

# Mainstream

*Founded by Nikhil Chakravartty*

VOL LV No 32

New Delhi

July 29, 2017



# Manipulating Narratives

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Karl Marx once said that the ideas of the ruling class are in every epoch the ruling ideas. This is apparently relevant in recent times, when many minority community people have been lynched on petty issues like beef-trading (or mere suspicion of that). Such attacks are due to manufactured and divisive narratives being imposed on the hitherto harmonious social order. Unless these narratives are questioned and countered through an affirmative and inclusive action, India's composite fabric could be subjected to a false consciousness of a few individuals and imposed hegemonic narratives of the ruling class.

Since India has a pluralistic arrangement of society, it is important that narratives are consciously chosen and publicised so that the marginalised sections of the country do not feel threatened as 'others'. When India became independent, Nehru deliberately adopted 'secular-developmental' narratives so as to nurture the fledgling nation's social set-up that stood shaken by the partition on religious narratives. If the nation has survived and flourished as a democratic secular country in the last seven decades, it is because of the emphasis on the grand narratives like secularism as the core narratives propelling our socio-political lives. However, the engendering of narrow, concentrated and religion-centric narratives in recent times are a matter of concern. The issue of beef-trading or protection of cow is just one of several issues that are being invented to impose the concept of 'others' on the minorities.

Cows are suddenly being venerated to a higher pedestal where they cannot be killed or consumed as meat. The issue has been portrayed as being a matter of 'concern' to the majority community. Once narratives are usually passed on through many sources (sometimes orally and some-times through manufactured whispers), they get manipulated in the transition process from one group of people to another. As a result, these narratives are leading to chaos and unrest in different pockets of the country.

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The manipulation of the narratives is being attempted in several ways. *First*, the Vedic texts and scriptures are being rewritten or are being translated differently. References to beef-eating in the earlier versions, though debatable, have been quietly modified through due contestation. School texts are being rewritten so as to hegemonise the young minds towards the majoritarian views. We are now being taught that the cow is the holiest of animals (without objectively testing the same).

*Second*, business firms and entrepreneurs are being encouraged to emphasise on the 'holy' aspects of the cow. There is a Bangalore-based firm that sells distilled cow urine. The Haridwar based Patanjali group manufactures at least five products using cow urine, the utility of which is yet to be established scientifically.

*Third*, the state is also chipping in through legislation to accord a pivotal status to the cow and even attempt a cow slaughter ban. The just notified Prevention of Cruelty to Animals (Regulation of Livestock Markets), Rules, 2017 will hurt millions of poor farmers and squeeze the country's Rs 1 lakh crore meat and allied industries. The worst hit will be mostly the Muslim meat and leather traders who have been at the receiving end of the cow narrative.

*Fourth*, the public intellectual class in India are being discouraged to speak against the project of narrow narratives. As Romila Thapar points out in her recently edited book, *The Public Intellectual in India* (Aleph, 2017), the liberal space in India is threatened by religious fundamentalism, big business, and, worryingly, a government that appears to be tacitly encouraging the attack on freedom of expression, secular values and rational reading of history.

THE overt emphasis on such narrow narratives has several implications. *First*, issues like the cow have come to symbolise the assertive politics of one group using the majority community's tag to shame the minority groups. The new-found power through electoral politics is being used by these