

The crucial role of liberal education in safeguarding the values of our republic

THINK The quality of education and knowledge imparted to an entire citizenry determines the very source of thought and its nature

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In a recent statement, Bharatiya Janata Party national general secretary Ram Madhav said that Hitler and Mussolini were "products of democracy". The remark reminded me of Plato's Republic. Sometime in 360 BCE, Plato said: "Doesn't tyranny spring from democracy?" Plato, looking at the ills of the Athenian democratic system then, was one of the first thinkers to write that letting people govern themselves could ultimately make the masses (or a majority) support the rule of tyrants, substituting democracy with demagoguery. This may sound shocking, but the more you look at current political trajectory of countries like Turkey and Brazil, the more it rings true. Even the US and India seem to be under a wave of majoritarian populism.

Back in Athens, the political arena was filled with rhetoric, with little commitment to empirical facts or truth. Leaders focused on oratory skills or speeches that aroused the citizenry's emotions, rather than

appeal to their logical thinking. Power could simply be harnessed by mobilizing the collective will of citizens by targeting their sentiments more than intellect. Not just Plato, Socrates too, who was extremely critical of the democratic process of electing leaders, did not acknowledge democracy as representative of what an "ideal state" should be.

In a famous illustration, Socrates, while lecturing about what an "ideal state" must look like, asked Adeimantus who he would rather have managing a sea voyage: some random passenger, or an educated, well-trained and experienced captain? Socrates then used that metaphor for the state, asking why we would let just anybody manage the ship of state. He then went on to propose a "totalitarian regime" as an ideal state, "where rulers who have been educated in ruling for decades" may be granted absolute power over the citizenry. His praise of the Spartan monarchy for being "better managed" and "less understood for its administrative effectiveness by others" is well-

known.

Similarly, even liberal thinkers like Voltaire, who strongly advocated freedom of expression and religion, once told Catherine the Great of Russia, "Almost nothing great has ever been done in the world except by the genius and firmness of a single man combating the prejudices of the multitude."

Of course, one must distinguish between the form of democratic structures present in Athens, where enfranchisement was limited to around 20% of the population, mostly Caucasian males over the age of 18 and with parents who were also citizens. There was a minimum wealth requirement for some higher offices. In countries like India, we have a direct democracy and the constitutional republic guarantees every citizen an equal vote.

Still, some of the problems outlined by thinkers down the ages from Socrates to Voltaire do echo in present times. So, what can help protect our democratic core and the constitutional republic that promise, through separations of power, equal rep-



Everyone must receive an education that helps one think

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resentation for all and the protection of minorities from discrimination? Socrates provided an answer when he said: "There is one good, knowledge, and one evil, ignorance."

The quality of education and knowledge imparted to an entire citizenry determines the very source of thought and its scope in being inclusive or exclusive in nature. In Greece, education in grammar, logic, philosophy, rhetoric, astronomy, geometry (among others) was considered integral to the learning process and for those interested in public life. This is the aim of today's "liberal arts education" curriculum. The average voter and the person seeking votes both ought

to receive the kind of education that makes them think and share a mutual respect for dialogue, debate and even dissent.

Unfortunately, what one sees today is the opposite of that. The political instrumentalization of fear, the evocation of negative sentiments like insecurity and anxiety in a collective ordering of society, goes against the constitutional morals that our republic sought to protect and promote. We have had talk of "de-radicalization" camps for children in Kashmir, a school re-enactment of a violent mosque demolition in 1992, and other disquieting instances.

Polarization seems entrenched at the very source,

application of thought. Poor-quality education is primarily responsible for that. The sciences need more attention in social science discourse, and critical aspects need more open space for a scientific temper for constructive action. But, instead of an educative ecosystem of critical self-reflection, as a prerequisite for rational approaches to knowledge, we seem to have a "moral hazard" problem perpetuated by democratic deficiencies and poor educational practices that tend to marginalize the value of a scientific temper to make space for rhetoric, falsehoods, and "othering".

As we celebrate 70 years of our Constitution this Republic Day on 26 January, one can only hope that protecting a constitutional republic as inclusive and pluralistic as ours could make the young and old, the rich and poor, reflect upon the fragility of democracies all the way from Athens to the modern day, and learn from their transitions to safeguard our freedoms. In a world as interconnected and pregnant with possibilities as ours, a disregard for liberal education and thought would make us vulnerable to demagoguery, and perhaps also incapable of keeping our republic intact.