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Misreading the Past

The UGC's New Framework for Indian History

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A new undergraduate history curriculum reduces the complexity of the past to simplistic ideas of religious difference. The official promotion of such ahistorical thinking adds weight to the project of misreading the past to fuel divisive passions.

In a compellingly written essay, Sanjay Subrahmanyam explored the relationship between pre-colonial violence in South Asia and the creation of a 'grievance industry'.¹ Drawing on a range of examples, Subrahmanyam argued that the memory of social violence was not divisive or exclusionary by default; and that it took sufficient harnessing—in the form of rituals, spectacles, and the use of mass media—to transfigure the memory of violence into grievance.

Take for instance the shrine of Salar Masud in Bahraich, which attracts devotees from different communities. Popularly known as Ghazi Miyan, Salar Masud's image as a warrior (*ghazi*) who fought for the cause of Islam does not deter non-Muslim shrine goers from seeking his intercession with God. In fact, he is also remembered as a protector of cows, and this does not seem to be at odds with the image of a *ghazi* in the folkloric tradition.

There are various ways in which a distant memory or episode is narrated and disseminated to elicit affect. Some retellings advertently foster violence. For instance, the events that ultimately led to the demolition of the Babri Masjid in December 1992, comprised performative tellings of perceived historical injustice. Some of these mobilising tactics have been chillingly captured in Anand Patwardhan's documentary, *Ram ke Naam*.

In tandem with provocative speeches, festooned chariot rallies, and swashbuckling displays of resurgent masculinity, are the somewhat silent components of this grievance industry: pamphlets, books, CDs, and syllabi.

The last of these is related to institutional teaching and learning and works in rather insipid ways. Narratives of grievance work in synchrony with certain ahistorical modes of thinking, in which presentist passions animate our understandings of the past. A curriculum framework can catalyse the production of grievance by fuelling such passions. Further, such ideas are given pedagogical and institutional sanctity when contained in syllabi and curricula. A supposedly innocuous curriculum can make heroes and villains of past actors, box people in neat categories, and make exclusive forms of civilisational resurgence the telos of history.

A syllabus for the nation

In March 2021, the University Grants Commission (UGC) published the [Learning Outcomes based Curriculum Framework \(henceforth LOCF\)](#) for the undergraduate programme in history. The LOCF charts the contours of academic programmes in universities. Crucially, only minimal deviation from the framework's courses and suggested readings is permitted.

The opening line of the framework sums up the thrust of this pedagogic intervention succinctly: "History, as we all know, is a vital source to obtain knowledge about a nation's soul." (4) The nation emerges as the axis of historical enquiry, even though it might be important to locate it on a "larger canvas". We are told that a departure from the current framework will give "Indians a feeling of ownership over their own history with a broader worldview." (5).

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The goal of studying history is articulated in terms of proprietorship, of owning the territory of the past, as if eternally congruent with the modern nation-state and exclusively endowed to its citizen-subjects in perpetuity. This image of a timeless nation is strengthened by at least two papers in the curriculum. A paper titled 'The Idea of Bharat' (20) has a sub-theme on the "eternity of [its] synonyms," while another paper on the history of modern India (44) foregrounds 'Bharat as Shaswat [sic] Rashtra' (eternal nation).

Ideas of an original, timeless Indian civilisation are routinely evoked in popular discourses. Such ideas are often used to identify practices that did not originate in that civilisational milieu, and people associated with those practices considered aliens. It is not unusual to think in terms of nation-states, but it necessarily delimits our understanding of history. What makes history one's own? And what happens to the history of others, those who lie outside or/and at the margins of the national community?

Beyond Hindu and Muslim

The problem of delimiting frames that hinder rather than facilitate historical analysis is more pronounced in the LOCF's courses on pre-modern history: more specifically in the paper that broadly deals with the transition to the early medieval period "History of India: 550 CE- 1200 CE" (29-30). Rather redundantly, it is organised around the rise and fall of dynasties. Interestingly, the first reference to religion in the paper is after the "Fall of Rajput Power", which is quickly followed by the "establishment of Muslim rule" (30). It leaves us with the impression that regional ethno-political lineages were abruptly replaced by a monolithic political formation based on religion.

A blanket term like 'Muslim rule' obliterates the regional, ethnic, political and even theological specificities of Muslim social formations, in favour of a homogenous macro-category. While expressions like 'Muslim rule', 'a community of believers', or 'the king of Islam' are to be found in abundance in the medieval and early modern texts, such references elicit contextual meanings. While trying to constitute notions of rulership in the languages of Islam, two contemporary rulers could draw from remarkably divergent theological strands.

