
Against History (News Item Dawn)

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MMA against teaching pre-Islamic history

By Raja Asghar

ISLAMABAD, Feb 21: Religious parties in the National Assembly were on Wednesday up in arms against teaching Pakistan's pre-Islamic history in schools to find Speaker Amir Hussain willing to keep the issue burning in a house committee, ignoring some dissenting voices in the ruling coalition.

Members of the six-party Muttahida Majlis-i-Amal also staged a token protest walkout over the inclusion of chapters about Hinduism, Buddhism and ancient emperor Chandragupta Maurya in the history textbooks for classes VI to VIII after a heated discussion, before a listless and inconclusive debate on the law and order situation in the absence of the boycotting People's Party Parliamentarians, the main complainant in the matter.

The government used the second PPP boycott after the question hour – in protest against violence during the Feb 10 by-election for a National Assembly and a provincial assembly seat in Sindh – to push through a bill seeking to establish a National Institute of Oceanography without any debate.

Five MMA members had raised the history textbook issue through a call-attention notice, but their claim that the inclusion of chapters they considered objectionable had caused a "grave concern amongst the public" was disputed by Minister of State for Education Anisa Zeb Tahirkheli and some other ruling coalition members, who accused the religious parties of seeking to keep students ignorant about glorious periods of the sub-continent's history such as the Indus Valley or Gandhara civilisations.

But the authors of the notice seemed unimpressed despite some interjections from the chair to justify the teaching of pre-Islamic history for the sake of knowledge and described the changes as part of what they saw as a government attempt to secularise the educational curricula.

"That may be your history, (but) ... our history (starts) from Makkah and Medina," MMA member Farid Ahmad Piracha shouted as he led his alliance's walkout when Bushra Rehman of the ruling Pakistan Muslim League, then chairing the proceedings, allowed party colleague Ali Akbar Vaince to voice his support for the chapters even after the speaker had referred the matter to a house standing committee for more discussion as he did with another call-attention notice of five PPP members regarding changes in the examination system for classes IX and X.

PML member M. P. Bhandara staged his own protest walkout earlier after Speaker Hussain rejected his plea to disallow the MMA call-attention notice for what he called not being of immediate importance and seeking to erase 5,000 years old history starting from Moenjodaro from the textbooks.

The speaker repeatedly said there was no harm in studying pre-Islamic history for the sake of knowledge as he and his contemporaries did in schools, colleges and universities but, to an apparent surprise of the treasury benches, accepted an MMA demand to refer the matter to the standing committee, which the alliance members could use to continue the controversy.

Ms Tahirkheli earlier told the house that the decision to include the new chapters –

the like of which existed in old history books but were excised at some later stage – was taken by an inter-provincial committee which also included ulema and rejected allegations that Islamic chapters were being deleted or curtailed from the curricula.

"If you don't regard the history of Moenjodaro and Harappa as your heritage, then you may delete it. But if you are proud of it then students must know about it," she said.

Muttahida Qaumi Movement member Israrul Ebad saw the MMA call-attention move as an attempt to provoke a "fight between Muslims and non-Muslims" and asked the chair to "take notice of this notice".....

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