I. Introduction

There are no absolute criteria for declaring a person a hero or a villain in history because someone’s conduct may be a heroic action to one country but can also be a huge disgrace to another country at the same time. Some people therefore take an agnostic stance in order to avoid such conflicts. However, unlike individual historians, a nation inevitably has to take a stance when evaluating a historic figure in order to keep its identity. One of the best ways to promote the government’s view on historic figures is through education, specifically by approving history textbooks that represent her ideas. Therefore, government approved textbooks contain implications on how the government wants the people to think about historic figures.

In 1961, the government of India established an autonomous organization called National Council of Educational Research and Training (NCERT) to assist governmental education policies. The council has been publishing government approved textbooks of many different subjects that are used for Classes I to XII (1st grade to 12th grade). Its textbooks are all open to the public in the form of online textbook. (1) Although the service is temporarily inaccessible now, some other websites provide download links. (2) In order to examine how heroes and villains in the history of India are portrayed in government approved materials, this paper mainly deals with history textbooks published by NCERT, Classes VI to XII.

II. Heroes

II.1 Ashoka

Ashoka was the third king of the Mauryan Empire, which was the first empire to unify most of the Indian subcontinent around 300 B.C. Ashoka maintained expansion policy of his father and gained the title of conqueror. Under Ashoka, the empire extended from today's Afghanistan to today's Bangladesh, and to Kerala province in the south. It covered practically the entire Indian subcontinent except tiny province in the far south. Although it is not correct to say that the entire Mauryan territory was gained by Ashoka, he did acquire significant portion of the land.

However, his expansion policy did not last forever. After he conquered the Kalinga province of eastern India, contemplating about the
great loss of innocent lives on both sides, he became skeptical about the use of battling and subjugating other people. He then deeply accepted Buddhism and declared it the empire's official religion. His new political ideals were based on ‘Dharma,’ which Ashoka interpreted as 'rational and universal ethics/teachings of Buddha,' among its many meanings. He emphasized his philosophy by installing stone pillars inscribed with principles of Dharma. Among the principles were ‘avoid killing and eating meat,’ ‘communication between religions is good, so listen carefully and respect teachings that other people follow.’ Under his rule based on Dharma, diverse ethnic/cultural groups could coexist without producing serious conflicts.

Indian textbook for Class 6, Our Pasts Part 1 devotes one entire chapter to Ashoka. Considering that there are only two historical figures who are portrayed in one entire chapter, the other being Mahatma Gandhi, the importance of Ashoka in the ancient history of India is clear. The chapter first explains the difference between an empire and a kingdom and then introduces Ashoka as an example of an emperor. Ashoka's achievements are explained for the rest of the chapter.

The book covers Ashoka in chapter 8 under the title of 'Ashoka, the emperor who gave up war,' which implies that he was a lord who emphasized peace and order. Indeed, the chapter mainly portrays Ashoka's achievements only after the war against the Kalinga, when which he dramatically changed his foreign policy. His change of mind is described as a very extraordinary conduct, as the book writes “He [Ashoka] is the only king in the history of the world who gave up conquest after winning a war.” Although he was engaged in numerous fights in order to expand the empire, his eight years of conquests before the war against the Kalinga are missing in the book.

The textbook further highlights Ashoka's peace-loving aspect by including his inscription describing the Kalinga War, showing personal thoughts of Ashoka.

"Eight years after becoming king I conquered Kalinga. About a lakh and a half people were captured. And more than a lakh of people were killed. This filled me with sorrow. Why? Whenever an independent land is conquered, lakhs of people die, and many are taken prisoner. Brahmins and monks also die. People who are kind to their relatives and friends, to their slaves and servants die, or lose their loved ones. That is why I am sad, and have decided to observe dhamma, and to teach others about it as well. I believe that winning people over through dhamma is much better than conquering them through force. I am inscribing this message for the future, so that my son and grandson after me should not think about war. Instead, they should try to think about how to spread dhamma.”

His message to his subjects is also included.

"It is both wrong to praise one's own religion or criticise another's. Each one should respect the other's religion. If one praises one's own religion while criticising another's, one is actually doing greater harm to one's own religion. Therefore, one should try to understand the main ideas of another's religion, and respect it.”

While records of Ashoka's conquests are missing, these intimate quotes show inner thoughts of him to portray him as a warm-hearted man. This helps strengthen the main idea of the chapter: Ashoka was a great king who was tolerant and lawful to his subjects.

