

The Genocidal Pogrom in Gujarat: Anatomy of Indian Fascism

The Campaign Against History

Sumit Sarkar

University of Delhi

The BJP led Indian government has been consistently promoting sectarian concerns in education. History has predictably borne the most severe onslaught. Books of renowned historians have been withdrawn from the syllabus and will no longer be published by the National Council for educational Research and Training (NCERT) or prescribed as school texts from March 2002 onwards. The books concerned are authored by Romila Thapar, RS Sharma, Satish Chandra, Arjun Dev, Bipan Chandra. The latest is that, not willing to wait even until then for fear of strong opposition, a Central Board of Secondary Education (CBSE) circular to all heads of schools has unilaterally ordered deletion from the existing texts of certain portions and statements, without consulting the authors concerned, and it is also stated that no discussions must take place on these portions and themes in the classrooms and no questions must be set on them in examinations. The Government is doing all this, without sanction of Parliament, and opposition in Parliament. Here we give responses from two eminent historians.

Two kinds of arguments have been offered to justify the deletion of ten passages from NCERT history textbooks (to be followed soon by their replacement, and then the abolition of History as a separate subject till Class XI). The Prime Minister announced that this is because the books are 'one-sided'. How does he know, and what gives him the authority to issue such a fatwa? It is nobody's contention that the NCERT books are perfect, or that they must never be amended or even replaced. (The history texts of the Ekalavya group in Madhya Pradesh are in some ways better suited to pedagogical needs, for they were written on the basis of intensive and prolonged discussion with small town and village teachers and practical experience at schools on the part of the authors). But imaginative and innovative teaching is furthest from the minds of today's revisers of history, for they deliberately ignore the obvious point that any revision must be based on at least a minimum level of competence in the subject. Views about the past are always diverse and open to change, and in that sense history is being 'rewritten' all the time. (Things are not really all that different in the natural sciences, where too there is constant debate and change). But that does not mean that any and every version is equally acceptable, irrespective of the kind of evidence being offered in its support, and the quality of interpretations. That beef-eating was common even among Brahmans for a considerable time in ancient India, for instance, was established many years ago on the basis of Sanskrit texts by scholars of the stature of Rajendralal Mitra and Mahamahopadhyay P.V. Kane, and confirmed by massive archaeological evidence. A noted archaeologist, Dr Nayanjot Lahiri, has just reminded us that sites being interpreted nowadays as related to a so-called 'Saraswati valley civilization' happen to be particularly rich in evidence of beef-eating. ('The Past Proscribed', *Hindustan Times*, 5 December 2001).

The remarkable thing about the NCERT textbook deletions is that the books have not been placed for evaluation before any expert committee of fellow-scholars. What is even more significant, the names of those writing the new textbooks have become a state secret (to

be guarded by POTO, perhaps?). At the 'Big Fight' programme of 1 December, Shri Rajput, head of the NCERT, stoutly refused to divulge the names of the people he rather touchingly described as "my historians", much to the amusement of millions of viewers.

The second justification, offered by BJP spokesmen like V.K.Malhotra, is even more dangerous. The books are not factually inaccurate, but they are unsuitable because they hurt the 'sentiments' of children of sundry communities and religions. So children (many actually 17-18 years old, some maybe voters) should be deliberately taught pleasant lies: an excellent beginning for the much-touted new stress on 'value-education'! And, once again, who decides, when, and whose sentiments? The passage in Satish Chandra's book about the execution of Guru Tegh Bahadur, which no one had objected to even at the height of the Khalistani movement, suddenly comes under attack, and sadly, first of all from the Delhi Congress--just on the eve of Punjab elections. Incidentally, anyone who takes the trouble to read that passage would realise that it is quite exemplary in its strict avoidance of even a trace of 'one-sidedness'. For here Professor Chandra introduces students to four more-or-less contemporary accounts of the Guru's execution, and compares them rigorously to reach the most likely evaluation. The words for which he is being abused now--"plunder and rapine"--are *not* the writer's own, but come from what he explicitly describes as the "official" Mughal account. For a historian, though maybe not for a loyal bureaucrat, an 'official' version is often the one least trustworthy.

