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India: How the Parivar is taking over institutions in education and culture

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A hallmark of the Modi government's first 200 days in office is the beginning of the Sangh Parivar's Long March through the Institutions of the State, in particular bodies that deal with education and culture. The Parivar's agenda is to influence their working to reflect its own specific brand of "cultural nationalism" by engineering long-term changes in their programmes and priorities, and making key appointments of personnel who will loyally execute such changes.

The government's imposition of the observance of Christmas Day as "good governance" day on a range of Central educational institutions—including Kendriya and Navodaya Vidyalayas and Central Board of Secondary Education (CBSE)-affiliated schools, the 45 Central universities, the elite Indian Institutes of Technology (IITs) and Indian Institutes of Management (IIMs)—is only the latest, if symbolic, step in that direction. It forces them through a mere executive order to celebrate the birth anniversaries of two Parivar icons, Atal Behari Vajpayee, and the even more sectarian former Hindu Mahasabha leader Madan Mohan Malaviya.

The larger Sangh agenda includes more substantive changes in the content of education and what is officially supported and promoted as culture. For instance, the government has appointed pro-Hindutva or pro-BJP individuals to head the apex-level Indian Council of Historical Research (ICHR), the prestigious Indian Institute of Advanced Study (IIAS) at Shimla, and Banaras Hindu University (BHU), established, incidentally, by Malaviya in 1916.

This sends out an unmistakable signal about the shape of things to come in other Central universities including Jawaharlal Nehru University, the Indian Council of Social Science Research (ICSSR), some of the IITs, and the CBSE, among many other institutions where new appointments are due soon to their top posts or their councils/governing bodies.

An even stronger signal emanates from the manner in which Parvin Sinclair, the upright and independent-minded director of the National Council for Educational Research and Training (NCERT), was ousted more than two years before her term ended, aborting at the last stage the revision (improvement and updating) of the National Curriculum Framework 2005 she had initiated. The NCF was itself the product of a long, broadly consultative process of "de-saffronisation", which led to widely acclaimed, secular-liberal, pedagogically vastly superior, school textbooks.

On May 22, even before Narendra Modi was sworn in, the RSS-affiliated Shiksha Sanskriti Utthan Nyas run by Dinanath Batra (of book-pulping fame) demanded a "total" overhaul of the education system and rewriting of textbooks so they inculcate "patriotism", reflect "Indian tradition, social consciousness... and spiritualism", and help build a "strong and vibrant India". He insisted that human resource development (HRD) minister Smriti Irani reconstitute the NCERT. When Sinclair refused to toe Irani's line on the NCF and other issues, she was reportedly charged with financial irregularities, not allowed to defend herself fully, and asked to resign.

There has been no similar purge in other institutions so far. But the government has used three

other methods to favour the Parivar: appointing RSS functionaries or close sympathisers to high positions although they manifestly lack academic competence, leave alone distinction; nominating mediocrities who are BJP fellow-travellers to head institutions; and co-opting appointees of the previous regime by striking questionable deals with them which benefit the Parivar.

Last month's appointment of Girish Chandra Tripathi as BHU vice-chancellor, a post held earlier by luminaries like S Radhakrishnan and Acharya Narendra Dev, falls in the first category. Tripathi, long a hardcore prant (province)-level RSS official, was a professor of economics at Allahabad university. But going by a google-scholar search and other available biographical entries, he has published no books or papers, at least recently.

According to a former colleague of his, Tripathi shrewdly played Uttar Pradesh-style Brahmin politics as a loyalist who publicly kowtowed to Giridhar Malaviya, the BHU founder's manipulative pro-RSS grandson; Tripathi "probably never taught a full 50-minute class". Malaviya officially nominated Modi as the Lok Sabha candidate from Varanasi. He also headed the search-cum-selection committee that recommended Tripathi's name!

The appointment of Y Sudershan Rao, a singularly undistinguished historian close to a spiritual guru (who mediated with the RSS-BJP on his behalf), as ICHR chairman is a similar, if somewhat less sordid, story. Rao rails against Western and Marxist scholars and defends the caste system. He wants to prove the historicity of the Mahabharata and the Ramayana. He emphasises the relevance of the Puranas: "The ICHR has to play a catalyst role in taking to people their history" through the epics. According to Romila Thapar, Rao fails to distinguish between epics and historical texts. He has published no articles on the epics, or on Ayodhya as Rama's birthplace, in peer-reviewed journals.

