Teaching against Communalism: Role of Social Science Pedagogy

Ananya Vajpeyi
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Communalism has so far been an ideology that anti-communal forces have tried to address in the informal sectors of pedagogy. What are the issues involved in building a formal syllabus for university students that systematically deals with communalism with a view to encouraging a principled rejection of its ideas and practices?

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Of late, the discussion in the public sphere as regards communalism and education has centered around two problems. One, the communalisation of higher education, particularly of disciplines such as history and philosophy; and two, the danger of institutions of religious education – be they ‘mathas’, ‘madarsas’, or missions – becoming the proponents of political ideologies and thus the breeding grounds of communally-minded subjects. However, there does not seem to have been much attention directed towards trying to imagine how educational processes and institutions could be used in order to analyse communalism and, through such a process of analysis, persuade young citizens to turn away from it. Communalism has so far been an ideology that anti-communal, of both a secularist and an anti-secularist stripe, have tried to address in the informal sectors of pedagogy, namely: activism, awareness campaigns, documentation and theorisation; no one has sought to bring it squarely into the realm of social science pedagogy. This article attempts to identify some of the issues involved in building a syllabus that systematically teaches university students what communalism is, with a view to encouraging a principled rejection of its ideas and practices by them no matter what their religious affiliation.

To begin with, let it be said that the very attention to communalism by both activists and theorists alluded to above, has produced a vast literature on every aspect of the subject, in a range of media. A history of communalism, examining its roots in colonial governmental and law, is easily presented. The role of key actors in the social reform, nationalist and popular movements during the latter half of the 19th and the first half of the 20th centuries in furthering or hindering the discourse of communalism has been thoroughly examined. Historians have also shown the differences between inter-religious and inter-sectarian strife in south Asian premodernity, and communal conflict in colonial and post-colonial India. Similarly the sociology of communalism, revealing its constitutive connection with modern ideologies of caste, is now available to us. So also an analysis of the growth of communalism that attributes it to economic backwardness, class disparities, state-sponsored developmentalism and big science is not hard to cull. Since the beginning of the 1990s, traditional Marxist analyses of communalism have been supplemented by an examination of the effects of economic liberalisation and globalisation on the hardening of communalism; more recently the riot has served as much as a source for historical narratives, statistics, interviews, etc. They mark judgments, acts and bills on matters relating to communalism. Similarly, some investigations of the psychology of communalism and communal violence are present in the literature. The anthropology of violence has naturally homed-in on communal riots and communities of riot-survivors as objects of study. In modern Indian languages, particularly Punjabi, Hindi, Urdu, Bengali and English, the entire genre of partition literature centres around communalism; more recently the riot has served as much as a source for literary representation as for ethnographic data. In gender studies there has been an attempt to triangulate women, communalism and the law; to show the important relationship between the construction of women’s identity and communal identity; and to record the accounts of women who have been the victims of communal violence.

Outside the organised disciplines, citizens’ groups have extensively documented communal violence and its aftermath, in text and on film, in the form of reports, narratives, statistics, interviews, etc. They have also investigated the breakdown of the law and order machinery during episodes of communal conflict, especially the nefarious role of the police, armed forces, and other state apparatuses, and made their findings publicly available. The Internet serves as an ideal site for the circulation of such information. Documentary filmmakers and filmmakers in
parallel cinema have helped build an impressive body of fictional as well as non-fictional films on this theme. Photographers have always had a special part to play in raising the nation’s conscience through their images of communal violence. In addition, more or less organised anti-communal awareness campaigns and protest movements routinely produce tracts, pamphlets, posters, songs, journals, plays and other educational materials for performance and distribution among the general public, especially students. Some groups have also, over time, organised concerts, art shows and other cultural expressions to promote communal harmony. Often times the musical or other outcomes of these events are commercially available. Newspaper, magazine, TV and radio reports of communal activities and violence, in all major Indian languages constitute a huge archive on their own.

