

## TURK TALK

HISTORY

TEACHING OF  
THE PAST

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 **SHARPEN YOUR PENCIL** and answer this question: when did the Non-cooperation Movement begin? (a) January 1921; (b) November 1921; (c) December 1921; (d) May 1921. I'll wait. Put that smartphone away. No Googling.

This question, from a recent high school board exam, is typical of what one finds on examinations in history and social science. Had the question varied year with month—June 1885 (the formation of Congress) or May 1919 (the Jallianwala Bagh Massacre)—it might have tapped something useful. But does it matter if a 17-year-old can recite the exact month, some 92 years ago? (The question is itself arbitrary. Can't one argue that the movement actually began in 1920, when Congress first voted?) Such minutiae leave a rancid taste in students' mouths. No wonder they come to view history as little more than trivial pursuit.

An examination comprising such questions is not about education. Its singular and unabashed goal is to rank students on a set of decontextualised facts that measure only the ability to sit in one's bedroom with a stack of flash cards, while resisting

the temptation of television, *Facebook*, or even a good novel. Such questions nurture the misperception that learning history is about strengthening the muscle of memory rather than training the mind.

India is not alone in suffering this affliction. Think you know something about American history? Well, then, identify Gabriel Prosser and Benjamin Gitlow (Give up?) Prosser fomented a failed slave revolt in Virginia in 1800; Gitlow published a minor socialist newsletter and was arrested in 1921. One would have to look long and hard to find a single educated American who can say something meaningful about either character. Yet both names appear on the 2006 administration of the US Assessment of Educational Progress for high school students. That is not a misprint, 'progress' not regress.

And what if you really needed to know the month of non-cooperation or the name of Benjamin Gitlow's newsletter? That is why you have a smartphone in your pocket. How does recalling from memory that the MONTAGU Declaration was issued in 1917 not 1918 advance economic development? How does it help create a generation of entrepreneurs? If science and maths are the engines of development; if every hour in the school day is a precious resource, why retain school history? Is the only justification a sentimental attachment by a balding generation, "We had to suffer. So should you."

Sentimentality is a weak reed in a global village. A generation ago, if we wanted to examine George Washington's correspondence, we would have had to travel to Washington DC, curry favour with the archivist at the Library of Congress, and wait patiently in the anteroom until our turn. Now just fire up your laptop. Yet, amidst such changes, the teaching and testing of history remains snugly encased in an exoskeleton as impenetrable as a cockroach's. Students sit in rows reminiscent of Dickens.

### FAILED SYLLABUS

Teachers march through a printed syllabus fully aware that such excursions leave little more than faint traces in memory. Beads of perspiration drop from students' brows as they cram disembodied dates into their brains. At a time when global competition and education are uttered in the same breath, what brief can be offered for this type of instruction? If history is solely an exercise in memory, then let's capitulate to those IT guys who demand curricular lebensraum for chemistry and physics and maths.

Such a conclusion brings us back to Google, the mixed blessing of our age. On one hand, it is a modern wonder that we carry a device that renders encyclopaedias, atlases, reference books, almanacs and other remnants of the pre-digital era obsolete. On the other hand, this raging ocean of bytes has no coast guard policing its waters. It is dangerous out there in Cyberland. Every crank with a computer practices historiography without a licence.

What kind of historical narrative would do you like? Was communalism a British invention, prior to which Hindu and Muslim masses dwelled in harmony like the lion and the lamb? Or does communalism have deeper, more stubborn roots: Aurangzeb's destruction of the Vishwanath temple or Jai Singh II's attempt to remake Indian society in the cast of varnashramadharma? Which should you choose? The one that strikes your fancy? Should we order up our history like a favourite dish at a restaurant? This too is the consequence of Google. It makes it easy to nurse our narcissism, honour our prejudices, and massage our egos. What happened in the past? You get to decide.

Such is the reality today's students face. Multiple histories lure them with gaudy footnotes (often fabricated) that flatter their pre-suppositions in every venue — except school. There, history has no loose ends, no grey zones of ambiguity. Learn the syllabus and do well in the exam. Don't ask questions.

School, it is claimed, should prepare students for life. But too often the only thing school prepares students for is school. Outside the schoolhouse gate, the information revolution awaits. Our digital natives may be able to assess information yielded by a search engine but they often do not know how to sort through it. We squander the precious minutes of history instruction to produce parrots ill-equipped to assay evidence and weigh competing accounts. We have failed to teach them that history's most important questions are murky, and demand a willingness and a tolerance to wade through the muck until something like clarity — or even a hazy beam of light — appears. Google dishes up ample portions of information, but cannot teach sound judgment. History, well taught, can.

How can we bring the teaching of the past into the 21<sup>st</sup> Century? It will require us to face the fact that giving students a single textbook with no jagged edges, no competing views, no opportunity to examine original documents, and no practice in evaluating evidence is like preparing swimmers to survive a raging sea, but never letting them out of a wading pool. It is a failed pedagogy. Worse, this pedagogy fails a democratic society. For the only thing that saves democracy from demagoguery is the critical faculties of its citizens. The lifeblood of democratic mind is the ability to sort out truth from jingoism, to discern sound argument from empty bluster.

To read history, Voltaire once quipped, is to refute it. Good history teaches us what to accept and what to refute. We are obliged to make that judgment on the basis of evidence, not prejudice — even if we do not like where that trail of evidence leads. As commonly taught, history teaches us only to accept. It does not train the mind for democracy. It readies it for totalitarianism.

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