CONFLICTS IN INDIAN HISTORY TEXTBOOKS:

BETWEEN AVOIDANCE AND ABUNDANCE

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Abstract

The history textbook controversy in India between 1998 and 2004 saw the opposition of two series of textbooks. A major subject of disagreement concerned the treatment of conflicts: first, the interpretation of certain events as conflicts, and then their inclusion or omission in the textbooks. This article analyses the way social conflicts and violence have been thematised in history textbooks in India over the last forty years. The argument here is that when the textbooks are elaborated primarily as nation-building instruments, the historical narratives they contain avoid the representation of social conflicts within the nation. This implies that conflicts (and violence) can be mentioned, but only when they involve the nation against its 'others'. This hypothesis is developed comparing the historical narratives in successive textbooks on medieval and modern India.

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Introduction

In 1996, Krishna Kumar wrote an essay in which he argued that "institutional education in [India] avoids imparting the knowledge of issues that involve conflict". At the beginning of his account, he reports an episode which occurred in Delhi in 1984, on the day schools reopened after the anti-Sikh riots that followed the assassination of Indira Gandhi. The school principals had received specific orders to make sure children would not discuss the riots in their classes. "Apparently, these orders were given to convey the idea that normalcy had been restored, so the normal curriculum was what the teachers should follow." On that day, Kumar was observing one teacher trainee who was giving an English lesson in grade six. She asked a child to build a sentence with the verb 'to arrive'. The example the boy gave was "when a Sikh arrived in Delhi, he was killed by Hindus". The teacher seemed stunned by "the horrifying bluntness" of the sentence but followed the order not to discuss the events in class and continued the English lesson as if nothing had happened.[1]

Approximately twenty years later, a new social science textbook for class XII was written in which not only the 1984 anti-Sikh violence is included as a subject of study but also the 2002 Gujarat riots and the Ayodhya dispute (The *Hindu*, 17 August 2006). This textbook was ready for the academic year 2007-08, but its contents were already disclosed in August 2006 and caused a lot of stir.

Even if we take into account the urgency, after which the order not to talk about the riots in schools was issued, the decision still bears witness to the reluctance of the educational system to acknowledge social conflicts in India. But this attitude seems to have changed with the new textbook. What happened? How can we explain the change of attitude in the way conflicts are dealt with in school curricula?

[1] Kumar, K. *Learning from Conflict*, New Delhi, 1996, pp. 6-7.

In order to shed some light on this question, I will look at the way **social conflicts and violence have been represented in history textbooks in India over the last forty years**.[2] In the next part, I will develop my hypothesis and identify its different components. I will then turn to the history textbook controversy which took place mainly between 2000 and 2004, and that saw the opposition of two series of textbooks. A major subject of disagreement concerned the treatment of conflict: first the interpretation of certain events as conflicts, and then their inclusion or omission in the textbooks. The divergence in points of view was particularly evident concerning the representation of the Hindu-Muslim relations in medieval India. We will first consider this point. Then, a closer examination of the textbooks on modern India – notably the way Mahatma Gandhi's assassination is depicted - will allow us to see the differences in the treatment of conflicts in this troubled period of Indian history. The last part concentrates on the question of how violence is depicted, or rather not depicted, in the textbooks. In concluding I discuss the continuities and discontinuities that mark the most recent series of textbooks.

Educational Material and the Representation of Conflicts

At first glance, the few studies on the question of representation of conflicts in textbooks and in schools (in India or elsewhere) point to the avoidance of societal conflicts in schools and educational material. I have already quoted Krishna Kumar's argument about the Indian educational system. Michael Apple, an American sociologist having studied the curriculum and the textbooks used in the United States, arrives at a similar conclusion. He shows that any mention or representation of social conflict is systematically avoided in the school environment.[3] Thus, studying very different contexts, these two authors arrive at the same conclusion: textbooks tend to bypass social conflicts.[4]

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[2] I follow Kriesberg's broad definition of social conflict according to which social conflict is considered to exist "when two or more persons or groups manifest the belief that they have incompatible objectives" (Kriesberg, L. *Constructive Conflicts. From Escalation to Resolution*, Lanham, 1998, p. 2).

[3] Apple, M.W. *Ideology and Curriculum*, New York 2004, chap. 5.

[4] Other studies on the treatment of conflicts in textbooks include Pathak for India (*Social Implications of Schooling. Knowledge, Pedagogy and Consciousness*, Noida, 2002) and Rodríguez for Argentina ("Poverty, Exclusion and Social Conflict in the Schoolbooks of

This observation caught my attention and constituted the starting point of my reflection. Yet this premise has to be substantially nuanced within the Indian context. Indeed, after having analyzed the three consecutive series of Indian textbooks, I noticed that conflicts are mentioned on certain occasions. A closer study of when and how they appear in the textbooks suggests the following specifications: **when the textbooks are elaborated primarily as nation-building instruments, the historical narratives they contain avoid the mention of social conflict within the nation. Conflicts (and violence to a lesser extent) are referred to, but only when they involve the nation against its 'others'**.

Each part of this assumption needs some clarification. First, the hypothesis that textbooks avoid references to social conflict is applicable only '**when the textbooks are elaborated as nation-building instruments**'. As a matter of fact, states use the school system to mould their 'citizens'. Since the school is supposed to influence young minds, political regimes model it in such a way that it transmits the 'right' information. The school was, and still is, considered a training-ground for responsible citizens.[5] Yet, I should clarify at this point that this study is not about the reception of a certain discourse but a study of the discourse itself. I do not deny that the school is in a position to play a 'nationalizing' role, but I feel that some caution is necessary when determining the degree of influence exerted by the messages it circulates.[6] However and even though there is no guarantee that the messages transmitted by the school will be absorbed by the students,

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Argentina during the First Peronist Period", *Paedagogica Historica*, Vol. 43 (5), 2007, pp. 633-52).

[5] Schleicher, K. "Nationalism and Internationalism. Challenges to Education", in Schleicher, K., ed. *Nationalism in Education*, Frankfurt am Main, 1993, pp. 13-38.

