

# Desaffronising: easier said than done

The impression that history is a tool for ideological warfare should be erased, writes PRATAP BHANU MEHTA



THE PROJECT of desaffronisation of education, to which the UPA government is committed, will need to be undertaken with immense delicacy, care and finesse. No one ought to oppose pedagogical reform that helps us transcend the egregious aspects of Hindutva ideology: targeting minorities through caricatured representation, promoting simple minded views about historical causation, and deploying a distorted history in service of a dangerous cultural nationalism. But rather than simply revert back to the pre-BJP curriculum, we ought to confront the more difficult questions about the relationship of the humanities and social sciences with nationalism and ideology more generally. For successful desaffronisation of the curriculum it is not simply enough to replace current textbooks with alternative ideological propaganda. The old curriculum and textbooks had, after all created the ground that was propitious for the backlash that Hindutva capitalised on, and it would be a mistake to dismiss criticisms of the old textbooks and curriculum as simply a Hindutva conspiracy. The secular left establishment, that dominated history writing for almost fifty years needs to ask why it did not manage to convince the general public that history writing was something more than partisan ideological warfare.

If desaffronisation is to be successful and enduring, the challenge will not be changing the contents of textbooks; this is relatively easy. The challenge will be to have textbooks produced by a process that commands credibility; the challenge will be to overcome the widespread cynicism that the humanities and social sciences are simply appendages of the powers that be, that curriculum change is not simply about changing the colour from saffron to red, or that odd combination of saffron and red that Congress used to indulge in. The challenge of desaffronisation will be to move away from the thought that education is about ideological indoctrination. The past failures of educational establishment on this score, the complete collapse of the distinction between ideology and education that characterises left dominated states like West Bengal, suggest that this task is easier said than done.

We have never really questioned the assumption that the purpose of teaching subjects like history at school, is to produce a past in the service of the nation. The dominant non-BJP histories did this by eliding



ny, nor of over determined discord. The historiography of partition is complex, but there is at least the possibility that partition is not simply a product of a conspiratorial mistake. But if the starting assumption of historiography is that genuine religious differences are an epiphenomena, it leaves the students without any resources to respond to genuine conflict when they encounter it. The only two responses available are "explaining the conflict away" which was the strategy of the left, or "blaming" whoever you took to be the other side, which

## HISTORY CAN KILL

was essentially the BJP'S response. Neither left much room for a nuanced confrontation with difference and conflict itself. The challenged of de-saffronisation is to write the history of conflict without simply writing away that conflict.

In both BJP and left historiography citizenship came to be tied to particular conceptions of history. We were put in this morally awkward position whereby our secular credentials were judged by the views we took on medieval history, or the citizenship status of minorities was thought to flow from what

their ancestors might have done five hundred years ago. There is no particular reason why we cannot leave the historiography of medieval India or partition to be an open question, subject to different interpretations, including the one that claims that Indian history has been marked by religious discord as much as religious harmony. The point of de-saffronisation should not be to replace one myth about history with another. It should be to detach questions of citizenship from the thickets of historical identity. Our constitutional project would be in deep peril if it depended upon the vagaries of historical writing - as if one piece of archeological evidence, or evidence of one more temple or stupa destroyed, should shatter the very foundations of the nation. If this point were effectively communicated the stakes in ideological combat would automatically be lowered. Ironically what we need is not alternative histories but a lowering of the stakes of history.

It would be a mistake if the project of "desaffronisation" simply yielded yet another set of history wars. These debates over history do little to educate us in the moral foundations of modern citizenship, in the constitutional values we need to uphold, regardless of our views on history or identity. And they are, if the past is any guide, likely to produce a more effective counter mobilisation of Hindutva forces. The test of a society is not whether it can produce a shared conception of history, the test is whether it can deal with differences about the past.

The aim of desaffronisation in the humanities and social sciences ought to be to impart a general set of skills that makes students more articulate and reflective about their moral commitments and rights. It ought not to patronisingly shield them from the complexities of difference. Our debates over curriculum have concentrated more on the content of education than on its purpose: the provision of a general intellectual training. There is far too much emphasis on the absorption of information and too little on the acquisition of appropriate skills to acquire or use information. In any education system, there is bound to be a tension between these objectives, between imparting some information as settled fact and between inculcating a healthy scepticism in students towards received facts. But our education system has erred on the side of the former.

