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Nationalistic Narratives in Pakistani Textbooks

Summary

- History textbooks encapsulate a state's official narrative for its citizens, and depending on their content, can create and sustain chauvinistic attitudes toward out-groups.
- Though complex and multifaceted, all official narratives seek to answer three questions: Who are we? Where do we belong? How far back in time do we go?
- In Pakistan, nationalistic narratives took hold during General Zia-ul-Haq's decade in power in the 1980s, aided by the Jamaat-e-Islami (JI) party.
- As part of a push for "enlightened moderation," General Pervez Musharraf's education reforms during the 2000s attempted to deradicalize Pakistani textbooks, but his attempts failed due to JI's influence within the bureaucracy.
- Any reform of Pakistani textbooks will have to be led by political parties at the national level; however, the 2010 eighteenth amendment that devolves education to the provinces complicates this task.

“ Any attempt at large-scale reform of Pakistani textbooks must be conducted by political parties at the federal level.”

Background

History textbooks are not only of interest to the school students that they are written for, but also to scholars, policymakers, and political elites. These textbooks capture important, official state narratives, and depending on their form and content, can often generate conflict.

First, the narratives themselves can cause tension across or within states. For example, relations among China, Japan, and South Korea are often strained by the content of official narratives,¹ such as those surrounding the Nanjing Massacre.² Internally, domestic political actors often disagree on historical perceptions, such as who bears responsibility for slavery in the United States,³ who the main protagonists are in a particular state's national history,⁴ or how ethnic minorities, women, or the working class are portrayed.⁵ These domestic disputes generally bring a lower risk of violence; they are typically addressed through the courts,⁶ legislatures,⁷ or bureaucracies.

Second, the narratives can drive the potential for violence by creating or reinforcing divisive attitudes toward out-groups.⁸ This is a more gradual cause of conflict, but arguably more important.

Following the cataclysm of nationalism and destruction that was World War II, the United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization initiated a textbook reform effort, claiming in its charter that “since wars begin in the minds of men, it is in the minds of men that the defenses of peace must be constructed” and publishing *A Handbook for the Improvement of Textbook and Teaching Materials* four years later.⁹ In South Asia, research has found that Pakistani textbooks used in social studies, history, and Pakistan studies feature statements that are “entirely one-sided, in favor of Muslims and Pakistan,”¹⁰ and contain “a strong current of exclusivist and divisive tendencies,”¹¹ especially against religious minorities.¹² In India, meanwhile, some eleven-year-olds are taught that meat eaters “easily cheat, tell lies, forget promises, are dishonest and tell bad words, steal, fight and turn to violence and commit sex crimes.”¹³

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Though complex and multifaceted, nationalism encompasses three basic concerns. First, who are “we”? Is the boundary that divides “us” and “them” based on geography, creed, religion, caste, race, language, or something else? Second, where are we from or, in a different formulation, where do we belong? The presence of a historic “homeland” that a group lays claim to is essential to national identity. Third, how far back in time do we go? Though nationalism is a relatively modern political force, nationalists do not believe so. To the contrary, tracing a lineage to bygone eras, no matter how historically tendentious, is a core element of nationalist projects.

This third element of narrative creation—the collective memory and occlusion of particular periods and dates¹⁴—forms the basis of the author’s broader research on South Asian textbooks, aimed at delineating how states create and sustain positive images of their nations and negative ones of others. This brief focuses on the treatment of two dates in particular in Pakistani textbooks: 1947, when India and Pakistan won national independence, and 1971, when Bangladesh won independence.

Bureaucratic Politics of Education

To understand Pakistan’s treatment of these dates, it is important to first understand the politics surrounding the education bureaucracy. The education sector can often be the source of political patronage: The provincial ministries of education collectively constitute the largest public sector employer in the country, and in the form of teachers’ salaries, represent a bounty of economic and political capital for distribution to party workers. Moreover, it is the sector that ideological actors, or those significantly invested in questions of national identity, pay great attention to.

Education became a federal subject in Pakistan in 1976, before being devolved to the provinces under the 2010 eighteenth amendment to the constitution. Each provincial ministry of education has a curriculum wing and a textbook board, which reports directly to the minister. Board members are usually drawn from the ranks of the education bureaucracy or from party or clan networks; and their level of expertise in global educational standards, pedagogy, or established best practices is minimal. The boards develop textbooks in liaison with influential private-sector publishers; once written, the books are sent to the ministry, which approves them for general use in the market.¹⁵ Schools have little leeway in using books other than those prescribed. Even private schools, which technically enjoy the right to choose their own books, will use officially prescribed books for those grades that administer standardized exams.

