



SAFFRONISATION OF THE EDUCATION SYSTEM: A THREAT TO INDIAN SECULARISM

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ABSTRACT:

This paper examines the saffronisation of education in India as a political and ideological project that seeks to reshape collective memory, cultural identity, and democratic values. Unlike Western models of secularism that enforce a strict separation between religion and state, Indian secularism, conceptualized by Rajeev Bhargava as contextual secularism or the principle of principled distance, allows the state to engage with religion while safeguarding pluralism and social justice. However, recent curriculum revisions, institutional appointments, and media narratives indicate a shift toward embedding Hindutva ideology within the education system. The erasure of Mughal contributions, omission of Gandhi's assassination context, silencing of communal violence, and weakening of scientific discourse highlight the ideological manipulation of knowledge. These interventions, supported by propaganda and institutional capture, risk eroding pluralism, legitimizing caste and gender hierarchies, undermining scientific temper, and weakening democratic citizenship.

In contrast, Mahatma Gandhi's vision of education emphasized inclusivity, moral development, and respect for diversity. The paper argues that safeguarding the secular character of education is not merely a constitutional duty but also essential to preserving India's democratic ethos. Unless urgent steps are taken by the state, civil society, and academia, the saffronisation of education threatens to transform India into a majoritarian society where critical inquiry and pluralism are systematically devalued.

Keywords: Saffronisation of Education, Indian Secularism, Hindutva Ideology, Cultural Hegemony, Constitutional Safeguards

SECULARISM- A CONCEPTUAL OVERVIEW:

Secularism, in its broadest sense, refers to the principle of maintaining a distinction between religious institutions and the functions of the state. It ensures freedom of religion, equality of all faiths, and the protection of individuals from religious domination. The core idea is to prevent religion from dictating governance while simultaneously protecting the right of individuals to practice their beliefs freely.

However, secularism has been understood and practiced differently across contexts. Western secularism, especially in the American and French traditions, emphasizes a strict separation of church and state. The state is

expected to remain completely neutral and refrain from engaging with religious practices or beliefs. In contrast, Indian secularism evolved within a society marked by extraordinary religious diversity. Instead of erecting an absolute wall between religion and state, it allows for a principled engagement: the state may intervene in religion to abolish discriminatory practices (such as untouchability or gender inequality), while also extending protection and recognition to different religious communities.

Political theorist Rajeev Bhargava describes this model as "contextual secularism" or the principle of principled distance. According to him, Indian secularism is neither irreligious nor strictly separationist; rather, it is designed to preserve religious harmony, social justice, and pluralism by allowing the state to engage with religion when necessary, while maintaining equal respect for all faiths.

This delicate balance, however, is under increasing strain. Recent trends in educational policy and curriculum revision point towards a deliberate attempt to saffronise education, embedding Hindutva ideology within the academic framework. By privileging one religious-cultural identity, such efforts risk eroding the inclusive and pluralistic ethos of Indian secularism and replacing it with majoritarian narratives. Given the central role of education in shaping democratic citizenship, this ideological shift raises urgent concerns about the future of India's secular and constitutional values.

However, the Constitution of India ensures education as a fundamental right; on the other hand, secularism constitutes a basic framework of the Constitution, and as a result, the education system of India has been guided by the ethos of secularism and democracy. To substantiate this argument, the Indian Constitution provides certain basic provisions to ensure that secularism and education are intertwined with each other.

CONSTITUTIONAL SAFEGUARDS AND EDUCATIONAL RIGHTS:

Education, which plays a vital role in shaping the understanding and promoting tolerance amongst individuals, has become a right of all individuals without any discrimination. Hence, with the advancement of human rights discourse, education has been recognised as an important fundamental right of all, as a response to which various international commitments have ensured that the right to education is a basic right of all.