II.2 Akbar

The mighty conqueror Timur (or Tamerlane) invaded India in 1398 A.D. He did not face much resistance during his invasion, so he simply walked over to Delhi. One of his descendents, known as Babur, established an empire which unified an India that used to be split among various Muslim and Hindu kingdoms. The empire is called the Mughal Empire.

Akbar was the third emperor of the Mughal Empire. During his reign, the empire covered most of the northern and central India, being one of the most powerful empires of the age. He expanded vast territory of the empire, a policy that three following successors also pursued, yet in a less successful manner. He is credited to have not only expanded the empire, but also firmly consolidated the emperor's power over his territory. In the early years of his reign, he did not tolerate Hindus and other religions, but after series of religious debate with learned scholars of many different religions, he began to exercise tolerance.

The Indian textbook devotes a chapter to Mughal emperors and their administrative systems. This chapter introduces how the Mughal Empire was founded and shows achievements of few emperors beginning with Babur. Among Muslim rulers of the Mughal Empire, Akbar is the one who receives the most attention and best evaluation. His name is mentioned more frequently than that of any other emperor throughout the chapter. Akbar is further praised by the expression, “the greatest of all the Mughal emperors, for he not only expanded but also consolidated his empire, making it the largest, strongest and richest kingdom of his time.”

One of the reasons that Akbar is considered a hero in Indian history might be that he practiced religious tolerance. He embraced different kinds of religions, despite being a Muslim himself. For example, he showed high respect towards Jesuit missionaries, who later recalled him as a very accessible and caring lord. Indeed, remarks on Akbar's religious tolerance are repeated multiple times in the text. His debate with Jesuit missionaries, interfaith debates at Fatehpur Sikri with Muslims, Hindus, Jainas, Parsis and Christians are described in one separate section.

He even invented an eclectic religion called 'Din-i-Illahi.' Further, the textbook emphasizes with colored text that Akbar's religious tolerance as one of the main reasons for the empire's continuance for a century and a half in the subcontinent filled with such a heterogeneous population.

II.3 Siraj ud-Daulah

Siraj ud-Daulah was the last independent Nawab of Bengal, after whose reign British East India Company started its rule over Bengal. The Battle of Plassey between Siraj and the British East India Company provided a turning point in the history of India in that the victory of the British East India Company enabled it to take control over Indians. In the battle, Siraj was defeated with the betrayal of Mir Jafar, who later was made the Nawab for his contribution for the British in the battle. Siraj was captured during his escape and later executed by the order of Mir Jafar's son, Miran.

One of the main causes of the Battle of Plassey was an incident called 'Black Hole of Calcutta,' which happened after the conquest of Calcutta by Siraj ud-Daulah. When Siraj was angered by the British East India Company extending fortifications around the Fort William in
Calcutta without his permission, he ordered the company to stop. The company did not follow his order, only to face Siraj's retaliation. He conquered Calcutta and put 146 British subjects in a 20 by 20 foot chamber, which is known as the infamous Black Hole of Calcutta. (12) Only 23 of them survived. This incident provided a good reason for the British East India Company to proceed with its conquest of India.

However, the Indian textbook does not discuss this incident in detail. In the chapter where the Battle of Plassey is introduced, it simply writes, "After negotiations failed, the Nawab marched with 30,000 soldiers to the English factory at Kassimbazar, captured the Company officials, locked the warehouse, disarmed all Englishmen, and blockaded English ships." (13) There is no mention on the size of the warehouse or the number of people locked in it. The word 'Black Hole' is never mentioned. This is contrary to the British textbook's detailed description of the incident. History Scheme, a history textbook taught in British schools, introduces the incident in perspectives of both sides by discussing how Indian historians and British historians argue different numbers for the people who were locked in the Black Hole. (14)

From the Indian perspective, the Black Hole of Calcutta is not a very pleasant incident to write because it gives the British East India Company an excuse to some degree. In addition to avoiding discussion about the Black Hole, the Indian textbook strengthens the view that the British East India Company's conquest was illegitimate and unjust by saying that "It was refusing to pay taxes, writing disrespectful letters, and trying to humiliate the nawab and his officials." (15) By such negative expressions used for the British, Siraj ud-Daulah is portrayed as an able and strong ruler who fought against the British East India Company.

II.4 Rani Lakshmi Bai

Rani Lakshmi Bai was the queen of Jhansi, who also participated in the rebellion of 1857 as a leader of the revolting army. Her activities mainly took place in Jhansi, so she is sometimes called 'The Rani (Queen) of Jhansi.' She was one of the leading figures of the rebellion.