Ideologically, grand shifts took place in history education following General Muhammad Zia-ul-Haq’s coup in 1977. Zia’s plans for Islamizing education were encapsulated in the 1979 National

Education Policy and carried out with the aid of the JI party, which dominated the education bureaucracy thanks to a relatively educated rank and file, a heightened interest in questions of national ideology, and Zia's patronage. As one former ministry of education official stated simply, "In Pakistan, nationalism construction starts from the armed forces, and is articulated by right wing religious parties, especially JI. They have been instrumental in developing the mainstream narrative on nationalism."¹⁶ Most other parties simply do not understand the power of controlling education policy; in the words of another former ministry official, "Political parties other than Jamaat have not done their homework."¹⁷

Jl control of the education bureaucracy impeded both the pace and extent of deradicalization undertaken by another military dictator, Pervez Musharraf, in 2002 and 2006. Musharraf's failures speak to a more general difficulty associated with reform: It is not enough for elites to have political will or an expressed desire for change. A holistic strategy for education reform has to consider the ideological makeup of institutions where the reforms must be implemented. Indeed, the JI's staying power within the bureaucracy means that it need not win votes to influence curriculum and textbooks—though electoral victories surely help, as evinced by its recent successes in the removal of "secular chapters" and "objectionable material" from textbooks in Khyber Paktunkhwa.¹⁸

"Big" Dates in Pakistani Textbooks

It is not surprising that the events of 1947 are discussed more frequently than those of 1971 in Pakistani textbooks. However, even the terms in which the years are discussed are revealing. The dominant theme of narratives on 1947 is liberation. One Class 10 textbook from Punjab notes simply that "On 1st October 1947, while addressing the officers of the Government of Pakistan, he [Jinnah] said that their mission was the establishment of a state where they could live like free people in their own socio-cultural set up necessary for the promotion of social justice and Islamic Ideology."¹⁹ Another passage states that "Pakistan emerged as an independent state on the map of the world on 14 August, 1947. The basic purpose of getting Pakistan was to provide the people an environment wherein they could lead their lives according to the basic principles of Islam. On the basis of two Nation Theory people of subcontinent launched a freedom movement and got Pakistan."²⁰

The events of 1971 are discussed in predictably more grim terms in Pakistani textbooks. However, little is stated about the structural causes of Bengali disaffection with the Pakistani state. To the contrary, the books emphasize the geopolitical implications of the ensuing civil war. As one Pakistan studies textbook notes, "No instant and effective operation could be done in East Pakistan because of vast distance of land as well as disconnected air communication and non cooperation of the local people. Consequently, our army had to surrender. Eventually India succeeded in achieving her objectives and East Pakistan appeared on the map of the world with the name of Bangladesh on 16th December, 1971."²¹ Rather than educating readers about the deeper causes of the territorial split, textbooks gloss over state culpability in both the outbreak of, and violence during, the crisis. Instead, they highlight how regional or global powers conspired to create Bangladesh, with little fidelity to the historical record.

Implications

Though more general lessons on nationalist narratives must await a deeper, comparative study of textbooks in other South Asian countries, several implications are apparent from this baseline analysis of Pakistani textbooks.

First, nationalistic narratives should concern both domestic citizens and international observers because of their role in generating hostility and the potential for violence. Second, more than most

issues, textbook politics create path dependence—whereby decisions in the past strongly circumscribe one's freedom of action in the present. If a certain point of view is promoted in historical accounts, then by virtue of this perspective becoming "official," it will be disproportionately more difficult to remove or challenge such a narrative later.

Third, reform that pushes for or against particular narratives must be attuned to political realities. To prevent bureaucratic inertia from impeding reform efforts, political elites must take a holistic approach to the politics of education, with due consideration to the staffing of the curriculum wing and textbook board; the political capital afforded to reformers in the midst of electoral and coalitional politics; and the formal and informal ties between private-sector publishers and education bureaucracies that privilege certain narratives over others.

Fourth, and relatedly, any attempt at large-scale reform of Pakistani textbooks must be conducted by political parties at the federal level. One side effect of the 2010 devolution of education to the provinces has been that ideological debates that would normally have bubbled up nationally have been circumscribed to the provinces, such as Khyber Pakhtunkhwa. Civil society can, at best, help establish the parameters of good policy, but without a debate conducted by major political parties at the federal level, Pakistan's national narrative will likely remain ossified from the 1980s. For this to occur, parties will have to be convinced of the importance of education politics beyond their patronage potential.

Notes

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ABOUT THIS BRIEF

Ahsan Butt is an assistant professor at the School of Policy, Government, and International Affairs at George Mason University. His work focuses on ethnicity and nationalism, international security, and South Asia. This brief summarizes initial field research supported by the U.S. Institute of Peace on the politics surrounding history textbooks in Pakistan and their implications for conflict. The research is part of a broader study on states' construction of nationalistic narratives.

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