One of Rao's first actions was to invite a Belgium-based, rabidly pro-Hindutva scholar, SN Balagangadhara, to deliver the Maulana Azad Memorial Lecture on November 11. Balagangadhara's views drew serious criticism from distinguished historians like Rajan Gurukul.

The nomination by the MHRD of Chandrakala Padia as the chairperson of IIAS-Shimla, and by the foreign ministry of Kavita Sharma as the VC of South Asian University, belong to the second category. Padia, who comes from Varanasi, does have some published work, but its quality is not commensurate with her position at IIAS. Sharma was director of the India International Centre, Delhi and earlier principal of Hindu College, but can claim little academic accomplishment.

Third, the Parivar has cut deals with various UPA appointees, who have turned pro-BJP-RSS, including University Grants Commission chairman Ved Prakash and Delhi university VC Dinesh Singh, who both attended a lunch hosted by RSS chief Mohan Bhagwat in Delhi on October 12. Prakash is anxious to continue in his post till 2017 despite vigilance and other inquiries against him.

Singh's favourite, but mindless, scheme (Four-Year Undergraduate Programme) was recently shot down by Irani. Sensing the wind, he capitulated. He now plays Bhumihaar-cum-Parivar politics and recently made more than 20 questionable appointments in university departments, according to teachers. He has also provided a platform to senior RSS functionaries on the campus, including Indresh Kumar and Krishna Gopal.

A dark presence behind some of these appointments and related decisions is said to be MHRD's officer on special duty Sanjay Kachroo, who has worked with several corporate houses, including Reliance, and had access to secret MHRD files even before he received intelligence clearance.

On October 5, something extraordinary happened in the auditorium of the National Museum in New

Delhi. An organisation called the Akhil Bharatiya Itihaas Sankalan Yojana held a symposium there on “Maharaja Hemchandra Vikramaditya”, alias Hemu. ABISY claims that Hemu established a “Hindu raj” in North India before the second battle of Panipat, albeit for 29 days, until the Mughals ousted him. Reputed historians regard this as Hindutva-inspired myth-making. No rewards for guessing that ABISY is RSS-sponsored; it even functions out of the Sangh’s office in Jhandewalan!

Among the scheduled speakers were ABISY office-bearers, the BJP’ Subramaniam Swamy, and then minister for culture Shripad Naik, who had to suddenly leave for Goa. Swamy was the star of the show. He shockingly demanded, to a deafening applause, that books written by Romila Thapar, Bipin Chandra and other “Nehruvian” historians must be “burnt”.

How did the auditorium, normally reserved for erudite talks and academic debates, become the venue of this hysterical celebration of Hindutva? Under the rules, said a museum official, it can be rented to “cultural” or “academic” non-governmental organisations. Like the RSS, ABISY too claims to be one. Under the guidelines, issued in May 1999, the NGO must get “prior approval of the Department of Culture”. ABISY must have got it: after all, the minister was to be a speaker. Next, it could be the turn of the original “cultural” organisation.

The culture ministry also presides over the Sahitya, Lalit Kala and Sangeet Natak Akademis and their branches, the national libraries and archives, the Archaeological and Anthropological Surveys of India, the National Gallery of Modern Art and Indira Gandhi National Centre for the Arts, and various heritage sites and subject-specific missions.

These are rich sources of patronage and favours, for which the Akademis, for instance, are notorious. They are now liable to be used to further more explicitly ideological-political, divisive agendas, the way the ASI was by NDA-1 (1998-2004). It conducted excavations around the Ayodhya mosque to “establish” the prior existence of a temple—although that’s not a legitimate function of archaeology.

Some key positions in these institutions are already held by Hindutva sympathisers. As more fall vacant, they are likely to be assigned to RSS loyalists, even more brazenly than earlier. The BJP didn’t then dominate NDA nearly as comprehensively as it now does, and will have fewer compunctions in being partisan.

