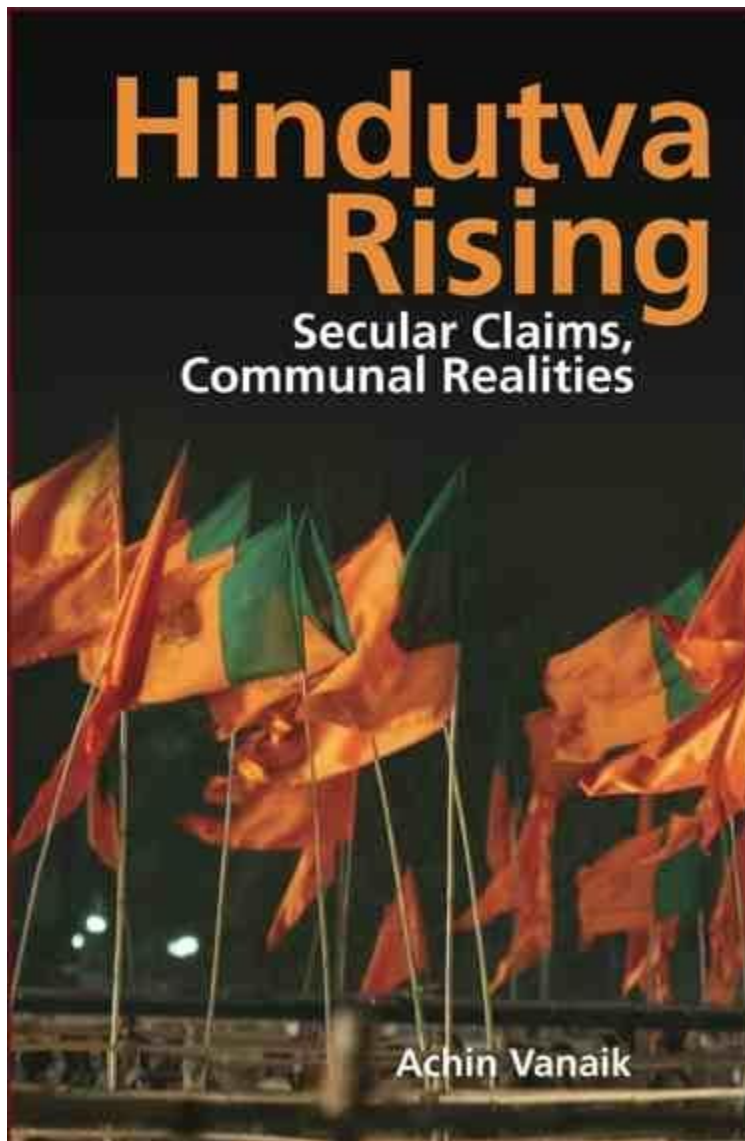


How does the BJP Control Educational Institutions in India?

24 Oct 2017

A book extract from *Hindutva Rising: Secular Claims, Communal Realities*



[Image courtesy Tulika Books](#)

...With regard to educational and cultural institutions of all kinds, the plan is simple: put Sangh loyalists into positions of control and authority in each and every case. If the BJP is in power, appointments favourable for the party are made by the central or state governments. If they are not in power in a state, this cannot be done directly. The BJP, then, uses governmental pressure to ensure this. Coming under the scope of the Sangh, then, are heads and senior personnel of central and state universities and research institutions; bodies empowered to determine the content of textbooks for government schools at central and state levels; cultural academies of various kinds; archival centres; training institutes, from the select and prestigious Indian Institutes of Technology (IITs), to those institutes producing film and television graduates; censorship boards; and so on. Besides this, the Sangh has its own network of schools. It is the biggest such private network in the country. They can substantially determine the curriculum and have it approved by its own state governments. In July 2016, the central government announced that it would institute a cultural mapping of artistes of various kinds into three categories – ‘Outstanding’, ‘Promising’ and ‘Waiting’ – for the purposes of sanctioning official funds and trips abroad. This, of course, is a way to introduce its own system of patronage to gain loyal members within the cultural sector.

Since the Sangh does not have a penumbra of intellectual heavyweights around it, too many of its appointments lack essential credentials, or even credibility as serious scholars or administrators, thus arousing public criticism, and sometimes, strong opposition within the institutions, as was the case in the Film and Television Institute of India (FTII), Jawaharlal Nehru University (JNU) and Hyderabad Central University (HCU). More specific protests by university students against interventions by either BJP governments, or the Akhil Bharatiya Vidyarthi Parishad (ABVP), the RSS student wing, which seeks to suppress their freedoms of association and speech, have taken place in Allahabad, Benares and Chennai. Such public

criticism is usually dismissed as coming from politically motivated figures comfortable with earlier dispensations which were highly biased and routinely appointed leftist intellectuals. In short, what the government is now doing is rectifying an earlier bias. On the whole, this counter-argument is not very persuasive because the mediocrity and unsuitability of various appointments has become very blatant...

