

Defending Fr Frazer's right to criticise

Friday, 25 April 2014 - 6:05am IST | Place: Mumbai | Agency: dna

Shilpa Phadke

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I was a teacher in St Xavier's College, Mumbai, in 1999-2001, and much to the chagrin of many of us, the then principal defended his stand against sleeveless clothes and the increasingly strict surveillance of any college socials at night, on the grounds that as a "minority institution" they could not afford to anger the conservative powers-that-be. Fr Frazer was then my colleague in the Department of Sociology.

St Xavier's unfortunately still has a dress code but some things have certainly changed. Since Fr Frazer took over as principal of the college he has taken several principled stands. He vocally opposed the arbitrary dropping of Rohinton Mistry's *Such A Long Journey* and the strong arm tactics of the Shiv Sena. He stood by human rights activist and former student of the college, Arun Ferreira, who was in jail on charges of being a Naxalite.

St Xavier's is a far from perfect institution; it wasn't perfect when I was a student, or a teacher there and it isn't perfect now. It was often deeply classist and like other educational institutions, arbitrary in the enforcement of rules. But one thing it always was and is: secular. It was secular when teachers formed groups to carry out relief work in the aftermath of the 1992-93 communal violence and it continues to be secular today.

Today, Fr Frazer has taken a stand against fascism and lopsided development. This is the kind of courageous and forthright college I imagined I was a student and teacher of. Yes, he wrote in his official capacity — and some people think its not quite de rigueur. Some have argued that this is an unacceptable abuse of authority as the head of an institution. Others see it as an impossibly grey and ambiguous area — the act of a Principal writing to students on the eve of an election.

But let's ask why the BJP is so incensed. Fr Frazer is the head of an institution that has an influential alumni. He is not saying anything other commentators have not already said in stronger words. But Fr Frazer is speaking to the "youth", the voters the BJP desperately want and imagine they will have. And more importantly, Fr Frazer is attacking not the BJP's communal agenda but rather its so-called development model, the Gujarat model.

Fr Frazer's email makes a case for why the [Gujarat model](#) does not offer any real development, and points to the state's poor performance on the Human Development Index. Further, he praises some of the schemes of the current government. He ends his email, by writing, "Choose well!" He names no political parties or candidates. He offers no threats. He simply offers his opinion.

This reasoned and reasonable letter is written in a time when hate speech and threats abound. The BJP's (over) reaction to the letter reflects their complete intolerance to dissent. Remember also that St Xavier's is a minority institution and doubly vulnerable in a possibly xenophobic environment, which makes Fr Frazer's willingness to stand up and be counted against fascism doubly courageous.

I have been asked how I would react if the Principal of another college wrote an email supporting the Gujarat model. I would write and speak against his/her view and register my dissent. But I would not for a moment argue against their right to speak and be heard. Let us not forget that all education is political.

Faced with threats, however, empty, of being thrown out of the country if we express dissent or criticism, there is every reason for us to speak and to defend the right of others to speak and write. The fabric of our democracy is at stake.

The writer is Assistant Professor at the Tata Institute of Social Sciences. She is an alumna of St Xavier's College, Mumbai