Strange as this might seem, the Modi government is even resisting conservationists’ efforts, under way for five years, to get Delhi declared India’s first heritage city by Unesco—a status like Rome’s or Cairo’s, coveted the world over. Delhi’s claim is primarily founded on the old city of Shahajanabad and New Delhi’s Lutyens Bungalow Zone. Some pro-Hindutva officials reject this as “India’s heritage”: both sites represent “alien” conquerors’ cultures.

The culture and urban-development ministries aren’t the only ones singing the Parivar’s tune. The foreign ministry under the “declare-the-Gita-India’s-National-Book” Sushma Swaraj has appointed Lokesh Chandra to head the Indian Council of Cultural Relations. Chandra’s past accomplishments as a linguist and historian are undeniable. But he is 87, and raves about Modi being a greater leader than Gandhi: totally attached to Indian “values”, fiercely dedicated to the poor, “above all political affiliations”—“an incarnation of God”, no less.

The ICCR is the most ramified of India’s education-research-cultural councils, with 10 centres and 100-plus university chairs abroad, and 20 regional offices. It offers over 3,000 scholarships, and organises scores of cultural performances and festivals—an enormous source of patronage and prestige, which the Modi government will no doubt use to sectarian ends.

Why, it's even putting pressure on universities to create chairs in cultural studies, to be named after Vivekananda—a figure the RSS has successfully milked through the Vivekananda International Foundation earlier headed by National Security Adviser Ajit Doval, and the rock memorial at Kanyakumari—and even more controversially, Deen Dayal Upadhyaya, whose contribution to culture remains unknown. It is also planning to award National Research Fellowships to three Sangh sympathisers (SL Bhyrappa, Ashok Modak and Suryakant Bali), only one of whom (Bhyrappa) has a distinguished record despite his “fevered hatred of Indian Muslims” (Sudheendra Kulkarni). These fellowships were earlier held by people like CV Raman, Satyendranath Bose, Mahashweta Devi and Andre Beteille.

The government has also launched Unnat Bharat Abhiyan by roping in all 16 IITs and two other institutes, to bring about “transformational change in rural development processes by leveraging knowledge institutions to help build the architecture of an Inclusive India”—whatever that might mean beyond experimenting with top-down technologies on “adopted” villages. The budget, reportedly in the Rs 100-200-crore range, will give the MHRD great leverage. Except in a couple of cases, NDA-1 didn't mess with the IITs. The Modi government could.

Parivar affiliates have held or plan to hold over the next three years numerous conclaves in Delhi, Ujjain, Nagpur, Bhopal and Goa on education and rewriting history to sanitise and glorify “Hindu India's” past. Their agenda, supported by powerful functionaries in state-run institutions, isn't limited to the social sciences and humanities; it's much broader.

It won't be easy to stop this juggernaut. The next onslaught will come soon, when eight of the 19 academic members of the Indian Council of Historical Research complete their first term and the rest retire. The eight should by convention get another term, but this seems unlikely. ICHR will be a test case, followed by numerous other appointments, including a majority of VCs of 14 central universities where vacancies recently arose, in addition to 40 percent of faculty posts in all Central institutions put together. The government can nominate their occupants or influence their selection decisively, especially if it's procedurally unscrupulous.

Only the Indian Council of Social Science Research, with 27 affiliate-institutes, has tried to create a (partial) firewall by taking away the power of direct nomination from the government. It has amended its memorandum of association by limiting the selection of council members from among those nominated by a collegium of ex-officio members like heads of eminent institutions (roughly 300), from whom a three-member committee would choose 50 percent more candidates than needed, and leave the final selection to the MHRD.

Unless public pressure is generated to create similar firewalls, our educational and cultural institutions will be totally saffronised and irreparably damaged.

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P.S.

[*http://www.prafulbidwai.org/index.php?post/2015/01/01/How-the-Parivar-is-taking-over-institutions-in-education-and-culture-%28Parts-I-and-II%29](http://www.prafulbidwai.org/index.php?post/2015/01/01/How-the-Parivar-is-taking-over-institutions-in-education-and-culture-%28Parts-I-and-II%29)