

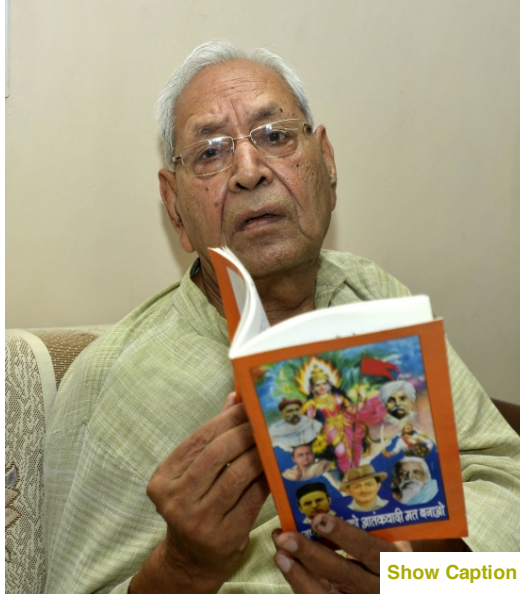
# FRONTLINE

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EDUCATION

## Distorted lessons



**If some textbooks published recently by the Gujarat government are any indication, right-wing ideologues and activists have started the saffronisation of education in earnest. By ANUPAMA KATAKAM**

*Professors profess, or preach, while the acharya practises. The former is a legacy of the British. So quit such pretentions and use acharya.*

—Page 40, Shikshan Nu Bharatiyakaran

*King Dilip was unable to have children. He went to Guru Vashisht's ashram where he was advised to worship and look after cows if he wanted his lineage to go forward. One day when the King saw a lion about to attack a cow, he stopped the lion and said "eat me first and spare the cow". The King's commitment paid off, for soon after several children were born to him.*

—Page 39, Prernadeep-3

*When a very strong Negro tried to open the door of an aircraft which was flying thousands of feet above sea level, an Indian grabbed him and tied him up like a buffalo thereby saving the lives of hundreds of Indians. The plane eventually landed safely in Chicago. The Negro was a serious criminal and the brave Indian an employee of Air India.*

—Story on Brave Gurudev Singh, Page 3, Prernadeep-2

*What we know today as the motorcar existed during the Vedic period. It was called anashva rath. Usually a rath (chariot) is pulled by horses but an anashva rath means the one that runs without horses or yantra-rath, what is today a motorcar. The Rig Veda refers to this....*

—Page 60, Tejoymay Bharat

*Education in India is neither Indian nor a real education. Education has nothing to do with this country's land. It is a result of mischief with words by Marx and Macaulay that today's young generation have become aimless, arrogant and stubborn.*

—Shikshan Nu Bharatiyakaran

*THESE are just a few samples taken from a set of textbooks on Indian culture published recently by the Gujarat government.*

*While cow worship, the importance of the swastika, lessons from sages and seers, and the roles of demons and deities are very much a part of Indian folklore, the disturbing aspect is that the stories in these textbooks have been twisted to suit a particular agenda. As if that is not enough, the chapters are filled with politically incorrect and offensive words, racist comments, absurd anecdotes and false theories.*

*Nine books on the importance of Bharatiya Sanskriti (Indian culture) and the "Hindu" code of conduct have been prescribed by the Gujarat government as supplementary reading for primary and secondary schools and will be distributed to about 40,000 schools across the State. Of these, eight are written by Dina Nath Batra, a long-time Rashtriya Swayamsewak Sangh (RSS) activist who heads the Shiksha Bachao Andolan Samiti.*

Batra is perhaps better known for his book-policing and campaigns to remove so-called non-nationalistic words and passages from school textbooks. Earlier this year, Batra managed to get Penguin India to pulp well-known author Wendy Doniger's book *The Hindus: An Alternative History* because he and his band of protesters felt it insulted the Hindu religion.

Reactions to the textbooks have been extreme, with the right wing claiming nothing is wrong and the liberal voice saying everything is wrong. Yet the blatant distribution of these books has shown that saffronisation has reared its ugly head again. It also exposes the unfortunate sectarian views of a group of people who time and again get away with a form of fundamentalism that is becoming increasingly dangerous.

State government officials are not clear about the exact purpose of the book distribution. "We just have orders to publish and distribute. It is not part of the curriculum but for use in the libraries," said an officer.

They have ensured that the books are not circulated in the missionary or English-medium schools, says Father Cedric Prakash, a Jesuit priest and a human rights activist. "What we had predicted is now becoming a reality," he said.

Ironically, while Gujaratis are traditional, they are not necessarily conservative; they readily adopt aspects of Western culture that suit them. Of course, they are deeply religious and by and large convinced by the saffron agenda. But, with rampant migration to other parts of the world, Gujaratis are highly exposed to other cultures. It is one thing to distribute religious texts, but it is another to send out books with strange notions and beliefs to this community, says an observer.

### **Batra's books**

According to Batra, the Gujarat State School Textbook Board (GSSTB) liked his books in 2007 when he published them. The State government asked if they could be translated for its school curricula. He claims there has not been any financial transactions over the deal. Even more disturbing, yet not surprising, is that all eight books have been endorsed by the then Chief Minister, Narendra Modi, who writes a message in each of the texts.

The books published are *Vidyalyaya: Pravruttiyan Nu Ghar*; *Shikshan Maa Triveni*; *Premadeep 1,2,3 and 4*; *Shikshan Nu Bharatiyakaran*, *Vedic Mathematics*; and *Tejoymay Bharat*. Informed sources say 50,000 copies of each book have been printed.