1. The Universal Declaration of Human Rights (1948), Article 26, affirms the right to education directed toward the "full development of the human personality" and the strengthening of respect for human rights and freedoms — goals incompatible with sectarian indoctrination.
2. The International Covenant on Economic, Social, and Cultural Rights (ICESCR, 1966), Article 13, obligates states to ensure education that promotes understanding, tolerance, and friendship among all groups.
3. The UN Convention on the Rights of the Child (1989), Article 29, emphasizes that education must prepare the child for a responsible life in a free society, fostering respect for cultural diversity and human rights.
4. UNESCO's 1990 World Declaration on Education for All and its later frameworks underline that education must be inclusive, scientific, and non-discriminatory, serving as a tool for empowerment rather than ideological control.

India, being a democratic country, is always committed to the idea of liberty, equality, and fraternity, which is based on the principle of non-discrimination. As education is an important aspect of human life, the Indian Constitution provides a robust framework to ensure that education remains secular, inclusive, and oriented toward rational inquiry. Key provisions include:

1. Article 21A: Ensures free and compulsory education for children aged 6–14, emphasizing equal access to knowledge without discrimination on grounds of religion, caste, or creed.
2. Article 45 (Directive Principles of State Policy): Mandates the state to provide early childhood care and universal education, reinforcing the state's responsibility to create an egalitarian learning environment

3. Similarly, articles 29 and 30 guarantee Cultural and Educational Rights that protect the interests of religious and linguistic minorities.
4. Articles (25–28) Guarantee freedom of religion to all citizens and explicitly prohibit religious instruction in state-funded institutions, thereby safeguarding the secular fabric of education.
5. Article 51A(h) (Fundamental Duties): Calls upon citizens to develop a scientific temper, humanism, and the spirit of inquiry and reform, positioning education as a means of nurturing rational citizenship.

Despite these safeguards, recent practices such as making Surya Namaskar, Saraswati Puja, or Gita recitations mandatory in certain public schools raise serious constitutional concerns. Similarly, the promotion of texts like the Manu Smriti, which contain regressive and casteist principles, undermines the constitutional promise of equality (Articles 14–15) and risks legitimizing discriminatory hierarchies.

The judiciary has repeatedly emphasized the secular character of education:

1. In *Aruna Roy v. Union of India* (2002), the Supreme Court ruled that religious instruction in state-run schools violates Articles 28(1) and 25, affirming that education in India must remain secular and free from sectarian influence.
2. In *Bijoe Emmanuel v. State of Kerala* (1986), the Court upheld the right of students belonging to the Jehovah's Witnesses community to refrain from singing the national anthem on grounds of conscience, highlighting that freedom of belief and non-coercion are central to education in a democratic society.
3. In *Kesavananda Bharati v. State of Kerala* (1973), secularism was recognized as part of the Constitution's basic structure, meaning it cannot be diluted by legislative or executive action.

The imposition of majoritarian religious practices in state-funded institutions thus violates not only India's constitutional safeguards but also its international obligations. Such practices blur the line between cultural tradition and religious indoctrination, transforming schools into sites of cultural hegemony rather than democratic emancipation.

Moreover, privileging ritualism over scientific inquiry contradicts Article 51A(h) of the Constitution and UNESCO's call to strengthen scientific literacy as a global imperative. The long-term danger lies in weakening democratic citizenship, narrowing pluralism, and eroding the spirit of inquiry essential for a modern, knowledge-driven society.

In this sense, the systematic undermining of constitutional and international educational commitments represents both a legal violation and a democratic crisis. Safeguarding education's secular and scientific ethos is therefore not only a constitutional duty but also an obligation to the international community.

SAFFRONISATION: AN OVERVIEW

Saffronisation is a term used to describe the growing influence of Hindu nationalism, often associated with the Rashtriya Swayamsevak Sangh (RSS) and its affiliated organizations, in Indian politics and society. The term "saffron" is symbolic of Hindu culture and spirituality, with the color saffron representing the Hindu faith and its ideals. The process of saffronisation seeks to integrate Hindu cultural and religious values into the fabric of Indian society, which can often result in the marginalization of other religious communities, particularly Muslims and Christians.

