

20 June, 2004

THE WEEK



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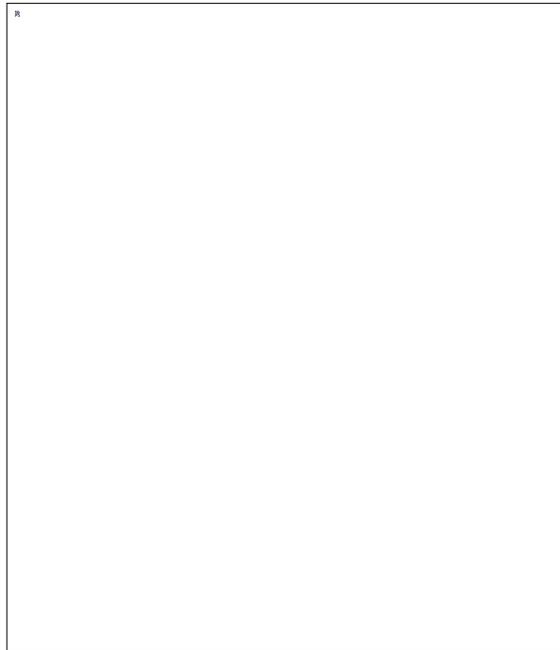
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▶ Operation Wipe-out



From revamping 'distorted' history books to retaining autonomy of academic institutions, the government promises to reverse the Hindutva agenda of the previous regime

By Debashish Mukerji

It has not been a mere change of regime. The United Progressive Alliance (UPA) taking over from the National Democratic Alliance (NDA) at the Centre is rapidly ushering in a completely different atmosphere. The secular lobby is in full cry, inundating the government with suggestions on how to wipe out the saffron stain of the past five years. The nationalist lobby is in retreat, licking its wounds, and vowing to return another day. Every controversial decision and appointment of the previous government, specially in the HRD and culture ministries, is being closely

examined. "There is no question of any witchhunt or rapid, drastic reversals," maintained senior Congress leader Salman Khurshid. "We don♦t even have the mandate for that. But certain necessary steps will have to be taken."

A few of them have already been. Union HRD Minister Arjun Singh has moved quickly to remove one of his predecessor Murli Manohar Joshi♦s favourite bureaucrats, V.M. Pandey, while another favourite, National Council of Educational Research and Training (NCERT) chairman J.S. Rajput has sought early retirement. Mushirul Hasan, vociferous critic of the BJP, has been appointed vice-chancellor of Jamia Millia Islamia in Delhi. Minister Jaipal Reddy has ordered a close scrutiny of appointments made during the NDA rule in his information and broadcasting and culture ministries to identify Sangh sympathisers.

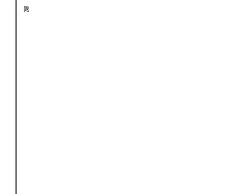
But these are early days yet. Many more changes can be expected in the near future. The UPA♦s Common Minimum Programme (CMP) merely pledges to ensure that "all

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institutions of higher learning and professional education retain their autonomy" and that "academic excellence and professional competence will be the sole criteria for appointments to academic bodies". It says nothing about the appointments already made. Left-leaning organisations like Sahmat, a CPI(M) cultural affiliate, and the Bharat Jan Vigyan Jatha (BJVJ), comprising progressive educationists, however, have submitted memoranda insisting that all NDA appointments in these bodies be reviewed. Given the UPA's dependence on Left parties for support, and Arjun Singh's own record of proximity to the Left, there is no doubt that these demands are being taken very seriously.

No doubt Joshi appointed handpicked men in top positions in well known institutes, but did this really undermine the institutes' functioning and credibility? In the Indian Council of Historical Research (ICHR) and the Indian Council of Social Science Research (ICSSR), Joshi appointed nominees like M.G.S. Narayanan and M.L. Sondhi, respectively, who rebelled against him and pursued their independent paths that Joshi himself finally sacked them.

