

Defamatory article directed against Michael Witzel, of Harvard University, that appeared in the right-wing New Delhi newspaper, *The Pioneer*, on Christmas Day, 2005.

The author is Kanchan Gupta, a columnist closely associated with the Hindutva right in India. (And what interesting tales can be told about him!)

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S. Farmer

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Harvard Don Denigrates Hindus

Kanchan Gupta/ New Delhi

Boorish comments denigrating India, Hindus and Hinduism by a self-proclaimed 'Indologist' who is on the faculty of Harvard University has unleashed a fierce debate over the increasing political activism of 'scholars' who teach at this prestigious American university.

Prof Michael Witzel, Wales professor of Sanskrit at Harvard, is in the centre of the storm because he tried to prevent the removal of references to India, Hinduism and Sikhism in the curriculum followed by schools in California which parents of Indian origin found to be inadequate, inaccurate or just outright insensitive.

Known for aggressively pushing theories forged by Left historians of the Romila Thapar genre that have been long discredited through scientific means, including DNA studies, this 'linguist' is known for promoting himself as a 'historian' in academic circles. His proximity to Left historians in India is no secret.

Such is Prof Witzel's contempt for Indians who live and work in the US that he has not minced words running them down as an ethnic group. On one occasion, he declared: "Hindus in the US are lost or abandoned people."

Admonishing second generation Hindus in the US and their religious practices, he commented, "Second generation (Hindu) people just understand Hinduism as a 'boaring ritual', temple visits and Indian comic books... All such items add to the heady brew that we have seen emerging here."

Since 'boaring rituals' was placed within parenthesis, Hindus took it as a reference to Vishnu and felt offended. There was little they could do, however, to bring this Harvard scholar, variously described as "supremacist" and "ignorant", to heel.

They got that opportunity in November when Prof Witzel led, what later turned out to be an abortive campaign, putsch to prevent the cleansing of school texts of anti-Hindu and misleading material.

For years, Indian parents, who form a sizeable number in California, had been seeking the removal of such references in the State's textbooks. For instance, one textbook described Goddess Kali as "bloodthirsty". The section on Ramayana and Hanuman urged students to look around the classroom and see if there was a monkey among them. Another described Hinduism as a religion that teaches women are inferior.

The most offensive and inaccurate reference was to the 'Aryan invasion' theory that has now been junked by historians across the world. While talking of this theory, the texts spoke of tall, blue-eyed Aryans invading India and contrasted them with 'curly-haired, snub-nosed Dravidians'.

Not only were Indians riled by this reference, they also found it to be racial and insensitive to the entire community.

Early this year, the California School Board of Education, finally yielding to mounting pressure from concerned Indian parents, appointed a Commission to revise references to Hindus and their faith in prescribed school curriculum. In November, the Commission submitted its recommendations, including the scrapping of all references to the 'Aryan invasion' theory. Even before Indian parents could begin celebrating their victory, Prof Witzel wrote to the State Board of Education, using the Harvard letterhead, contesting the proposed changes and insisting that the 'Aryan invasion' theory was based on historical and scientific evidence.

He rallied the support of some other Left historians and scholars - they described themselves as 'a panel of international experts on India and Hinduism' - to launch a virulent campaign against parents pushing for change in curriculum by branding them as "Hindutva brigade" and encouraged others to hurl scurrilous allegations against California's Hindus.

Taken aback by Prof Witzel's aggressive tactics and misled by his credentials, the Commission decided to hear him out. Prof Witzel repeated his allegation that the recommended changes were motivated by Hindutva forces and would "lead without fail to an international educational scandal if they are accepted by the California's State Board of Education."

Prof Witzel, however, discovered that unlike India's Left historians, it was no easy job to browbeat or impress the Commission.

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Soon, his campaign began to unravel, partly because members of the Commission were believed to have been put-off by his 'condescending attitude' and largely due to the absence of any material to support his outrageous stand.

The Commission saw the intervention and activism of Prof Witzel and his cohorts as 'little more than a gratuitous attempt to peddle their own prejudices in the guise of scholarly consensus.'

