a disservice to students. The classroom is the place to clarify, contextualize and balance such issues in order to provide students with a rich and rewarding learning experience.

In closing, we acknowledge that we have seen another document written by Vamsee Juluri, and “Scholars for People” which include several parties who have already made numerous and interested submissions to the IQC. We do not wish to engage the wild accusations and confusion in that document which advance ignorant or malicious distortions of the scholarship of current committee members and a past committee consultant; and which deliberately misrepresent our recommendations. We find it troubling that those with no actual training or certification in the fields at hand have taken it upon themselves to interpret the writings of archeologists and others on the committee who are the best sources to explain their own scholarship. As always we are available to consult with the Board members or the History and Social Sciences project staff of the Instructional Quality Commission to explain or clarify our edits as needed.

South Asia Faculty Group