

Time To Let Go

We are products of our past, but we don't have to be prisoners of it

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India's days of glory are in the past and the only way the country can reclaim its preeminence in the global order is by going back to its ways of living in the old times, goes the common refrain of India's conservative class and Hindu nationalists. Dangerously for our country, this view has been widely supported and endorsed by leaders and members of the ruling party. As a consequence, policy making in recent years in sectors as varied as economy, education and healthcare among others has frequently harked back to ancient Indian knowledge and traditions.

In 2014, the central government elevated the department of AYUSH to a ministry dedicated to promoting the controversial medical sciences of ayurveda, homoeopathy and unani. Last year, it moved a bill that would allow AYUSH doctors to take a six-months bridge course to qualify for a formal MBBS degree, before sanity and a parliamentary standing committee prevailed and the provision was removed. Neither ayurveda nor homoeopathy have any scientific evidence of their efficacy to date; with the latter having been debunked widely around the world.

Propagation of Sanskrit, a language spoken by all of 25,000 Indians as per Census 2011, has been another area of focus. Back in 2014, over 70,000 students across 500 Kendriya Vidyalayas were asked to switch from German to Sanskrit as their third language of study. In 2016, the Union HRD ministry asked all IITs and IIMs to offer elective language courses in Sanskrit. Recent reports suggested the HRD ministry has prepared a plan to train five lakh Sanskrit teachers in the next four years.

At another level, our politicians and scholars have blatantly propagated myths, or what may be charitably called unverifiable statements, about the achievements of ancient Indians. Prime Minister Narendra Modi has publicly gone on record that genetic science and cosmetic surgery existed in ancient India. In 2015, Indian Science Congress hosted a lecture that examined ancient aviation technology as mentioned in the Vedas and claimed that ancient India had interplanetary planes.