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SAFFRONIZING CALIFORNIA'S HISTORY CURRICULUM:
LONG DISTANCE HINDU NATIONALISM IN THE UNITED STATES

A Dissertation Presented
to
The Faculty of the School of Education
International and Multicultural Education Department

In Partial Fulfillment
of the Requirements for the Degree
Doctor of Education

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Dissertation Abstract

Since the 2000s, how U.S. schools teach about South Asia has been the site of contestation. In California, official processes soliciting community input into history curricula have brought ideological clashes between conflicting factions to the California Department of Education. The conflicts over South Asian history are an extension of struggles in India, in the context of the rise of Hindu nationalism, a widespread movement toward a “Hindus-first” India, partly through brutalizing subaltern communities and dissidents. Such violence has often been justified through manufactured histories vilifying Indian minorities and supporting the notion of an ancient, glorious Hindu civilization. From the 2000s, U.S.-based Hindu nationalist groups have attempted to insert such histories into U.S. textbooks.

This dissertation focused on the 2016-2017 controversy surrounding the California Department of Education process to revise the History-Social Science Curriculum Framework. U.S.-based Hindu nationalist groups took part in the process starting in 2014. In 2015, South Asia academics wrote to the California Department of Education with numerous recommendations challenging the inaccuracy and political messaging of the histories supported by Hindu nationalist groups. In 2016, progressive and minority activists entered the fray, forming a coalition called South Asian Histories for All (SAHFA) to support the scholarly recommendations that challenged sectarian narratives.

This perspectival history, authored by a SAHFA member, analyzed the efforts of Hindu nationalist groups to influence California textbooks, drawing on documents and

interviews with scholars and activists critical of Hindu nationalism. This study utilized three analytical frames to challenge the prejudices and hate evoked by partisan histories.

The first identified key players and the funding involved. Using tax returns and other public documents, the first data chapter established the Hindu nationalist affiliations of several groups participating in the California history revision process, and the resources mobilized by them in support of their versions of South Asian history.

The second analyzed the political messaging of the histories, identifying the communities and identities targeted by prejudices encoded within (e.g. connected to caste, gender, religion).

The third discussed the mobilization strategies used by Hindu nationalists to disseminate and advocate for their histories, and responses from non-Hindutva scholars and activists.