

Teaching and writing history

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Though much has been said regarding what should or should not constitute the history curriculum, the methodology that should be adopted for teaching has largely been ignored. It is widely believed that bright students do not opt for social sciences. History, as a part of social science, has also its share of such beliefs. Students grow up with a bias that learning history is boring and if you happen to suffer bouts of insomnia, open your history text book in order to experience the joys of instant sleep. To many, the study of history is all about memorizing facts and dates.

The existence of such negative attitudes towards social sciences in general, and history in particular, needs to be recognized and corrective measures taken to change such attitudes. History has few takers in the contemporary education structure. Such construction, values attached and competitiveness for achievement has had a negative effect on the popularity of history as a subject at the plus two and undergraduate levels.

Mathematical and science based areas of knowledge involving rationality and high levels of abstraction are construed more relevant to the public sphere. They certainly have a primary position in many government and private sector undertakings. They are also considered more masculine and instill a false sense of pride among those who are able to opt for them on the basis of marks. Subjects that involve greater degree of personal, social, communicative and affective modes of thought are seen as more relevant to the private sphere and are gendered as feminine. Arguably, history spans both spheres, as it has an important public dimension. Yet many of the skills required for its effective study - communicative skills, for example, which have erstwhile been gendered as feminine, are now considered equally important for the public sphere and for both the sexes. This

perception has to be viewed in the context of the post-industrial economy in which communication skills have a far higher profile than in the past.

Finally, what constitutes learning in society is also important. Historically, our society has valued the lone intellectual learning at its highest levels. As a result, learning that is seen as collaborative, negotiated and engaging personal perspective has often not been held in high esteem. History has not been recognized as a subject that is autonomous.

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The apparent contradiction lies between planning a spatially balanced syllabus, which gives due regard to a local, national and world perspective and the skewed structure of the negative curriculum which has been planned to please all communities and to displease none. In fact, each theme should be seen in its global context and a world time line could be used to build up structures in the pupil's mind, which are beyond the constraints of the syllabus. These techniques would provide a coherent program of study rather than a series of disjointed blocks.

Even 'facts' which the earlier regime deemed necessary to be mentioned in textbooks may be taught but with a clarity and sense of vision. There is no harm in teaching religion but it should not be governed by deranged communal and xenophobic fantasies while highlighting the specificity of each religion and its culture. It is imperative to also focus on an ultimately unifying matrix.

Therefore there is a need to shift from the fixed and unitary perspective of historical facts to a dual, even multiple, and dialectical perspective. Should emphasis on history of our religion and religious ethos become imperative, it is important to emphasise that religion may be a factor but not the factor in the shaping of history. When highlighting the negative aspect of acrimonious relations/animosity between different religious/ethnic communities, the positive aspects of religious interaction and intermingling should be underlined.

The beauty of history is that ideas can change with new evidence, and historical skills, like the thinking behind them, involve a layered process that needs to be broken down and understood much like peeling an onion to get to the core.

The debate between moral and historical education has become too polarised. However, the moral and the historical, both converge and differ.

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Having clarity about this is a sign of mature professional understanding. For instance, when dealing with women's history, teachers should use a range of sources and methods such as oral history, to reveal connections between work, family, culture, war and politics that illuminate issues far wider

than 'how women were treated'. The students should also be taught to link the local, immediate and seemingly ordinary issues to bigger issues engaging the society and government.

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As a consequence, students of history are less likely to be judged as meaningful or potential learners. However, there is considerable change in the perception now. Collaborative and communicative skills are increasingly more highly prized than lone intellectual activity. This puts history on demand as it helps sharpen communicative skills.

Often, I have been the object of puzzled stares from youngsters, whenever I told them that history is an interesting and useful subject. The unfortunate adolescent needs to look beyond the narrow career choices generally attributed to history. Today, history needs a marketing strategy like any other brand in the market. For example, women's history can provide students with fresh and intriguing access points to significant social and political trends, which may come handy while working for an NGO.

In today's world, people need to demonstrate initiative, inquiry and understanding which can be developed through investigative learning of subjects like history. The study of history is essential for a well-rounded individual who is capable enthusiastic, imaginative and knowledgeable apart from being compassionate. It has the power to develop investigative and problem solving skills as well as analytic and empathetic thinking useful in many career options. Like journalism or even the corporate world.

But if history can provide such wide prospects, why isn't it a subject which is as coveted, if not more, as science and mathematically aligned subjects. The problem largely lies in the way history is taught at the school and undergraduate level. A normal history class witnesses a dull faced teacher ranting off a lecture or worse, reading from the text. Equally outdated is the pattern of evaluation of the performance of the students.

Only teachers who are extremely motivated should be assigned the task of teaching history, for lovers of history are made not born. The sheer fascination and curiosity on the teacher's face and in the teacher's voice acts like a mirror. It is to be kept in mind that a weakly structured classroom regime can be very dull for students. The pupils reflect it back. Classroom activities should be fun but the fun should be designed to illuminate.

Therefore, history teachers ought to have a developed understanding of the nature of the discipline, and not like a history teacher at my son's school, who smugly told the students that the cartridge of the Enfield rifle evoked a reaction from Hindu as well as Muslim sepoys during the revolt of 1857, because the cow and the pig (the grease of which was used in the cartridge) were sacred to the Hindus and Muslims respectively.

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Each student should be made to write out a short summary of difficulties and his needs and discuss it in the tutorial class. The pace of teaching may be varied to meet the needs of all students. The students may be made to read different texts especially of literature, which reflect the history of the period in which they were written. It is time to add some spunk to the traditional talk and chalk based teaching of history if we want the discipline to flourish.

A teacher of history should plan lessons meticulously, manage classes effectively, teach with enthusiasm and engage pupils to their fullest ability. The teacher's focus of learning must be pupil centered and based on their specific needs. It is imperative to create interest and motivate the students while teaching and in this endeavor, simple pedagogical skills come handy. For instance, instead of dry reeling off of facts, the use of Initial Stimulus Material (ISM) or 'hook' (which could be an intriguing image, story or analogy or even a puzzle related to the topic) can act as a spring board for staged questioning, and leads to sustained interest in the class.

The ISM should be deliberately oblique because slow unfolding sustains interest. Other pedagogical devices include essay writing, debates, fancy dress shows, film screenings, visual aids etc. In short, the content of the lesson should be driven more by students than by the teacher. History teaching should involve setting out tasks for pupils, which are full of challenges and working out a strategy to incorporate, inquiry, discussion and sharing of ideas. The reoriented methodology of teaching history will help engage students as critical thinkers about the past so that they can fulfill their roles as good citizens.

This sophisticated learning brings to fore the issue of how to cover such a vast content. Thus the question arises as to what should and should not be included in the syllabus. In this regard, it would be worthwhile to adopt a broad and balanced approach, linking developments to one another and setting them in a world context. Instead of having textbooks, which are mere statements of attaining excellence, the books should also explore how ordinary lives can be rescued from condescension of those who write and teach history.

Here again the role of a history teacher becomes challenging, as truth telling is fraught with difficulties and dilemmas. The teachers need to be armed with strategies to help them deal with sensitive and controversial issues in the classroom. At the end of it, students should be able to understand and respond to bigotry, corruption, communalism and prejudice and the like in a positive manner.

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