3.1 The Saffronisation of the Education System:

The saffronisation of education in India is a particularly controversial aspect of this phenomenon. There have been growing concerns that the content of textbooks and teaching materials is being altered to reflect Hindu-centric narratives, often at the expense of a pluralistic and inclusive view of Indian history. Critics argue that this trend undermines the secular fabric of India by distorting historical facts, promoting religious intolerance, and fostering division among India's religious communities.

3.1.1. Curriculum Manipulation

Recent revisions in NCERT textbooks reflect a deliberate attempt to reshape collective memory and national identity through selective inclusion and exclusion of knowledge. Among the most significant alterations are:

Erasure of Mughal contributions: References to Mughal emperors, their governance, architecture, and cultural legacy have been removed, minimizing the role of Muslim rulers in shaping India's composite heritage.

Silencing of Gandhi's assassination context: Details linking Nathuram Godse's ideology to Hindu nationalist groups, and the subsequent ban on the RSS, have been eliminated. This omission weakens historical accountability and reshapes the narrative of India's freedom struggle.

Omission of critical social conflicts: Chapters on the Gujarat riots, the Naxalite movement, caste struggles, and communal violence have been deleted, erasing uncomfortable but essential episodes that reveal structural inequalities and challenges to democracy.

Attack on scientific thought: The removal of Charles Darwin's theory of evolution, Mendeleev's periodic table, as well as discussions on environmental movements and democratic rights, undermines the development of scientific temper and rationalist traditions enshrined in the Indian Constitution.

These curricular changes go beyond pedagogy; they function as ideological tools. In Althusser's framework of the ideological state apparatus, education becomes a means of producing subjects who internalize dominant worldviews without resistance. At the same time, through Gramsci's notion of cultural hegemony, one can see how dominant groups seek to secure consent rather than rely solely on coercion, normalizing a singular narrative of Indian civilization that prioritizes Hindu majoritarian identity while marginalizing pluralist and dissenting traditions.

The broader consequence is the production of a generation that inherits a sanitized, homogenized view of history and science, one that discourages critical inquiry and democratic dissent. By rewriting the past and suppressing alternative voices, curriculum manipulation consolidates ideological dominance, turning education into a site of cultural control rather than emancipation.

3.1.2. Institutional Capture

The appointment of ideologically aligned Vice Chancellors and faculty members in central and state universities reflects a strategic attempt to reshape academic culture and intellectual discourse. Such appointments often prioritize loyalty over academic merit, gradually transforming universities into extensions of political ideology rather than independent spaces of critical inquiry.

This capture is also evident in the introduction of courses and departments promoting astrology, rituals, and Vastu, which blur the line between scientific education and religious or cultural belief systems. These initiatives not only marginalize rationalist traditions but also legitimize superstition under the guise of indigenous knowledge.

Symbolic actions, such as one Delhi University college plastering cow dung on classroom walls to align with Hindutva notions of purity, demonstrate how ideology penetrates everyday practices of higher education. These measures are not mere cultural expressions but calculated efforts to normalize a worldview that subordinates critical thinking to tradition and faith.

The cumulative effect of such interventions is the erosion of academic autonomy. Universities, instead of functioning as spaces for free debate and inquiry, risk becoming instruments for manufacturing consent and reproducing dominant political narratives. This undermines the plural and secular foundations of higher education and reshapes knowledge production along ideological lines.

3.1.3. Media and Propaganda

Mainstream and social media in India have become powerful tools for shaping public opinion and reinforcing ideological narratives. In the present context, the growth of Hindutva discourse through television channels, newspapers, and digital platforms has contributed to redefining the national identity along religious and cultural lines. Instead of serving as a neutral watchdog of democracy, much of the media has been reduced to "god media"—a term that denotes unethical praise of the ruling party.