[6] The school's influence has its limitations as seen in the case of the former Soviet Union and East Timor. Thus, the political regime in the former Soviet Union was challenged from within even as schools dispensed an education based entirely on communist ideals (see Laville, C. "La guerre des récits : Débats et illusions autour de l'enseignement de l'histoire", in Moniot H. and M. Serwanski, dir. *L'histoire et ses fonctions: Une pensée et des pratiques au présent*, Paris, 2000, pp. 151-64). In East Timor, all efforts to impose an Indonesian identity failed despite the numerous strategies employed by the Indonesian government since the mid-1970s. The education system was designed so as to instil Indonesian values and practices in children, but this attempt at assimilation met with failure (Arena, A. "Education and Nationalism in East Timor", *Social Justice*, Vol. 25 (2), 1998, pp. 131-48).

the potential strength of this system appears clearly to the actors who are in a position to use it.

The first two series of Indian textbooks were prepared with an overt nation-building aim which has been stated and re-stated in the successive official documents on education. In 1952, the Mudaliar Commission Report defined the goals of secondary education in the following words:

> "The aim of secondary education is to train the youth of the country to be good citizens who will be competent to play their part effectively in the social reconstruction and economic development of their country."[7]

In the same spirit, the 1986 National Education Policy emphasized the function of national integration that the school was expected to perform. The Curriculum for Primary and Secondary Education resulting from this policy remained faithful to this concern. Hence, the first part of the curriculum dealing with the stakes and goals of education clearly states:

> "[at] this point of our history, the most urgent need is to consciously develop national spirit and national identity. Education, as an instrument of social transformation, should ensure that its beneficiaries and products demonstrate a national consciousness, a national spirit and national identity which are considered essential for national unity."[8]

The same desire for nation-building is manifest in the curriculum prepared in 2000. The first chapter contains a strong reaffirmation of the conception of the school as an instrument to reinforce the nation-state:

> "The school curriculum must inculcate and nurture a sense of pride in being an Indian through a conscious understanding of the growth of Indian civilisation and also contributions of India to the world civilisation and vice versa in thoughts and deeds. Strengthening of national identity and unity is intimately

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[7] Quoted in Advani, S. "Educating the National Imagination", *Economic and Political Weekly*, Vol. 31 (31), 1996, p. 2077.

[8] NCERT. *National Curriculum for Elementary and Secondary Education. A Framework, Revised Version*, New Delhi, 1988, p. 5.

associated with the study of the cultural heritage of India, rich
with various hues. […] [Education] should be seen as developing
a national spirit and national unity essential for national
identity."[9]

The official documents of the last fifty years then display the same zeal
for nation-building. The nation-building process advocated in these
texts was intended to have a homogenizing effect on the population
and fight against separatist or insurrectionary tendencies. As we shall
see at the end of this paper, the last curriculum (2005) and the textbooks
elaborated on its basis are somewhat different.

Regarding the second element of my hypothesis, that **the historical
narratives contained in the textbooks avoid the representation of
social conflicts within the nation**, I speak here of a straightforward
avoidance and *not* the type of ambiguous amnesia described by Ernest
Renan when he writes that:

"l'essence d'une nation est que tous les individus aient beaucoup
de choses en commun et aussi que tous aient oublié bien des
choses. […] tout citoyen français doit avoir oublié la Saint-
Barthélemy, les massacres du Midi au XIIIe siècle."[10]

The way Renan writes about amnesia is paradoxical: he does not give
any detail about the events his readers are "supposed to have already
forgotten", which suggests that he assumes that his (French) audience
is well aware of what they should have forgotten. According to
Anderson, the explanation of this paradox is to be found in:

"a systematic historiographical campaign, deployed by the state
mainly through the state's school system, to 'remind' every
young Frenchwoman and Frenchman of a series of antique
slaughters which are now inscribed as 'family history'."[11]

Anderson notes that Renan does not write that every French citizen
must have already forgotten the Paris Commune as, at the time, its

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[9] NCERT. National Curriculum Framework for School Education, New Delhi, 2000, p. 12.
[10] Renan, E. *Qu'est-ce qu'une nation?*, Paris, 1996, p. 228.
[11] Benedict Anderson analyses Renan's affirmation in a chapter added in the second
edition of his book *Imagined Communities*. Anderson writes that the origin of this addition
is "the humiliating recognition that in 1983 I had quoted Renan without the slightest
understanding of what he had actually said: I had taken as something easily ironical what
was in fact utterly bizarre" (Anderson, B. *Imagined Communities*, London, rev. ed. 2006, p.
xiv).

memory was still vivid and the event could not, for this reason, be turned into a "reassuring fratricide".[12] The conflicts we will look at are thus not of the Saint-Barthélemy type, but rather correspond to the French Commune in that they either awaken vivid memories or have consequences in the present precisely for the definition of what is and what is not "family history".

In the last part of the hypothesis, I state that **conflicts (and violence) can be described but only when they involve the nation against its 'others'.** As we will see in the Indian textbooks, the identity of the 'other' might vary partially according to the different national conceptions reflected in the textbooks. Still, the British Empire is a constant other and the conflict with the *Raj* is a central element in the modern India textbooks. It might very well be that Krishna Kumar did not envisage it as a social conflict (in contrast with Kriesberg's definition quoted in footnote 1). Nevertheless, it seems not tenable to affirm that textbooks about the independence struggle do not impart "the knowledge of issues that involve conflict" (Kumar 1996: 7).

Violence appears in the hypothesis in brackets because it is sometimes mentioned but very rarely represented (I will come back to this question in the last part of this paper). Conflicts' intensity can be mapped along a continuum from physically non-violent conflicts to conflicts marked by extreme physical violence. But extreme violence is also qualitatively different in its potential for rupture and its traumatizing effect. In this sense, as many new incremental processes may follow this initial shiver, extreme violence has a foundational power.

The History Textbook Controversy and two Visions of the Indian Nation

In my previous research, I studied Indian history textbooks and the different readings of the nation and of Indian history they advanced.[13] In this regard, the treatment of social conflicts has been a recurrent

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[12] Anderson, B. *Imagined Communities*, p. 200-1.
[13] I developed this analysis in my PhD thesis "L'enseignement de la nation en Inde: le débat sur les manuels d'histoire (1998-2004)", Université de Genève et Institut d'Etudes Politiques de Paris, 2007.

issue in the writing of Indian history textbooks. There have been heated controversies about the categorization of certain events as conflicts, about mentioning or not mentioning certain conflicts and then about the way to speak about them.