In other words, there is no paucity of materials for someone seeking to construct an undergraduate or postgraduate syllabus about communalism in India today. The questions then are: How are these materials to be collected, organised and taught in a systematic and reasoned manner even as the raison d’etre of a course of this kind is to alert young citizens to the dangers of communalism and make them antipathetic towards it? What kind of training and preparation would the instructor herself require before she could take on the responsibility of such interested pedagogy? What are the ethics of teaching against the subject that is being taught? Is there some danger that anti-communal mobilisation will become domesticated once it is incorporated into academic syllabi, and thereby lose its political efficacy, its critical edge, as it were? Can those who are very committed to an anti-communal politics be trusted to teach in a rational and dispassionate manner? Conversely, can uninterested teachers be trusted to get across an unequivocally anti-communal message whilst teaching about communalism?

II

An experiment in teaching against communalism is currently being conducted at the National Law School of India University (NLSIU), in Bangalore. Final year LLB as well as first and second year LLM students have the option of taking a seminar titled ‘Casteism, Communalism and the Law: An Introduction’ taught by this author. The class runs from October 2002 to January 2003, under the aegis of the Centre for the Study of Casteism, Communalism and the Law, a new entity within the school managed out of the department of sociology at the NLSIU. Students are aged 21-23 on average, and the class size is over 40, of which no less than 30 are present on any given day.1

The details — strengths or gaps – of this particular syllabus aside, what is the typical dynamic in a classroom of this sort? The teacher is forced to ask herself: Are there enough, or indeed any students from minority communities represented in the class? If, for example, there are absolutely no Muslim students enrolled, then does that necessarily affect the general direction of debate, and the final consensus that may or may not be reached? Do others take up the position of those who are absent? These types of questions routinely come up regarding Black and other minority students on American campuses. In India, do students speak as members of religious communities, or as citizens, or does their voice alternate between these two identities? What is the exact point when a person stops arguing in a rational disinterested fashion, and assumes the role of defender or spokesperson of the community to which she belongs? What topics suddenly spark an emotional response, interrupting the structure of an on-going discussion?

I found, for instance, that a module on ‘Rama and the Ramayana in the Political Imagination of Modern India’ elicited a heated reaction from my class, and helped put many of the broader themes of the course on the table.2 We talked about the porous or shifting line between religion and culture, the relationship between political mobilisation and cultural and/or religious symbols, the place of history versus that of mythology in identity politics, the persistent role of the past in the present, the difference between religious belief and religious ideology, or Hinduism and Hindutva, and so on. It might appear that this topic, of the Rama figure and the Ramayana narrative, is rather literary, and cannot speak much to the problem of communalism. But my hunch, that choosing so recognisable a civilisational icon would crystallise some abstract questions for the students, while simultaneously grounding the current communal conflict in deeper cultural politics, in fact turned out to be correct. A religious discourse would proceed along one axis of the ‘meaning’ of Rama and Ramayana; social science has its own work of exegesis cut out for it.

We discussed not only the historicity of Rama cults and the traditions of performance and worship associated with this hero/deity all over south, south-east and east Asia, but also present-day issues before the Indian nation: Ram Janmabhumi, Ram mandir, and, in the aftermath of Gujarat 2002, the ominous reverberation of the slogan ‘Jai Shri Ram’. It does seem to be necessary to engage cultural artifacts across religious traditions — head-on within the social scientific framework. The idea here is certainly not to invent a separate social science for India, as critical indigenists have repeatedly suggested (failing, apparently, to see the absurdity of such a plan). It is not even principally to explore what cultural texts and practices are about in and of themselves, but rather to understand what they come to mean in given socio-historical contexts, and how they are used to create, represent and mobilise communities. The identities of groups are more often than not grounded in acts of collective interpretation, and we need not only to examine the objects of interpretation, but also the interpretive act itself, to grasp better what drives the subjects of interpretation in their groupness.

