

Scrapping Charles Darwin: Hindutva's Anti-Scientific Maladies

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Welcome the canons of pseudoscience. Open your arms to the dribbling, sponsored charlatans. According to a growing number of India's top officialdom, teaching Charles Darwin's theory of evolution to children in their ninth and 10th grades is simply not on.

Last month, the National Council of Educational Research and Training (NCERT), a purportedly autonomous government organisation responsible for curricula content and textbook publishing for India's 256 million primary and secondary students, [continued its hostility](#) against Darwin as part of its "content rationalisation" process. NCERT had taken the scrub to evolution during the COVID-19 pandemic, implausibly arguing that it was necessary to drop its teaching in moving classes online. (Darwin would have been most bemused.)

A closer look at the list of dropped and excluded subjects in the [NCERT publication](#) of "rationalised content in textbooks" from May last year is impressive in its philistinism. In addition to dropping teaching on Darwin, the origin of life on earth, evolution, fossils and molecular phylogeny, we also see the scrapping of such subjects as electricity, the magnetic effects of electric current and the "sustainable management of natural resources".

Evolutionary biologist Amitabh Joshi of the Jawaharlal Nehru Centre for Advanced Scientific Research was less than impressed, [calling](#) the measure "a travesty of the notion of a well-rounded secondary education".

On April 20, the non-profit Breakthrough Science Society launched an [open letter](#) demanding a reversal of the decision. "Knowledge and understanding of evolutionary biology is important not just to any subfield of biology, but is also key to understanding the world around us." Though not evident at first glance, "the principles of natural selection help us understand how any pandemic progresses or why certain species go extinct, among many other critical issues."

A sense of despondency reigns on whether NCERT will change course, even in the face of protest. In [the view](#) of biologist Satyajit Rath, “Given the recent trajectories of such decisions of the government of India, probably not, at least over the short term. Sustained progressive efforts will be required to influence the long-term outcomes.”

The anti-evolutionary streak in Indian politics, spearheaded by the Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP), has been present for some time, always threatening to spill over with acid implications into the education syllabus. In 2018, India’s then Minister for Higher Education, **Satyapal Singh**, [urged the removal](#) of evolution from school curricula, remarking that no one had ever seen “an ape turning into a human being.” Before a university gathering at a university in Assam, he claimed to “have a list of around 10 to 15 great scientists of the world who have said there is no evidence to prove that the theory of evolution is correct.” He even threw poor Albert Einstein into the mix to justify the stance, claiming that the physicist had thought the theory “unscientific”.

As ever with such characters, ignorance is garlanded with claims of expertise. Singh was speaking as a “man of science”. As a man of science, “Darwin’s theory is scientifically wrong”. Man, he claimed, “has always been a man.”

Prime Minister Narendra Modi’s tenure has been characterised by a coupling of mythologisation and anti-scientific inquiry, grouped under the notion of Hindutva – that India was, and is, the sacred homeland of Hindus, with all other religious groups foreign aberrations. By blending the two, outrageous claims purportedly scientific can be drawn from ancient folklore and texts. Myth is rendered victorious.

In 2014, Modi gave a most extravagant example of this exercise by [claiming](#) that “plastic surgery” and “genetic science” explained the creation of Lord Ganesh’s elephantine head and Karna’s birth respectively. Given that the latter, an epic figure of the Mahabharata, “was not born from his mother’s womb”, Modi could confidently state that “genetic science was present at that time.”

Such astonishing, crude literalism is tantamount to stubborn claims that Indians were the first to discover the means of flying, given Arjuna’s ride in a chariot piloted by Lord Krishna at the Battle of Kurukshetra. And sure enough, the 102nd session of the India Science Congress, hosted in January 2015, [featured a panel](#) led by a number of BJP government members claiming that Indians had pioneered aviation that could fly not only across planet Earth but between planets.

Other instances of this abound, some blatantly, and dangerously irresponsible. In April 2019, BJP parliamentary member Pragya Singh Thakur [told](#) the television network *India Today* that a heady “mixture of *gau mutra*” (cow urine), along with “other cow products”, including dung and milk, cured her breast cancer. Oncologists mocked the conclusions, but the damaging claim caught on.

With such instances far from infrequent, academics and researchers feel beleaguered in a landscape saturated by the credo of Hindutva. In 2016, number theorist Rajat Tandon observed that the Modi approach to knowledge was “really dangerous”. Along with more than 100 scientists, including many heads of institutions, he [signed a statement](#) protesting “the ways in which science and reason are being eroded in the country.”

A number trying to buck the trend, notably those numbered among rationalists and the anti-

superstition activists, have been threatened and, in some cases, murdered. The scholar and writer M. M. Kalburgi paid with his life in North Karnataka in August 2015 [for a remark](#) made quoting Jnanpith awardee U. R. Ananthamurthy that urinating on idols was not a transgression that would necessarily attract divine retribution.

In September 2017, the progressive journalist and publisher Gauri Lankesh was gunned down returning to her home from work. She had become yet another victim of what the police in India euphemistically [call](#) "encounters", drawing attention to herself for her stand against the Hindutva stampede and her sympathetic stance towards the Maoist Naxalites.

The recent bureaucratic assault on Darwin and the continued elevation of mythology above sceptical scientific inquiry, bode ill for India's rationalists. But despite being browbeaten and threatened, many continue to do battle, defiantly and proudly.

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