... On 31 October 2015 a five-member committee, comprising four bureaucrats and one favoured academic, was set up to bring out what is now called the T.S.R. Subramanian Committee Report, to serve as the basis for a new education policy. It was submitted on 27 May 2016 to the government, which has not so far made it public, arousing suspicions that even before the possibility of any widespread public scrutiny and discussion, it might be quietly finalised and pronounced as a policy after consultations with some state governments. The drafts were to be sent to state governments, but the education minister Ashok Chowdhary, of the non-BJP government of Bihar, pointed out that no draft had been sent to his office, even as the former central human resources and development minister, Smriti Irani (now replaced in a recent cabinet reshuffle), castigated Bihar for not sending in its suggestions. The report was procured by Frontline magazine, and two of its recommendations are particularly disturbing. It talks of the necessity of 'value education' being integral to teaching. This is a long-standing obsession of the Sangh, and is shorthand for inculcating and indoctrinating Hindutva values and beliefs in schoolchildren from an early age. At the university and tertiary level, the report calls for curbing student involvement in politics, meaning that educational institutions should effectively ban or otherwise prevent such activities. This can also clear the way for the ABVP, which is affiliated to the RSS (and not to the BJP). The RSS claims to be a cultural, not a political organisation...

... Shortly after his victory, Modi ordered the Information and Broadcasting Ministry to carefully

start monitoring issues trending in the social media. In particular, there was to be a close vigil on people tagging Modi by name in blogs, tweets, and Facebook posts. This obviously creates the possibility of data being passed on to intelligence agencies like the Intelligence Bureau, whose former head, A. Doval, is now the national security advisor at the PMO; to the Research and Analysis Wing; and to the Central Monitoring System, which is a clandestine electronic mass-surveillance data-mining programme. Modi has not proposed privacy legislation that would protect personal data from abusive use by government authorities. In fact, a stronger surveillance state is being constructed.

An earlier measure instituted by the previous UPA government is important here. It was an effort to give each citizen a unique identification number and card, courtesy of the Unique Identification Authority of India, on the basis of quite detailed personal information on each person's mobile number/s, occupation, residence, family details, and so on. This is also called the 'Aadhar' card. In one respect, this is part of the neoliberal project to help target welfare schemes, and avoid universalising such benefits. The effort to make such a card make *compulsory* in order to receive certain benefits has not been stymied by the Supreme Court. But the process of expanding the net of Aadhar card-holders is going on, as is its linkage to certain consumption rights, even though these cannot, technically, be denied to non-card-holders. The real danger is the database that will come out. Despite official assurances that this huge reservoir of personal information will not be misused, the Aadhar legislation, as it stands, has no guarantee of recompense against possible misuse, while crucial exceptions are laid down that can allow secret surveillance and elimination of the assumed privacy of those investigated. District judges (who, unlike judges at higher levels, can be pressured by the government much more easily) can sanction access to this database for the government without disclosure to, or

discussion with, the person or persons affected. Furthermore, a joint secretary authorised by the government can do the same ‘in the interests of national security’...

This freshly edited extract has been published from [Hindutva Rising: Secular Claims, Communal Realities](#), by Achin Vanaik, New Delhi: Tulika Books, 2015, with permission from the publishers.

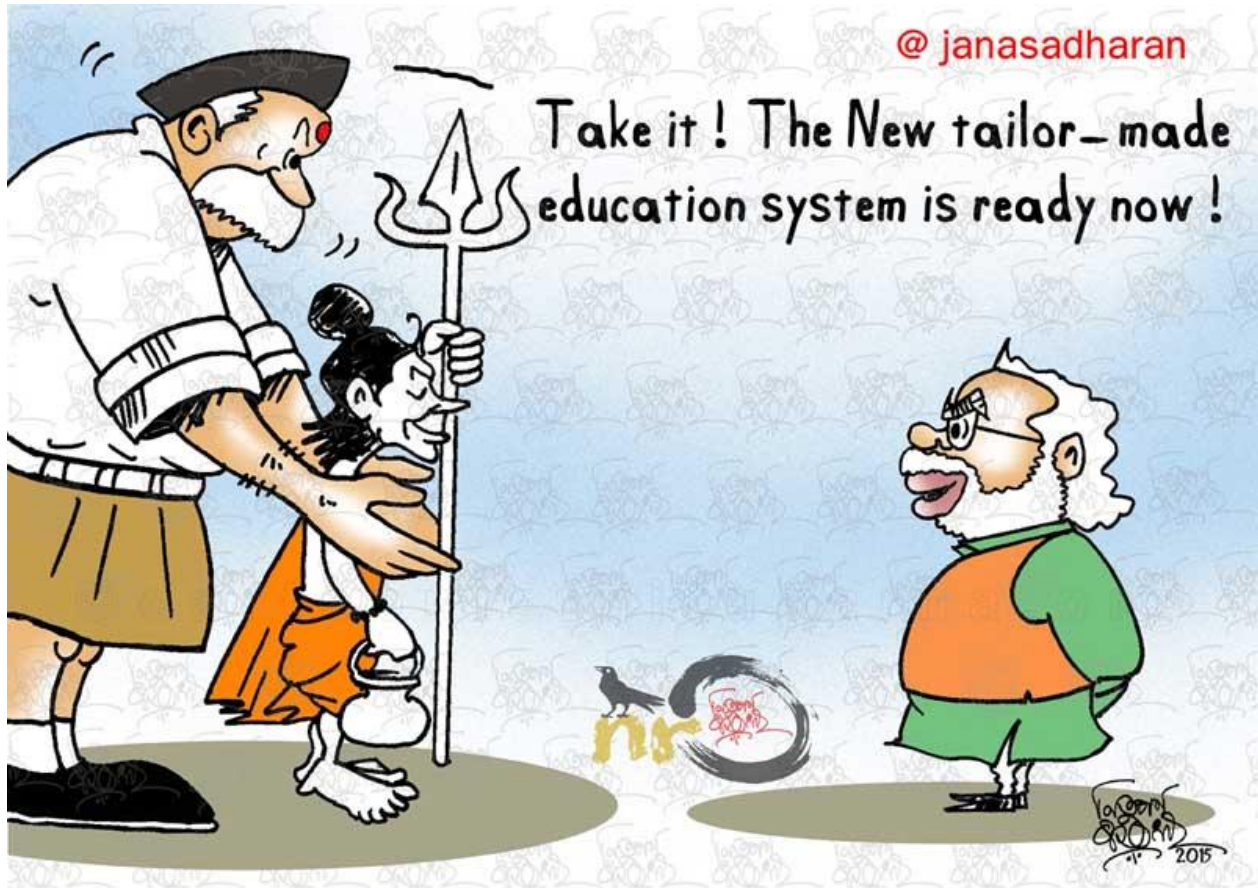
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Courtesy: Indian Cultural Forum

