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Is professionalism history?

It's easy to rage against the 'toxification' of institutions over the last five years. But why such silence against the institutional bias of decades before? Is it the end of the line for professional experts?

IN HIS article in the *People's Democracy*, Harkishen Singh Surjeet has noted that he won't be satisfied only by removing 'saffronites' from their institutional posts, but would also love to demolish their reputations. Thus, the sudden flurry of inquiries into the mismanagement and irregularities that have occurred in the past five years. For what he wants is a return to the 'Golden age', a return to a model *soviet*.

Surjeet's article has concretised the basic core issue: who decides that "the civil servant or government appointee in question performs his duties in a biased manner"? Can a biased establishment or an individual take unbiased decisions? Take one issue that's attracted considerable attention over the last four years — history textbooks. Vir Sanghvi (*Fights, camera, factions*, Oct. 19) comes out with the brave pronouncement: "The damage done to the study of history in this country is just one example." This one sentence has the potential to summarise the travesty of the situation comprehensively — only if it was not preceded by another nugget: "During the tenure of the NDA government, there were instances to suggest that its appointees were behaving in a blatantly partisan manner." It's obvious that Sanghvi hasn't read the books he is referring to and his repeated allegations are only part of the sustained efforts to demolish the professional credibility of individuals who he believes are biased.

Before history passes a verdict on the damage done to history teaching let one refresh recent memory. The legislative assembly of Delhi passed a resolution on October 29, 2001: "This House strongly condemns the attempt made to distort the history of the country and resolves to support the implementation of secular education policy based on the provisions of our Constitution." The House went on to recommend that on "page 328 of [the] 11th class NCERT curriculum book *Madhyakalin Bharat*, under the heading 'Sikh', appropriate amendment may be made and objectionable portions about Shri Guru Teg Bahadur Ji be removed... that book authored by individual writers containing objectionable comments about various religions including the book titled *Ancient India* be proscribed forthwith". By an order of the Delhi government (October 9, 2001), the portions containing derogatory reference to Guru Teg Bahadur were deleted.

The NCERT received copies of all these circulars and orders, considered the issue in the national perspective and issued an advisory to the CBSE recommending the deletion of this paragraph along with a couple of others on October 19, 2001. Totally ignoring that the first salvo was fired by a 'secular' government and that the NCERT only followed suit, as the same represented the thinking and perception of the people and unattached historians, an unscrupulous attack followed. It was duly supported by a sym-

thetic media, the traces of which persist till today. No one has yet provided an answer to the query: how can the recommendation of the Delhi government, which was secular and in the interest of history and the nation, become communal when NCERT just 'dittoed' it?

Confusion in differentiating between 'reprint' and 'print' has been talked about. The book that was considered 'communal' was, in fact, in use for many decades. Even if there was an error of comprehension, there was no evidence of the courage to accept the same publicly. On the contrary, when one of the new NCERT books missed talking about the murder of Mahatma Gandhi, the lapse was regretted in all sincerity and the said book was promptly reprinted with necessary changes within weeks. This lapse continues to be highlighted even today, without any reference to the swift corrective action.

No one refers to the major policy recommendation made in 1986/88: from Classes VI to X, integrated social sciences should be taught and the practice of teaching of separate subjects of history, civics, economics and geography be discarded. Subsequently, the Yash Pal Committee endorsed the idea and made several recommendations on reducing the load of the school-goer. A breakthrough was achieved and integrated books in social sciences were produced. These have earned general appreciation from teachers and students alike. Of course, a select group of 'eminent scholars' would like to think otherwise.

History has been destroyed and mutilated for decades. The tragedy is that Sanghvi and his ilk ignore that completely A Class XI book declares that in ancient India "people certainly ate beef but did not take pork on any considerable scale" and that "the cattle wealth slowly decimated because the cows and bullocks were killed in numerous Vedic sacrifices". Read again and decipher whether it is history or politics that is being played out in textbooks?

Two generations have been taught that the "historicity of the 23 *tirthankaras* is extremely doubtful" and that the mythology of the *tirthankaras* "seems to have been created to give antiquity to Jainism" (*Ancient India*). I've met historians to understand how such statements fit into the narratives of history I'm yet to comprehend it. How many of those who lament the distortion of history during the last five years are aware of what was being dished out to the impressionable young minds in the name of history prior to this half-a-decade? Is it necessary to totally ignore the possibility that an Anupam Kher, an L.M. Singhvi, a Sonal Mansingh or a J.S. Rajput could contribute professionally in the interest of the sectors of their expertise? Exclusion leads to divisiveness, something that education should never accept.

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TWO BEATEN TRACKS:
Outside the NCERT office