To come back to 'sentiments': what if they are mutually opposed, as can happen so often? References to the oppressive aspects of the varna system and, no doubt soon, any criticism whatsoever of ancient Brahmanical society, are to be deleted. Dalits, subordinated castes, women, have obviously no 'sentiments' worth bothering about. How dangerous the sentiments 'argument' can become was revealed during the Ramjanambhumi movement, when, worsted repeatedly in historical debate, its protagonists came to emphasise that no one, not even the law courts, must go against what 'Hindu' religious sentiment had (rather recently) discovered, that Ram had been born precisely at the spot where the Babri Masjid had stood for the last five centuries. Today the VHP is repeatedly using that plea again to reiterate its resolve to build the full-pledged Ram temple there from next March (just around the time of the UP elections). The BJP leaders due to alliance compulsions have not yet fully endorsed this plea, but their use of an identical argument of 'sentiment' and 'religious hurt' to justify the attack on history is an ominous indicator which anyone who cares for the future of democracy, secular values, and cultural and intellectual freedom needs to take very seriously indeed.

Above all, is it the function of history, even history taught to schoolchildren, to ignore all 'unpleasant' facts, and become a collection of moral fables or happy tales, its contents dictated by 'religious' and/or 'community' leaders chosen by the Sangh Parivar for its political games? The Human Resources Minister has already proclaimed this principle of compulsory vetting by religious leaders, and is said to have issued a written order to the NCERT to that effect. But education is worthwhile only if it stimulates rational thinking and questioning from the earliest possible age, and much of inherited common-sense (and often sentiment) necessarily comes under scrutiny: as when children learn that, contrary to the evidence of their eyes, the earth moves round the sun. Maybe the scientific explanation for eclipses should be banned, for it might hurt the belief that they are caused by Rahu? It may be dangerous, though, to be sarcastic about such things, for we have a Minister who might think this to be a good idea, and who is trying to introduce into university teaching courses on astrology and (according to a recent UGC proposal) "occult sciences".

The justification of interference and censorship in terms of 'sentiment', unfortunately, is

not confined only to the Sangh Parivar . The Left Front Government in West Bengal, for instance, is reported to have just stopped the screening of a Russian film which had appeared to its cadres to be slanderous of Lenin. At the heart of such arguments or political interventions lie a widespread assumption that the past must have been more-or-less similar to the present, or at least continuous with it--that history is a single, evenly-flowing river, without the sharp discontinuities or ruptures which actually often make it very different and unfamiliar. And so we try to make history-writing into a game of picking and choosing from the past elements that seem useful for our present interests and emotions, whether the project be the communalisation of politics, secular `national integration', stimulus to national pride, or revolutionary transformation of society. The counterpart of such selective use at times becomes suppression or censorship of what is thought to be inconvenient, embarrassing, hurtful of today's sentiments, politically incorrect.

But it needs to be emphasised that 'history' of a particular kind is vital for the Sangh Parivar, in ways and forms which go very much beyond its importance for other political trends in India. The interference by the BJP-dominated government has therefore been far more systematic and energetic than under any previous regime. All governments play games of patronage and nepotism, and Congress or Left regimes have certainly not been innocent of such things. But not only must past misdeeds not be made into a justification for present crimes: what is happening now *is* qualitatively different. To take an example: in the late 1980s, the government of Rajiv Gandhi appointed Irfan Habib, renowned Marxist historian and member of the CPI (M), Chairman of the Indian Council of Historical Research. That was at a time when the CPI (M) was bitterly opposed to the Congress, and indeed soon afterwards it cooperated with the BJP to some extent in defeating the Congress in the 1989 general elections. The same Rajiv Gandhi regime appointed prominent archaeologists like S.P.Gupta, with known Sangh Parivar associations, to important posts in another key funding body, the Archaeological Survey of India. Some attention was being paid, therefore, to academic quality or stature: very different from the systematic and unashamed packing of all central government funding institutions since 1998.

'History' of its own kind is indispensable, if Hindutva is to consolidate its claim to be the sole spokesman of the 'Hindus', who have to be convinced that their interests and emotions are and have always been unitary and inevitably opposed to those of Muslims or Christians, regardless of differences of caste, gender, class, immense regional variations. 'History' is vital also because the Sangh Parivar has remarkably little to say about the crucial problems of Indian society, above all mass poverty and social injustice. Endless harping on the past misdeeds, real or imagined, of other religious communities is an excellent diversion, well suited for the preservation of existing power structures. And extreme forms of cultural nationalism have to be foregrounded, precisely because political and economic independence is being surrendered in unprecedented ways to the United States and Western multinationals.

There had once been a certain fit between assumptions of continuous and endless religious strife, and the habit, derived in part from the British, of slicing up Indian history into `Hindu' and `Muslim' periods, treating religious communities as unchanging blocs and defining eras in terms of the religion of rulers. All this changed as history writing came of age and progressed beyond the deeds of kings and great or evil men. The BJP doctoring of history, so reminiscent of totalitarian states, whether Fascist or Stalinist, is an attempt to turn the clock back and, if possible, do away with history altogether.

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