Saffronising and Corporatising Indian Education: Critique of the National Educational Policy 2016 Draft

13 Aug 2016

After almost three decades the Hindu Nationalist Party in power has proposed paradigmatic shifts through an elaborate restructuring of the Indian educational policy frameworks. It is a drastic change from the previous NPE 1986 of Rajiv Gandhi government. The NEP 2016 Draft is released by the MHRD with reference to a background document called TSR Subramanian Committee Report, May 2016.



Cartoon by Nituparna Rajbongshi

There was very little criticism in the media with the required critical accent. Now it has been widely concluded that NEP 2016 is an attempt to Hinduise and saffronise Indian educational policy. This is a continuation of the saffronisation agenda of the Vajpayee regime during which the ICHR heads like MGS officiated the saffronisation of NCERT history text books (See Sarkar 2002, Thapar 2000). The current news that Amit Shah and RSS ideologues have met Javadekar and insisted on implementing this draft also confirms and validates this critique. There is no sufficient addressing of the crucial issues such as gender, caste and the environment in the draft. Human rights and constitutional rights issues are grossly excluded and Sanskrit and Yoga are projected beyond all reasonable proportions right from school education. As per the draft, Hindu religious dogmas and Varnasramadharmas should be injected into young minds in the guise of moral education in schools. This detailed

critique of its Cultural Nationalist vision or totalitarian philosophy and flawed historical premises, is done in the context of the incorporation of RSS agendas in both TSR Subramanian Committee Report and in NEP Draft 2016. The Preamble to Vision/ Mission clearly shows the Cultural Nationalist or Hindu Brahminical agenda that works in perfect unison with the global corporate capitalist forces.

Erasure of the Indigenous Educational Legacy

The preliminary statement of the NEP 2016 draft, released by MHRD, says that Vedic Education is the earliest form of education. This is not based on historical or archeological premises, and is contestable in the light of new findings on Indus valley civilization and its Sramana legacies and antiquity (See Ratnagar 2000; Shendge 2002). The Indus valley civilisation and its art, architecture and epistemological cultures are now found to be older than 8000 years, and is the oldest civilisation known in the world (Sarkar 2016). It clearly pre dates the “Vedic age” which begins just 4000 years back, somewhere around the period BC 2000-1500, also marking the end of the Indus valley civilization. The concrete archeological evidences including the Yogi in *Padmasana* explains this ancient Sramana indigenous enlightenment legacy in India which was based on learning and the ethical dissemination of knowledge. The Jains view this Padmasana Yogi as Adinatha or Rishabha, and the Buddhists view him as a pre Buddha in sharp contrast to the Hindu claims that it is Pasupati Siva. This dominant claim is as anachronistic as the claim that Pasupata Saivism originated in parts of north India only in the 5th and 6th century AD.

The draft begins with such an erasure of the true indigenous Sramana educational legacy of India, and ascribes it to the “Vedic” legacy from Iran:

The Education System which was evolved first in ancient India is known as the Vedic system. The ultimate aim of education in ancient India was not knowledge, as preparation for life in this world or for life beyond, but for complete realisation of the self. The Gurukul system fostered a bond between the Guru & the Shishya and established a teacher centric system in which the pupil was subjected to a rigid discipline and was under certain obligations towards his/her teacher. (1)

Reviving and Revamping the Teacher-centric Gurukul Vedic System

Further, the notion of the Vedic Gurukula system of education as teacher centric, and the ultimate aim as self realisation, is also foregrounded to obscure and cover up the Sramanic knowledge traditions. Sramanic traditions are democratic, anti caste/Varna/patriarchal, and much more rational and oriented towards the student/learner, than the centralised patriarchal hegemonic exclusivist paradigm of the Vedic Gurukul system. The latter system was denied to the non Brahman Varnas within the Varnasramadharm, women, and Avarnas in general. The notion of Vedic education or Gurukul system as a teacher centric model and for it to be revived or modeled, is also against modern and democratic decentered approaches to pedagogy and contemporary educational practice (Sen 2002).

