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November 8, 2005

Ruth Green, President  
State Board of Education  
1430 N Street, Room 5111  
Sacramento, California 95814

Dear Ms. Green and Members of the Board,

I write on behalf of a long list of world specialists on ancient India — reflecting mainstream academic opinion in India, Pakistan, the United States, Europe, Australia, Taiwan, and Japan — to urge you to reject the demands by nationalist Hindu ('Hindutva') groups that California textbooks be altered to conform to their religious-political views. The names of over four dozen scholars who have asked me to write you and the Board — more names are coming in hourly — are attached at the end. The list includes the most distinguished world experts in the field.

The nature of these proposed revisions only became known to international scholars on Saturday, November 5 — or we would have acted sooner and with even greater force.

On behalf of my colleagues, I would like to call the Board's attention to four points:

1. The agenda of the groups proposing these changes is familiar to all specialists on Indian history, who have recently won a long battle to prevent exactly these kinds of changes from finding a permanent place in history textbooks in India. The proposed revisions are not of a scholarly but of a religious-political nature, and are primarily promoted by Hindutva supporters and non-specialist academics writing about issues far outside their areas of expertise. These opinions do not reflect the views of the majority of specialists on ancient Indian history nor of mainstream Hindus. There are ill-concealed political agendas behind these views that are well-known to researchers and tens of millions of non-Hindu Indians, who are routinely discriminated against by these groups.
2. Ironically, the revisions that Hindu nationalists are now trying to force into California textbooks have been soundly repudiated in the last two years by Indian educators; previously, in a brief period in which the central government was under Hindutva control, those same types of revisions were temporarily inserted in Indian textbooks by the National Council of Education Training and Research (NCERT). The result was chaos in the Indian educational system and an extended battle in the Indian press that lasted several years. It would trigger an immediate international scandal if the California State Board of Education were to unwittingly endorse religious-nationalistic views of Indian history from which India has only extricated itself in the last two years.
3. The U.S. State Department has repeatedly warned of the dangers to religious freedom involved in the kinds of historical revisions demanded by Hindutva groups. Thus the

State Department's "International Religious Freedom Report 2003" complains of the massive "rewriting of textbooks to favor Hindu extremist interpretations of history" that occurred when the national government was under Hindutva control. In its 2004 report, written after the fall of that government, the State Department noted that these revisions were being corrected, but continued to warn of dangers to public education in Indian states like Gujarat in which Hindutva power remained firm, resulting in those regions in "the politicized inculcation of Hindu religious and cultural norms". The politicized views of history criticized by the U.S. Department of State are of the same type currently being proposed for use in textbooks aimed at sixth-grade California students.

For the 2003 and 2004 U.S. State Department reports discussing these issues, see:

<http://www.state.gov/g/drl/rls/irf/2003/24470.htm>

<http://www.state.gov/g/drl/rls/irf/2004/35516.htm>

4. The names on this letter, which have all been gathered over the past 48 hours, represent a broad cross-section of the world's leading historians, religious scholars, archaeologists, philologists, and linguists conducting specialized research on ancient India. A few of the signers include Romila Thapar, India's most famous historian, and a recent Kluge Fellow at the Library of Congress in Washington; Stanley Wolpert, Professor Emeritus at U.C.L.A, long the preeminent U.S. specialist on Indian history; Madhav Deshpande of the University of Michigan; Harry Falk, of Free University, Berlin; Patrick Olivelle, of the University of Texas; Muneo Tokunaga of Kyoto University, Japan; Maurizio Tosi of the University of Bologna; and dozens of equally world-famous researchers.

Our growing list, as it existed early this morning, is provided below. Other names are coming in at a rapid pace, and hundreds more could be quickly gathered. I will be happy to update the Board on additional endorsers of this letter if that becomes necessary, and to personally assist the Board in any way possible in the future.

In conclusion: the proposed textbook changes are unscholarly, are politically and religiously motivated, have already been rejected by India's national educational authorities, and will lead without fail to an international educational scandal if they are accepted by California's State Board of Education.

Sincerely,

Michael Witzel  
Wales Professor of Sanskrit  
Editor-in-Chief, The Harvard Oriental Series

Several pages of endorsements by internationally known researchers follow

Homi Bhabha, Prof., Harvard University, hbhabha@fas.harvard.edu

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