

Proposed debate on the removal of the term “Pythagorean theorem” from school texts

1. As a group of independent decolonial scholars, we believe it is very important that school texts should be based on correct facts and history, since they shape the minds of young children who are tomorrow’s citizens. We believe colonial education deliberately introduced falsehoods in our school texts to glorify the colonizer and assert White/Western supremacy. The education system was globalised by colonialism, and has persisted even after the supposed end of colonial rule. As such, many obvious falsehoods have remained not only unchanged but **unexamined** even 75 years after independence. The math syllabus has changed very little. The term “Pythagorean theorem” is a good example of something that has gone unexamined and unchallenged in these last 75 years.

2. **The immediate occasion.** Based on the Indian government’s New Education Policy (NEP) the state of Karnataka has proposed some changes to school texts involving Pythagoras and Newton. There [are several news items about it](#). It has also been clarified that the underlying position papers [will not be applied immediately, in the current academic year](#), so that gives us some time for debate. We are enclosing [a short twitter summary](#) backed by numerous scholarly publications and teaching experiments available in [this list on why the teaching of math needs to be decolonized](#). While many changes are needed, we propose to take up one issue at a time to avoid any confusion in these debates.

4. The debate being organized (in a Zoom meeting) by us on Sunday 24 July 2022, 11 am, will focus on **the “Pythagoras theorem”**. (We will take up the more complex apocrypha and fictions about Newton and the calculus in future debates.) Though these issues have arisen in India, we emphasize that neither of these is a local issue, limited to India: the world-over children in the former colonies are indoctrinated into the term “Pythagorean theorem”.

5. The exact topic of the debate: **“The term Pythagorean theorem should be removed from our school texts as it is nothing more than a historical fiction.”** We invite people who are curious about these propositions including those who think that **excising the** “Pythagorean theorem” from school text books is unacceptable and deplorable to be part of the debate. The primary questions up for discussion on the basis of **hard evidence**: (1) historical evidence for the existence of Pythagoras; and (2) his connection to the proposition called the “Pythagorean theorem”?

By “hard evidence” we exclude tertiary sources such as Wikipedia.

Two other important questions are (3) are there any axiomatic proofs of the “Pythagorean theorem” found in **any** Greek text (or anywhere else in the world for that matter) before David Hilbert’s proof of 1899. A subsidiary question is (4) What are the actual origins of the idea of axiomatic proof?

6. If there is no evidence for Pythagoras or his connection to the “Pythagorean theorem”, it is only right and proper to eliminate all 32 references to the “Pythagorean theorem” in the current class X NCERT math school text.

We believe the contents of school texts MUST be re-examined and any falsehoods found must be rejected. We believe this must be done in a way which is not quickly scuttled due to polarised differences in political views. We believe this should be done by open debate, not the secretive

exercise of authority by people declared “experts”, on colonial benchmarks. Though the immediate issue is specific to the Indian case, we recommend this process of re-examining colonial education in **all former colonies**: our children have a right to know the truth disentangled from a mass of colonial fictions.

The false history embedded in the term “Pythagorean theorem” has been used to assert and maintain colonial supremacy by asserting -- as done in the current class IX NCERT school text -- that “Greeks” had a “superior” way to do math. Did they?

We believe it is important to take up these issues since (a) math is a compulsory subject, so these falsehoods affect all, (b) this fiction-based history is probably the route through which a bad colonial philosophy of math has been imposed on children, and the reason **why math is perceived as hard by most learners today**.³

7. Those interested in participating should first register at <https://forms.gle/8nxxHqTyxtZCBBm6>.

A detailed statement in favour of the motion is posted at <https://tinyurl.com/Pyth-note>. Anyone wishing to participate is free to upload in advance a brief list of points, either in favour or against the motion.

Dr Claude Alvares
Dr Murzban Jal
Dr V. Ramanathan
Dr C. K. Raju