Anachronisms, Fabrications and Distortions of India's Educational History

The dating of the oldest universities in the world and India are also deliberately skewed and distorted by the draft, clearly against the concerted opinion of the leading educationists and historians in India today who have dated Nalanda and Takshila in rational ways (Sen 2011). The time period of Takshila and Nalanda are pushed into unbelievable anachronisms, evidently distorting the history of education in ancient India with a hidden Hindu agenda:

The world's first university was established in Takshila in 700 BC. The University of Nalanda, or the Nalanda Mahavihara as it was known at the time, established in 4th century BCE, was one of the first great universities in the world. (1)

The dating of Takshila to 700 BC is bogus, and is done in the manner of Sudarshan Rao who was obsessed with pushing the dating of the *Mahabharata* further into the remote past, in order to increase the antiquity of the Hindu epic. It is evident that this pre-cursive and preclusive dating is done to obscure the life and teachings of the Buddha and his Sanghas in the 6th century BC. To mask the Buddhist university system that has its beginning in Nalanda, Vikramasila and Odantapuri, a Vedic origin story in the manner of Purushasukta of the Rigveda is fabricated and

placed well in advance. It may also be attributed to the obscuring of the Indus valley legacy of culture and knowledge that may be continuing in fractured and decentered forms even after BC 1500 during the Sramanic traditions of democratic education. Nalanda's dating to BC 4th century is also problematic as it came up in early CE to prominence especially after 4th century AD in the Gupta period, as rightly pointed out by Amartya Sen in the earlier reference. An acceleration in time is given to Nalanda Mahavihara to guard the undue early dating of Takshila. It has to be perceived in its own context critically.

Stress on “Nationalist” Legacies and Gokhale/Roy/Malaviya Trio Instead of Phule/Savitribai/Narayanaguru

The glorification of Gokhale, Ram Mohan Roy and Malaviya during their “Nationalist days”, and the silence on Phule and Savitribai from Maharashtra and the LMS and CMS missionaries, Narayanaguru and Ayyankali from Kerala, regarding their pioneering educational missions from early 19th century onwards, is highly unjust and parochial. Like the distortions done regarding the early universities and educational history in India, this “Nationalist” legacy of Indian education is also ahistoric, full of erasure, and partial or biased. It was Narayanaguru in Kerala who gave the untouchable Avarna the message of liberation through education and empowerment through organisation (Sekher 2016). It was Ayyankali and Poyka in Kerala who pioneered such educational struggles among the dalits of Kerala. It was Ayyothee Thassar in Tamilakam who championed the educational activities along with his neo-Buddhism in Tamil Nadu in the late 19th century. There is not even a mention of Ambedkar — the greatest Indian academic scholar of his time who advised the people to “educate, agitate and organise” during the “Nationalist” period and provided scathing critiques of this “Nationalist” and cultural Nationalist discourses, which are, in the present time, assuming fascist proportions (Sekher 2015).

Over Emphasis on Skill Acquisition in the Changed “Knowledge Economy”

The report is also self-contradictory. There is a sharp contrast between the Vedic ideal of self realisation presented in the beginning, and in the thrust on skill acquisition (4) and the very concept of “knowledge economy”. Conceiving and conceptualising knowledge systems and its sustenance as an economy is part of the neo-liberal agenda and

corporate capitalism. Such a “knowledge economy” serves the interests of the market and the players of globalised capital. It is the logic of late capitalism that harps on unchecked growth and globalisation in such a knowledge economy which can be “developed or boosted” by misusing Indian education. For skill learning we already have departments of technical education and professional engineering colleges, poly techniques and ITI systems and technical training networks, in addition to various private institutions imparting technical skills based training and certification, all over the country. This emphasis on skill and technology is also part of a planned global agenda to deconstruct the philosophy of liberal humanities education based on social sciences and critical humanities which provide a critique of such ruthless commercialisation and neo liberal agendas. That Thatcherism choked the Birmingham School of Contemporary Cultural Studies (BCCCS) to its death because critical scholars like Stuart Hall and Paul Gilroy critiqued the racial neo-liberal agenda of Britain is a case in point here.



Image courtesy mhrd.gov.in

Elaborate Restructuring in Indian Education Under “National Developmental Goals”

It is in continuation with the impetus on the “National” that the idea of “national developmental goals” is proposed by MHRD’s NEP 2016 draft (5). What is national and what is development are issues to be contested and debated thoroughly in a democratic world. An aggressive growth and development agenda which is rendered as everything and the end goal without any state control and ethical regulation, is a messianic and destructive imagination of late capitalism and corporate-right wing nexus in the third world. It is imperative to define nationalism in a clear and democratic way and to set the lucid agendas of development and its goals after elaborate debates and reformulations.

Changed Vocabulary: No Emphasis on Secularism, Scientific Spirit or Democracy

This “Nationalist and Developmental” agenda pushes some of the key concerns of equity and justice to the periphery in the educational agenda in India. Words like secularism, socialism, equality, rationalism, democracy, inclusion etc. are rendered insignificant or obsolete by this neo-liberal Nationalist developmental goals, working in tandem with the cultural Nationalism thrust on heritage, tradition and religious amity (5). A discourse of exclusion and reactionary retrogression is in place in this drastic change in vocabulary.

Stress on “Nation’s Well Being and Development” and Lack of Emphasis on People’s Welfare

Nation’s well being and National identity is stressed and conceived as a major goal of education (5) and this is also in marked contrast with the self realisation Vedic model presented in the beginning (1). Though Gandhi’s quote here is presented as against the misuse of education for economic gains, his concept of basic education and that of Varnasramadharm, along with the projects of Harijanodharana and Gramswaraj or Hindu Swaraj, were actually Hindu hegemonic and Brahmanical in orientation, and paternalistic in practice. He viewed the crucial issue of caste as an internal issue of the Hindus to be addressed and redressed by the caste Hindus denying agency, speech, and self-determination to the victims of Varnasramadharm. It is worth remembering that his lethal use of the hunger strike to save the caste Hindus from becoming a minority led to the Poona Pact, which was criticised and exposed in Kerala in 1936 itself by critical thinkers and editors like Sahodaran Ayyappan as “Poona Pattini” — a term that has

set the media idiom here in Kerala. The untouchables rejected his term “Harijan” outrightly as it was the term of abuse imposed upon the children of Devdasis in the Vaishnava temples of Gujarat. Dr. Ambedkar's own work, *What Congress and Gandhi have Done to the Untouchables*, are historic lessons worth remembering here (Ambedkar 2002; Sekher 2012). Thus, the Gandhi's vision on education is again reactionary with the Hindu commonsense and Varnasrama consensus that shape it from behind.