Dr Metzenberg, a California biologist, rejected Prof Witzel's insistence that the 'Aryan invasion' theory should be retained, by citing scientific evidence.

"I've read the DNA research and there was no Aryan migration," he retorted, adding, "I believe the hard evidence of DNA more than I believe historians."

He went on to describe Prof Witzel's portrayal of Hinduism as 'insensitive' and something that Hindus themselves would be unable to recognise.

With Prof Witzel's case collapsing, the California Board of Education threw out his counter-recommendations.

But that has not put a full stop to the odious Witzel story.

Upset with his ham-handed political activism and attempt to use the Harvard tag to block reform of school curriculum, Indian parents and students have launched an e-petition to corner and expose Prof Witzel for what he is - a charlatan posing as a historian.

The petition, addressed to "trustees, alumni and students of Harvard University," begins by saying: "We the undersigned insist that Harvard University end its association with Aryan Supremacist/Creationist hate-mongering activities... Prof Michael Witzel and his 'scholars clique' in the Harvard Sanskrit and Indian Studies Department have exhibited a pattern of hateful, ignorant statements and abysmally low standards of scholarship."

The petition then refers to the letter sent by Prof Witzel and his fellow-travellers to the California State Board of Education on Harvard stationery.

"Recently, Witzel and his "scholars clique" earned ridicule for Harvard by sending a shockingly incompetent letter to the California State Board of Education... The sweeping hate stereotypes, ad hominem attacks, and general lack of facts in their letter make for depressing reading by any Harvard well-wisher."

It transpires that "several of the signatories (to Prof Witzel's letter) later confessed to not even having seen the proposed changes that they were bitterly opposing.

Predictably, the California Board, after affording these losers undeserved courtesy based on Harvard's name, rejected their position as unscholarly, insensitive, biased and devoid of facts -- heaping ridicule on the Harvard brand. If this is the standard of tenured Professors, what does it imply for the worth of a Harvard education?" The petition has already been signed by more thousands of people.

A good question, that.

The witzel unprintables

The petition against Prof Michael Witzel of Harvard University refers to the Indo-Eurasian Research (IER) Internet hate group that he runs. Insisting that contents of the material posted on the Net "show his bias against the Indian-American community," signatories to the petition record their "abhorrence of these actions which have shredded Harvard's reputation as a civilised institution".

The following are summarised extracts from a recent article by Prof Witzel and have been quoted in the petition:

* Witzel writes that 'Indian Civilisation would be a good idea'

* Witzel writes that NRI (non-resident Indian) stands for Non-Returning Indians! A schoolyard bully's taunt against immigrant children, but coming from a tenured Harvard Professor?

* Witzel claims that Indians in the US do not invest in the higher education of their children (since they avoid the zoo that Witzel has made of his own department?)

* Witzel used the slur "HiNA" meaning in Sanskrit, inferior, lowly and defective, as an acronym for Hindus in America. Does this juvenile propensity to invent racial slurs, much as it may impress his Prominent Academic IER cronies, define Harvard's intellectual class in 2005?

* Witzel declared Hindu-Americans to be "lost" or "abandoned", parroting anti-Semite slurs against Jewish people. Coincidence or symptom?

* Witzel's fantasies are ominously reminiscent of WWII German genocide. He says that 'Since they won't be returning to India, [Hindus immigrants to the USA] have begun building crematoria as well.'

* Witzel sneers at the Hindu belief in evolution, enshrined in the Ten Incarnations, which include the Varaha, the wild boar. He writes that second generation [Hindu] people just understand [Hinduism] as 'boaring rituals' (puja, etc.), temple visits and Indian (mythological) comic books..."

* Witzel ridicules the most sacred of Hindu mantras: Inexcusable for a schoolyard bully, not to mention a historian and professor. He writes:

"Many short mantras (the later bija mantras) like oM have humble origins the Veda... used in the Veda to call your goat .. and your wife."

* Witzel demeans the daughters of Indian-American parents, who take the trouble to learn their heritage through traditional art forms. In the worst of racist slander, Witzel claims that Indian classical music and dance reflect low moral standards.

READERSPEAK

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