There was such a controversy in India between 1998 and 2004 about the curriculum and history textbooks produced by the National Council of Educational Research and Teaching (NCERT), which is the federal institution entrusted with responsibility for framing school curricula and publishing textbooks. The textbooks elaborated by the NCERT are not used in most schools because most states of the Indian Union prepare their own textbooks for use in their respective government schools. For this reason, only approximately ten percent of the school-going children in India directly use the NCERT books. Nevertheless, NCERT textbooks have a symbolical relevance: as they stem from the Centre, the narratives NCERT history textbooks contain, for instance, gain the status of an official 'national' history.[14] NCERT textbooks also influence, directly or indirectly, textbooks prepared for use in state government schools.

In 1998 the Hindu nationalist party - Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP) or Indian People's party – came to power at the head of a coalition government at the centre. One of its early decisions was to replace the history textbooks, which had been in use since the 1970s. A wave of criticism followed this 'rewriting of history'. The BJP was accused of using the education system to instil its Hindu nationalist ideology in school children. The opposition came mainly from people defending a secular conception of the nation.[15]

This debate staged an opposition between two different conceptions of the Indian nation: on the one hand, the Hindu nationalist conception according to which national belonging depends on the adherence to a particular religion. Here minorities are accepted only if they confine their faith to the private sphere and if they recognize Hindu symbols as

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[14] In the following, the use of the term textbook without specification refers to the NCERT textbook.
[15] The practice of secularism in India is generally marked by the state adopting a policy of equi-distance towards all religions, rather than a separation of state and religion: Bhargava, R. "La spécificité de la laïcité à l'indienne", *Critique internationale*, Vol. 2 (35), 2007, pp. 121-47.

national symbols.[16] In contrast membership of the nation in the secularists' conception of the nation is determined by citizenship.

Each of these conceptions of the nation corresponds to a different vision of history. We can thus distinguish a Hindu nationalist historiography and a secular historiography based on antagonistic presuppositions concerning the role played by religious factors in history in general and the relations between Hindus and Muslims in Indian history in particular. In a Hindu nationalist perspective, the conflicts between Hindus and Muslims occupy the centre of Indian history since the arrival of Muslims in India. According to the secularist view, the conflicts between Hindus and Muslims began in the 19th century as a product of colonialism and of the British 'divide and rule' policy.

The first set of textbooks put forth the secular version of history. These books were written in the 1970s by historians influenced by a Marxist understanding of history. Not all the authors were Marxists but they all adhered to the secular ideal.[17] The authors chosen to prepare the second set of books, on the contrary, shared a Hindu nationalist vision of the nation and its history. In the rest of this article, I will designate the latter textbooks as NDA textbooks because they were written while the BJP-led National Democratic Alliance (NDA) was in power. As we will see, the two historiographies resting on two different conceptions of the nation will speak about / or not speak about social conflicts differently.

The social science textbook we mentioned in the introduction - published in 2007 – is part of the third series of textbooks, which was prepared after the Congress-led coalition won the elections in 2004. I will leave this series aside for now and come back to it in the conclusion.

The first series of history textbooks are marked by an insistence on the secular character of the nation and its national movement, and on the ideals of tolerance, harmony and justice. By emphasizing these values, the authors sought to impress them on the minds of their young

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[16] Jaffrelot, C. "From Indian Territory to Hindu *Bhoomi*: The Ethnicization of Nation-State Mapping", in Zavos J., A. Wyatt A. and V. Hewitt, eds. *The Politics of Cultural Mobilization in India*, New Delhi, 2004, p. 214.

[17] See Hoffmann, S.A. "Historical Narrative and Nation-State in India", in Sharma A., ed. *Hinduism and Secularism : After Ayodhya*, Houndmills, 2001 and Pathak, A. *Social Implications of Schooling*, 2002, pp. 112-20.

readers as natural values of the nation. The medieval India textbook in the first series contains a whole chapter on the Moghul emperor Akbar who ruled from 1556 to 1605 and is represented as a ruler symbolizing tolerance, while only two paragraphs are devoted to the reign of Aurangzeb who ruled from 1658 to 1707 and is popularly believed (whatever the historical accuracy of this representation) to embody politico-religious fanaticism and repression.[18] Akbar is described as follows:

> "Akbar was a great ruler not because he ruled a vast empire, but because of his concern for the country and the people. […] In many ways Akbar had the same ideas about ruling as did Ashoka. Ashoka said in one of his edicts 'All men are my children.' If Akbar had known about this he would have agreed with it. Akbar's great dream was that India should be united as one country. People should forget their differences about religion and think of themselves only as the people of India."[19]

History, as narrated in the above passage, is intended to stress Hindu-Muslim unity. The description of the *sufi* and *bhakti* traditions under the Delhi Sultanate (from the early thirteenth century to the early fifteenth century) is in line with this approach. These traditions are commonly presented as syncretic and the idea of syncretism is generally associated with tolerance[20]:

> "Among the Muslims who had come from Persia and other lands in the eleventh century were some *sufis*. They settled in various parts of India and soon had many Indian followers. The *sufis* emphasized love and devotion as a means of coming nearer to God. […] Because of the emphasis on love, they were tolerant of

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[18] Aurangzeb shares the epithet of 'history's villain' with Sultan Mahmud of Gazni who invaded North India seventeen times between the years 1000 and 1026.

[19] Thapar, R. *Medieval India. History Textbook for Class VII*, New Delhi, 1st ed. 1989, republished 2001, pp. 94-5.

[20] Van der Veer shows that syncretism is not always synonymous with tolerance. Furthermore, after a study of the worship of a *sufi* saint conducted in the town of Surat in Gujarat, he feels that one should be prudent when using syncretism with reference to *sufism* (1994). He also highlights the contemporary implications of the discussion on the syncretism of Islam as it is practiced in India. Some authors have used this idea to prove the 'Indianness' of Indian Muslims (van der Veer, P. "Syncretism, Multiculturalism and the Discourse of Tolerance" , in Stuart C. and R. Shaw. *Syncretism / Anti-Syncretism. The Politics of Religious Synthesis*, London, 1994, pp. 203-4).

other religions and sects, and believed that the paths to God can be many. […] The *sufis* did not try to convert Hindus to Islam but advised Hindus to be better Hindus by loving the one true God."[21]

The text then describes the *bhakti* movement:

"The *bhakti* teachers also taught that the relationship between man and God was based on love, and worshipping God with devotion was better than merely performing any number of religious ceremonies. They stressed the need for tolerance among men and religions."[22]

As we can observe with the above-quoted examples, as secular historians the authors of the old textbooks emphasize the prevalence of tolerance and harmony between different religious communities in Indian history. On the other hand, episodes of tensions and violence are approached rather hastily and summarily as we will see with the examples of the treatment of the medieval period, of the Partition and of Gandhi's assassination.