III

In trying to comprehend why and how group identity is performed, in particular communal identity, surely the key is to achieve some insight into violence. However, violence is difficult to address in a pedagogic context, or so I’ve felt. Common sense dictates that violence against women has a special place in women’s studies, racial violence in the study of racism — so also there is no getting around communal violence in a syllabus about communalism (or indeed caste violence in a syllabus about casteism). The question is how to make sure, on the one hand, that the entire course isn’t overwhelmed by this single theme of violence; and, on the other hand, how to ensure that the discussion of violence doesn’t become pornographic, inflammatory or in some other way ethically questionable. There is also the more philosophically complex problem of whether, in attempting to discover the meaning of a violent act, we aren’t somehow justifying it. A semiotics of violence should not end up in a justification of it.
In the event of having to decide what to prescribe on a reading list and what to leave out without recourse, in advance, to a well-developed theory about positioning violence as a topic of pedagogy, I found myself making all sorts of pragmatic choices. I included sections of Valentine Daniel’s *Charred Lullabies: Chapters in an Anthropography of Violence*, even though it is a difficult book for an undergraduate class, but excluded Appadurai’s essay ‘Dead Certainty: Ethnic Violence in the Era of Globalisation’ [Appadurai 1998]. I spoke to my students at length about the latter, but couldn’t bring myself to ask them to read it for themselves. Television coverage and news magazine images of the Gujarat violence have been explicit enough, but I could not screen Gopal Menon’s documentary ‘Hey Ram! Genocide in the Land of Gandhi’ for my class. I have to confess that these were intuitive preferences and I exercised nothing more or less than a teacher’s prerogative in prescribing or proscribing materials. But in future I would like to have access to a philosophically robust and empirically grounded principle on the basis of which to determine how and how much to focus on violence. Right now it’s not clear to me whether such a principle would come from a theory of education, from social scientific theory, from the discipline of psychology, or from some mixture of all these. The experiences of other teachers in dealing with the subject of violence in classrooms across the country would serve as a valuable input for comparative assessment and learning.

In the course of the semester a senior colleague at NLSIU asked me to help him, informally, in preparing a public lecture he was to deliver, on ‘The Problems of Social Harmony in India’. He suggested that I draw on the readings in my syllabus about Casteism, Communalism and the Law to point him in the right direction. It was then it struck me that we had discussed threadbare in this class every aspect of social conflict, but had never really turned to the idea of social harmony, and the related ideas of ‘national integration’ and ‘unity-in-diversity’. Have these ideas become non-objects in Indian social science? Or are they, as erstwhile slogans of the secular state, as official constructions left over from the Congress Party era, merely objects of ridicule for contemporary social scientists? Or can we perhaps see through them to the other side, to the philosophically complex category that is just as important as violence, namely, its opposite, tolerance? ³

Chatterjee has theorised ‘toleration’ in relationship to secularism, but that was in the shadow of the demolition of the Babri Masjid a decade ago [Chatterjee 1994]. With the riots in Gujarat we seem to have crossed a new threshold in the widespread public acceptance as well as the open state sponsorship of communal, especially anti-Muslim, intolerance. Two of my students opted to work on Hate Speech as a legal concept for their research projects due at the end of the semester. India does not have any laws pertaining to Hate Speech – these young legal minds wanted to argue both the need and the form of future (or rather, by their lights, inevitable and therefore imminent) legislation in this area. It is not just the BJP but also the Congress that has conducted a particular kind of election campaign in the Gujarat poll this year, the speeches of candidates from all sides being equally offensive. The message of intolerance is being broadcast all over the land, both by those who are in power and by those who aspire to it. One logical reaction would be to prepare ourselves legally to deal with its growing entailments in our political practice, whether they be shockingly communal election speeches or other ideological propaganda materials full of hate and unabashedly so – posters, CDs, films, pamphlets, etc.