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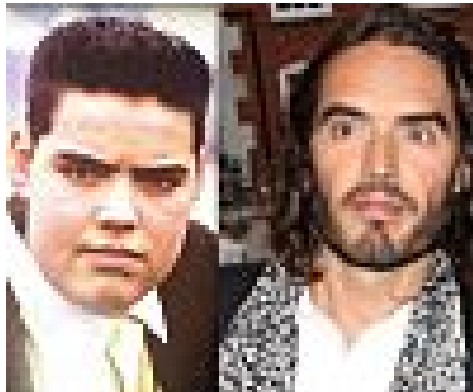
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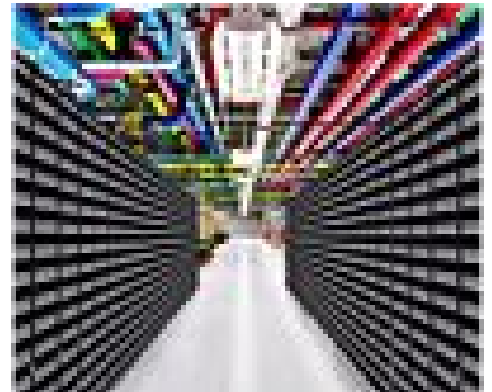
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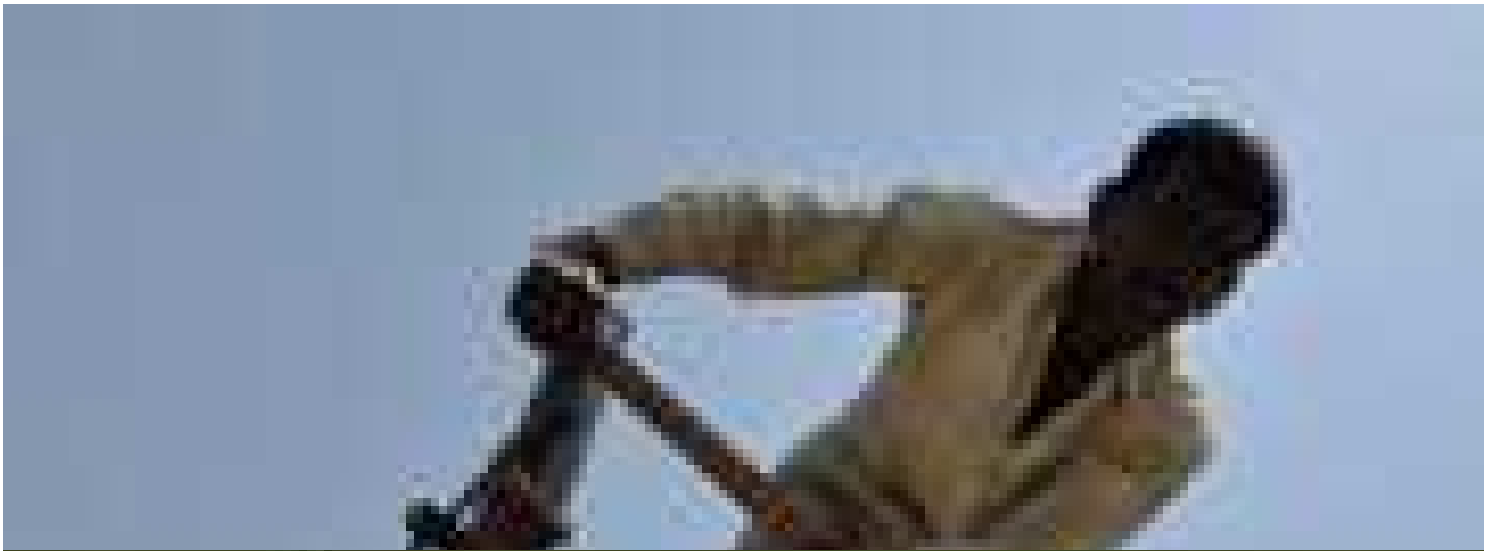
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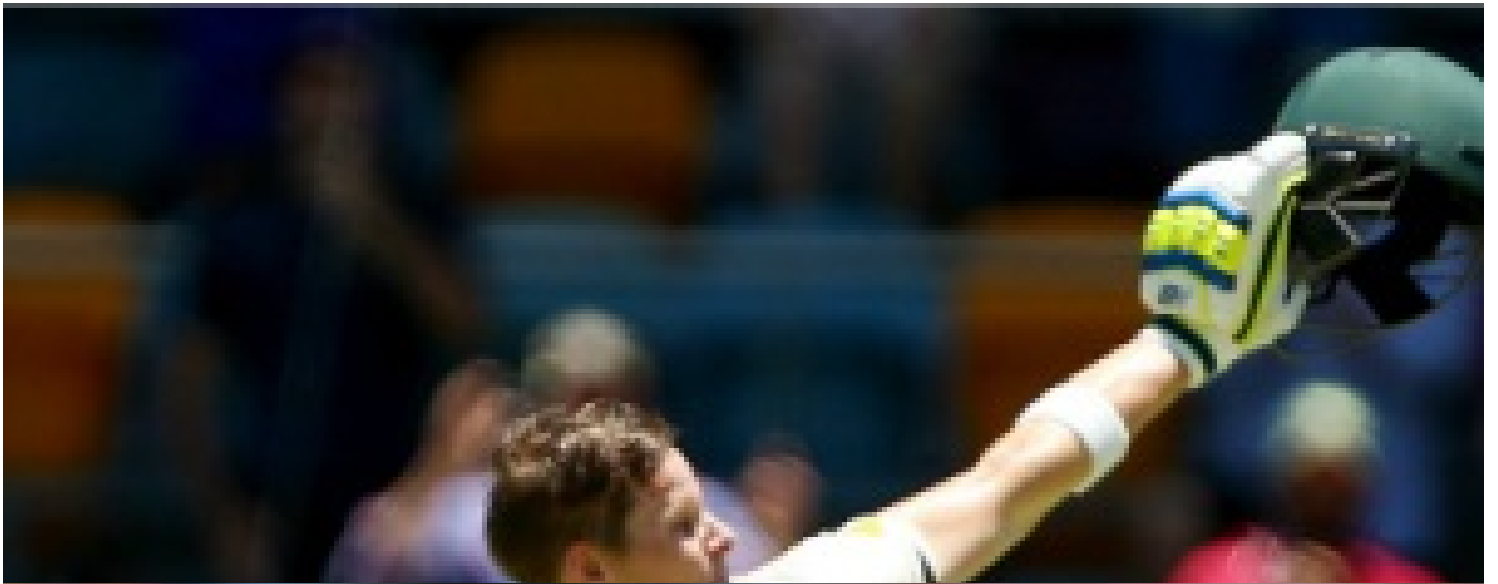
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is used in the case of control and conflict of interest, is very
looking minority and
willfully violating model code of election. He is a snake in the grass just promoting myopic view of a overzealous minority.