Lakshmi Bai is a national hero, whose masculine aspect is emphasized. The Indian government refers to her fights as 'heroic battles' when introducing her. (16) She is sometimes compared with Joan of Arc for her brave fights. (17) Her bravery as a woman is widely promoted to Indians; there are several fictions and films about her. (18) They usually portray her as a masculine warrior, wearing armor and holding a sword in her hand. The NCERT textbook for Class XII also has a drawing of her in armor, with a caption 'Rani Lakshmi Bai, a popular image.' (19) It implies that she is often depicted as a heroic warrior.

II.5 Mohandas Karamchand Gandhi

Mohandas Karamchand Gandhi is probably the most well known Indian of the 20th century. He was a political and spiritual leader of India during the Indian independence movement. His philosophy is characterized by satyagraha, which represents resistance to tyranny by civil disobedience, based firmly upon total nonviolence. He is commonly known around the world as 'Mahatma Gandhi,' or 'Great Soul.' He spent several years in jail both in South Africa when he was working as a lawyer and in India during his protests. He was assassinated in 1948.

The Indian textbook for Class XII, Themes in Indian History deals with Gandhi in one separate chapter (20) The book uses the expression 'Mahatma Gandhi' when indicating him in the title, which subtly shows respect toward him. The name 'Mohandas Karamchand Gandhi' used only twice in all 30 pages of the chapter. After introducing his real name, the book uses the name 'Gandhiji' throughout the chapter. 'ji' is a suffix used among Hindus which shows great respect to a person. (21) By how the book calls Gandhi, it is possible to assume that the book writes about Gandhi in a respectful context, which is not strange at all considering his worldwide renown and status in India as the Father of the Nation. It would be in turn strange not to portray him as a respectable figure.

The whole chapter is focused on Gandhi's life and the movements he led. The rise of Gandhi as the nation's political leader is first explained and then his achievements are discussed for the rest of the chapter starting from non-cooperation. The salt satyagraha is then discussed first as a case study. Description on the "Quit India" movement follows. After the book is finished with explaining Gandhi's independence struggle, it moves on to his later years and his assassination. In the last section of the chapter, it introduces various ways to know about Gandhi. Letters between Gandhi and Jawaharlal Nehru are included.

Gandhi's death is compared with that of Lincoln in the textbook. In the section 'The Last Heroic Days,' it borrows the view of the Time magazine and says "it was a bigoted American who had killed Lincoln for believing that human beings were equal regardless of their race or skin colour; and it was a bigoted Hindu who had killed Gandhiji for believing that friendship was possible, indeed necessary, between Indians of different faiths." (22) This comparison further makes Gandhi of a hero by putting him on the similar level as another well known hero, Abraham Lincoln.

III Villains

III.1 Mihirakula

The Gupta Dynasty started to decline in the 5th and 6th century. This caused many independent powers to rise and attracted foreign powers. Among them were the Huns. The Huns succeeded in annexing a large part of the Gupta Empire. Mihirakula was one of the Hun rulers during that period.

Mihirakula is described as a good ruler by a famous 7th century Buddhist scholar Xuanzang in his book "The Record of the Western Region." (23) It might be because he conquered large area of land, which at least extended up to Gwalior region.

However, in the Indian perspective, Mihirakula was not a very respectable person because he was an intruder and he did not practice religious tolerance. He destroyed temples and monasteries, with particular hostility towards Buddhism. This view is revealed in the government's narrative on Indian history. On the website of the Indian government, Mihirakula is described as "a cruel barbarian and one of
III.2 Aurangzeb

Aurangzeb was the sixth emperor of the Mughal Empire. Although he was the third son of Shah Jahan, he could become an emperor through a succession war with his brothers. His reign is characterized by many wars of expansion. The Mughal Empire reached its greatest territorial extent during his reign. However, after Aurangzeb’s death, the empire gradually began to decline.

