

## OPINION

# Fake news, paid news thrive in intellectual passivity – in India, blame it on the education system

Public opinion would not have been so decisive but for our willingness to be dumping grounds for other people's opinions.

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“A man is what education makes of him,” wrote Immanuel Kant. A nation is built, we are told, in her classrooms. John Dewey argued at length, in *Democracy and Education* (1916), for the need to orient education to equip the people for democracy. Plato recognised education as vital to the robustness of a republic. Thinkers on education, in diverse ages, have emphasised the need to train people not only to be developed in themselves, but also to be proper representatives of the human species. Only good, or virtuous, human beings can be responsible citizens and, as Aristotle insisted, happy individuals.

The tragedy of India is that we refuse to link our purpose and practice of education to realising the “India of our dreams”. As of now, the India of our dreams is, as TS Eliot would say, “a heap of broken

images”. We ply a plethora of projects in a disjointed and random fashion. Nothing coheres. Most of us seem to have given up dreaming about India and consigned ourselves to waiting for the India of “somebody else’s dreams” to land in our laps. The collective passivity this implies has its roots, sadly, in the conditioning we have suffered in classrooms. This is a serious matter. We are formatting ourselves via education, even if unwittingly, against the genius and genre of the republic.

Even as we wait languidly for dream-India to materialise, somehow, in spite of ourselves, we bemoan the phosphoric sparking of fascist tendencies. But we hardly ever wonder if we aid and abet this process. Nothing hits a people like a bolt from the blue. We fashion and forge our miseries and calamities through acts of omission and commission.

## **Public opinion: Anything but public**

Our intellectual passivity lends deadly power to public opinion. Public opinion is to democracy what the army was to kingship. God, Napoleon famously said, “is on the side of bigger battalions”. Today god, having taken a democratic turn, seems to be on the side of those who can afford to deploy the smartest propaganda battalions and monopolise the manufacturing of public opinion. But, surely, public opinion would not have been so decisive but for our willingness to be dumping grounds for other people’s opinions. Public opinion, said the writer GK Chesterton, is “opinion minus my opinion”. It is because none of us has any opinion of our own that public opinion reigns supreme in the public sphere. But public opinion is mere opinion, all the same. It is somebody else’s opinion. We do not care whose opinion, or the intent underlying its generation. Public opinion is anything but public in its origin. It is public only in respect of its consumption. It is opinion that the public is made to mistake for its own opinion.

This brings us to “fake news” and “paid news”, which we tend to think of in the analogy of an epidemic like smallpox – as though, like the virus, it is in the air. But its fertile soil is our intellectual passivity, moral apathy and habitual credulity. Rather than helping us assume the responsibility of thinking factually and justly, education has conditioned us to accept everything on trust. Politically, we are in a perpetual classroom. The connection between the education we courted and the fake news that we consume is very real, even if we refuse to acknowledge this nexus.

## **What is a republic?**

The reason people do not think for themselves is that our practice of education shies away from promoting clarity on basic concepts and realities. Consider, for example, our facile assumption that we are a “secular, democratic republic”. We rarely ever pause for a moment and ask, “But what is a republic?” That, thanks to Bharatiya Janata Party leader LK Advani, we have lost the distinction almost entirely between secular and pseudo-secular is an issue of which we shall take only a cursory view. Advani did so, in his eagerness to usher in Hindutva into the public sphere at a time when public disfavour still overcast that ideology. Secularism was a hindrance to be wished away. That it was integral to the basic architecture of the Constitution was conveniently ignored. What enabled Advani to succeed significantly in this task was the haziness in understanding this key concept that prevailed then. In a multi-religious polity like India, in which the majority religion preponderates over the rest, secularism is an essential condition for the survival of its republican character.

A republic is distinguished by a Constitution founded on rights and duties. Hence it is that the Preamble of our Constitution foregrounds four ideals – justice, liberty, equality and fraternity. But how does a state remain republican unless its citizens uphold in practice republican values and ideals? How can a republic survive if its Constitution is undermined and its key tenets kept in suspended animation? At the core of the republican vision is the duty of the state to fully develop the resources and potential of its citizens. A state ceases to be republican when its citizens are left languishing in under-development and hero-worship. The problem aggravates when the doctrine of separation of powers between the legislative, the executive and the judiciary is undermined, imperiling, among other things, the rule of law.

Given that our enterprise of education has proved itself incommensurate to nurturing the republican outlook in us, we can do no better than draw from the resources of spirituality to compensate for this lacuna. The function of spirituality, unlike that of religion, is to nurture people in the discipline of objective and non-partisan thinking. The ways of god are radically different from the dispositions of man. Faith in god is, hence, a mandate to not conform to partisan and propagandist projects and advocacies. As Hannah Arendt argues in *The Life of the Mind*, human beings need to be linked to the metaphysical domain if they are to be sane in coping with the physical realm. To be delinked from the former is to be disoriented in the latter. As Kant said, we need god so that we may overcome the instincts and impulses of our lower nature and abide by universal imperatives. The discipline that godliness entails rules out every form of corruption, including parochialism, jingoism and xenophobia, which are hysterical manifestations of human pettiness.

God is a republican. Spirituality, comprising universal values, is a necessary foundation for the sanity and stability of a republic. That is why values-education is integral to education-for-nation-building. Our present a-moral, values-blind practice of education stands in urgent need of radical reform so as to make it conducive to nurturing an authentic, republican way of life.

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