

Gandhi the Hindu

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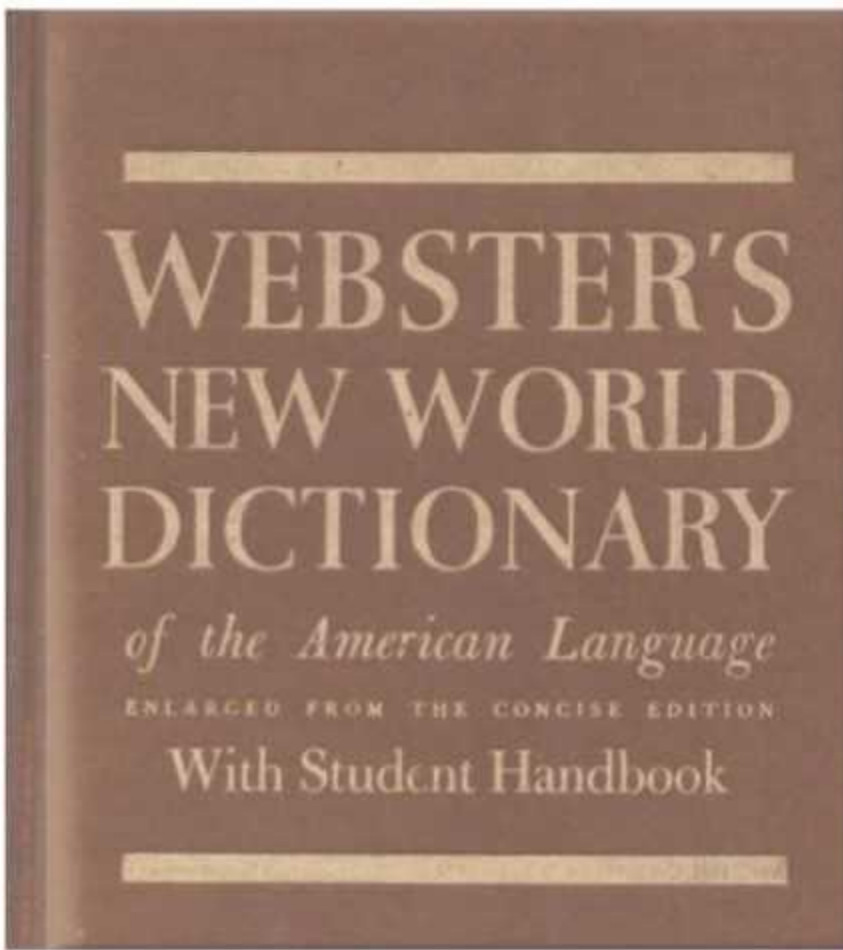
Educated persons have an idea that a dictionary or lexicon, which is an alphabetical list of words and their meanings with pronunciation, etymology and origin, is unbiased and neutral. The same kind of belief exists about an encyclopedia, which unlike a dictionary, is a compendium of information on many subjects or any particular subject, say a medical encyclopedia. Teachers and parents always advise their students and children to consult dictionaries and encyclopedias, whenever the latter want to know the meaning of a word or about any subject. Dictionaries and encyclopaedias supply authentic meanings of words and information on various subjects. They have become an essential part of the culture of the educated community. We often forget that dictionaries and encyclopedias are also compiled and written by human beings, who as the proverb go commit errors.

One of the most famous encyclopedic dictionaries is the Webster's New World Dictionary of American English, which was first published in 1951. In 1953 its first college edition appeared after a decade of preparation by a group of dedicated young scholars in the United States of America. The main objective of this group of energetic and enthusiastic lexicographers was to break away from the then prevailing view on dictionaries. The established view of the lexicographers was similar to the current belief about the lexicon, which runs as follows: 'a dictionary or lexicon is authoritative like a law of the land. One has to abide by what the dictionary says. Lexicons can never make mistakes or errors.'

Contrary to popular belief, in the Foreword of the Webster's first college edition, the editors wrote about their dictionary that it 'was not to create the impression that it was authoritarian, laying down the law; it was to play, rather, the role of a friendly guide, pointing out the safe, well-traveled roads.' Their main innovation was to give importance to relaxed pronunciation used in ordinary conversations by cultivated speakers of that language, then known as 'General American'.

The Third college edition of Webster's New World Dictionary of American English was published in 1988 by Simon and Schuster Inc., which was the revised version of its second edition published from 1970 onwards going through several rounds of revision up to 1986. The third edition is a massive 1,557-page encyclopedic dictionary with colour plates and contains more than 1,70,000 words and their meanings. This dictionary was compiled by 100 scholars in different fields with editorial assistance of specialists in 22 branches of knowledge, like, Aeronautics & Astronautics, Anthropology, Astronomy, Automotive Engineering, Biology, Biochemistry, Biophysics, Chemistry, Dentistry, Law, Music, Philosophy, Photography, Physics, Sports and many others. Interestingly, there was no special consultant and contributing editor on history and politics.

