

# CBE to revise Hindu text in Social Science books

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Sacramento, Calif

**T**HE 500,000 sixth graders in California schools will be reading about Hinduism in a markedly different way from now. Earlier this month, the California Board of Education's (CBE) agreed to adopt revisions and edits in state social science textbooks for sixth gradersculmination of a months-long struggle for the Indian immigrants.

Nearly 100 activists, educators, parents and observers attended the CBE review hearing for revisions in state social science textbooks here on December 4—a process that is done every six years. Having spent several months preparing for the process, many Hindu activists and parents were cautiously pleased with the hearing's outcome.

Of the 170 'edits' initially proposed by Hindu interest groups, the CBE eventually rejected only 12 and passed the rest following a December 2 meeting of the state Curriculum Commission. This victory, however, was not easily won, with tempers flaring and emotions running high at the hearing.

Parents were given a chance to speak on the issue. Madhulika Singh said her 11-year old was so embarrassed by the textbooks that he became ashamed of being a Hindu. Singh's son was being made fun of by classmates who read simplistic and inaccurate tenets of Hinduism such as "Evil deeds cause a person to be reborn as a lower creature... if you have had bad karma you will be reborn as a chicken or pig."

Close to 1,000 parents signed the petition for changes, which is unprecedented in Cali-



Hindu Education Foundation coordinator Anjali Patel and Professor Tilak Sam Rao

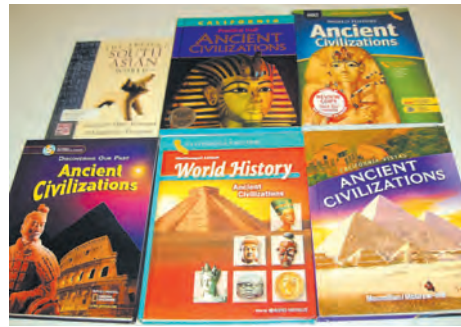
fornia. This enthusiasm was largely due to the encouragement and boost given to the movement by an earlier victory on a similar grassroots issue in Virginia.

The Vedic Foundation and the newly-formed Hindu Education Foundation worked for a year getting educated, getting facts, and signatures. In the process, many Hindu activists learned that Jewish, Sikh and Islamic scholars were also gearing up for the revisions. Los Angeles-based Hindu Americans and community activists such as Kevin Kaul and others brought the issue to local state representatives and Congresswoman Linda Sanchez, whose district has a high concentration of Hindus. Sanchez wrote to State Super-

intendent of Public Instruction, Jack O'Connell urging him not to take any immediate action on the textbooks but to "allow sufficient time for Indian-American views to be considered and to allow sufficient time for their charges of bias to be investigated."

Each of the Hindu foundations had their own list of edits, however, both were united in their rejection of the "Aryan Invasion theory," maintaining that the 'invasion' never occurred. The 170-odd edits were initially approved by the CBE and supposed to be adopted on November 9.

The CBE hired a three-person ad hoc committee including California State University,



Northridge, Professor Shiva Bajpai, to review edits in a transparent manner. Bajpai, who has taught at Northridge for nearly 35 years, approved 75 to 80 percent of the requested edits.

An organized objection to the ad hoc commission's review was raised by some progressive and leftist groups, which included social scientist Anjana Chaterji of CIIS and mem-

bers of IER (Indo-Eurasian Research). This content review committee included well known academicians Michael Witzel, a Harvard University professor of Sanskrit and member of IER; Stanley Wolpert from UCLA; and James Heitzman of UC Davis. The committee rejected about 58 out of the 170 of the proposed changes by the ad hoc committee. Witzel's coalition wanted little or no changes made to the textbooks and the arguments of both sides was presented to 14 commissioners from the CBE. The ad hoc committee adopted nearly all of his petitions except for the nagging issue of the Aryan Invasion, which Hindu experts vehemently opposed and Witzel's coalition ardently supported. In due course, the phrase, "Aryan Invasion Theory" was substituted with "Aryan migration" and the prefix, "some historians believe..." added.

One clear change recommended by the Vedic Foundation was the use of "deity" for "statue" in referring to the carved image of a God or Goddess, called *Murthi* in Sanskrit. Though Witzel's group was opposed, the CBE agreed to change "statue" to "deity."

Commissioner Munger was in the minority to accept all of Witzel's rejections. Yet he was voted down, with most CBE members siding with the ad hoc committee and several abstaining from voting due to "lack of expertise."

This change in textbooks, many supporters of the edits feel, will be in tune with the Board of Equal Opportunity guidelines, which state: "Portray accurately and equitably" and "Instill a sense of pride in every child in his/her heritage."

## Indian arrested for siphoning millions from 9/11 FEMA funds

SUJEET RAJAN

New York

AN INDIAN American, who worked as a top city official in New York, has been arrested for bungling millions of dollars from the Federal Emergency Management Agency (FEMA) funds in the wake of the September 11 terrorist attacks.