The textbooks' interpretation of 'medieval' Indian history, a period associated in some accounts with 'Muslim rule' in north India, has been particularly controversial.[23] In 2002, the authors of the newly published NDA textbooks were accused of wrongly depicting the medieval period as a time of Muslim oppression towards Hindus. In return, Hindu nationalists accused secular historians of leniency in their treatment of Muslims, who were portrayed as foreign invaders in NDA textbooks, and of ignoring the violence they perpetrated such as the destruction of temples and forced conversions.

Hindu nationalists were not the only ones to point out that secular historians avoided mentioning conflicts between religious communities.[24] Other scholars, who were not particularly sympathetic to Hindu nationalism, made similar observations:

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[21] Thapar, R. *Medieval India*, 2001, p. 53.
[22] Thapar, R. *Medieval India*, 2001, p. 54.
[23] The 'first chapter' of this controversy took place in 1977, see Rudolph L.I. and Rudolph S. Hoeber. "Rethinking Secularism : Genesis and Implications of the Textbook Controversy, 1977-79", *Pacific Affairs*, Vol. 56 (1), 1983, pp. 15-37.
[24] As Bayly notes in his article on communal riots between 1700 and 1860, we should certainly not assume that any conflict involving Hindus and Muslims or Sikhs and Muslims is a communal conflict. Yet, it can be considered communal when "there is

> "We have never really questioned the assumption that the purpose of teaching subjects like history at school, is to produce a past in the service of the nation. The dominant non-BJP histories did this by eliding any possible differences between religious communities within the nation. On this view, there were no religious or ideological differences between communities that could not be explained away by the imperatives of seeking wealth or power. Or, when all else failed we simply described this conflict as 'communal' or 'obscurantist', thus disavowing the possibility of genuine disagreement."[25]

In the same vein, we can quote Tapan Raychaudhuri who underlined the failings of secular nationalist historiography:

> "The xenophobic Hindu historian talks endlessly of Muslim tyranny, the vile nature of the Yavana beast. The radical-liberal historians, on their part, really do not help by playing down the facts of Muslim iconoclasm and temple destruction. Whether a Rama temple once stood where the Babri mosque was later erected is an almost irrelevant issue. What matters is that such things did happen all over Northern India. […] we need to understand and inform the lay public of the true nature and context of such happenings. More important, we historians have done a great disservice to our people by virtually papering over the history of violent inter-community conflicts. School text-books gloss over them with one-liners."[26]

Hindu nationalists not only reproached secularists with presenting Islam in an excessively favourable light but also for being too critical towards Hinduism. On the other hand, the secularists deliberately described the Hindu nationalist approach as 'Brahmanical'. This term refers to the desire to protect the higher status of Brahmins in society and to defend a strict observance of the caste system. The secularists believe that the Hindu nationalists transmit a Brahmanical interpretation of ancient history in which they fail to mention the

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adequate evidence that participants and observers both recognized that subjective matters of religious affiliations *did* in fact represent a significant, if not exclusive, issue in the conflicts" (Bayly, C.A. *Origins of Nationality in South Asia*, Delhi, 1998, p. 212).

[25] Mehta, P.B. "Desaffronising: Easier Said than Done", *Tehelka*, 26.06.2004.

[26] Raychaudhuri, T. "The Invention of Communal Ill Will", *The Telegraph*, 06.06.2006.

injustices of the caste system and justify upper-caste domination. However, the secularist textbooks mention inequality but they do not talk about the conflicts that it might cause. Thus tensions linked with caste questions during the independence struggle find no space in the old textbooks.

Conflicts related with castes are, indeed, very seldom touched upon in both series of textbooks. Ambedkar who, we could say, represented caste issues during the independence struggle, plays a very marginal role in both textbooks on modern India for class XII. In the old textbook, he appears only at the very end in the part concerning the writing of the Constitution. He enters the scene earlier in the NDA textbooks in relation to his demand for separate electorates for the 'depressed classes' (i.e. the former 'untouchable' communities), and the Poona Pact. Ambedkar was convinced that specific political rights were needed to further the emancipation of the 'untouchables'. Gandhi on the other hand opposed this measure because he thought that it broke social unity. A compromise was found with the Poona Pact that replaced the separate electorates by a quota of reserved seats for the 'depressed classes' in the legislative assemblies. The textbooks do not present the opposition between Ambedkar and Gandhi clearly and give the impression that the issue was solved with Gandhi breaking his fast after the signing of the Poona Pact on September 24, 1932.[27]

In the NDA textbooks the injustices of the caste system are not mentioned at all. Hindu nationalists do admit that there were conflicts, highlighting conflicts between Hindus and Muslims, but these conflicts implicate the group they want to stigmatize or exclude, i.e. the Muslims (and also Christians, generally in connection with British colonization). Thus Hindu nationalists place the source of conflict outside the nation as they imagine it. On the contrary, they do not mention the tensions within the nation 'as it should be'; they do not represent the existence of conflicts within the nation (for example between castes).

The authors of the old textbooks draw attention to the colonial influence on this interpretation of Indian history, where Hindus and Muslims are presented as two antagonistic groups. Romila Thapar

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[27] Mittal, S. C. *Modern India. A Textbook for Class XII*, New Delhi, 2003, p. 233.

claims that the Hindu nationalist discourse projects the two groups as the monolithic and uniform religious communities imagined by the Raj and treats them as a political reality.[28] She criticises this discourse as a whole because it conceals the social inequalities between different castes and pays no heed to the question of social emancipation of the most underprivileged castes. The projection of Muslims (and Christians to a lesser extent) as 'Others' diverts attention from the social inequalities within the 'Hindu' group.