The portrayal of the Prime Minister as a "maha manav" (great man) illustrates how political leaders are mythologized through selective representation. Such glorification mirrors propaganda techniques where dissent is silenced, and alternative narratives are marginalized. Simultaneously, minorities are often reduced to the category of "vote banks", with pejorative depictions in school textbooks and popular media that foster communal polarization.

3.1.3.1 A comparison to Plato's Allegory of the Cave and Media Narratives:

Plato's Allegory of the Cave (Republic, Book VII) describes prisoners chained inside a dark cave, forced to watch shadows cast on a wall by objects passing in front of a fire behind them. For the prisoners, these shadows become reality because they have never seen the world outside. When one prisoner escapes, he realizes the shadows were illusions, but his attempt to convince the others is resisted—truth is painful and destabilizing.

The Cave as Media Reality:

In the current Indian context, mainstream media often functions like Plato's cave. The public, confined within the space of televised debates, sensational headlines, and viral social media posts, sees only shadows of truth rather than reality itself. The repetition of state-sanctioned narratives becomes the dominant perception of reality.

The Fire as Propaganda Machinery:

The fire in the cave represents the ruling ideology and propaganda apparatus. Just as the fire projects selective shadows, the media projects carefully curated images of the leader as a benevolent, heroic figure, while suppressing alternative voices.

The Shadows as Constructed Narratives:

The portrayal of the Prime Minister as "maha manav" is akin to shadows that exaggerate and distort truth. The ordinary citizen accepts this image because it is the only one visible, while inconvenient truths—economic inequality, dissent, communal strife—remain hidden in darkness.

The Philosopher vs. the Media Narrative:

In Plato's allegory, the philosopher who sees the truth outside the cave must return to enlighten the others, but risks hostility. In today's India, independent journalists, academics, and activists who challenge the dominant narrative often face censorship, legal harassment, or branding as "anti-national." This resistance to truth-tellers mirrors the hostility of prisoners who reject the escaped philosopher's insights.

The comparison highlights how the myth-making function of media transforms political leaders into larger-than-life figures while reducing the masses into passive spectators. Unlike Plato's allegory, where truth is ultimately attainable, today's media landscape raises the question: What if the fire itself is controlled, and the exit from the cave is systematically blocked?

The ideological capture of media not only deepens communal polarization but also weakens democracy by replacing reasoned debate with emotional propaganda, prioritizing spectacle over substance, and turning citizens into consumers of ideology rather than critical participants in democracy. Thus, the allegory of the cave underscores the danger of a manufactured reality where media no longer enlightens but enslaves, trapping society in illusions.

In contrast to the current trend of ideological monopolization, Mahatma Gandhi's vision of education means nurturing truth (satya), non-violence (ahimsa), and inclusivity for all, especially for the downtrodden. For Gandhi, education was not merely about transmitting information or promoting sectarian identities; it was about character-building and moral development, rooted in India's diverse spiritual traditions.

Gandhi emphasized that education should shape the spiritual dimension of the individual, but it should never be confined to a single religious doctrine. Instead, it should draw upon the ethical teachings of all traditions- Hindu, Muslim, Christian, Buddhist, and others to foster mutual respect and harmony. Through his concept of Nai Talim (Basic Education), Gandhi proposed that schooling should integrate manual work, intellectual growth, and moral training. This was not meant to indoctrinate but to create self-reliant, socially responsible citizens capable of living in cooperation rather than conflict. Whereas the contemporary ideological agenda often pushes for the homogenization of identity under the banner of cultural nationalism, Gandhi believed in unity through diversity. For him, India's strength lay in its pluralistic traditions, and education had to protect that pluralism. Gandhi rejected the idea of education as propaganda. He insisted that moral authority comes not from imposed ideology but from personal example and ethical conduct. An education system that glorifies a political leader as a "maha manav" contradicts Gandhi's belief that no individual should be elevated beyond moral scrutiny. For Gandhi, education was inseparable from democracy. A spiritually grounded yet inclusive education would empower citizens to think critically, engage in dialogue, and resist injustice. In contrast, an ideologically captured education system risks producing uncritical followers rather than active participants in democratic life.

