

Meddling with Higher Education

Economic Times (October 15th, 2016. <http://blogs.economicstimes.indiatimes.com/et-commentary/meddling-with-education-needs-to-stop-if-india-wants-to-compete-in-technology-driven-world/>)

A colleague recently appeared for a job interview at a premier Central University located in Delhi. After the subject matter experts had grilled my colleague on his research which was on esoteric particle physics (his project was “Dark Matter signatures at the Large Hadron Collider and Non-Standard Models”) the chairperson of the board butted in. “ All this is alright, but what has all this got to do with our scriptures and culture?”.

This totally flummoxed the hapless candidate. He mumbled some Deepak Chopraish gibberish about cosmic energy, quantum dance of particles etc. Clearly the board was not impressed. Needless to say he never got the job.

This is not an apocryphal story. It actually happened. And if a recent news report is to be believed, it is not even going to be an isolated incident. The Economic Times (6th October 2016) reports on the activities of an offshoot of the RSS, the Bhartiya Shikshan Mandal (BSM), which recently organised a two-day workshop to “ bring the stream of knowledge of the past to the present to make our future more meaningful and comfortable (sic)”.

Lest one thinks that this was a frivolous conference of a fringe group, the news item states that the workshop was attended by 130 teachers and 7 vice chancellors of universities. Prior to this, the outfit had organised an international conference on “Research for Resurgence” where several political bigwigs spoke. The then HRD Minister, the venerable Ms. Irani struck a belligerent note and pontificated about how modern physics is exemplification of Indic knowledge and how no less an authority than J. Robert Oppenheimer has said so. The misquoting or selectively quoting well known sources is par for the course for the Sangh ideologues it seems.

It gets worse- apparently, 6 universities have already agreed to amend their PhD guidelines to include “applicability and social relevance as essential requisites of the research proposal”. Another, MCNU in Bhopal has already introduced guidelines where it is “ mandatory to cite Indian knowledge traditions in the review of literature section of a PhD proposal”. Another university has introduced engineering courses in Hindi and plans to do the same for medicine.

What, one might ask, could be wrong with any of these proposals? After all, who can argue with promoting indigenous culture and tradition and indeed the national language? The picture however, is not so clear cut. Of course, there is obviously a larger ideological agenda to hegemonise cultural discourse. What else could one say when some of the topics identified for research by the outfit is “Media policy of Ramayana” or “Conceptualisation of

Ram Rajya: good governance". And then there is also the homogenization of myriads of little traditions into a grand narrative which of course is upper caste Hindu. As we have seen in many other instances, "Indian culture" is being used as a cognate for Hindu culture thus in one stroke pushing aside tribal, minority and Dalit culture.

Insidious as this is, there are other dangers which one should be cognizant of. The impact of such ideas on our higher education would be disastrous. As it is, despite having a reasonable Gross Enrolment Ratio (the percentage of the population in the relevant age group enrolled in an education institution) of around 23%, we are nowhere in the global educational sweepstakes. None of our universities can claim to be truly world class. Our share of the global knowledge production industry is truly miniscule despite having a large scientific human resource base. Our technical graduates need extensive training before being employable. Instead of focussing on steps to improve the quality of our education, these kinds of initiatives, which in most cases seem to have covert state backing, obfuscate matters and makes things worse.

The use of Hindi or the vernacular in higher education is in principle a positive step. However, for it to be meaningful, it is absolutely crucial to first have an ecosystem where good quality textbooks and supplementary material is available in the language of instruction. Sadly though, there are not even enough translations of high quality material leave alone textbooks originally written in the vernacular. The initiative of the National Translation Mission under the National Knowledge Commission to translate material into Indian languages has run aground. What does one expect the engineering and medicine students to use as textbooks when there are none available? Maybe they would be taught the essentials of aerospace engineering from ancient scriptures which have poetic descriptions of the Pushpaka Vimana.

It is one thing if the Honorable Prime Minister or the HRD minister believe in astrology and other mumbo-jumbo in their private lives. But their public pronouncements should make us worry. Can we now expect courses in Vedic Aviation and Ancient Genetics? After all it has been claimed publicly by senior functionaries that the Vedic people built supersonic aircraft and also practiced IVF. We have already have an example- the creationist movement in the US has forced many states to modify their curriculum and textbooks to include the Biblical creation myth alongside Darwin's theory of evolution. This kind of meddling with education needs to be resisted if we are to produce a generation which can compete in an increasingly technology driven world. Else we would be left with students whose knowledge of science is like their knowledge of history- of the Amar Chitra Katha variety.