Few complaints of saffronisation have been heard either against some of Joshi's other favourites like Kireet Joshi, chief of the Indian Council of Philosophical Research or G.C. Pandey, head of the Indian Institute of Advanced Studies. At the University Grants Commission (UGC), the controversial Hari Gautam has long retired, while his successor, Arun Nigavekar, though also chosen by Joshi, has not done anything to attract similar secular flak. Even the most flamboyant Joshi acolyte among educationists, NCERT's J.S. Rajput, has resigned. So what is the point?

"It is not merely the men at the top of these institutions that we are talking about," pointed out Prabhat Patnaik, Jawaharlal Nehru University professor of economics and signatory to the BJVJ memorandum. "In educational institutions it is essential to have knowledgeable people; their political ideology should not matter. I may strongly disagree with Narayanan's views on history, but no one can deny that he fully deserved his appointment. The problem with many of the appointments made during the previous regime was that they were not competent to do their jobs. Thoroughly ignorant people were made members of important committees and expert bodies just because they were close to the RSS."

Similarly, many maintained that those who did not toe the saffron line were harassed. "Rajput ran a reign of terror," stated Anil Sadgopal, BJVJ vice-president and education professor at Delhi University. "Nobody dared speak his mind at his meetings. People at NCERT refer to that period as a bawander (whirlpool), a toofan (cyclone) which has now hopefully passed. So many who asserted themselves were abruptly transferred." Thus Sahmat and BJVJ have also asked for an inquiry into "harassment of staff" and for "annulment of transfers".

The most controversial of Joshi's actions as HRD minister was the introduction of new NCERT textbooks, specially those on the social sciences, from the academic year 2002-2003. Each of these books has been repeatedly critiqued in the mass media and academic journals; their poor language, glaring factual errors, and above all, their hidden communal bias. No substantial change or revision was undertaken: at the NCERT's urging, they became part of the Central Board for School Examinations (CBSE) syllabus.

"The BJP governments have always done this," reminded Sadgopal. "It began when the Sunderlal Patwa government in Madhya Pradesh introduced a foundation course textbook at the undergraduate level, which was blatantly communal. Fortunately that damage was

undone when Digvijay Singh came to power. Then Rajnath Singh changed the history textbooks of UP when he was education minister. It is integral to the BJP-RSS long-term strategy."

Naturally, doing away with these books is top on the secularist agenda. The CMP itself pledges to "take immediate steps to reverse the trend of communalisation of education" including removing "the communalisation of the school syllabus" that has taken place in the last five years. "We intend to examine both the syllabi and the textbooks prescribed, right from school to university level," said Khurshid.

Sahmat and BJVJ, however, want more. They have demanded a review of the National Curriculum Framework for School Education (NCFSE), formalised in 2000, on the basis of which school syllabi were recast and thereafter new textbooks written. They want the Central Advisory Board on Education (CABE), on which state education ministers are all represented, but which remained defunct throughout the NDA's rule, to be revived. "Although education is a concurrent subject, CABE is the only forum where state and Central education ministers can interact," said Sadgopal. "Joshi knew that most of the states, ruled by non-BJP parties, would not agree to his proposals. So he dispensed with CABE altogether."

There is a hitch, however: the NCFSE was challenged by Magsaysay winner Aruna Roy in the Supreme Court and the petition defeated! Two of the three judges declared that there was no statutory need to consult CABE before implementing the NCFSE, nor did they find anything wrong with a particular sentence in the document the petitioners had claimed was communal. "The judgment doesn't validate the entire NCFSE," insisted Sadgopal. "There is much more to that document than that one sentence."

Similarly, both the UPA and the Left organisations are agreed that the jyotirvigyan (astrology) and purohitya (priestly rituals) should be scrapped. "We are not just for de-saffronisation, but for rationalisation of education as well," noted Khurshid. "We must ensure the courses we teach are befitting a modern, rational, forward-looking country." Here again however, the Supreme Court, in early May dismissed scientist P.M. Bhargava's petition denying astrology was a science and seeking a ban on its teaching. "One doesn't have to accept every judgment of the Supreme Court," said Prabhat Patnaik defiantly.