SAFFRONISATION OF THE EDUCATION SYSTEM A THREAT TO INDIAN SECULARISM:

The saffronisation of education, the infusion of a singular religious-ideological narrative into the curriculum, poses profound risks for the future of Indian democracy and social cohesion. Its consequences extend beyond the classroom into society at large.

4.1 Erosion of Pluralism:

India's greatest strength lies in its pluralistic traditions, where diverse religious, linguistic, and cultural identities coexist. When textbooks highlight only one dominant tradition while downplaying or misrepresenting minority contributions, they create a narrow and exclusionary narrative of the nation. This erases the role of Muslims, Christians, Dalits, women, and other marginalized groups in India's history and culture. Over time, such erasure fosters alienation, resentment, and a fractured national identity.

4.2 Decline in Scientific Temper:

Article 51A(h) of the Constitution calls upon citizens to develop a scientific temper, humanism, and the spirit of inquiry. However, saffronisation often replaces rational inquiry with mythological claims presented as historical or scientific facts—for instance, assertions about ancient aviation, genetic engineering, or astrology as superior sciences. This not only undermines critical thinking but also diminishes India's global credibility in research and innovation. A generation educated without skepticism or evidence-based reasoning risks falling behind in science, technology, and problem-solving capacities.

4.3. Legitimization of Caste and Gender Hierarchies:

By reviving or legitimizing texts like the Manu Smriti, which prescribes rigid caste roles and patriarchal norms, saffronisation threatens the fragile progress India has made toward social justice and equality. Such narratives reinforce the idea that caste-based discrimination or gender subordination is culturally "natural" or divinely sanctioned. This runs directly counter to constitutional values of equality (Article 14), prohibition of discrimination (Article 15), and abolition of untouchability (Article 17). Embedding these hierarchies in education risks normalizing oppression for future generations.

4.4. Threat to Democratic Values:

Democracy thrives on debate, dissent, and respect for diversity. An education system dominated by a singular ideology trains young minds to accept authority uncritically, celebrate majoritarian dominance, and silence alternative viewpoints. In place of constitutional ideals of liberty, equality, and fraternity, students are exposed to feudal glorification of kings, religious dogma, and heroic depictions of select leaders. This weakens the foundation of constitutional patriotism and instead promotes blind loyalty to individuals or groups, undermining democracy itself.

The saffronisation of education risks transforming India from a pluralist democracy into a monolithic, majoritarian society where diversity, reason, and equality are systematically devalued. The stakes are not only educational but civilizational, affecting the kind of citizens and leaders India will produce in the future.

CONCLUSION:

The saffronisation of education is not merely a pedagogical change; it is a deliberate political project aimed at reshaping the cultural and ideological foundations of Indian society. By privileging a singular religious identity, it threatens the delicate balance of contextual secularism that has long defined the Indian experience and undermines the inclusive vision enshrined in the Constitution.

Indian secularism, built on the principles of pluralism, tolerance, and equal respect for all faiths, now faces unprecedented stress due to the growing influence of Hindu hyper-nationalism and the ideological capture of education. This shift risks narrowing the idea of India into an exclusionary narrative that marginalizes minorities, legitimizes social hierarchies, and erodes critical thinking.

Safeguarding secular and inclusive education is therefore essential. The education system must continue to reflect the diverse histories, cultures, and traditions of the nation, so that future generations grow up with respect, empathy, and an appreciation of India's plurality. Only by doing so can India produce citizens capable of reasoning freely, resisting dogma, and engaging in democratic dialogue.

The challenge posed by saffronisation demands urgent and collective action. The government, educational institutions, civil society, and citizens must work together to uphold secular values and prevent the erosion of India's democratic ethos. In the end, preserving the secular fabric of education is not just about protecting textbooks; it is about safeguarding the soul of Indian democracy itself.

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