Appadurai (1998) has talked about ‘political obscenity’ in the context of especially cruel, indeed inhuman, acts of ethnic violence. But such obscenity has now spilled over from the domain of brute physical force into the hitherto-civil realm of language and other symbolic representation too. When a kar sevak en route to Ayodhya to build a temple over the ruins of the Babri mosque (and of our secular polity) sings a Ram bhaajin, it is not a simple expression of his devotion to his god, free of the desire to taunt his Muslim countrymen. Gone are the days when a painting of Shivaji or a statue of Ambedkar could be read as the carriers of innocent meanings, like Marathi pride or dalit pride. Prejudice is the ugly Siamese twin of such pride – the two always go together. No glorification of the self today is untainted by the denigration of the other (if indeed it ever was). Hence the difficulty, faced equally by the Sangh parivar and by the fundamentalist ideologues across the border, in constructing a believable narrative for their respective nations, the Hindu rashtra and Pakistan, both of which, like it or not, carry the baggage of an already always miscegenated history. Is it not important, then, to address ourselves afresh to the enfeebled and attenuated notions of harmony and tolerance, to recharge them with a sense of purpose? Is there any other way to make sense of our past, to live out our present and to imagine our future as an irresistibly plural and prolific people?

Simeon (2001) has pointed out that one of the biggest analytic failures of Indian social science was to get taken in by the segmented character of communalism on the subcontinent, and to see instead Muslim, Hindu, Sikh and other communalisms. These have all along been understood as distinct, with each one having its own history, structure and effects upon the nation. He argues that in fact there is only one phenomenon, namely, Indian communalism, and this is really nothing other than the Indian version of fascism. We should look back and recognise this unitary force as the cause and driver of the partition (and, extrapolating from such an insight, also perhaps of the many wars with Pakistan since then, and the many communal conflagrations that have occurred within the country since 1947). Elsewhere in the world, the basis of fascism is usually a ‘fabricated and exclusive ethnic identity’. In India there are many such identities, hence the misleading appearance of discrete and dissimilar communal discourses. In actuality communalism in India has a generic character, that Simeon tries to capture:

Indian fascism’s ideological method defines democracy in arithmetical rather than institutional terms, despises democratic values; and accords superiority to hateful ethnic mobilisation over the requirements of civic order and criminal justice. It uses so-called traditional values to express a fear of women and hostility to gender equality; it also glorifies violence as a ‘masculine’ virtue.

Further Simeon points out that the currency of communalism – a term that he uses interchangeably with ‘Indian fascism’ – is sentiment. In a situation of conflict, we hear of communal ‘passions’ being inflamed, of the ‘feelings’ of this or that community being hurt. Very often the supposed provocation could be an event that occurred way back in history, through the agency of individuals and groups long dead and gone, but the reaction to this is nevertheless here and now. It seems that in our society there are no mechanisms whatsoever to process these free-floating
emotions of hatred, anger, jealousy, fear and humiliation—hence riots, those public detonations of pent-up collective sentiments. But riots are just one expression of the politics of sentiment. Simeon alerts us that:

The most significant consequence of this trend is the justification that self-appointed guardians of morality have obtained for violence and defiance of law, for cultural policing, book burning, and the intimidation of artists and creative activity in general. Film screenings have been disrupted, writers and painters threatened and beaten up, academic work and speculation subjected to the promise of dire consequences.

It seems to me that there is an urgent need, in such a highly charged and oppressive environment, to develop the idea of tolerance. This has to be a habit of mind that regulates the behavior not only of the state towards its citizens, but of these citizens towards one another. All parties need to keep a check on the negative emotions and hate-filled words that have so quickly, before our very eyes, vitiated our public life almost beyond recognition. Ironically, we may have to begin thinking about tolerance in a systematic fashion precisely because in the absence of such thinking the discourses that surround us have become intolerable, certainly to anybody with the slightest faith in democracy.

