

The Genocidal Pogrom in Gujarat: Anatomy of Indian Fascism

History vs Propaganda

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What is really at stake in the current row over history textbooks is the right of the professional historian to assert the pre-eminence of history over myth and fantasy. History in India has been regarded as a soft option: The popular belief is that anyone who has read a few books on a subject can claim to be a historian.

What is not generally understood is that in the last half century the writing and research on history has become far more professional. We do now have to observe a historical method; ways of reading and interpreting sources. Reading a text alone is not sufficient to draw historical conclusions, it is equally important to know the context of the text - the purpose, the function, the audience and the patron, all go towards the making of a text.

Reading, therefore, means an analytical activity that draws on logical reasoning, and the priorities of causation. There is also the input of other disciplines in the social sciences - in ancient history, for example, both archaeology and linguistics make contributions.

In other words, writing history is a complicated process. This is not understood very often at the popular level, and certainly not by the politicians who are currently criticising the history we write. This then raises the question of who judges what is valid history? The validity has to be judged by professional historians who may criticise these books and whose criticism we would take seriously (provided they are professional historians).

Politicians and heads of religious organisations would have views on the politics of what is included in a textbook, but one cannot take their judgments on the correctness or otherwise of the historical content of the books, with any seriousness.

The NCERT is not willing to reveal the names of the so-called historians whom it claims to have consulted. So the debate is not among historians but between historians and politicians. The real issues are not issues of historical accuracy.

What our critics are saying in effect is that: "We neither need to know your methods nor are we interested in knowing them. That is irrelevant. What we are interested in is the political message, a political exploitation of a particular historical view that we endorse".

The real concerns are to provide propaganda for the elections in UP and Punjab, and to facilitate the imposition of the RSS version of history on state schools.

It is curious too that some of our books have been used for almost 40 years - mine on Ancient India has been prescribed since 1966 and I revised it in 1987 - and have not created pedagogic problems. But we are suddenly told that there are 50,000 complaints against them and that certain communities are feeling offended by them.

One of the attitudes that we have to grow out of as a society is the insistence that anything a historian or a social scientist might say must have the consent of the community to which it relates. If one reads the chronicles and historical biographies of earlier times, all manner of remarks - sometimes outrageous - were made about various communities.

Yet there was accommodation. Sooner or later we shall have to come to terms with the notion of a critical evaluation of social groups, and this may bring about the maturity that we need in present times. Beyond the immediate politics of the action, there is an attempt to falsify history in order to prove the theories on which the Hindutva ideology is based. For example, the historical primacy of a distinctive Aryan people is maintained.

This is unacceptable, because Aryan is a linguistic label, refers to the Aryan-speaking peoples and is not the name of a single people or a race.

There were many who lived in the subcontinent prior to the Aryans. The claim is made that the Aryans were indigenous to India, which most scholars reject in favour of arguing for migrations of Aryan-speakers into India.

The latter argument is supported by linguistic data, but in the Hindutva reconstruction of the early past, the linguistic evidence is ignored.

Another assertion - that the Harappan civilisation was created by the Aryans - is not taken seriously by most scholars, nevertheless we now have Murli Manohar Joshi pronouncing on what he calls the Sarasvati civilisation, and which he claims is prior even to the Harappan. Yet the evidence for this is so far invisible. The Rigveda is also being taken back in time, and quite arbitrarily from millennium to millennium.

What is happening is that there is a building up of a fantasy that is being thrust upon students in the guise of historical knowledge. This is doubly objectionable because the fantasy is attempting to prove that the caste Hindu has an unbroken, lineal descent of 5,000 years. The thesis of Savarkar that those who can claim Indian ancestry and India as the land of their religion, can claim to be Indian, the others being foreigners, is sought to be vindicated.

A further element in their theory is that Indian civilisation, encapsulated in Vedic Aryanism, was entirely indigenous and was the first to invent all manner of sophisticated technologies, none of which was derived from other cultures.

They argue simultaneously that India virtually civilised the world. The notion of civilisation in this theory is a 19th century, colonial concept, now discarded by historians.

The other area of dispute arises yet again from their endorsing the colonial interpretation - the interpretation of Mill and Macaulay - that Indian history should be seen as the Hindu and the Muslim civilisations and the British period.

This views Hindu and Muslim communities as being monolithic and uniform, as well as permanently in conflict. Muslim rule, therefore, meant the oppression of Hindus.

If one looks at the medieval scene without the blinkers of Hindu and Muslim communalism, it is fascinating to see the interface between what we call the Hindus and the Muslims and between them and many others. An example of this is Eknath's, Hindu-Turk Samvad, that speaks freely and even critically of differences, but the context is one of living life together. What is also fascinating is that the medieval period is the time when many present-day rituals, practices and mythologies, were being formulated as a part of Hinduism. They drew from the interface of varying ways of life and beliefs, modulated over time.

To say, therefore, that all Hindus religious practices derive from the Vedas is an artificial imposition of uniformity on a religion whose strength lies in its plurality.

(As told to **Mahesh Daga**)

Courtesy: [The Times of India](#)

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