

The loss of intellectual autonomy

To define one's identity or community in terms of an exclusive religion is a vexed European notion



RAJEEV BHARGAVA

No person in today's world likes to be told what to do or what to think. The young are particularly keen to have the freedom to decide which beliefs to form. Intellectual autonomy is widely considered to be an important value. This was probably not true in the past when large numbers of people were illiterate, knowledge was produced and stored by a few, and there was wider social legitimacy for submission to those with power and authority.

However, even then, poets and philosophers routinely felt that intellectual autonomy is smothered by temptations of power. Asked by his pupils on how to relate to rulers, the medieval philosopher-saint Al Ghazali said, "It would be disastrous to go to a ruler to offer unsolicited advice. It is acceptable to offer your opinion if the ruler sought you. But it is best if he goes his way and you go yours."

Strategy of intellectual control

Since the end of the 18th century, as technologies of knowledge production became increasingly available to larger sections of society, intellectual autonomy has been threatened not only by state power, but in other invidious ways. Colonialism is a case in point. The British strategy of intellectual control was implemented by crafting a system of education rather than brute coercion. Although the best of our thinkers outmanoeuvred this system – after all our most original thinker of this period, Gandhi, was a product of this very education – it created acute anxiety among self-reflexive thinkers. For example, Sri Aurobindo lamented the "increasing impoverishment of the Indian intellect" in the face of new knowledge imposed by European contact. "Nothing is our own, nothing native to our intelligence, all is derived," he complained. "As little have we understood the new knowledge; we have only understood what the Europeans want us to think about themselves and their modern civilisation. Our



English culture – if culture it can be called – has increased tenfold the evil of our dependence instead of remedying it."

A more catastrophic malady resulting from this "well meaning bondage" was the loss of intellectual autonomy. The watchword of Indians, he argued, has become "authority", blind acceptance of ideas coming either from outside, from Europe, as was the case of the then English-educated Indians, or from inside, from fossilised traditions, as was the case of traditional pundits. It was as if the only choice before Indian intellectual elites was a hyper-westernised modernism or ultra-traditionalism. Some elites would have every detail of their life determined exclusively by Western ideas. Others would have them fixed only by *shastra*, custom and scripture. Each wanted to reform the other, which was nothing but a call to substitute the authority of "Guru Sayana with the authority of Max Mueller" or the "dogmatism of European scientists and scholars" with the "dogmatism of Brahmin Pandits". The absence of real choice was a symptom of an undermined capacity to think on one's own, the power of humans to accept or reject nothing without proper questioning.

Much the same conclusion was reached, a decade later, by the Indian philosopher, K.C. Bhattacharya. In 'Swaraj in Ideas', Bhattacharya feared that Indians might suffer from a subtler form of domination "when one's traditional cast of ideas and

sentiments is superseded without comparison or competition by a new cast representing an alien culture which possesses one like a ghost." To be sure, when two cultures come into sustained contact with one another, there is bound to be give and take. One culture might even give to the other more than it takes from it. However, all creative assimilation involves a real conflict of ideas, and elements of an alien culture can be accepted only after "full and open-eyed struggle has been allowed to develop" between the two encountering cultures.

Two alien ideas in India today

I am afraid we have allowed two deeply problematic alien ideas to penetrate our collective consciousness without thorough questioning or proper comparison with ideas emanating from our intellectual traditions. One is the idea of religion, and the second, a particular conception of the nation. Religion, as a demarcated system of practices, beliefs and doctrines, is largely an early modern European invention and begins its existence in and through the theological disputes of the 16th and 17th centuries. Under the impact of colonialism, this category came to India and obliged Indians to think of themselves as members of one exclusive religious community, not just different from but opposed to others. It is of course true that gods and goddesses, ethical norms and prescriptions, rituals and practices did exist in

some form in the past. But these were not thought to be part of one single entity called Hinduism, so that those who owed allegiance to any one of these sets of practices did not think of themselves as belonging to a single system of belief and doctrine in competition with and opposition to all others. Indeed, mobility across communities and multiple allegiances were common. As a result, most people refused to be slotted into rigid, compartmentalised entities. They were religious but did not belong to a religion. This has virtually ceased to be the case.

Second, religious belief or practice, or adherence to a doctrine, was never viewed as a condition of membership in a wider national community. One's religious or linguistic identity made little difference to one's belonging to the nation. Alas, now, for many inhabitants of our territory, a nation cannot but be defined in single religious or linguistic terms. An exclusivist conception of the ethnic nation – entirely against the spirit of local Indian religions or conceptions of nationhood – devised first in Spain in 1492, developed further during the European wars of religion, and perfected in the 18th or 19th century has seized the Indian mind. Thanks to narrow-minded education institutions and now the electronic media, the idea was first disseminated and then unquestioningly accepted by Indians as if it were a long-held indigenous Indian idea. In accepting this alien idea of religion and nation without proper comparison or competition with Indian ideas of faith and community, we have sacrificed intellectual autonomy and gone down the road to hell from which Europe has itself yet to recover.

To define one's identity or community in terms of a single, exclusive religion – Hindu, Muslim or any other – is a perverse European notion, a mark of our cultural subjugation, a symptom of the loss of our intellectual autonomy. To have done so is to have uncritically abandoned our own collective genius for something ill-suited to our conditions. Can this be reversed? Is it too late to heed Sri Aurobindo's warning or follow Gandhi's example? Can we recover our collective intellectual autonomy?