IV

Teaching against communalism necessarily means teaching for secularism, even though there is no simple opposition—‘Ideology +A v Ideology -A’—to be posited between the two. I was surprised at the extent to which there appeared to be a natural—as opposed to a constructed—consensus among my students that secularism as a concept is defunct. Some thought this was because it is an import from the west and from Christianity; others thought this was because the Constitution had never been able to define or redefine the term properly for India (secularism = the state’s equi-distance from, indifference to, or equal love for, all religions?). Some thought it was always official ideology rather than popular conviction; others thought that the Congress Party had taken secularism with it to the grave. Some even bought into the smoke-and-mirrors doctrine of the Hindu right that secularism is pseudo-secularism, and religious nationalism is real secularism. No one seemed to think that secularism was successful sometimes and fails at other times; that even if it has lost its way it could be brought back on track; that some synthesis could be effected between its many senses and some significance recuperated from this new hybrid category. But no one could deny, either, that we have no real choice than to make it work, not in spite of or against our many religious traditions, but precisely in their midst. Secularism may have been reduced to an empty signifier today, but other than filling it once more with meaning—meaning and teeth—it’s not at all clear what the political alternative might be.

As a mental exercise, I asked my students to picture a day in their life in the Hindu rashtra. I posed to them a series of questions, polemical and yet deadly earnest, in the style of Arundhati Roy. Which items of their regular clothing would they be willing to give up in the name of proper Hindu dress? Which of their beloved foods would they happily bid farewell to? What types of music would they gladly sacrifice for the cultural purity of this imaginary nation, which architectural monuments would they eliminate, how many arenas of their existence would they willingly shrink and desiccate in order to count as dutiful citizens of this Promised Land? How would they complete a single sentence in any modern Indian language with so many words disallowed for being of foreign origin? What would they remember of a past become taboo, and where would they hide their censored memories?

The fact is that Indians have no idea what the fascist utopia actually entails. We mistake a nightmare for a dream and wish it could come true. Those of us who yearn for some such space, not recognising it for the dystopia it is, do so not so much from ideological conviction as from sheer ignorance of the real meaning of an exclusive, authoritarian majoritarian state for our small everyday pleasures and freedoms, for our assumption that we count, each one. Those of us who gather in the shade of our swords or ‘shakhas’ know that when we step out, a constitutional sun still shines on us and under the rule of law we can breathe easy. Glib talk in the national press and media about Gujarat being the ‘laboratory’ of Hindu nationalism masks our collective inability to project ourselves as the dissection rats in these ghastly experiments with untruth.

Who wants to live in Hindu rashtra? If some big national newspaper had con-
ducted a poll, my guess even so recently as a year ago would have been that almost every Indian who took a moment to think about this question would have answered, ‘Not me’. But such trust in the fundamentally secular character of our people begins to appear naïve today. The citizens of Gujarat – at least those who still have left the freedom to vote – seem happy to choose between light and dark shades of saffron. They are deciding the future government of their state within the communal parameters set by the Hindu Right but ratified or acquiesced to by all major political parties. What does this mean? That no one wants an alternative? Or that since none seems forthcoming – not from the discourses of politics, not from the state or national leadership, and not from civil society – the people have resigned themselves to a more or less communal fate? How must an anti-communal option, one that will prevent social strife, economic ruin, cultural impoverishment and political destruction, be created and presented, not just to Gujaratis but to all Indians? More importantly, how must the very desire and demand for such an option be rekindled among ordinary folk? How are we to reject this reduction of us – humans and citizens – to guinea pigs in the laboratories of communal ideology?