Aurangzeb is a very controversial figure. He was a devout Muslim and his policies reflected his religious inclination. Hindu historians therefore consider Aurangzeb a terrible lord who suppressed his own subjects. Indian textbooks have traditionally supported this interpretation that he was a cruel and monstrous villain in Indian history. (25)

Different interpretations about his reign aside, there are disputes about facts on Aurangzeb’s reign, too. For example, facts on historical records of his temple destruction vary a lot. There is an opinion that he destroyed temples numbering of digits, if not five. (26) This opinion alludes to remaining records on Aurangzeb’s personal remarks. On the other side, there is an opinion that he never ordered temple destruction, guessing from the fact that he was a devout Muslim, whose religion orders no compulsion in religion. This opinion alludes to 1946 edition (before separation) of history textbook used in Bengal. (27) In article ‘Aurangzeb,’ Wikipedia, it is said that his policy of temple destruction clearly took place, although the number of temples destroyed are disputed from 80 to 60,000. (26) This article alludes to Richard M. Eaton’s 2000 book, Temple Desecration and Indo-Muslim States.

History textbooks of India also changed its view on temple destruction several times. As mentioned before, 1946 textbook taught in Bengal says,

“If Aurangzeb had the intention of demolishing temples to make way for mosques, there would not have been a single temple standing erect in India. On the contrary, Aurangzeb donated huge estates for use as Temple sites and support thereof in Benares, Kashmir and elsewhere. The official documentations for these land grants are still extant.” (29)

However, this view has changed after separation of India and Pakistan. Government approved textbooks have strengthened the view that he was “a religious Muslim who was anti-Hindu, who taxed them, who tried to convert them, who discriminated against them in awarding high administrative positions, and who interfered in their religious matters.” (30) This view has later changed in the 2007 edition of textbook, Themes in Indian History for Class XII. It says,

“All Mughal emperors gave grants to support the building and maintenance of places of worship. Even when temples were destroyed during war, grants were later issued for their repair - as we know from the reigns of Shah Jahan and Aurangzeb.” (31)

It is saying that Aurangzeb actually funded repair of destroyed temples, a view which is totally different from the one supported in previous history textbooks.

Although Indian textbooks dramatically changed their views on temple destruction policy of Aurangzeb, the traditional Hindu view is that he was a villain. This view emphasizes that in addition to ordering temple destruction, he insulted Shivaji, the Hindu founder of Maratha kingdom, by derisively calling him a “Mountain Rat.” (32)

III.3 Robert Clive

Robert Clive was a British officer who fought against Siraj ud-Daulah in the Battle Plassey. He won the battle with the help of Mir Jafar, a general of Siraj who betrayed his master. Clive gained fame from this battle, although his victory was largely due to his enemy's lack of loyalty, rather than his brilliant military tactics. His victory signaled the dominance of the East India Company in Bengal. Puppet Nawabs were appointed by the East India Company to rule Bengal in favor of the demands of the Company. When the Nawab did not cooperate, he was replaced with another one who was more cooperative. Clive later was appointed the governor of Bengal in 1767.

Clive in the history of India is clearly not a welcomed person to Indians. He was a soldier who fought against the Indians to establish the basis for further colonization of the country. This view is apparent in Indian history textbooks.

In Our Pasts for Class VIII, Clive is portrayed as a person who promoted the view that the East India Company should directly interfere with political matters of India, largely because of great profit it might bring. By emphasizing that Clive’s argument was based on economic reasons, the textbook gives the impression that Clive was a greedy man whose motivation was on money. The book includes a letter that Clive wrote to William Pitt, one of the Principal Secretaries of State to the English monarch, after the Battle of Plassey.

“But so large a sovereignty may possibly be an object too extensive for a mercantile Company ... I flatter myself ... that there will be little or no difficulty in obtaining the absolute possession of these rich kingdoms : ... Now I leave you to judge, whether an income yearly of two million sterling with the possession of three provinces ... be an object deserving the public attention ...” (33)

Here, Clive is arguing that the British Empire herself should take possession of the kingdoms in India because it might be very profitable. By including this letter of Clive, the textbook describes him as not only an invader but also a greedy man. He is further portrayed as a corrupt officer by pointing out the irony that he amassed great fortune in India, still was asked to remove corruption when he was appointed governor of Bengal, only to be cross-examined later for his suspicious accumulation of wealth. (34)

The textbook solidifies this view by including Clive's remark on his being 'astonishingly moderate' after the Battle of Plassey.

“Consider the situation in which the victory at Plassey had placed me! A great prince was dependent on my pleasure; an opulent city lay at my mercy: its richest bankers bid against each other for my smiles; I walked through vaults which were thrown open to me alone, piled on either hand with gold and jewels! Mr Chairman, at this moment I stand astonished at my moderation.” (35)

With this quote, Clive’s extravagant lifestyle is emphasized, so that the readers can confirm him as a money lover.