Supporting rationality does not mean we are opposed to Hindu culture. We may oppose astrology, but not Ayurveda, says Salman Khurshid.

Less than half a dozen universities have actually commenced jyotirvigyan or purohitya courses, despite financial inducement offered by the UGC. The NCERT's textbooks have been prescribed in CBSE-affiliated schools alone, which constitute only five per cent of all schools in the country.

How much damage has the BJP's education policy actually inflicted? "The CBSE is a prime institution among education boards," noted Sadgopal. "Many state education boards, specially in states ruled by the BJP, would have taken their cue from it and introduced the same books as well in due course. It is important to nip the mischief



early."

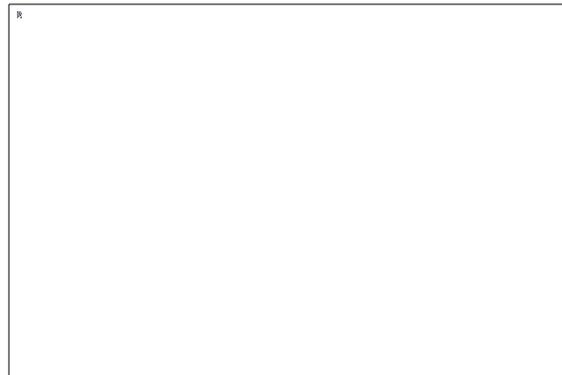
So too the appointment of ill-qualified Sangh sympathisers to important educational positions. "It is so difficult to create and nurture good teaching centres in Third World countries like India," declared Patnaik. "Good teachers are so few, and they can always take up assignments elsewhere, specially abroad. The signals the BJP government sent vitiated the atmosphere in institutions."

With the return of the Congress to power, academics by and large are certainly breathing easier. "I have had strong differences with the Congress, but it cannot be denied that it has always practised a kind of liberalism," said Patnaik. "It leaves academic institutions alone."

Congress leaders are, however, stung to the quick by any suggestion that their de-saffronisation agenda is being dictated by Left parties or organisations. "If the Left agrees with some of the steps we take, that's wonderful," said Khurshid. "But it should be remembered that we are believers, while they are not. Our ideal is Mahatma Gandhi, who was in to religion: theirs is Karl Marx."

Khurshid assured that some of the pet projects promoted by the BJP—be it the mapping of the hidden Saraswati river, or the Sindhu darshan at Leh—which have no overt communal content, will not be interfered with. "We have no problems with them," he averred. "If we support rationality, it doesn't mean we are opposed to ancient Hindu culture. We may oppose astrology, but we certainly don't oppose Ayurveda."

Only the extreme, sectarian moves of the BJP-led government would be undone. "Unlike in the case of the Marxists, there isn't a clear divide between what the BJP does and what we in the Congress find acceptable," Khurshid emphasised. "We maintain ours is a pluralistic society, but we also recognise that Hindus constitute 85 per cent of that society and hence the Hindu element will be dominant. We believe in supporting the Mansarovar pilgrimage, as well as the Haj."



RSS view

What is right about history

By Debashish Mukerji

What is the truth about India's past? The RSS holds one view, the secularists another. And never the twain can meet. They are equally passionate about their view of history, equally convinced that theirs alone is the correct version.

Balancing act: With frequent policy changes, education is a

challenge in more ways than one

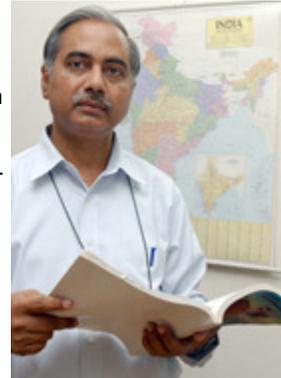
Seshadri Chari, former editor of Organizer, was totally unapologetic about the changes Murli Manohar Joshi introduced in social science textbooks. "There were basic anomalies which had to be corrected," he said. "Young minds have to be told the truth about history in a balanced way." To the charge that what the RSS regarded as balanced was in fact a communally coloured version, he responded: "If highlighting only Muslim rule in

India as God's gift to humanity, and dismissing the pre-Muslim period as a dark age, amounts to secularism, we are against that sort of secularism."