The books are translations from Hindi into Gujarati. Frontline was able to obtain the Gujarati extracts which have been paraphrased and translated into English for the media. It appears clear from these paragraphs that Batra has essentially put into them his own jingoistic spin on subjects ranging from science, geography, literature, history and mathematics.

The four books titled *Premadeep* are compilations of anecdotes, which include the story of the king who worshipped cows—*Gau seva* as they called it—to have children. *Premadeep* also relates an incident involving Dr Sarvepalli Radhakrishnan, who told the British that Indians were "rotis cooked right by God". The British apparently were half-cooked rotis and the Africans over-cooked rotis.

Another narrative in *Premadeep* speaks about Swami Vivekananda who, apparently, when asked by a Westerner why he wore foreign shoes though he insisted on Indian clothing, said, "I was saying exactly this that in our view, the place for the foreigner is here [indicating his shoes]."

In *Shikshan Nu Bharatiyakaran*, where Batra dwells on education, he says: "Modernisation of education should not mean Westernisation but Indianisation." He blames the communists and Orientalists for the "bad" education system that is prevalent in India. "English education had made Hindu word ugly. Sons of Marx and Macaulay have played mischief with our ancient words and have caused a deep wound on our pride by giving place to discrepancy and distortions in our history."

In *Shikshan Maa Triveni*, Batra suggests that one of the ways to create an ideal Indian society is for the youth to visit an RSS shakha daily. Keeping a good friend circle is not enough. To be faultless is to be in the company of saints and learned people. The student who goes to an RSS shakha daily finds miraculous changes in his life, he says.

Sample some of his gems on science. *Pushpak Viman*, a flying chariot used by Rama, was the first aeroplane in the world. *Vedic Maths* is the real mathematics and must be compulsorily taught in schools. *Rishis* (sages) were scientists whose inventions in the fields of technology, medicine and science have been appropriated by the West.

Batra's moral and political prescriptions include a proposal to redraw India's map to include neighbouring countries. This is in keeping with the RSS ideology of *Akhand Bharat*. He says birthday cakes and candles are not an Indian custom and must be completely done away with.

Although not written by Batra, *Tejoymay Bharat* is equally bizarre on scientific explanations. Here is a sample (page 92-93): "Kunti had a bright son like the sun itself. When Gandhari, who had not been able to conceive for two years, learnt of this, she underwent an abortion. From her womb a huge mass of flesh came out. (Rishi) Dwaipayana Vyas was called. He observed this hard mass of flesh and then he preserved it in a cold tank with specific medicines. He then divided the mass of flesh into 100 parts and kept them separately in 100 tanks full of ghee for two years. After two years, 100 Kauravas were born of it. Stem cell research therefore was found in India thousands of years ago."

### **Hilarious but scary**

Batra had accused Doniger, an award-winning Indologist, of interpreting Indian history incorrectly. Historians argue that Batra could be accused of the same offence.

Speaking to the media when the texts became public, Irfan Habib, the well-known historian, said, "The contents are so absurd that any reaction would seem superfluous. I don't know what they will teach students when they have turned geography into fantasy." Another historian from Gujarat said the books were "not just regressive but extremely dangerous to young impressionable minds".

The textbooks have marked Batra's big entry into the world of education. Until recently he kept up a crusade against the National Council of Educational Research and Training (NCERT) to remove "objectionable" passages from various textbooks. Not shy of legal battles, he has fought 10 cases against them on these issues. Also targeting the Central Board of Secondary Education (CBSE) system, Batra has made out a blueprint for its overhaul. This includes a ban on teaching foreign languages; making Sanskrit a mandatory language from class VI to VIII; opening a call centre for inculcating culture, values and nationalism among students;

*removing Urdu and English works from the NCERT's Hindi textbooks; barring the CBSE from collaborating with any foreign group; and coming out with a new CBSE syllabus based on Indian values.*

*When questioned by the media about his motive in these crusades, he reportedly said that "he is wedded to India's core idea—unity in diversity" and that he "wants Indianness in the field of education".*

*Batra came into the national limelight when, in 2008, he moved the Delhi High Court to secure a ruling to drop A.K. Ramanujan's famous essay on the many culturally specific versions of the Ramayana from Delhi University's history syllabus. At that time former Prime Minister Manmohan Singh's daughter Upinder Singh, a history professor who had shaped the syllabus, said the department had to deal with venomous personal attacks, legal notices and browbeating that were extremely unfair to the academia.*

*Why people like Batra get away with their narrow-minded beliefs is a question that needs to be addressed by the establishment. The fact is that a right-wing government has emboldened self-appointed protectors of the Hindu religion such as Batra. He and his ilk will be endorsed by the current government, which is evident from the fact that Batra's books were endorsed by Narendra Modi when he was Gujarat Chief Minister.*

*The recent history of attacks on academics, historians, writers, film-makers and so on, which have taken place under the watch of right-wing regimes, show that the establishment supports these incidents. "Unless there is a groundswell of protest from civil society groups, particularly from academics and intellectuals, the future is really going to be bleak," says Father Prakash.*

*Historians believe that because these movements were not curbed in the past, people like Batra have been able to thrive and cause widespread damage. Unfortunately, it is always the victims who go on the defensive and end up buckling under this brand of fanaticism.*