6 ^ [] • Reply • Share >



sailor • 8 months ago

The good father has done exactly what the moulvis do in madrasas. Why should there be any partiality. In the process he has also reduced the great institution of St. Xavier to the level of a Madrassa.

4 ^ [] • Reply • Share >



Naga Sahay • 8 months ago

The institution in question is one of the many run by illegitimate progeny of McCaulay. The alumni apparently have had no alternative as all educational institutions were established by the British to serve their colonial interests. We believed that characters like Fraser who brings up the rear of social rejects and renegades, will at least try to be average citizens of the country and keep off from spreading communal poison under whatever garb. Incidentally, the sociology departments in these establishments are basically subversive and platform for proselytization. To claim that they can pronounce judgements on developmental models will therefore, be an insult to intelligence. Note that this cheap clergy given undue powers for communal reasons, should have known that secularism - british coinage - expects the church to keep off matters of state and that christianity has nothing whatever to do with democracy

3 ^ [] • Reply • Share >



Hypocrite · 8 months ago

Perhaps it pains BJP followers to have their god sent model trashed. If Gujarat Model is very good why does not Modi or BJP debate it when leaders from other states like Tamil Nadu have criticised the model? You start doubting the model when voters in the South get freebies due to thier habit of asking 'What is in it for me?'. Vague indicators of development in the form of US style GDP numbers won't cut ice. A country exists for its people and not for its elite alone. Gujarat model which rides on capitalism alone will not be acceptable to many and should rightly be criticised. Further, Indian federal structure is designed so that states have more autonomy in all affairs. Remember India is a Union of States like the erstwhile USSR with a common ethnic and cultural brotherhood. Unless each of the states are allowed to handle their disputes on their own the nation could even go to extent of separatism (god forbid).

^ | v · Reply · Share >



SAGE · 8 months ago

I am saddened that Shilpa you have been a teacher and do not realize what a teacher can and cannot teach to his/her students. Irrespective of your political affiliation, whether Communist, Congress or BJP and hatred or love for Modi, you have no right to convey your preferences to your students as a teacher. You can express your opinion as an individual. Once you do that, you are contributor to the evil that our society suffers from. It includes condoning corruption and falsehood when suits you, and condemning when it does not. Even if a politician, you should desist from such immoral stands, if you really desire to improve our society.

1 ^ | v · Reply · Share >



acrutiapps · 8 months ago

Everyone has right to criticize anything. Fr. could have criticized Modi on any public forum. But as a pricipal he had no right to use his position to influence his students. period!

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