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Teaching racist history

C. K. Raju*

During the NDA regime, there were several controversies regarding the distorted history in NCERT school texts. For example, the name Aryabhata was misspelt as Aryabhata. That might seem a trivial matter, but, according to the Monier Sanskrit dictionary, "bhata" means "a mercenary, a hired soldier...a servant, a slave". On the other hand, "bhata" means "lord, my lord...a title of respect used by humble persons to address a prince; but also affixed or prefixed to the name of learned Brahmins", such as Kumarila Bhatta. All original manuscript sources for Aryabhata, without any known exception, and also all commentaries on his work, refer to him as Aryabhata or simply as "bhata". Thus the changed spelling in the NCERT text also changed Aryabhata's caste, converting him into a Brahmin. History is a source of soft power, and such false history helps to glorify Brahmins by promoting the idea that that all knowledge in India was innovated by Brahmins.

Subsequently, the UPA government revised the various NCERT texts, with the specific aim of purging them of controversial history. However, the incorrect spelling of Aryabhata as Aryabhata still remains. In this case there is no overt political motivation, so this must be regarded as a genuine mistake. What processes led to this mistake? Clearly, the authors lacked expertise in the history of mathematics which they have set out to teach to school children. They relied on an inaccurate secondary source.

It is easy to understand why our experts are not so expert. First, "experts", or committee members, in this country are often decided by their proximity to politicians rather than their knowledgeability. And, in a scientifically illiterate society, no one asks why a retired astrophysicist is the best choice for a school text on mathematics. This "illiterate attitude" of unquestioning acceptance has wider ramifications, for the entire society gets further de-skilled due to the decisions made by such "experts". In over half a century since the Independence, no government in India opened a single university department to teach history and philosophy of science (HPS). (The NDA government opened some 20 university departments in astrology, but not a single department in HPS studies.) So there is not even any way to build genuine expertise in this area. This despite the fact that history has become such a major preoccupation of Indian society.

Secondly, our experts are seen to be socially useful primarily as brokers of Western knowledge- hence the other way to decide expertise is by association with or praise from some authoritative Western source. This way of deciding expertise makes the country susceptible

to the soft power of the West, for such "experts" cannot be expected to recognize the possibility that the West too might have promoted false history with a similar view to glorify itself and promote the idea that all useful knowledge was innovated in the West.

The dangers of relying on such inexperienced experts are visible in the fresh mistakes that have now arisen, as the NCERT texts have swung to the opposite extreme. One sort of biased history has been replaced by another. For example, the NCERT mathematics text for class nine now has a number of pictures of Greek mathematicians such as Pythagoras, Euclid etc. After looking at these pictures my son asked "why do all Greeks look alike?" The reason is not hard to understand: these images, like roadside images of gods and goddesses, are not authentic but are all based on the artists' imagination. They look alike because they project a Caucasian stereotype: the artists' imagination was implicitly racist. Euclid, for example, was supposedly from Alexandria, located in the African continent; so how can we be sure he was Caucasian? In fact, some Arab sources, such as al Qifti, claim that Euclid was a Greek only by nationality, and born at Tyre, a place where Alexander made many slaves. Without a racist word being used, the picture settles the question of Euclid's genetic history in the child's mind. But if we are not sure of Euclid's genetic history, why should we be displaying such biased pictures in school texts which millions of impressionable schoolchildren regard as the literal truth? Just as the wrong spelling of Aryabhata promotes Brahmin supremacy, these fake images of Greek mathematicians promote White supremacy, further enhancing the awe of the West.

Recently in the matter of the Sethusamudram project, the government filed an affidavit in court arguing that there is no evidence for the existence of Rama. Myths must be distinguished from history which requires evidence. Although the government subsequently withdrew the affidavit under political pressure, I unreservedly accept the position that history requires evidence, and what cannot be proved should be regarded as myth. However this principle should not be applied selectively, as is politically convenient; the same principle should be applied equally to Western myths.

What is the evidence that Euclid even existed? Millions of people hear the Ramayana and believe in the existence of Rama. Likewise, millions of people read school texts and believe in the existence of Euclid. Children believe the first story they hear, so no one asks: what is the historical evidence? Euclid is supposedly the author of the book called the *Elements*, but few people are aware that Euclid's name does not appear in any of the Greek manuscripts of the *Elements* known until the 18th c. These manuscripts mention only Theon, whose daughter Hypatia was lynched by a Christian mob. The Greek

commentaries on the *Elements* also do not mention Euclid, but speak mysteriously of the "author of the *Elements*", though they mention others by name.

The key evidence for Euclid is taken to be a passage in a commentary by Proclus, a 5th c. philosopher who succeeded Hypatia, and was declared a heretic by the Christian church. Proclus comes some 800 years after the supposed date of Euclid, and the passage states that Euclid was not mentioned by any earlier source. It is hard to take seriously the name Euclid in this isolated passage, since elsewhere Proclus speaks only of the anonymous "author of the *Elements*". The actual manuscript of Proclus' commentary comes from 500-800 years after Proclus for it is on paper, which made a late entry into Europe. For the original manuscript on Papyrus to have survived for so long, it would have had to be copied out several times, and in this process, someone might easily have added the passage about Euclid with a view to clarify who the mysterious "author of the *Elements*" was. The passage refers to a citation of the *Elements* by Archimedes. The single known citation of the *Elements* (not Euclid) is in a work attributed to Archimedes, but known only from after the 14th c, and is regarded as an interpolation since such citations were not the practice in Archimedes' time. However, since this interpolation was known to the author of the Proclus passage, that passage must come from even later, probably the 15th c. So this passage as "evidence" for Euclid is miserably inadequate. If this be the standard of evidence, then the evidence for the existence of Rama is far superior.

Distorted history relates to religious fanaticism not only in India but also in the West. In a recent book, I have argued that the history of the Greek origins of all knowledge was concocted during the Crusades as follows. Starting 1125, shortly after the first Crusade, and using the gold that the church earned from it, a large Arabic library at Toledo was translated wholesale into Latin. This was when Europe first came to know about the *Elements*. However, at this time of intense religious fanaticism, the church was ashamed to admit that it was learning from the hated Islamic enemy. Therefore, it pretended that it was "recovering its Greek inheritance" which had merely been preserved by the Arabs. However, in the House of Wisdom in Baghdad, as in the Great Library of Alexandria, knowledge came from all over the world, including Persia and India. The Arabic library at Toledo reflected world knowledge of the 11th c. But, by this artifice of attributing most of it to the Greeks, the church appropriated all knowledge of the world until the 11th c as part of its "Greek inheritance". Later-day Greeks like Theon, Hypatia, and Proclus, who were opposed to the church, also were run down as mere carriers of knowledge. Because the translations at Toledo were a complex process, involving groups of

translators, and an intermediate language, they led to several howlers. The very name Euclid might well have originated in such a howler, for some Arab authors interpret "Uclides" as coming from Ucli (= key) + des (= space, geometry) meaning "the key to geometry". Subsequent racist historians completed the job by eliminating also the Egyptian sources of Alexandrian knowledge as argued by Martin Bernal in *Black Athena: the Fabrication of Ancient Greece 1785-1985*.

Is an uncritical acceptance of Western hate politics the best answer to its Indian counterpart? Should we allow such politically motivated processes to thus misinform our children and indoctrinate them into awe of fictitious Western achievements?

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