

Hindu nationalism and education: Why vigilance is needed under a BJP government

Dishil Shrimankar argues that education policies are vulnerable to being influenced by Hindu nationalist perspectives under a BJP government with a strong mandate.

Although it is too early to thoroughly assess the Ministry of Human Resource Development's (HRD) working, it is worth throwing light on the involvement of this ministry in developing education policy during the last Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP)-led National Democratic Alliance (NDA) government in the late 1990s.

Education policy has generated considerable debate and attention amongst scholars working on Indian politics in the past. Many political commentators argued that the BJP's former secular coalition allies, especially the Janata Dal (United) and Telugu Desam Party, helped moderate the party's *Hindutva* ideology during the previous BJP-led government. This came to be known as the moderation thesis. However, this moderation thesis was put to test in the aftermath of the 2002 Gujarat riots and the increasing attacks on the Christian minority during the late 1990s. Although the moderation thesis evoked considerable debate, the discussion did not always extend to education policy. Many advocates of the moderation thesis accept that the BJP, and the wider Sangh Parivar, were successful in the subtle implementation of the *Hindutva* project during the NDA government. This can be seen in the handling of education policy.

During the previous BJP-led NDA government, the party appointed Murli Manohar Joshi and Uma Bharti to lead the workings of the HRD Ministry. Both are known for the closeness to the Rashtriya Swayamsevak Sangh (RSS), and have played a significant role in the *Ram Janmabhoomi* campaign. During their time in power, they oversaw changes to history textbooks and the curriculum, reinterpreting history into Hindu vs. non-Hindu eras of rule. India's foremost historian Romila Thapar (who authored some of the original textbooks) objected to the changes, questioning the accuracy of the new narrative in which the authenticity and achievements of the Hindu eras were set against the alleged foreign import, anti-Hindu practices, and historic failures of other periods. The BJP's response was to attempt to intellectually discredit Thapar and other academics who protested.

Some of these activities were also met with opposition from the BJP's coalition allies. For instance, when the coalition partners were invited for a conference held for improving India's primary and secondary school curricula, several of the regional political parties threatened to boycott the opening of a conference organised by the HRD Ministry, led by the *Hindutva* ideologue Murli Manohar Joshi. The boycott was primarily a response to the agenda paper at the conference, which sought to abrogate Articles 29 and 30 of the Indian constitution. These Articles grant minority religious groups special education dispensations and privileges for their languages. Moreover, the agenda paper sought to incorporate Vedas and Upanishads into basic school teaching and hoped to make Sanskrit compulsory. However, the stiff resistance towards these measures from the BJP's coalition partners resulted in the withdrawal of the controversial aspects from the conference. This effort undertaken by the secular political parties confirms that in the past coalition politics forced the BJP to moderate its *Hindutva* stance in order to accommodate the religious minorities.

This time there are no coalition allies to obstruct the party from implementing their *Hindutva* agenda. Therefore, the onus is passed on to the media and other social activists to remain vigilant. The role of the independent media is particularly significant. Last time, the media paid little attention to the issue regarding the BJP's education policy and did not sufficiently draw attention to the threat to national minorities. In any democratic country, the media plays a significant role in bringing issues at the forefront and putting pressure on the government to take action. When the press did take this initiative under the BJP-led government the secular political forces in the NDA were upfront in playing their part of negotiating moderation with the BJP in return of their support to the coalition. For instance, when the debate, labelled by the press as the "saffronisation" of education, became a national issue in the summer of 2001, the BJP's coalition partners were upfront in criticising

the party's high command for directing a communal agenda of the Sangh Parivar, which went contrary to the principles enshrined in the Indian constitution. This clearly underlines the importance of the role of independent media. This time this role will further increase as the leverage of the alliance partners this time round is marginalised as a result of this historic mandate afforded to the BJP.

With a stronger mandate, the party does not stand at the mercy of its coalition allies. Acknowledging this difference, it is still important to highlight the debates around education policy under the 1998 government, and to note the dangers posed by the *Hindutva* project to religious minorities. Vigilance, from the media and from other social activists, is required to moderate the more extreme elements of the Hindu nationalist agenda in the coming years.

About the Author

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