Monoculturalism and National Goals

The NEP 2016 draft calls upon “the youth to become global citizens, with their roots deeply embedded in Indian culture and traditions” (5). What is Indian culture in the first place? There is no such monolith. In reality, it is only a plurality of regional vernacular cultures which exist in India. The old and Nationalist Upanishadic and Vedic, or Brahmanical Hindu hegemonic culture, cannot be thrust upon the vast majority of people who are outside the caste Hindu system or the Varnasramadharm (Sekher 2008). The dalit bahujans are Avarna who have a Buddhist and non-Hindu lineage (Omvedt 2006). Thus, what India has is a pluralistic tradition composed of a polyphony of cultures. A totalitarian essentialism lurks behind this violent and reductionist homogenous view of Indian culture as singular and Hindu or Vedic.

It almost sounds like Macaulay talking about the creation of native sahibs in his Minutes of 1835. The creation of such global citizens that is fixed and entrenched in Indian Culture and catering to the global “knowledge economy”, elaborates the globalised agenda of Indian Corporatism and Cultural Nationalism. A perfect union of corporate, global late-capitalism and cultural, elitist neo-Brahmanism of India, is visible in this global India agenda. The merging of the state apparatuses and modes of corporate production or market is another visible reminder of the onslaught of the coming to power of fascism (Griffin 1995). The Culture projected here as Indian is apparently the Hindu, or specifically the caste Hindu or Brahmanical Vedic/Vedantic or Upanishadic culture. It goes well with the type of hegemonic discourse of Hindu – Hindi – Hindustani – Dilli – Sanskrit. Are cultures of the outcastes and women or minorities included here? Why is there no mention of the cultures of the North East and the South in

particular? These cultures inevitably become subcultures or even counter cultures of the National. Thus the draft envisages a totalitarian and fascist monoculture of Hinduism for the whole of India in a perfect Cultural Nationalist manner or totalitarian fascist way.

Another important omission and silence on constitutional rights and guarantees in the draft must be read in this context of rising India image from Aurobindo. The vision of overwhelming India from Aurobindo (6) is like the “India Shining” campaign done during Pramod Mahajan’s and Vajpayee’s time. The passages of the draft here force a “rising India” sentiment which must be inculcated among every Indians. In a critical view, it is nothing but the Nationalist and more specifically the cultural Nationalist fervor that has become fascism in the present (Jaffrelot 2009). How this cultural Nationalist mobilisation has come to power misusing democratic process, and how it makes a mockery of our democracy and constitution, is also evident in the presence of extreme xenophobia and violence done to dalits and minorities in the country today. As a genuine early spokesman of Hindu India and divine life, Aurobindo had this sentiment earlier when he advocates a firm faith in rising India despite “every difficulty” and atrocity or caste violence in the present as per the draft:

In the words of Sri Aurobindo, “*The Indians must have the firm faith that India must rise and be great and that everything that happened, every difficulty, every reverse must help and further their end... The dawn will soon be complete and the sun will rise over the horizon. The sun of India’s destiny would rise and fill all India with its light and overflow India and overflow Asia and overflow the world.*” The rest of the 21st century could then belong to India.(5)

The problem with the Aurobindian vision is that it is deeply fixed in the Vedic/Vedantic worldview and its Brahmanical ideals; and is in sharp contrast to modern, democratic and secular vision of India enshrined in the Constitution. His books such as *Savitri*, *The Life Divine*, *Raja Yoga* and *Future Poetry* are increasingly recognised to be totalitarian texts of Vedic obscurantism and Hindu revisionism (Sharma 2003). Aurobindo’s overwhelming India and Vivekananda’s regenerated Hinduism often push forth and reiterate the Brahmanical hermeneutics that form the

base of cultural Nationalism in India (Misra 2005).

Gandhian Basic Education and Swadharma

The crisis with Gandhian basic education is also similar in reproducing and reinforcing the Brahmanical notion of Varnasramadharma as Swadharma (Gandhi 1962). His works like *Ideal Bhangi* and *Varnasramadharma* reveal this reality. His project of Harijanodharana and the very term Harijan originally used to refer to the Children of Devdasis in Gujrati Vaishnava Hindu temples; were out rightly rejected by the people at the bottom in his own life time as we have seen earlier. Ambedkar has also written volumes about the Gandhian mode of negotiating the caste issue as a mere eradication of untouchability and a reinstatement of Varnasrama. His notions of Gramswaraj and Hindswaraj also reinforce and reestablish the caste Hindu hegemony and the Brahmanical values in indirect and covert ways. Thus there is an urgent necessity to rethink and critique his basic education model and his view of education and social transformation especially in the light of 60 years of post republican Gandhian propaganda done using public funds through the All India Radio and DD television by the state. Such a propaganda eventually Hinduised the society, and now the Hindu Nationalists are in power through the ballot itself by making a charade of the Indian constitution and democracy. The distance between Hindswaraj and Hindurashtra is very little, as time tells us.