The Freedom Struggle and Gandhi's Assassination

A comparison of the treatment of the freedom struggle in the two textbooks on modern India for class XII will allow us to show the differences in the treatment of conflicts in this troubled period of Indian history. [29]

In the textbooks written by secular historians (this example is from Bipan Chandra but the same could be said for the textbook on modern India for class VIII), the Congress is the principal actor in the struggle for independence. The privileged position given to the Congress's nationalism to the detriment of other political movements is characteristic of the old textbooks. It reflects the adherence of their authors to secular nationalism. The textbooks promote the Congress's nationalism by assigning to it the attributes of a progressive force that promoted and defended the nation's unity and fight for freedom against colonial exploitation and against Hindu and Muslim communal division. Bipan Chandra's *Modern India* textbook teems with a large variety of heroes and villains. The Congress Party is prominent among the heroes and the British *Raj* is ranked among the villains. Apart from the British government, the group of villains also includes communalists (both Hindus and Muslims).[30]

Secular nationalist historiography transmits a deprecatory view of the Muslim League in general, and of Jinnah in particular, as source of

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[28] Thapar, R. "The Future of the Indian Past", Seventh Lakdawala Memorial Lecture, 21.02.2004, http://www.sacw.net/India_History/r_thaparLecture21022004.html, accessed 3.01.2007.

[29] The old textbook from Bipan Chandra (1st ed. 1971, republished 2004) and the NDA one written by Satish Chandra Mittal (2003).

[30] Rai, M. "Jinnah and the Demise of a Hindu Politician", *History Workshop Journal*, Vol. 62 (1), 2006, pp. 235.

communal conflicts which led to Partition. As a matter of fact secular historians, who are determined to stress the unity between Hindus and Muslims in India, criticized the two-nation theory supported by the Muslim League as "unscientific and unhistorical" to take up a qualification by Bipan Chandra who describes the Muslim League between 1935 and 1939:

> "The Muslim League, led by Jinnah, turned to bitter opposition to the Congress. It began to spread the cry that the Muslim minority was in danger of being engulfed by the Hindu majority. *It propagated the unscientific and unhistorical theory that Hindus and Muslims were two separate nations which could, therefore, never live together*. In 1940, the Muslim League passed a resolution demanding partition of the country and the creation of a state to be called Pakistan after independence. The Muslim League propaganda gained by the existence of such communal bodies among the Hindus as the Hindu Mahasabha."[31]

Secular historians also drew attention to the decision of the *Hindu Mahasabha* (a Hindu nationalist organization) to cooperate with the British during the Second World War.[32] On the other hand, these historians turned a blind eye to the failure of the Communist Party of India to participate at critical points in the struggle for national independence.[33]

Hindu nationalist historians adopted a similar approach, but they reversed roles: in their textbooks on contemporary India, they highlighted the responsibility of the Muslim League and the fact that the Communist Party did not play an active part in the struggle for

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[31] Chandra, B. *Modern India*, 2004, 258-9, emphasis added.

[32] This decision was motivated by the intention of winning British support for the Hindus and it was also seen as a means for Hindus to be recruited in the army and thus "to acquire the martial skills necessary to 'resist' the Muslims" (Jaffrelot, C. "Réformes socio-religieuses et nationalisme (1870-1948)", in Markovits, C., dir. *Histoire de l'Inde moderne 1480-1950*, Paris, 1994, p. 556).

[33] The Communist Party of India (CPI) held its first conference in 1925. Between 1930 and 1934, the Congress Party organized the civil disobedience movement in which the CPI did not participate following a directive from the Comintern forbidding it to take part in any political mass activity. In 1942, the CPI opposed the *Quit India* movement. It did so following instructions from the Comintern that all actions should be subordinated to the defence of the Soviet fatherland and its policy of alliances during the ongoing war (Vanaik, A. "The Indian Left", *New Left Review*, Vol. 159, 1986, pp. 49-70).

independence but kept quiet the lack of participation of Hindu communalist parties.

We see here that the nationalist secularists equally condemned Muslim *and* Hindu communalism (though they identified the latter only with Hindu extremist organizations) whereas the textbooks rewritten by Hindu nationalist historians considered the Muslim League (and particularly Jinnah) as being solely responsible for Partition without referring to Hindu communalism. The NDA textbook *Contemporary India* for class IX was criticized for this type of asymmetrical presentation, emphasizing the Muslim communalist discourse of the Muslim League and omitting the Hindu communalist one of organizations like the *Hindu Mahasabha* and the *Rashtriya Sawamsevak Sangh* (association of national volunteers - RSS).[34]

Another omission in the *Contemporary India* textbook particularly caught public attention: Mahatma Gandhi's assassination, which was not referred to at all. Gandhi was killed in 1948 by Nathuram Godse who was a member of the RSS until the early 1940s when he decided to set up his own organization, the *Hindu Rashtra Dal*. He and his associates were also closely associated with the *Hindu Mahasabha*. After the Mahatma's death, the RSS was accused of involvement in the murder and the organization was banned until July 1949.

The book, published by the NCERT in August 2002, was withdrawn for correction shortly after its appearance and reprinted in October 2002. The new edition included only one extra sentence: "Gandhiji's efforts to bring peace and harmony in society came to a sudden and tragic end due to his assassination by Nathuram Godse on January 30, 1948, in Delhi while Gandhiji was on his way to attend a prayer meeting".[35]

This amendment, however, did not satisfy the critics who felt that the addition was insufficient. They felt that it was necessary to mention Nathuram Godse's relationship with the RSS and the Hindu Mahasabha, as well as the ban on RSS between 1948 and 1949. They

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[34] Rajalakshmi, T. K. "The Wrong Lessons", *Frontline*, Vol. 19 (22), 2002; The RSS, which defines itself as a socio-cultural organization, lies at the centre of the Hindu nationalist movement. It was established in 1925 by Dr Hedgewar with the aim of promoting and strengthening the Hindu nation.

