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India: Pride and prejudice

Tuesday 26 December 2023, by [BIDWAI Praful](#) (Date first published: 26 June 2015).

FROM THE ARCHIVE: How the Bharatiya Janata Party-led government was trying to ram through a Hindu sectarian agenda in culture and education in 1999.

(Praful Bidwai (1949-2015), a senior journalist and political commentator, passed away earlier this week on 23 June. Bidwai wrote extensively on matters ranging from political economy and nationalism to environment and geopolitics. He was also a prominent anti-nuclear activist. In light of the Modi government's attempts at wielding greater control over the public broadcasting in India, here's Bidwai's piece from the December 1999 issue of Himal Southasian about how the Bharatiya Janata Party-led government was trying to ram through a Hindu sectarian agenda in media, culture and education. See his [other writings for Himal Southasian](#).)

In mid-November 1999, the government sacked two directors of the Prasar Bharati (PB) Board, Romila Thapar and Rajendra Yadav, by invoking the principle of biennial 'rotation' of members. It did this because the government is not legally empowered to remove or appoint directors. Thapar is India's best-known historian, a world-class scholar, and a highly regarded public intellectual. Yadav is a reputed Hindi writer and commentator. Both are known for their independent views and their commitment to genuinely autonomous public media.

The government's midnight coup against Thapar and Yadav was a shocking violation of the spirit of media autonomy. The action deserves to be condemned not least because the PB came into existence after a quarter century of debate marked by the reluctance of successive governments to cede control over the powerful state-owned electronic media and vest it, in the model of the BBC, in a broad-based board which would not be answerable to the government. In a country where nearly half the population is illiterate, the electronic media enjoys a privileged status and has enormous reach.

The government could have applied an objective criterion to retire two of the six directors, such as in the drawing of lots, which had been proposed by the PB Board itself. Instead, this malicious targeting of Thapar and Yadav, termed "intellectual violence" by Jaipal Reddy, the man who helped establish the PB, showed up the BJP's motive. And that is to remove anyone who would oppose the BJP's attempt to control the powerful body. It is now widely expected that the two new directors to be appointed will be those whose worldview complements that of the BJP's own.

Already, in practice, it has been difficult for the PB Board to be an effective and autonomous body which guides and provides oversight to the governmental electronic media. For example, it has no finances or staff of its own. The impact of padding the PB Board with ideological fellow BJP travellers will have a pernicious and direct impact on programming. Given that the audience of Doordarshan and AIR go throughout India and also to a significant audience elsewhere in the South Asian neighbourhood should be enough to convince anyone of the negative fallout of which the ousting the two directors could be harbingers to.

Turning from the electronic media, then, to education, no less pernicious has been the effort of Education Minister Murli Manohar Joshi to get school curricula radically rewritten so as to promote “Bharatiya culture” (read, glorification of “Hindu India” and deny the rich non-Hindu influences on Indian culture).

Curricular revision is a long, elaborate process in India, and education is as much the charge of the 25 constituent states as of the central government. Guidelines have to be issued to framers of syllabi and writers of textbooks by specialised organisations such as the National Council for Educational Research and Training (NCERT), which in turn draw upon scholars from the Indian Council of Social Science Research (ICSSR) and Indian Council of Historical Research (ICHR).

The BJP has begun tinkering with this superstructure by appointing its own people to head the NCERT and the National Open School. It has radically recast the ICSSR and ICHR by appointing utterly discredited individuals to leadership positions, persons of the kind who invent history rather than research it. And the curricular revision is very definitively underway with discussion papers and guidelines in circulation. Some of these papers not only stipulate the objectives and ‘values’ of education, but also substantially lay down its core content. All future textbooks must conform to these ‘values’ and standards. (In practice, this will apply to institutions at the state level too because they are donor-driven by federal-level funders).

To take one example, the Discussion Paper for the National Open School (with more than one million pupils) has highly objectionable formulations about Indian culture and its ‘unique contribution’ to the world history. It glorifies “Bharat” and regards all other South Asian societies “uncultured”. A few examples:

- Indians are “a race”. More, they have “a mission” and “destiny” as a race.
- It is “a fundamental postulate of Hindu thought that every way of life has its own contribution to make...” But “the ultimate reality” is defined by Krishna alone.
- According to the Ramayana legend, Sri Lanka was opulent. It had “excellent houses, decorated with wonderful wreaths and jewels, golden archways, pearls, diamonds, etc”. But it was not “cultured”. “In refreshing contrast, Ayodhya was both civilised and cultured. People were learned, free from greed [and] truthful...”
- India, irrespective of who ruled it, has never sought to subjugate other people, cultures or lands (i.e., it never had to contend with marauding nawabs and brutal rajahs).
- “Bharatiya culture is the only culture which has understood the life problems (sic) in their totality... In the history of the world, it is the only effort to see the science, philosophy, religion, psychology and social life in an integrated form.”
- “Bharat excelled in every branch of Science...Our sages realised reality lying in every sphere of life.”

Such denial of the plain truth that India has since ancient time been a multi-cultural, multi-religious, syncretic society will lead today’s student generation right up the path of communal bigotry. Certainly they will never be told in the classrooms that Christianity or Islam in India is older than Hinduism as most Indians know it today. The discussion papers greatly exaggerate ancient India’s achievements and present the country as a victim of repeated foreign aggressions and invasions, especially from Islam. They argue that the time has now come for Indians (read ‘Hindus’) to assert themselves. It will not be long before this toxic bundle of fanciful ideas will be fed to millions of schoolchildren as absolute, historical truth.

The BJP’s project in culture and education is driven and well-defined. In the most recent government (as in the one immediately prior to it), the party showed itself open to sharing certain cabinet portfolios with its junior allies, but it has jealously guarded culture and education for its own

minister. This is because the BJP is serious about its long-term agenda of imposing a narrow majoritarian vision of culture upon India's masses and India's children. This Project of Prejudice is, in the end, far more insidious than the demolition of mosques, for it involves manipulating minds, injecting hatred into them, encouraging stereotypes, and yoking India's young to a hate-ridden kind of nationalism.

Already, the party is promoting xenophobia by bringing in a bill to prevent persons of foreign origin (read, Sonia Gandhi) from holding high office. It is busy whipping up hatred and advancing agendas of political overcentralisation and authoritarianism. All of this can only spell trouble for Indian democracy in the days ahead.

Praful Bidwai

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P.S.

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