Silence on Issues of Gender, Caste, Sexuality and Ecology

The draft mentions the word gender only once in the section "Preamble to Mission". The precarious use of the term "gender gap" (11) to substitute, or erase grave issues of gender inequality and systemic discriminations based on embodied forms of subjugation, is highly contestable. Despite the bloody institutional violence done on historic victims of gender and caste, as in the case of numberless dalit girls and dalit researchers like Rohit Vemula in leading central universities in the country, there is no acknowledgement or an action plan to counter these serious issues of social exclusion and cultural forms of hierarchy and violence. Gender inequality in education, and its nexus with caste inequality, are not even addressed by the draft. Another major omission is that of the sexual minorities and transgenders in Indian society who are experiencing serious human rights and civil rights violations. While

Sanskrit and Yoga are pushed into the draft from all corners, it keeps mum on the crucial issue of ecological crisis, as seen in the recent devastation of the Yamuna flood plains and evasion of legal penaltee by an “Art of Living” cult group led by Sri Sri — a disguised Hindu demigod. The careful and cunning evasion and silence on issues such as gender, ecology, caste and sexuality are typical examples of the totalitarian and repressive regime and its social, political and ecological vision.

Education and the Globalisation Model

The NEP Draft 2016 talks about certain “Global Commitment”(13). It is ambiguous and in tandem with globalisation models of education which try to supply cheap labor to the globalisation processes, and misuse or allow the exploitation of a trained work force or developed human potentials, in a developing society like India. It must be remembered here that our commitment is primarily to our democracy, republic and constitution. We are also citizens of the world and it is based on the cosmopolitan and democratic values of liberty, equality and fraternity, rather than on any global commitment to any global corporate giants or MNCs. The impetus given to this global corporate commitment once again exposes the corporate-Brahmanical alliance that operates to supply human resources to the global capital.

Education as Performance/Growth

The Vision of “high performing education” is again another corporate vision and therefore contestable (14). It also contradicts the self realisation Vedic model, or the Gandhian model too (1). Also it is in sharp contrast to the social and cultural models of any form of liberal education in the modern world, and reduces the conception of education into growth and competition based on the capitalist and corporate models. It marks a paradigm shift from the social commitments in Indian educational policies from Kothari Commission to 1985 NPE. This corporate model is that of unimaginable performance and unchecked growth. Education, especially university education as a site of creation of critical consciousness in multi and inter-disciplinary formations, is largely ignored and sidelined by this performance agenda of speed, and unlimited growth and free trade. The economic logic of competition and high speed of growth

or performance, again points towards the corporate Brahmanical model of “excellence” and “high performance.”

Education as the Manufacture of “Products”

In an extreme vein of this corporate capitalistic commercialised view of education, students are termed as mere “products.” It is an extreme case of crass commercialisation and a dehumanising of the humans subjects in higher learning. Commodification of the whole system of education and students or researchers are evident in such expressions as “improve employability of the products of school and higher education”, under the section "Goals and Objectives" (14). Thus the goals and objectives are revealed to be that of global corporate capitalism. Its Indian Cultural Nationalist avatar of Hindutva fascism has merged perfectly with the corporate apparatuses in a perfect, totalitarian unison.

Another strategy of Cultural Nationalism is to project Sanskrit and regional languages beyond limits, and curtail the academic standards of higher education achieved and maintained through English throughout the university system. In the higher academia, this indirect attack and restriction on English is the attack on modernity and the rational cosmopolitan discourse. We have already discussed the check on secular and scientific temper enshrined in the Constitution in this draft. By catering to the regional linguistic chauvinisms and Cultural elites, the forces of Cultural Nationalism are deliberately playing the parochial linguistic identity card to centralise Sanskrit at the cost of the regional language chauvinists.

Conclusion: RSS Agenda and Saffronisation of Education

There were media reports that the Modi government has given maximum preference to the suggestions made by the RSS in this policy draft (Mahajan 2016). The latest news of the recent meeting of Amit Shah, RSS high priests and Javadekar, — the new head of MHRD — prove this premise of a Hindutva conspiracy. The suggestion to introduce value based education (carefully concealed caste Hindu values of Varnasramadharma obviously as the value); mother tongue teaching; reversal of non-detention policy; prominence to Sanskrit as a “living language” and

not as a classical language; and intense inclusion of Yoga in the schools, were also suggested by the RSS. The TSR Subramanian Committee that studied these things have accepted and carefully incorporated the Sangha Parivar agendas into the back ground document of NEP 2016 draft. Bureaucrats and Parivar/VHP affiliates like J.S. Rajput, who was at the helm of NCERT and its saffronisation, Shailaja Chandra, Sevaram Sharma, and Sudhir Mankad are the other members of the committee that submitted the reports after RSS dictates in May 2016.

In short, the think tanks of MHRD and the ruling Hindu Nationalist party, and the purely Brahmanical RSS ideologues are clearly behind this NEP 2016 draft. It stands for the Vedic and Varnasrama Hindu world view and the neo-liberal corporate Brahmanism. It has to be challenged, checked, and resisted in general by the secular academic community and citizens in general if we need to save the idea of a democratic and secular India.