[35] Om, H. *et al. Contemporary India. Textbook in Social Science for Class IX*, New Delhi, 2003, p. 57.

argued that the incomplete allusion to this event had its origin in the BJP's desire to avoid any mention of the link between the RSS and Gandhi's assassination.[36]

The omission of Gandhi's assassination gave rise to a large number of indignant comments on this lacuna, which attributed it to the BJP's desire to deliberately ignore this event. The author of an article that appeared in February 2003 in the English newspaper, *The Hindu*, deplores the way this tragedy is treated:

> "Our children, then, must grow up not knowing that Gandhi was killed. That Gandhi was killed by a Hindu. That his killing, was, indeed part of a wider political current which resented Gandhi's acceptance of Muslims as part of the Indian nation. All this, because that political current has finally come into its own and taken hold of the reins of power in New Delhi."[37]

Hari Om, author of the section in question, replied in an article published a few days later in the same newspaper that the "omission was not deliberate" and that it was due to "time and space constraint". Thus "it was impossible […] to include each and every development in the limited space available".[38]

However, the description of Gandhi's death was not much more detailed in the earlier textbook. Krishna Kumar (1996) analyses the way the book *Modern India* for class VIII presented this event. He begins by quoting an extract from the textbook written by Arjun and Indira Dev. I reproduce its central section below:

> "[Gandhiji] had devoted his life to the cause of Hindu-Muslim unity. When the communal riots broke out, he toured the riot stricken areas with his message of love and brotherhood to restore peace and communal amity. Gandhiji was in a riot-affected area of Calcutta on the day India became independent. The killings of Hindus and Muslims and the partition of the country had caused him deep anguish. *His message of love and brotherhood was not to the liking of some people. Their minds had been*

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[36] Peer, B. "Distorting History I", *Rediff on the Net*, 8.11.2002, http://www.rediff.com/news/2002/nov/08spec.htm, accessed 09.08.2006.
[37] RoyChowdhury, S. "The Killing of Gandhi", *The Hindu*, 04.02.2003.
[38] Om, H. "Omission not deliberate: author", *The Hindu*, 13.02.2003.

poisoned by their hatred for other communities. On 30 January 1948, a Hindu fanatic shot him dead as he was going to a prayer meeting. The Indian people who were just beginning to recover from the shock of the communal killings and destruction of the previous year were plunged into mourning."[39]

The information contained in this passage, Kumar points out, does not give the readers the necessary elements to make sense of the event. If we concentrate on the three sentences in italics, we understand from the first sentence that some people did not appreciate Gandhi's message of love and brotherhood. But no information is given about the identity of the individuals designated by the term 'some'. The text only makes it clear that their minds had been poisoned by hatred for *other* communities. The announcement in the next sentence of Gandhi's death at the hands of a Hindu fanatic leaves the reader without any explanation about the assassin's motives.[40]

The reason for this very partial narrative lies certainly in the desire to avoid the representation of social conflicts. However, for the reader to understand Gandhi's assassination, it would be necessary to mention the deep cracks that had appeared at the time between the Hindu and Muslim communities. But the authors of the textbook avoid this topic, giving the impression that they are glossing over aspects of events that make them uncomfortable.[41]

Let us return to the Hindu nationalist perspective and its treatment of Gandhi's killing in the textbooks rewritten between 2002 and 2004. The NDA textbook for class VIII, *India and the World*, does not deal with Gandhi's assassination.[42] The history section ends with India's independence. As we have seen, this episode is briefly recounted in the

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[39] Dev A. and I. Dev. *Modern India. A Textbook for Class VIII*, New Delhi, 1st ed. 1989, republished. 1991, p. 270-1, emphasis added.

[40] Kumar, K. *Learning from Conflict*, 1996, pp. 8-19. Arjun Dev paid Kumar back for the criticism in his own coin a few years later. In 2004, Kumar became director of the NCERT. He was also an advisor for the preparation of the class VIII history textbook for Delhi state which had decided to bring out its own textbooks (until then the state used the NCERT textbooks). Arjun Dev published a critique of this textbook in which he points out that Gandhi's assassination was not dealt with. There is only a brief reference to it on the last page of the text (Dev, A. "Looking Backward", *Communalism Combat*, Vol. 11 (108), 2005).

[41] Kumar, K. *Learning from Conflict*, 1996, p. 14-15.

[42] Sinha, S. *et al. India and the World. Textbook in Social Science for Class VIII*, Delhi, 2004.

second edition of the NDA textbook *Contemporary India* for class IX. In the single paragraph describing the event, Gandhi's assassination is introduced as follows:

> "Gandhiji was away to Calcutta when on 15 August, India won independence. He was busy there in restoring communal harmony between the Muslims and the Hindus. When the ministers in the West Bengal Government met Gandhiji with a view to seek his blessings on the Independence Day, Gandhiji told them: 'Be humble, Beware of power. Power corrupts… Remember, you are in office to serve the poor India's villages.' Gandhiji's efforts to bring peace and harmony in society came to a sudden and tragic end due to his assassination by Nathuram Godse on January 30, 1948, in Delhi while Gandhiji was on his way to attend a prayer meeting."[43]

The next paragraph deals with the first government of free India.

Thus, the NDA textbook does not give any more information than the old textbooks, and though some of the sentences and vocabulary are the same, the elements mentioned are not identical. They do also leave the reader even more perplexed about the reasons for the Mahatma's assassination than the paragraph we analyzed form the older textbook. The text describes Gandhi warning members of the West Bengal government about the perils of power and reminding them that their duty is to serve India's poor villages. After that, the text continues, without any other explanation, to Gandhi's assassination. Nevertheless, the vagueness here about Gandhi's assassination is not due - as it was for the secularists - to the reluctance to expose communal tensions. It is due, instead, to a refusal to mention the link between the murderer of the 'father of the nation' and the Hindu nationalist organizations.

This highlights the RSS's contradictory attitude to Gandhi. On the one hand, Hindu nationalists have a strong antipathy towards Gandhi and his philosophy of non-violent protest that they believe is cowardly and effeminate but, on the other hand, they try to 'co-opt' him so as to increase the popularity and accessibility of the Hindu nationalist movement.

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[43] Om, H. *et al. Contemporary India*, New Delhi, 2003, p. 57.

Representing Violence

It was already shown that the secularists emphasize the episodes of tolerance and harmony in Indian history. They avoid depicting conflicts between Hindus and Muslims and highlight the role of the Congress during the Independence struggle as well as Gandhi's non-violence. The profusion of illustrations concerning the struggle for independence in the old textbook on modern India (22 out of a total of 84 illustrations) can be explained by the importance of this period for the secular nationalist narrative. From the secularist point of view, the Congress was the principal architect of the independence struggle and of national unity during these crucial years for nation-building. The old textbooks stress the Congress Party's secular nationalism by treating it as the creator of the nation-state and the defender of unity and national emancipation against the exploitative forces of colonialism and the divisive factor represented by Hindu nationalism.