Apart from words, this ency-



clopedic dictionary has an interesting set of entries, which is brief information about famous scientists, litterateurs, politicians, statesmen and women, film makers, artists and sportspersons. The bias of Webster in this regard is quite remarkable. For example, we do not find the names of Satyajit Ray or Steven Spielberg although the names of Sergei Eisenstein, Federico Fellini, Alfred Hitchcock and Akira Kurosawa appeared on pages 435, 498, 641 and 751 respectively. In case of sports-persons, the omissions are more conspicuous. One will not find the names of Sir Donald Bradman, Pelé and Lev Yashin but names of famous U.S. boxer Muhammad Ali and American baseball players like Willie Mays as well as George Herman Ruth have been printed on pages 34, 837 and 1177 in that order.

Interestingly, among Indian intellectuals, we find the name of Jagadish Chandra Bose as 'Sir Jagadish Chandra 1858-1937: Ind. physicist and plant physiologist' in page 163 but not the name of CV Raman. The name of Rabindranath Tagore appears as 'Tagore, Sir, Rabindranath 1861-1941 Indian (Bengali) poet' on page 1363 but Swami Vivekananda did not find a place in this dictionary.

The Webster's encyclopaedic dictionary seems to have a great interest in recording the names of political leaders and statesmen of the past and contemporary period of different countries of the world. Thus, we find Fidel Castro (p.219), Che Guevara (p.599), Nelson Mandela (p.821) and Lech Walesa (p.1501) and here comes the most interesting part of the dictionary, particularly for Indian users. The last entry in page 554 is 'Gandhi' and there are two sub-entries of the word,

which are: 1. Mrs Indira (Nehru) 1917-84; Indian statesman: prime minister of India (1966-77: 1980-84): assassinated: daughter of Jawaharlal Nehru. 2. Mohandas Karamchand (1869-1948): Hindu nationalist leader and social reformer: assassinated: called Mahatma Gandhi.' Interestingly, Indira Gandhi has been referred to as a 'statesman'.

The Collins online English dictionary is not sexist like the Webster and mentioned Indira Gandhi as an 'Indian stateswoman'. It is relevant here to mention what the Collins online dictionary says about Mahatma Gandhi. In the British English version Collins reads about M.K.Gandhi as follows: 'Mohandas Karamchand, known as Mahatma Gandhi. 1869-1948, Indian political and spiritual leader and social reformer. He played a major part

in India's struggle for home rule and was frequently imprisoned by the British for organizing acts of civil disobedience. He advocated passive resistance and hunger strikes as a means of achieving reform, campaigned for the Dalit, and attempted to unite Muslims and Hindus. He was assassinated by a Hindu extremist' (Ibid). In the American English version, Collins followed the Webster route on M.K. Gandhi by saying: 'Mohandas Karamchand 1869-1948; Hindu nationalist leader & social reformer: assassinated (Ibid).

The obvious question which arises is why the adjective 'Hindu' is put before the name of Mahatma Gandhi? Indira Gandhi was also a Hindu, but her name was not preceded by the adjective Hindu. Let us move to page 908 of the encyclopaedic dictionary and we now find the word 'Nehru'. The information provided by the lexicon reads: 'Jawahar-

lal 1889-1964; Indian nationalist leader in India's movement for independence: prime minister (1947-64).' So, Nehru also did not require the epithet 'Hindu' like Gandhi.

Let me move to the entry under the name 'Thomas Paine', the famous revolutionary patriot of the USA. On page 971, the dictionary reads: 'Paine Thomas 1737-1809; American Revolutionary patriot, writer, and political theoretician, born in England'. On page 1507, the dictionary says about George Washington: 'Washington George 1732-99: 1st president of the U.S. (1789-97): commander in chief of the Continental army', and on page 785 it says about Abraham Lincoln: 'Lincoln, Abraham 1809-65; 16th president of the U.S. (1861-65): assassinated.

My point is simple. All the three great nation builders of the United States of America were Christians. Paine for example, despite his severe criticisms of the Bible believed in one supreme God and in early life he was also a member of the parish vestry, an influential local church group in East Sussex, England. Lincoln was a believer in the Bible and frequently quoted and praised the Holy book in his speeches. George Washington also privately prayed and read the Bible daily, and he publicly encouraged people and the nation to pray. Why then did the famous and prestigious Webster's New World Dictionary of American English depict Gandhi primarily as a Hindu nationalist leader of India? Finally, let us look at what the dictionary says about Muhammad Ali Jinnah, the founder of Pakistan. The Webster says on page 727: 'Jinnah, Muhammad Ali 1876-1948: Indian statesman: 1st governor general of Pakistan (1947-1948).' Suffice it to say that Jinnah is not depicted as a Muslim nationalist by the dictionary.

Hindu nationalist leaders all over the world may rejoice at Webster's categorisation of the Father of our Nation as 'Hindu' but the bias of the lexicographers is clear.

I would conclude with a quote from the erudite article 'The English language: variation, the dictionary and the user' by John Algeo printed in the third college edition of Webster's New World Dictionary of American English, about which the editor-in-chief Victoria Neufeldt stated: 'Users of this dictionary are urged to read this essay of Algeo' then Professor of English at the University of Georgia and former editor of the journal American Speech. I quote Algeo:

"Lexicographers however are human beings like the rest of us, with preconceptions, prejudices, and preferences. They subscribe to whatever worldview dominated their culture, and are taken in by the same popular delusions as we are. When they are functioning as lexicographers, they attempt to curb those normal human responses, but can never do so completely. Prejudices can be worked unconsciously into a dictionary, a fact that both the writers and users of the work have to keep in mind".



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