

# On saffroniza

Exponents of Hindutva usually believe that theirs is and slavish imitation

Education Dawn 19.1.02

**T**HE term 'saffronization of education' appears to denote a fairly innocuous, if dubious process. It is in fact both a treacherous and frivolous response to a grave cultural crisis, a kind of response that is typical of fascism, and fascists have made the most of radical impotence. Democrats with an inadequate sense of history, and leftists and radicals whose smugness is criminal in the light of their own historical consciousness, read in it a silly and disgraceful exercise, something like one of the numerous outcrop of ersatz Hindu cults of the moment. They fail to see that it is a combination of a confident appeal to a brutalized mass consciousness and a coercive imposition of a dogmatic view of national history and culture.

When the BJP, backed by the Sangh Parivar, detected slurs on communities like the Sikhs and the Jains in the impugned history textbooks of the NCERT, Congress stalwarts like A K Anthony and Digvijay Singh also murmured their assent to that reading, oblivious of the fact that those history textbooks (e.g. those by Romilla Thapar and Bipan Chandra, as well as those by Arjun Dev) had been written and approved during long years of Congress rule in the centre. Evidently there is now a change in the climate of opinion which makes critical references to traditions of different indigenous religion acts taboo. The change indicates far more than a turn towards populism. To put it bluntly, there is a confusion between legitimate pride in one's heritage and an oversensitive, indeed aggressive, attitude towards any critical interrogation of that heritage.

It is common to assume that such symptoms are passing whims and fads of those who occupy positions of power. On the contrary, when the Babri Masjid was turned into a heap of rubble, two of the most eminent and hard-hitting intellectuals among westernized orientals, Nirad C Choudhuri and V S Naipaul, well known for their pugnacious admiration for the west, hailed the barbarous act as a vindication of a dishonoured culture. In this view at least there is no difference between the diehard saffron brigade and the most intransigent pro-western elements. What is the secret behind this incredible alliance?

J S Rajput, director of the NCERT, in an affidavit before the Supreme Court, as well as in a circular letter introducing a new curricular framework for schools, affirms that the old and superseded framework had erred by overstressing a secular outlook and neglecting the spiritual heritage of the country. That balance was to be restored by introducing value education, and since values according to him are sanctioned by religion, ultimately religious education. Such views are not exceptional. Sometimes Mahatma Gandhi, Radhakrishnan, and other leaders of both the political and the cultural awakening of India before independence appear to speak in the same vein. But the disturbing new trend is a narrow, bigoted version of 'Spiritual Value', leaning explicitly on the Hindu heritage.

It is pertinent to mention here that

Munshi, the orthodox Hindu leader, categorically insisted on inclusion of the Christian's right to proselytize.

Saffronization of education is part of a far-reaching agenda to reverse such historic trends. And it actually harks back to the period of turmoil to which the secularism of the Constitution had been an answer. As if the road not taken then again faces the nation at a point to which it has returned in the course of its wanderings.

Hence, the kind of spiritual education envisaged in the new curricular framework of NCERT is quite contrary to the spirit of the Constitution. The director of the NCERT in a press handout mentioned the inherent "bigotry and dogmatism" of "Semitic creeds" (read Islam and Christianity) as against the broad outlook of Hinduism. No doubt the spiritual education of the new curriculum would also carefully introduce our young people to this nugget of wisdom.

However, the problem is not simply that of historical regression. There may be some continuity in history, but never pure regression. What appears to be purely regressive is also determined in some way by larger contemporary development. Neocolonialism today requires of its success the prevalence of feudal or semi-feudal ideas and practices. However, such elements, being out of step with the present, and failing to answer the genuine needs of the present, are bound to be overlaid with deliberate self-hypnosis, irrationality and savagery.

In any case it is an oversimplification to say that it is only a question of reactionary revival and regression. The ideology that has hypnotized the masses drawn by the saffron brigade had its genesis in early colonial times during the colonial transformation of Indian society, the introduction of modernity under colonial auspices. In is this form of modernity that has failed to solve some of the outstanding problems of our social heritage, but it is this form that acquires a dangerous attraction whenever our society and culture enters a blind alley. The uncritical and fanatical worship of a chauvinist version of our past is a product of the same mindset. And it is natural for such a mindset to submit to the hegemony of neocolonialism.

This requires some explanation. How does colonialism continue to shape our consciousness? It manifests itself first in a lack of confidence in one's own creativity and a dependence on western centres of learning for the very conceptions of academic and cultural excellence. This mental dependence is also actively promoted by western powers and their lackeys for obvious reasons. Ours is a cruel dilemma as we can neither snap our link with the colonial type of modernity at one go, nor find answer to many of our present dilemmas in tradition. But that hardly excuses a supine surrender to the poisoned charms of a reactionary solution from the past.

That there is an overriding need for thorough revision of the structure

sion had warned all developing countries about had been the strong colonial traces in the present education systems of their countries.

"And just as the political and economic effects of colonialism are still strongly felt today, so most educational systems in Latin American, Asian and African countries mirror the legacy of a one-time mother country or of some other outside hegemony, whether or not they met the nations present needs..." (pp 10-11)

The legacy of colonialism in the system of education and conceptions about education in these unfortunate countries has been succinctly summed up by J N Pieterse and Bhikhu Parekh in their introduction to *The Decolonization of Imagination* (OUP,



Illustration by Aburo

Kolkata, Chennai, Mumbai, 1997): "Although the effects of British colonialism on different aspects of Indian life and thought varied a great deal, and led to much critical self-questioning, colonial rule did distort India's understanding of its own past, present and future. It also weakened India's self-confidence and capacity to explore and experiment with alternative ways of life and thought. Above all, it encouraged heteronomy, the tendency to judge itself by western standards and to make western approval the basis of its self-respect and self-esteem, especially among the modernists for whom the west represented almost all that they valued." (p viii-ix)

The way out of this predicament