The central ambition of a liberal education ought to be the cultivation of a critical intelligence, an ability to go out and make up one's own mind based on sound evidence and rigor-

purpose of teaching subjects like history at school, is to produce a past in the service of the nation. The dominant non-BJP histories did this by eliding any possible differences between religious communities within the nation. On this view, there were no religious or ideological differences between communities that could not be explained away by the imperatives of seeking wealth or power. Or, when all else failed we simply described this conflict as "communal" or "obscurantist," thus disavowing the possibility of genuine disagreement. If temple destruction were even acknowledged it would be explained away as emanating from a desire for wealth or political legitimacy. Partition was result of a combination of some or all of three forces: the British, power seeking politicians, or that un-illuminating category "communal forces." Whatever the merits of these narrative tropes in other respects, they had three unfortunate consequences. First, they generated an inherent distrust in textbooks produced by the left establishment. It would be myopic not to acknowledge that how genuine differences and conflict might arise. Medieval India was neither a site of seamless ideological harmo-

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cultivation of a critical intelligence, an ability to go out and make up one's own mind based on sound evidence and rigorous reasoning. In the way our textbooks are written, whatever the ideological persuasion they advance, this ambition is sorely lacking.

# Gandhi versus Gandhi

On October 2 last year, the I&B ministry issued advertisements in major dailies, quoting Mahatma Gandhi: "I would rather have India resort to arms in order to defend her honour than that she should in a cowardly manner become or remain a helpless witness to her own dishonour."

This was uncanny. Gandhi as a protagonist of mass militarism? Protests followed. But the last regime cared little for civil society criticism. The advertisement was not withdrawn. The damage was done. Gandhi was now being used by the BJP to distort Gandhi, to legitimise its xenophobic politics of violence. The ad deliberately did not include the very next sentence that Gandhi wrote in the same text, which turns the first part of the quote upside down: "But I believe non-violence is infinitely superior to violence; forgiveness is more manly than punishment."

This was a typical double-game best signified by the deceptive orchestra of double discourse by 'hardliner' LK Advani and 'moderate' Atal Behari Vajpayee. They would pose repeated contrasts, but in reality they were working on a smart symphony. They lied, did U-turns, fudged, half-lied, did the blow hot blow cold missionary act, planted stories, used propaganda, turned civilised discourse into a slanging match, and finally, when nothing would work, they would press Control Delete. Gag and hound and suppress.

On the old history textbooks, they did the same: they said rape, when it was rapine, they said a community has been vilified, when the text said something totally different, they said the new books are original, while they were so brazenly plagiarised in several parts. So much so, a belligerent Murlī Manohar Joshi went around town, de-

daring in public meetings, "Did our ancestors eat beef?"

So what is the level of this discourse? Should Professor DN Jha go to a BJP public meeting and quote from ancient texts to prove his point?

Besides, the new NCERT books, written by mediocre RSS loyalists, are full of bloomers. Some examples:

- Mahatma Gandhi's assassination was deleted. Nathuram Godse was not identified as a fanatic with links to the Hindu Mahasabha and RSS.
- On the Russian Revolution: Many generation old rule of the family of Czars was swept away by a coup led by Lenin, the leader of the Bolshevik Party. This political change was presented to the world as an ideological revolution rooted in Marxism and Communism.
- The Nazis: The ideology of the Nazi party was a sort of fusion of German nationalism and socialism. The rising tide of German nationalism was seething with an ardent desire of revenge.
- Goa liberation: The most notable achievements were the capture of Dadra on 22 July and Nagar Haveli shortly thereafter by the volunteers of 'Free Goa' movement backed by the Jana Sangh and the Goan People's party.

The fact is that the RSS (and Jana Sangh) did not participate in either the freedom movement or later anti-imperialist struggles. They were obsessed with trader politics, khaki knicker shakhas, Muslim bashing, communal riots and Pakistan. Or else, in the glorification of Hitler's holocaust.

That is why, the sooner we get rid of the Joshi-Rajput books, the better for the mental health of the nation.

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Institutionally, it is important for the project of desaffronisation that this round of reforming textbooks not be seen simply as another round in the great ideological ping-pong. Important organisations like the NCERT should not be seen simply as closed shops, the preserves of small ideological coteries. The biggest challenge is not desaffronisation, but ensuring that desaffronisation carries credibility. The decimation of higher education, and the structure of partisan alignments that characterise professional historians and social scientists will make this task exceedingly difficult. But we ought to use this opportunity to rise above narrow ideological brinkmanship. This means restoring the study of history and society to its proper complexity, not simply exchanging saffron for any other colour.