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Courtesy: <http://indianculturalforum.in>

Impoverishing education

01 Nov 2008

Will they bash up universities in Jakarta and other places for teaching different versions of the Ramayana?: Romila Thapar

The controversial decision earlier this month by the Academic Council of Delhi University to drop AK Ramanujan’s celebrated essay on the Ramayana, ‘Three Hundred Ramayanas: Five Examples and Three Thoughts on Translation’, from the BA history (honours) course has evoked

sharp protests from several historians and other scholars. Coming three years after the Hindutva student body, the Akhil Bharatiya Vidyarthi Parishad (ABVP), vandalised DU's history department to protest against the teaching of this essay, the decision has been criticised as a surrender of academic freedom in the face of political pressure.

Romila Thapar, the foremost authority on early Indian history, spoke to Priscilla Jebaraj about the decision, its adverse consequences for scholarship and knowledge, and the efforts by vested interests to project one version of Hindu cultural heritage and religious tradition over all others.

Q: You have said that this issue is not purely about history and academia simply because it involves the Delhi University's history department and Academic Council but that there's a political background to it.

A: I think there's a political background to it because the initial attack against this essay [in 2008] was led by the ABVP which made sure that TV cameras had begun to roll when they carried out the attack so that it would be properly recorded. Their demand was that this hurt the sentiments of the Hindu community and therefore it should be withdrawn. This is hardly an academic demand. And quite clearly, the way in which the activity was organised, it was an act of political opposition to the history department and to this particular essay.

The university initially took an academic position and appointed a committee of four historians to assess whether this essay should be withdrawn. Three experts categorically said that under no circumstances should it be withdrawn. One of them, interestingly, did not say that it hurt the sentiments of the Hindu community but said that it was inappropriate for undergraduate teaching, that undergraduates would not follow the whole question of variants and nuances and so on. So

the expert opinion again did not think it was necessary to withdraw the essay.

In spite of this expert opinion, and perhaps because the matter came up in court, it was taken to the Academic Council. And from what I can gather, there was no indication given that this issue would be discussed and therefore people went there unprepared and suddenly had to decide on this one way or the other. And what this initial action and the reaction of the university raise is the question whether courses and syllabi can be changed by groups beating up faculty and vandalising departments. And I think this is a very fundamental question which academia has to face and answer and take a position on.

Q: Ramanujan discusses several versions, including the Valmiki Ramayana and the Kampan Ramayana, both of which seem to have problematic elements for Hindu fanatics. Which version are they supporting?

A: Well, I think that probably none of them has even read the whole of the Valmiki Ramayana... Half of them haven't even heard of the Kampan Ramayana.

What are they supporting? Their notion from hearsay of what the Valmiki Ramayana perhaps expresses. And you know, one is angered by the fact that there are people who don't take the trouble to read and to study and to understand what the issue is before they just stand up and start shouting and screaming and wanting the dismissal of it.

What people don't recognise is that the story of Rama, what we call the Ramakatha, extends over a huge historical period. There's a distance of almost a thousand years between the first composition of the Valmiki Ramayana and Kampan's. There are also gradually regional

studies... So inevitably, there will be variants. The moment somebody sets out to write a new version of the story, however dependent that person may be on a particular version, there will be additions as indeed there were even to the original Ramayana. And this is the inevitable structure of an epic. When an epic captures public attention, bits and pieces are always added on and bits and pieces are subtracted. It's a growing kind of rolling stone, gathering and dropping as it goes along.

Q: So given that that is the structure of an epic, is there a danger in establishing a particular version in the minds of the mainstream as the definitive version? You once spoke of that danger regarding Doordarshan's Ramayana serial...

A: Absolutely. You have to emphasise the fact that there were variants or people tend to assume that there was only one version of the story or that that was the definitive version.

Now, at the time when the Valmiki Ramayana was written, there were two other versions current which were, in one case, entirely different and in another case, very substantially different.

There were the Buddhist Jataka, the Dasaratha Jataka as it is called, where Rama and Sita are brother and sister... and rule as consorts. Now, this is very much within the Buddhist tradition of origin myths and is really making a statement about the superior status of Rama and Sita, which has been completely misinterpreted by the uneducated who go around screaming and shouting at all of us who mention this version because it talks about Rama and Sita ruling as consorts.

The Jain variant, which Ramanujan also speaks of, is extremely interesting because the author, Vimalasuri, begins by saying that "The versions of the Ramakatha that you have heard so far are

totally false and incorrect, written by foolish men. I will tell you the true story.” And he goes on to locate it in the court of the historical King Srenika... and says that it is nonsense to depict the rakshasa as demons, that they were perfectly normal human beings. In other words, the version of Vimalasuri is trying to rationalise the fantasy of Valmiki and therefore it is fascinating to see the two versions together.

Q: So how is it that the Valmiki Ramayana has become the mainstream of Hindu culture?

A: It comes partly out of the tradition of giving greater precedence to Sanskrit literature because it was in fact the main cultural tradition over a long period but it's also partly that this was reinforced by colonial scholarship mentioning these as definitive texts.

Q: In the post-colonial era, as academia has been questioning that concept, has there been any similar move to change perceptions in wider society?

A: No, there hasn't been and for this I blame particularly the visual media because they have fostered the notion of there being definitive versions of every single major text in our cultural heritage and they have totally underplayed the fact that there have been variants.

But you see, it starts with academia. What is very disturbing in this whole story is that you have an Academic Council in one of the leading universities in this country, which debates the issue for over two hours and the vote is 90 against Ramanujan and 10 for. And one sits there and thinks, of the 90, how many actually took the trouble to read this essay when they were condemning it? [Many] people in the Academic Council had no idea of what the contents of this book were except that they were going on hearsay once again.

