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THE SCIENCES

India: The Modi Government's Pseudoscience Drive Is More Than an Attack on Science

Tuesday 6 August 2019, by [MUKUNTH Vasudevan](#) (Date first published: 27 September 2018).

A person who peddles a “fact” that Indians flew airplanes fuelled by donkey urine 4,000 years ago no longer need aspire to scholarly credentials. He only has to want to belong to a socio-religious grouping that wields power.

The All India Council for Technical Education (AICTE) has proposed a new textbook that will discuss the ‘Indian knowledge system’ via a number of pseudoscientific claims about the supposed inventions and discoveries of ancient India, *The Print* reported on September 26 [1]. The Ministry of Human Resource Development (MHRD) signed off on the move, and the textbook – drawn up by the Bharatiya Vidya Bhavan educational trust – is set to be introduced in 80% of the institutions the AICTE oversees.

According to the Bharatiya Vidya Bhavan website [2], “the courses of study” to be introduced via the textbook “were started by the Bhavan’s Centre for Study and Research in Indology under the Delhi Kendra after entering into an agreement with the AICTE”. They include “basic structure of Indian knowledge system; modern science and Indian knowledge system; yoga and holistic health care”, followed by “essence of Indian knowledge tradition covering philosophical tradition; Indian linguistic tradition; Indian artistic tradition and case studies”.

In all, the textbook will be available to undergraduate students of engineering in institutions other than the IITs and the NITs but still covering – according to the Bhavan – “over 3,000 engineering colleges in the country”.

Although it is hard to fathom what is going on here, it is clear that the government is not allowing itself to be guided by reason. Otherwise, who would introduce a textbook that would render our graduates even more unemployable, or under-employed, than they already are? [3] There is also a telling statement from an unnamed scholar at the Bhavan who was involved in drafting the textbook; as told to *The Print*: “For ages now, we have been learning how the British invented things because they ruled us for hundreds of years and wanted us to learn what they felt like. It is now high time to change those things and we hope to do that with this course”.

The words “what they felt like” indicate that the people who have enabled the drafting and introduction of this book, including elected members of Parliament, harbour a sense of disenfranchisement and now feel entitled to their due: an India made great again under the light of its ancient knowledge, as if the last 2,000 years did not happen. It also does not matter whether the facts as embodied in that knowledge can be considered at par with the methods of modern science. What matters is that the Government of India has today created an opportunity for those who were disempowered by non-Hindu forces to flourish and that they must seize it. And they have.

In other words, this is a battle for power. It is important for those trying to fight against the introduction of this textbook, or any other Trojan horse of pseudoscience, to see it as such instead of siloing it away as a matter of scientific debate – if at all there is room for that – because, for example, MHRD minister Prakash Javadekar is not waiting to be told that drinking cow urine to cure cancer is pseudoscientific. This is not a communication gap; Javadekar in all likelihood is not going to drink it himself (even though he is involved in creating a platform to tell the masses that they should).

Instead, the stakeholders of this textbook are attempting to fortify a power structure that prizes the exclusion of knowledge. Knowledge is power, after all – but an epistocracy cannot replace a democracy; “ignorance doesn’t oppress in the same way that knowledge does,” to adapt the words of David Runciman. For example, the textbook repeatedly references an older text called the ‘Yantra Sarvasva’ and endeavours to establish it as a singular source of certain “facts”. And who can read this text? The upper castes.

In turn, by awarding funds and space for research to those who claim to be disseminating ancient super-awesome knowledge and shielding them from public scrutiny, the Narendra Modi government is subjecting science to power. A person who peddles a “fact” that Indians flew airplanes fuelled by donkey urine 4,000 years ago no longer need aspire to scholarly credentials; he only has to want to belong to a socio-religious grouping that wields power.

A textbook that claims India invented batteries millennia before someone in Europe did is a weapon in this movement but does not embody the movement itself. Attempts to make this textbook go away will not make future textbooks go away, and attempts to counter the government’s messaging using the language of science alone will not suffice. For example, good education is key, and our teachers, researchers, educationists and civil society are a crucial part of the resistance. But even as they complain about rising levels of mediocrity and inefficiency, perpetrated by ceaseless administrative meddling, the government does not seek to solve the problem as much as use it as an excuse to perpetrate further mediocrity and discrimination.

There was no greater proof of this than when a member of the National Steering Committee constituted by the Department of Science and Technology to “validate research on panchgavya” told *The Wire* in 2017 [\[4\]](#), “With all-round incompetence [of the Indian scientific community], this is only to be expected. ... If you had 10-12 interesting and well-thought-out good national-level R&D programmes on the table, [the ‘cowpathy’] efforts will be seen to be marginal and on the fringe. But with nothing on the table, this gains prominence from the government, which will be pushing such an agenda.”

But we do have well-thought-out national-level R&D programmes. If they are not being picked by the government, it must be forced to provide an explanation as to why, and justify all of its decisions, instead of letting it bask in the privilege of our cynicism and use the excuse of our silence to sustain its incompetence. Bharatiya Vidya Bhavan’s textbook exists in the wider political economy of banning beef, lynching Dalits, inciting riots, silencing the media and subverting the law, and not in an isolated silo labeled ‘Science vs. Pseudoscience’. It is a call to action for academics *and everyone else* to protest the MHRD’s decision and – without stopping there – for everyone *and the academics* to vocally oppose all other moves by public institutions and officials to curtail our liberties.

It is also important for us to acknowledge this because we will have to redraft the terms of our victory accordingly. To extend the metaphor of a weapon: the battle can be won by taking away the opponent’s guns, but the war will be won only when the opponent finds its cause to be hopeless. We must fight the battles but we must also end the war.

P.S.

- THE WIRE. 27/SEP/2018:
<https://thewire.in/the-sciences/the-modi-governments-pseudoscience-drive-is-more-than-an-attack-on-science>
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Footnotes

- [1] <https://theprint.in/india/governance/in-engineering-courses-soon-wright-brothers-didnt-invent-plane-batteries-existed-in-vedic-age/124540/>
- [2] http://www.bhavans.info/news/show_other_news.asp?nid=1871&kid=12
- [3] <https://thewire.in/education/serious-indias-student-loan-default-problem>
- [4] <https://thewire.in/science/panchgavya-svarop-iit-csir-cow-urine>