How did the RSS react to the growing clamour to withdraw NCERT textbooks and restore the ones that had been in use in schools till 2001? "History doesn't change with a change of regime," declared Chari. "Such pranks, if they are carried out, will be highly detrimental to the interests of the student community."

The Leftists will be firing their guns using Congress shoulders, says Seshdri Chari.

He charged that the Congress was in the process of becoming a handmaiden to the Left forces. "The Congress party does not have the intellectual capacity to either judge or change textbooks," he insisted. "It is the Leftists who will be firing their guns using Congress shoulders." He accused the Left of intellectual dishonesty. "Take one of their favourite hobby horses: the Aryan-Dravidian divide," he elaborated. "They will insist in all their books that the Aryans were invaders from outside. Why can't they add just one line to say that this is not a settled fact, but is still being contested? Why don't they at least admit that this entire Aryan business is a 19th century idea? It was propagated by British historians to divide the people of India."



He claimed the RSS was reconciled to the fact that there would be a purge in the HRD ministry and some institutions of higher learning. "Displacing some bureaucrats and heads of institutions following a regime change has become a normal practice in this country," Chari stated. But he was quick to defend J.S. Rajput, chairman of NCERT. "Rajput did not overstep his position in any way," he said. "His only fault was to introduce value education in schools. For that you have to teach people about different religions." He denied RSS-linked individuals or organisations were favoured by the HRD ministry. "This was the first government which supported projects on the basis of merit alone, without any ideological considerations."

Nor was Chari concerned that the RSS viewpoint will not be reflected in textbooks. "With the Internet revolution you can no longer hide the truth," he said. "Schoolchildren need no longer rely for information on their textbooks alone."

Student's view **Changing subtext**

The Leftists will be firing their guns using Congress shoulders, says Seshadri Chari.

By Quaied Najmi

Sumil Mehul Shah, 14, is a class IX student of Green Lawns High School in south Mumbai. He is aware of the UPA government's proposed move to correct the alleged errors and aberrations in history textbooks, introduced during the time of the previous NDA government.

Changes must be beneficial and academically enriching to students and not simply be related to any political agenda, says Sumil Mehul Shah, 14, a class IX student in Mumbai.



Like many other students, Sumil firmly believes that the NDA government's move was ill-advised. At the same time, he feels that even the UPA government's rollback plans could go against the student community's interest. "Students would find it difficult to keep adjusting to changes every now and then," he said. "Moreover, parents and elders or senior students who help us in our studies would find it tough to assist with something that is different from what they had learnt."



Sumil feels that before any syllabus is modified, the views of students and parents must be considered by the authorities concerned. And that changes must be beneficial and academically enriching to students and not simply be related to any political agenda.

Sumil's father, Mehul, asserted that changes in academics which are politically motivated are not healthy for young students. "The students are at an impressionable age and the authorities must avoid anything that would, overtly or covertly, influence them," he said. "All these things may be right at the college or higher education levels when students can think independently."

The new agenda

- 4 Scrap new syllabi and new NCERT textbooks
- 4 Scrap Astrology and Purohitya courses
- 4 Review all BJP appointments in HRD and Culture
- 4 Reconstitute Central Advisory Board of Education
- 4 Stop funding of RSS inclined NGOs, trusts and projects
- 4 Review National Curriculum Framework for School Education, 2000
- 4 Inquiry into ICHR, ICSSR, etc.

Congress view

- u A committee to review them first
- u Review
- u Informal process already begun
- u Reconstitution
- u Stop funding
- u No opinion
- u No opinion

The left view

- [u Unilateral scrapping](#)
- [u Immediate scrapping](#)
- [u Supports move](#)
- [u Agrees with the Congress](#)
- [u Agrees with the Congress](#)
- [u Left organisations want a review](#)
- [u Left organisations want inquiry](#)

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