Education may be a way. Many times I found some of my students falling in with the on-going discussion, and then suddenly becoming recalcitrant. At such moments, of retreating into unreflexively communal positions that to all appearances had already been discredited in the class by consensus, they often uttered phrases that I felt could not have entered their heads except verbatim from the speech of their elders. These ‘sutras’ of casual, everyday communalism, picked up in the house and school from parents and teachers, were reproduced unhingly, uncritically, at points in the class-room conversation that were at first surprising to me but later began to be predictable. Islam is rigid; Hinduism is tolerant. Muslims are foreign; Hindus are native. Muslims provoke; Hindus react. Today’s broken mosques pay for yesterday’s broken temples. There’s no such thing as Hinduism. There’s no such thing as a non-Hindu India. Hindutva is politics, Hinduism is religion; the latter need have no fear of the former, because the spiritual triumphs over the material. Muslims proliferate because they are polygamous; Hindus are dwindling because they do not proselytise. We have all heard such things said, at the dinner table, in front of the television, and at other sites of bourgeois domesticity. The domestic sphere is where adults air their frankest prejudices and children absorb them. Sometimes stereotyped images of self and other, folk theories about belonging and exclusion, solidarity and enmity, that would have been at hand in the privacy of the home, spilled out into the quasi-public space of the classroom. When a very deep chord of such unprocessed – primordial? – conviction was touched, some of my students could not filter out, either by following the dictates of reason or by deferring to the protocols of civility, the communal attitudes they had heard expressed in the family environment.

Not even the pressure, implicit in the very nature of the power-imbalance between teacher and student, to conform to what could be construed as my position, nor the embarrassment at being immediately contradicted by more politically correct classmates, helped contain these communal articulations from time to time. So 21-year olds pronounced wisely on Nehru’s failures, Indira Gandhi’s wiles, Rajiv Gandhi’s blunders, and V P Singh’s mistakes. Their interpretations of the recent past of our nation were remarkably assured. They seemed to remember the partition, the emergency, the anti-Sikh riots of 1984, the anti-Mandal agitation, Babri Masjid, Pokharan, and Godhra, not merely as members of a TV-watching, movie-going generation, but as though they had been there. I was grateful that this kind of visceral identification with a given community did not extend into the remote past. For that would have made young minds feverishly relive centuries of war, invasion, genocide, desecration, and thus experience, as if first-hand, the agonies of a history imagined, anachronistically, to be riven by communal strife.

A syllabus is easily constructed; a literature review smoothly conducted. The problem here is of trying to communicate a set of values through a self-reflexive, self-critical, ethical and yet interventionist pedagogy. It is hard to open anyone’s mind. But the young are receptive, ready to revise their views – which as we have seen, are often really the undigested views of their parents – if persuaded by rational means. Teaching against communalism may be a way prevent the fearful dream of a Hindu rashtra from becoming a reality that no one, let’s face it, could possibly want to trade for a life in secular democratic India.

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Notes

1 The part of the course that focuses on casteism is not discussed in this article. For a copy of her taught syllabus on ‘Casteism, Communalism and the Law’, readers may write to the author.


3 Let us grant that no one in our public sphere even half-heartedly invokes the literal contrastive of violence, viz, non-violence, any more. At this point in our history as a nation, from no end of the political spectrum, along any axis, of caste, community, class or ideology, do we hear any invocation whatsoever of Gandhi’s ahimsa as a principle of personal ethics or civic life.

4 Being secular does not merely mean being anti-communal!

5 The other word besides ‘laboratory’ that I find problematic in the media’s frequent use of it to describe Gujarat, is ‘showcase’ – that unfortunate state is simultaneously a laboratory and a showcase for the ideological and practical workings of Hindutva. What does the experiment here consist in? Communalising minds and dividing people? What are the new products of this experimentation that get proudly displayed to the rest of the nation? Better ways to rape and kill humans, to burn and loot property, to make a mockery of the institutions of law and order? The Sangh parivar may be using such vocabulary in their internal publications – why do the national press and TV channels repeat these words and give them general currency? We have to be vigilant lest even seemingly innocent acts of reference become acts of validation. The semantics of communalism can permeate and infect our very language to the point that we find ourselves saying things we do not mean, complicit, willy-nilly, in an ideology we do not subscribe to.

References


