

UK's Citizenship Test

Why in news?

Historians have called on the United Kingdom's Home Office to review its citizenship test.

What is the citizenship test?

- The UK's citizenship test is called the 'Life in the UK Test'.
- It is a requirement for applicants who wish to acquire UK citizenship.
- This test is based upon an official handbook published by the UK's Home Office.

What is the issue with this handbook?

- In this official handbook, the Britain's history was retold in such a manner that it sanitises the nation's violent and brutal past.
- The handbook contains misleading and false representation of history during Britain's colonisation.
- This representation may be difficult for citizenship applicants from nations that were former British colonies.

What are the objections to this test?

- In an open letter, 181 signatories have called for a review of this test.
- They want a review because the handbook, on which this test is based upon, is fundamentally misleading and demonstrably false.
- The test appears to glorify Britain's colonial past, say the historians.
- There are many examples that the historians have highlighted in their letter.

What are the highlighted examples?

- The handbook states that while slavery was illegal within Britain itself, by the 18th century, it was a fully established overseas industry.
- The historians say that whether slavery was legal or illegal within Britain in the 18th century was a matter of debate.
- The handbook does not mention about the three million people who were transported as slaves and that people died during these journeys.
- It states that in the 20th century, there was an orderly transition from

Empire to Commonwealth, with countries given their independence.

- The historians say that decolonisation was not an 'orderly' but an often-violent process.
- The handbook promotes the misleading view that the Empire ended simply because the British decided it was the right thing to do.
- Similarly, the abolition of slavery is treated as a British achievement, in which enslaved people themselves played no part.
- The historians state that people of colour and people in colonies also have not been adequately represented in this retelling of history.
- Their contributions to the development and growth of Britain have been entirely omitted in the handbook.

Was the Home Office's citizenship test handbook ever revised?

- Given the handbook's latest edition was published in 2013, the presence of these inaccuracies are even more troubling.
- The handbook is not just a relic that has been continuously used without consciousness about these factual errors and misstatements.
- Conversations regarding historical inaccuracy and the whitewashing of Britain's colonial past were very much occurring in 2012-2013.
- This was the time when the process for republishing the handbook in an updated edition had started.
- Despite this, the Home Office had made no attempts to consider its own role in regurgitating convenient, white-washed retellings of history.
- Historical knowledge is and should be an essential part of citizenship.
- However, historical falsehood and misrepresentation should not.

Why is the handbook problematic?

- For applicants from former colonies with knowledge of imperial violence, this account is offensive.
- For those from outside the former Empire without prior education in history, the official handbook creates a distorted view of the British past.
- For British citizens in general, the official history perpetuates a misleading view of how we came to be who we are.

What has been the Home Office's response?

- It appears that the Home Office has taken note of the letter.
- A Home Office spokesperson said that the Office would keep its contents under review and consider any feedback that they receive.
- But, it was not clear if the concerns highlighted in this specific letter were going to be considered by the Home Office.

- This comes at a time when the Black Lives Matter movement has led to widespread protests across the UK and Europe.

Source: The Indian Express