Somebody gets up and condemns it and then a group turns around and says: “Oh well, if that is the case then, of course, we must condemn it.” So in a sense... what we lose out in this country is the habit of reading. We don’t go back to reading texts. We either see them on television or we see them in Amar Chitra Katha...

I don’t know what the politics of the vice-chancellor of Delhi University may be or, for that matter, even the politics of the 90 members who voted to remove Ramanujan’s essay. But there is obviously a political element in this. There’s a political element that a) says this is what my party doesn’t object to and would quite like my supporting it, or b) that this is really not my concern, it’s a political issue, let the Academic Council take a decision, which is why I gather there were quite a few abstentions as well, or c) don’t take a positive role in this because tomorrow you may be in the dock and no one will support you.

Maybe the Academic Council should be reminded that every scholar is required to question existing knowledge because that is the only way in which knowledge grows.

Q: The single expert on the committee who said it would not be appropriate for undergraduate education felt that the teacher would not be able to sufficiently explain the background. So at what point do we draw the line on when it would be appropriate?

A: Well, that’s precisely my point. If you go on saying that the teacher can’t explain it, why have you appointed that teacher? And why have you trained that teacher to be somebody who cannot explain a simple thing like the variants of a text?

Q: Was it an issue for the Academic Council at all or should it have been left to the history department alone?

A: It should have been left to the history department but I guess the Academic Council got cold feet because it had gone to court.

Q: It has been pointed out that Ramanujan himself is not a historian but a poet and folklorist. When it was suggested instead that they replace his essay with yours and RS Sharma's, it was pointed out that both of you are historians and that there was a value to having an interdisciplinary view.

A: This is a really very creative essay. We've all written on this subject... but what was nice about Ramanujan's essay was that you got a different perspective on this and that is what is so valuable for the student. In a course like that, where you're dealing broadly with culture, you need to have a different perspective every now and again.

Q: So as a broader issue, isn't the interdisciplinary approach a good thing? Getting perspectives from those outside the field of history?

A: There's nothing to stop a physics professor from reading that essay and asking questions or coming to different conclusions. But in the same way as a history professor would not intervene in the physics syllabus, one doesn't expect the physics professor to intervene in the history syllabus...

The interesting thing about this whole argument about interdisciplinarity is that the social

sciences are always attacked. But the sciences are never attacked because people are scared of making a fool of themselves by saying that this is not something worthy of teaching. So nobody questions the sciences. But with the social sciences, the world and his wife are there to comment, in some cases, without any kind of background knowledge of the subject. There's a feeling that you don't need to be an expert; this is all common sense.

Q: For many Indians, this is not just ancient mythology for an academic discussion but also their own current religious beliefs. Do you think there needs to be any kind of leeway given because of that?

A: You're quite right that it's not just mythology but also religion; and it was made that. Let me just go back a little bit into history and say that initially, many scholars believe, the Ramayana and the Mahabharata were just epic stories about heroes and that's the way they continued to be for quite a while. And then they were converted into sacred literature, by making Rama and Krishna avatars of Vishnu. And there's a superb analysis of this by VS Sukthankar in Pune who talked about the Bhrigu Brahmins converting these epics into Bhagavata literature, that is, converting the heroes into incarnations of Vishnu. And then it becomes sacred literature. Now today, yes, it's considered sacred literature but that is really not its roots.

Secondly, even if it is sacred literature, it is based substantially on mythology. I mean, this is very different from Buddhism and Jainism where the stories... there are mythologies, very many mythologies, but at the same time there is the hard core of the historical evidence of a historical founder and what that founder is supposed to have taught. This is a different story altogether.

Q: It's again different from Islam or Christianity where you have the People of the Book who

believe that the Book is the truth. Most Hindus don't believe that.

A: No, and one of the crises in the colonial period was when they set up the law courts and they said, according to European law, you swear an oath on the Bible. So they went running around asking which is the sacred book of the Hindus. And so you got the Bhagavad Gita, you got the Ramayana, you got the Vedas, you got all kinds of answers because there isn't a single sacred book, there's a multiplicity of sacred books. And there again the question of variation comes in. Who accepts which book as the primary sacred book?

Q: Are we seeing, over the last few decades, a change similar to that described by Sukthankar, of a group of people deliberately trying to create these definitive versions of Hindu sacred literature?

A: Yes, in fact, there's this move to make Hindu belief and worship very much based on the idea of the sacred texts.

Q: Ramanujan also discusses some international variants...

A: South-east Asia, for example, where the Ramayana is an absolutely fundamental text of culture but it's their own versions, not the Valmiki Ramayana. It is a fundamental part of the story in many versions in South-east Asia that Sita is the daughter of Ravana and Ravana doesn't know this because she was secreted away. So what do you do? I mean, are these people going to go bash up the universities in Jakarta and all those places because they're teaching these versions?

Q: And this in a time when we want to spread and globalise Indian culture.

A: I find it ironic that you have this incident taking place in Delhi the same week as the minister of HRD is sitting in the United States trying to persuade the top universities to set up campuses in India. Ramanujan was one of the most respected faculty members of the University of Chicago and the ministry of HRD would give its left hand to have the University of Chicago set up campus in India. Now, if Ramanujan had been alive and the university had a campus in Delhi and this had happened, as is perfectly feasible, what would have been the reaction? The whole thing is bizarre.

(This article was published on thehindu.com on October 28, 2011.)

Courtesy: The Hindu; www.thehindu.com

Archived from Communalism Combat, November 2011 Year 18 No.161, Agenda