III.4 Muhammad Ali Jinnah

In 1947, Pakistan gained independence from British India. Among the most influential people was Muhammad Ali Jinnah, who is...
called 'The Father of Pakistan.' He supported the 'Two-Nation Theory,' which states that Muslims and Hindus should live in separate nations.

For Hindu nationalist historians in India, Jinnah is perceived as a villain because he promoted separation to form a Muslim state, which might have been under united India's authority if it were not for his contribution. Muslim opinions were minority, so things could be managed as the Hindus wanted however adamantly the Muslim opinion was. It was proved when Jinnah’s strong demand that the Muslim League had the right to choose all the Muslim members of the Executive Council was not approved. Hindu historians therefore may criticize Jinnah as a cunning person who weakened the potential of united India for cultural, political, and personal reasons. Sources that promote such views usually mention that he drank alcohol.

However, the Pakistanis do not consider him as a villain, but a hero. They call him Quaid-e-Azam or Baba-e-Quam, which mean "Great Leader" and "Father of the Nation," respectively. This is similar to calling M. K. Gandhi as "Mahatma Gandhi" or "Gandhiji." Also, he is praised as a person with ‘gifted leadership.’ This may be obvious because he is the one who gave a home for the Muslims. He is the father of the nation.

History textbook made by NCERT takes a more neutral stance, although it does contain some criticisms on him. In Themes in Indian History, Chapter 14: Understanding Partition, the book gives a chronological narrative on how partition happened. Stances of both the Muslims and the Hindus are considered, opposite to how the Indian government writes about partition by mentioning that unified India was not possible because of the Muslim League's disagreement to participate in the deliberations of the Constituent Assembly.

NCERT textbook rather focuses on both sides' opinions to balance neutrality. It might be an obvious consideration to avoid conflicts within the country. However, there are some parts that contain criticisms on Jinnah. The book points out that Jinnah’s Two-Nation Theory does not recognize that 'the history of conflict between communities has coexisted with a long history of sharing, and of mutual cultural exchange.' It is saying that Jinnah's rationale for separation neglected a possibility for harmony that had been coexisting with conflicts for a long time. It also criticizes that Jinnah’s demand mentioned above was 'unrelenting,' with the connotation that his request was too much.

IV. Conclusion

Defining a person in history as a hero or a villain is very subjective. Different nations make different evaluations on people according to their contributions on each country’s development. When countries evaluate historic figures, they reflect their judgments in textbooks that are taught in schools, so that students can naturally absorb the nation’s view on history. Government homepages also provide brief summary of the country’s history, which also reveal the governments' views on historic figures.

Indian history textbooks made by NCERT describe heroes and villains in the history of India using different expressions or providing different types of sources. When describing heroes, they use expressions that show respect, such as 'Gandhiji,' but they may use expressions like 'barbarian' for villains. Including letters or introducing what a person said are also ways of promoting its views on people. This paper investigated how Indian history textbook includes or intentionally does not include such information to support its evaluation.

Comparison with English history textbook showed that different evaluations can be made on the same person. However, the degree to which the textbook emphasizes its view varies from person to person. It can be interpreted as a method to avoid expected conflicts when describing one too radically.

Notes

3. Navercast: People and History, article “Ashoka”
5. ibid.
6. ibid, Page 81
8. ibid, Page 225
9. ibid, Page 250
10. ibid, Page 251.
11. ibid, Page 252.
12. Wikipedia article, “Siraj ud-Daulah”
16. History : Freedom Struggle, from the Indian government
17. Navercast: People and History, article “Lakshmi Bai”
18. Wikipedia article, “Rani Lakshmibai”
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5. Themes in Indian History, Part 2 (Class XII), by board of NCERT, 2007 edition.

Secondary sources

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Impressum · Datenschutz


Many sites dealing with the Republic of India, in the section on history, deal with British India. Article : British India, from Wikipedia. Historical. National Historiography of Heroes. IV.1 Sun Yat Sen

Sun Yat Sen is an influential revolutionary and political leader in modern China; he was the first provisional president of the Republic of China in 1912 and the cofounder of the Kuomintang (2). He played and significant role in opening the modern era of China in 1911 by overthrowing the Qing Dynasty. It can be seen from the excerpt that people in People's Republic of China view Chiang as a betrayer and a fascist ruler. Chiang tried to eliminate the leftist elements that could threaten his control of Kuomintang, so he massacred thousands of suspected dissidents and communists in Shanghai. (24) These purges made Chiang seen as an anti-communist, and that angered the communist China.