One has to pay attention to these ideas as articulated by historical actors in their respective contexts and look at the relationship between identity and identification. The medieval period saw the emergence of a range of Muslim communities and disciplinary formations, ranging across Sufi hospices, mercantile settlements, military garrisons, and governorships. Surely, they were part of the larger Islamic world, as of the more specific South Asian localities. But the production of grievance requires one to use the blanket category of 'Muslim rule' at the cost of historical specificities, which can then be used as a synonym for 'the dark ages'.

It would have served a more meaningful purpose to introduce a sub-theme on the social histories of political violence and resistance, instead of appending a list of names sans context.

We are confronted with similar issues in a paper that has a dizzying assemblage covering the medieval and early modern periods. 'History of India, 1206-1707' (34-6) of the LOCF has merged three separate papers in the existing syllabus into one. The second unit of this paper covers the Mughal empire. A list of individuals, "Hemu Vikramaditya, Rana Pratap, Rani Durgavati, Chand Bibi," is appended to the sub-theme on the "establishment and re-establishment of Mughal rule." One wonders what purpose this list serves, except for consolidating a cult of heroes that resisted Mughal expansion.

Resistance to power is a fascinating theme to explore but must be pursued with some sophistication. Rather than focusing on heroic figures from the Amar Chitra Katha series, one could address the processes of protracted political violence, resistance to states put up by various social groups, and how figures like those listed above came to acquire such rebel status in different traditions.² Any theme on rebellion and resistance to sovereign authority in Mughal India must locate individuals in networks of alliances and look at the contingencies of political manoeuvring.

It is also important to remember that challenges to Mughal authority came not only from outside but also from the members of the family. Until his defeat in 1582, Akbar's half-brother Mirza Hakim was a formidable threat to Akbarid rule in Hindustan, operating from his court in Kabul. Even after his defeat, Akbar had to deal with the networks of powerful groups that had sustained Mirza Hakim's resistance, like the Naqshbandi Sufis, Hazaras, and Uzbeks. It would have served a more meaningful purpose to introduce a sub-theme on the social histories of political violence and resistance, instead of appending a list of names sans context.

Hybrid identities

Under the theme of 'Society and Economy', the paper has two separate sub-units, 'Hindu Society' and 'Muslim Society'. Certainly, there were people who identified and were identified as Hindus and Muslims in the early modern period, in different registers ranging from ritual practices to self-writing. Yet separating the two communities, to study as independent their "caste and occupational groups, lifestyle, education, customs and traditions" (34), as the LOCF mandates, is anachronistic. Such categorical segregations are informed by presentist understandings of terms like 'Hindu' and 'Muslim', often imagined as self-contained worlds.

Which of these categories would comprise the Kayasthas and Khatri who took up scribal and secretarial posts in the chanceries of Muslim rulers? Individuals like Chandar Bhan Brahman, Bhimsen Saksena, Nek Rai, and Anand Ram Mukhlis were well versed in Persian and the languages of Islamic statecraft, identified as Hindus, intelligently lamented the desecration of temples, adored and tried to emulate the literary style of old masters like Abu al-Fazl, and used the vocabulary of Islamic mysticism (*tasawwuf*) in their writings.³ Their education and lifestyle were perilously similar to those of their Muslim counterparts, and they were self-consciously Hindu. Such a separation as proposed by the syllabus precludes the scope to look at the interactions between different modes of being and performing, as they constituted the habitus of an individual in early modern India. It is evident that the LOCF has no room for such individuals and communities, for they lack in taxonomic purity: a purity that allows one to stay within a hermetically sealed category.

A glance at the list of suggested readings makes it clear that the LOCF discards decades of textured research in South Asian history. It reverts to time-worn concepts and teleologies that are hardly useful, if not for ulterior purposes.

It is a pity that the drafting committee constituted by the UGC would ignore decades of sophisticated research and teaching, to insipidly further narrow dispensational agendas that plague the very ‘soul of the nation’ it desires to understand.

For the unit on the Mughal empire, the readings include monographs by historians like Jadunath Sarkar (1870-1958), Ishwari Prasad (1888-1986), and Ashirbadi Lal Srivastava (1899-1973). Formidable historians and positivists of their times, they sought to frame the pre-modern period and the contentious issue of ‘Muslim rule’ within the teleology of Indian nationalism. Writing in the years of late colonialism, and subsequently, in the wake of independence, they worked within an ecology of concepts that is no longer tenable. For instance, in the suggested monograph by Ashirbadi Lal Srivastava, *The Mughul Empire* (1952), the sultanate is seen as a period of “foreign domination” in contrast with the age of Akbar. However, in the post-Jahangir period, the forces of nationalism were submerged by those of Islamic revivalism.⁴ These easy equivalences between ‘foreign domination’ and ‘Islamic supremacy’ on the one hand, and ‘Indianisation’ and ‘nationalism’ on the other, are routinely used to construe narratives of grievance.