Natarajan R. Venkataram (41), and Rosa Abreu (38), both of Queens, NY, were arrested on charge that they defrauded the Office of the Chief Medical Examiner, US Attorney Michael Garcia said.

The money was rushed to New York City after the September 11 attacks as an emergency federal aid to help the chief medical examiner identify the remains gathered from ground zero. But two city employees siphoned off at least \$10 million for their personal use, according to charges announced by federal and city authorities. The duo were accused of running a scheme of shadow companies and fake contract bids to steal funds sent by the FEMA soon after the attacks, when the medical examiner was overwhelmed by the huge and delicate task of identifying nearly 3,000 victims.

Venkataram worked from March 1992 until last September as the director of the Management Information Systems department in the medical examiner's office, the complaint says, according to the *New York Times*. He was in charge of buying computer equipment and software

for the office.

According to the complaint, Venkataram set up a network of front companies that he controlled, then steered computer contracts from the medical examiner's office to them. In some cases the companies provided some services, but in others they were paid for doing nothing.

According to an assistant US attorney, Deborah E. Land, the city's losses in the fraud would be more than \$10 million. Abreu was the director of records at the chief medical examiner's office, and she shared 'an intimate relationship' with Venkataram, the complaint says. L. Stephan Zander, a city investigator, said in a deposition that Abreu told him in an interview in August that she used funds channeled through the front companies to pay for her home mortgage and to take care of her father.

Calls to lawyers for Venkataram were not immediately returned. Over prosecutors' objections, Magistrate Judge Andrew J. Peck set bail for Venkataram of \$1 million bond secured by \$400,000 in cash. He had not posted bail and remained in custody.

Prosecutors argued that there was a risk that Venkataram, who is from India, would flee. Investigators discovered packed suitcases in his apartment just before his arrest, federal officials said.

The *Times* report said city investigators received information regarding Venkataram's activities from a whistle-blower, who was identified in the complaint only as another em-

ployee of the medical examiner's office who came forward in October 2004. The employee said that Venkataram and Abreu appeared to have 'an unusually close relationship' with each other, and with a vendor company, Comprehensive Computer Resources.

Tracing the vendor company's bank records, investigators discovered that it had made payments for hundreds of thousands of dollars to two companies whose registered address was Venkataram's home at 61-25 97th Street in Rego Park, Queens. The registered president of another company that Venkataram used was Abreu's aunt.

Venkataram saw to it that the computer company won an \$11.4 million contract from the chief medical examiner and was paid with funds from the federal emergency agency. According to the complaint, Venkataram directed \$5.5 million from those funds to bank accounts in India, for reasons that were not documented, and he paid nearly \$500,000 to front companies he had set up. He arranged, the complaint says, for several of his companies to present bids for the same contract, to make it appear there was a competition.

The complaint says that a man who ran Comprehensive Computer Resources admitted to investigators that he was a partner in the scheme. He then became a confidential informant for city investigators and secretly recorded conversations with Venkataram.

## Aiyer loses Houston City Council election to Lovell

SUJEET RAJAN

New York

IN A race reminiscent of Congressman Bobby Jindal's heartbreaker of a loss in his bid for Governor of Louisiana, Indian American Jay Aiyer lost his contest for the Houston City Council by a narrow margin after he had the upper hand during the days leading to the election, including raising more money than his opponent.

Aiyer (36), a popular and well-known candidate in his constituency in his capacity as Houston Community College Trustee, lost his bid for Houston City Council At-Large Position 2 to lesbian candidate Sue Lovell, by only 579 votes, the closest margin of victory in 25 years of the Council's history. Lovell received 18,232 votes (50.81 percent) compared to Aiyer, who took in 17,653 (49.19 percent).

"I intend to run again, stay active in politics, continue to serve the community and the city of Houston," said Aiyer, speaking to *The Indian Express*, on phone. "We did very well, came close to winning; I'm very happy about that. I wish Lovell the very best for the job, and will help her in whatever way I can," he added.

Lovell, a long-time community and political activist, also serves on the Democratic National Committee. She was endorsed by the Houston GLBT Political Cau-

cus and the Washington DC-based Gay and Lesbian Victory Fund. She conceded in a victory speech that her victory was an example of winning against the odds. She acknowledged she had spent less money than Aiyer on her campaign, and relied mostly on word of mouth.

Aiyer said he will continue working to preserve and improve public safety, repair aging infrastructure, and expand the city's park space. He said he wants everyone in the city to work together on achieving these goals, and hoped he could join Lovell in getting things done. "We both share some of the same issues," Aiyer said. "There were some attack ads, very critical of my record. They were factually incorrect but it came so late that we could not do anything about it," said Aiyer.

Aiyer said he is encouraged by the fact that there are more Indian Americans in the political arena, but noted that candidates have to prove themselves to the community by doing solid work the grassroots level.

Aiyer is a lawyer specializing in immigration and public law. He has also been a senior management consultant for Deloitte and Touche, L.L.P., working to improve the operations of public, educational, and non-profit institutions. He is the author of several reports on management solutions in governmental operations.