The Hindu nationalist rhetoric on the contrary emphasizes the necessity to restore and defend the Hindu nation against the Muslims and foreign influences. One might say that it 'exteriorizes' the Indian Muslims. As a means to defend the nation against a threat constructed as external, the use of violence is accepted and even encouraged.

The groups who took to armed resistance receive special attention in Mittal's book. This writer describes the role played by the nationalist revolutionaries and their offensive activities thrice in his book.[44] This is in consonance with the Hindu nationalist emphasis on the importance of martial skill, training, and traditions in defence of the nation. (Kovacs 2004: 381).[45] The focus on martial activities corresponds to the

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[44] In his 2003 textbook on modern India (2003), Mittal devotes chapter 6 "Some Major Armed Uprisings" to armed revolts against the British during the second half of the 19th century. He traces the emergence of the Wahabi and Kuka movements. He also talks of the Santhal rebellion during which members of the Santhal tribe got together an armed force to attack the British. Finally, Mittal mentions Vasudeo Balwant Phadke who organised groups of armed rebels (pp. 132-9). In chapter 10 entitled "Revolutionary Movements", Mittal describes the revolutionary activities for the nation's liberation in Maharashtra (the "sacrifice of the Chapekar brothers" (1879) and the "activities of the Savarkar brothers"), Bengal, Punjab and Delhi as well as the revolutionary activities organised overseas (pp. 183-92). Mittal also includes this topic in the chapter on Mahatma Gandhi and the national movement ("Mahatma Gandhi, National Movement and Revolutionary Activities", pp. 206-22).

[45] Through its various organizations the Hindu extremist movement motivates its followers to undertake physical training befitting a martial society. However, though

Hindu nationalist representation of the nation: a nation not 'under construction' but already constituted and needing to be defended. Hindu nationalists often expressed the opinion that their nation is caught in a warlike situation, which justifies actions that would be unacceptable in times of peace.[46]

Bipan Chandra's *Modern India*, in contrast, devotes no more than a few paragraphs to "revolutionary nationalism", which he also calls "revolutionary terrorism". Chandra's use of the term terrorist to describe his protagonists has provoked the indignation of Hindu nationalists, among others Devendra Swaroop. Swaroop accuses Chandra of comparing the methods employed by the Indian revolutionary movement with the methods of "Irish terrorists" and "Russian Nihilists" and of generally equating this type of nationalism with terrorism: "It is beyond our imagination that great patriots like Lokmanya Tilak, Lala Lajpat Rai, Hardyal, Khudi Ram Bose could be termed as terrorists by any present Indian historians".[47] According to Swaroop, the revolutionary movement constitutes one of the most glorious and inspiring moments in the struggle for freedom.[48]

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men participate in their capacity and duty as protectors, women's participation is limited to self-protection. Thus, organisations such as *Rashtra Sevika Samiti* and *Durga Vahini* train women to handle weapons for their own safety: Kovacs, A. "You don't understand, we are at war! Refashioning Durga in the Service of Hindu Nationalism", *Contemporary South Asia*, Vol. 13 (4), 2004, p. 381.

[46] Agarwal, P. "Savarkar, Surat and Draupadi. Legitimising Rape as Political Weapon", in Sarkar T. and U. Butali, eds. *Women & Right Wing Movements Indian Experiences*, London, 1995, p. 32.

[47] The two passages in Chandra's book that Swaroop refers to and criticizes are the following: "But the revolutionary young men did not try to generate a mass revolution. Instead, they decided to copy the methods of the Irish terrorists and the Russian Nihilists, that is, to assassinate unpopular officials. A beginning had been made in this direction when, in 1897, the Chapekar brothers assassinated two unpopular British officials at Poona. In 1904, V. D. Savarkar had organised the *Abhinava Bharat*, a secret society of revolutionaries. After 1905, several newspapers had begun to advocate revolutionary terrorism. The *Sandhya* and the *Yugantar* in Bengal and the *Kal* in Maharashtra were the most prominent among them. […] "Terrorism too gradually petered out. In fact, terrorism as a political weapon was bound to fail. It could not mobilise the masses; in fact it had no base among the people. But the terrorists did make a valuable contribution to the growth of nationalism in India. As a historian has put it, 'they gave us back the pride of our manhood'. Because of their heroism, the terrorists became immensely popular among their compatriots even though most of the politically conscious people did not agree with their political approach" (Chandra, B. *Modern India*, 2004, pp. 199-201).

[48] Swaroop, D. "They baffle us with their Goebbelsian mischief", *Organiser*, 02.07.2006. The *Organiser* is the official weekly of the RSS.

The secularists' as well as the Hindu nationalists' conception of the nation were carried through to some extent with the formation of the nation-state in 1947. In the old textbook, the history of modern India stops at this date. India gains independence and the story ends a few pages later, after mentioning in brief the movement of population between India and Pakistan and the accompanying violence, Gandhi's assassination and the drafting of the Constitution.

The creation of the two (which later became three) independent states of India and Pakistan (and later Bangladesh) and the accompanying carnage would have deviated from the main story of the establishment of a secular and democratic nation-state. Bipan Chandra mentions these events, but he does not allow them to deflect the reader's attention from the main plot of his story, the realization of the nation-state. The textbook ends with the following sentence:

> "With confidence in their capacity and their will to succeed, the people of India now set out to change the face of their country and to build a just and good society and a secular, democratic and egalitarian India."[49]

Once the nation-state comes into existence, the secular nationalist narrative comes to an end. According to the secular nationalists, Indians fought for their independence as a nation under construction. Having gained independence, the nation was completed. It had passed from the stage of a nation under construction to that of an independent nation-state.

According to Hindu nationalists, although independence was a crucial stage, their duty to protect and revitalize the nation continued after 1947. Therefore, Mittal's textbook contains another chapter after the one on Partition. This last chapter deals with the framing of the Constitution, the accession of the princely states to the Indian Union, Hindu-Muslim riots as well as the problem of refugees and, finally, economic problems. The textbook ends with the 'liberation' of Pondicherry and Goa. Yet, in the Hindu nationalist perspective, the aim is not achieved, the nation-state as it ought to be is not realized as

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[49] Chandra, B. *Modern India*, 2004, p. 273.