The production of grievance is a cumulative process, and none of these concepts that make up the framework exists in isolation. Notions of separate Hindu and Muslim societies accomplish a certain understanding of Indian history in tandem with the writings of scholars like Srivastava. These views further resonate with a range of acts, from resurgent political speeches to the renaming of roads.

The end of questioning

What does the LOCF seek to replace in the study of pre-modern pasts? The [2016 B.A. Honours History Syllabus](#) of the University of Delhi encourages students to look at historical complexities by framing units around literary genres, the relationship between inscriptions and identity, the politics of monumental constructions and rituals, service cultures, doctrinal traditions, among others. Such a framework invites students to historicise and complicate the taxonomies that historians work with, thus steering away from both mindless reproduction of concepts and their outright rejection.

The syllabus helped unpack the contingent and contested nature of political power. Sub-themes refer to symbols of power like sacred spaces, court cultures and conflicts to understand the making of political identities. For instance, why does a particular site become the target of repeated acts of sovereign conquest? What symbolic meanings are ingrained in such places? This is important because such questions allow both historical processes and their discursive narrations in the sources — the ways in which they were articulated and disseminated — to be discussed in the classroom, thereby introducing the undergraduate student to the rudiments of reading primary sources.

The alternative to the LOCF is not to populate the syllabus with non-conflictual, paradisiacal images of the pre-modern past. Rather, it is to introduce analytical frames that allow students to see social conflicts with all their complexities without making presentist reductions. This also involves a move away from the orthodox positivism of recovering absolute truths, and seeks a more intimate engagement with the archives, to see how events were narrated, in what contexts certain terms (like ‘Hindus’ and ‘Muslims’) are used in the sources and pay attention to the gamut of meanings that such enunciations elicit.

This close engagement with the historian’s craft was achieved to a great extent by the existing framework, as seen in the 2016 DU syllabus. It is a pity that the drafting committee constituted by the UGC would ignore decades of sophisticated research and teaching, to insipidly further narrow dispensational agendas that plague the very ‘soul of the nation’ it desires to understand.

Footnotes:

- 1 Sanjay Subrahmanyam, “Violence, Grievance, and Memory in Early Modern South Asia” in *Explorations in Connected History: From the Tagus to the Ganges*, (New Delhi: Oxford University Press, 2005), 80-101.
- 2 There is a diverse and impressive body of historical writings on resistance to Mughal rule, political violence, notions of victory and defeat, and contestations on the frontiers. To mention a few representative works at the risk of leaving out many others: Gautam Bhadra, “Two Frontier Uprisings in Mughal India,” in *Subaltern Studies Vol. II Writings on South Asian History and Society*, ed. Ranajit Guha (Delhi: Oxford University Press, 1983), Shail Mayaram, *Against History, Against State: Counter Perspectives from the Margins* (Delhi: Permanent Black, 2004), Cynthia Talbot, "Justifying Defeat: A Rajput Perspective on the Age of Akbar", *Journal of the Economic and Social History of the Orient* 55, 2-3 (2012): 329-368, Jorge Flores, *Unwanted Neighbours: The Mughals, the Portuguese and their Frontier Zones* (New Delhi: Oxford University Press, 2018), Subah Dayal, "Making the 'Mughal' Soldier: Ethnicity, Identification, and Documentary Culture in Southern India, c. 1600-1700", *Journal of the Economic and Social History of the Orient* 62, 5-6 (2019): 856-924.
- 3 Over the years, the writings of Karen Leonard, Muzaffar Alam, Sanjay Subrahmanyam, Rosalind o’Hanlon, and Kumkum Chatterjee, amongst others, have enriched our understanding of the scribal-secretarial groups in Mughal India. For a stellar contribution in this area, see, Rajeev Kinra, *Writing Self, Writing Empire: Chandar Bhan Brahman and the Cultural World of the Indo-Persian State Secretary*, (Oakland: University of California Press, 2015).
- 4 Ashirbadi Lal Shrivastava, *The Mughul Empire (1526-1803 A.D.)*, (Agra: Shivalal Agarwala and Co., 1959), ‘Preface to the First Edition’.