"[e]ven today, about a third of Kashmir territory remains illegally occupied by Pakistan, which it calls as *Azad* Kashmir".[50]

Yet, even if the NDA textbooks give more space to violent means to liberate and protect the nation, violence in itself is not described. There are only occasional brief hints to it. This is also the case for the treatment of Partition and it is valid for both series of textbooks. The books mention that there were riots and killings but nothing else. Of course, we would not expect violent acts to be described with great details in textbooks. Nevertheless, the books speak about riots only as a by-product of the advancement of history or of the development of the nation-state and they do not present the individual drama that they caused. The narration remains mainly that of a succession of political events following decisions of political leaders.

The old textbook refers only very cursorily to the violence which preceded and accompanied the Partition. The text contains a few references to the riots which happened before independence and after independence.[51] The violence of Partition is presented in a comparable way in the NDA textbooks even if, in these books, there is a clear emphasis on the Muslim League's responsibility for the violence before Partition.[52]

Gyanendra Pandey discusses the way Chandra presents Partition in this textbook. He sees it as emblematic of the general avoidance of the representation of social conflict and violence in what he calls the "dominant historiography" (that corresponds to what I called secular historiography).[53] Pandey explores the treatment of communal violence in India's colonial and post-colonial historiography and points out the

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[50] Mittal, S.C. *Modern India*, 2003, p. 261.

[51] See for example Chandra, B. *Modern India*, 2004, pp. 236, 268-70, 271.

[52] "The Muslim League did not recognize the right of the Congress to nominate Muslims to the Interim government. Further, towards the end of July, they resolved to withdraw its acceptance of the Cabinet Mission Plan and went on the pass the 'Direct action' resolution. According to a programme prepared for such action, 16 August 1946 was fixed as the 'Direct Action Day'. As a result communal riots broke out in Bengal, United Provinces, Punjab, Sindh and the North Western Frontier Province. [...]

The call for direct action had its maximum impact in Calcutta where communal riots broke out in an unprecedented scale. [The] Muslim League by adopting such a resolution provoked an atmosphere of communal hatred and anarchy. Mahatma Gandhi was deeply anguished by these riots. He castigated the Muslim's League's adoption of such a method in support of this demand and called it sinful." (Mittal, S.C. *Modern India*, 2003, p. 252).

[53] Pandey, G. *Routine Violence. Nations, Fragments, Histories*, Stanford, 2006, chap. 2.

avoidance or the marginalization of the role played by conflicts in society. He analyses the historiographical representation of mass violence and concludes that these conflicts are treated as aberrations and are, as a consequence, marginalized and removed from the main fabric of the historical narrative.[54]

Conclusion

Nations as imagined communities are generally the results of the coming together of groups from various origins and this mixing did not go without conflicts between groups that the national imaginary nowadays includes in the nation. However the textbooks as national history do not speak – or speak as little as possible – about these conflicts.

We see that the presentation of internal conflicts in nationalist histories poses problems as these narrations have precisely as their purpose to construct homogeneity inside the nation and to present the nation as a natural entity. As a consequence, the nationalist historical narrative omits to show how the 'nation' has been constructed as a collage, by addition, displacement and superimposition of successive parts. And that this process is not 'natural' and was not always harmonious. It sometimes used force in order to put together or maintain together the components of the 'nation'.

The study of the treatment of social conflict and violence in Indian history textbooks, conducted by looking at the representation of conflicts between Hindus and Muslims and to a lesser extent at the conflicts concerning castes, provides an explanation for the different representation of Hindu-Muslim relations within successive textbooks series. The secularists refrain from representing these conflicts or they defend the argument that there were no conflicts (thus nothing to represent) as they consider the Muslims to be within the nation whereas the Hindu nationalists do not. Regarding caste conflicts, both sets of textbooks avoid their depiction. They do mention the issue but they keep it to a minimum and do not treat them as conflict but rather as imbalances.

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[54] Pandey in *Routine Violence* talks about 'dominant historiography'.

As the authors of the first series of textbooks were influenced by Marxism, one might wonder if they depicted class struggle. In this regard as well, conflicts are not represented; what is highlighted is rather the advancement of the cause of the working class. The idea of consensus predominates as the textbooks emphasize that the Congress was defending the interests and fighting for the working class.

What is striking in both series of textbooks – be it through the avoidance of conflict when it is considered to involve communities within the nation or abundance of their representation when conflicts are seen to be between the nation and outsiders - is the direct link postulated between understandings of the past and the present: to define the nation both the secularists and the Hindu nationalists assume that the relations between Hindus and Muslims in the past define the status of Muslims in India today. Either the Muslims are presented as cruel invaders in the past and are therefore now excluded from the nation or they were tolerant rulers and are therefore now part of the nation. Irrespective of the relationship they imagine between Hindus and Muslims, the protagonists (secularist and Hindu nationalist) have not questioned the 'therefore'.

The most recent series of textbooks is different from the first two precisely because the people who elaborated it did not let a nation-building project entirely guide the textbooks' conception. First, they kept in mind some pedagogical concerns and, second, they distanced themselves from the opposition between secularism and communalism. In the last series to date, the rigid link between perceptions of the past and the present is less evident. This allows for a (prudent) representation of conflict and also for a certain representation of violence, notably during Partition. The narrative is less centred on the level of high politics and its decision-makers but leaves some space for stories about their impact on individuals.

We could wonder if the wider representation of social conflict in the last series of textbooks is due to a change in the conception of conflicts in society from a structural-functional representation according to which conflicts are negative because they destabilize the system to a more dynamic representation seeing conflict as a way to adapt to a

constantly changing environment[55]. The vision of conflict as dysfunctional has conservative consequences. It tends to prevent change. The more positive understanding of conflict allows for a more adaptable society and for a reflection of diversity. Moreover, one has to acknowledge the existence of conflicts to interpret its consequences.

This is not to say that the most recent textbooks do not look upon all conflicts as a trigger to change. Some conflicts - notably those related with caste and gender - brought positive change but, of course, the Gujarat riots or the destruction of the *Babri Masjid* in Ayodhya cannot be depicted as constructive events. Yet even these conflicts are presented in a light of fratricide, a deplorable fratricide but nevertheless family history.

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[55] See respectively Parsons, T. *Theories of Society: Foundations of Modern Sociological Theory*, New York, 1965. It is nevertheless important to specify here that for Parsons equilibrium did not equate static maintenance. There could be a moving equilibrium; and Kriesberg, L. *Constructive Conflicts. From Escalation to Resolution*, Lanham, 1998.

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