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## Secularism and Religious Education in India

The issue of religious education has been raised on several occasions in pre-and post-independence India but has always been abandoned in the end, without arriving at any definite conclusions. This is partly due to the excessive stress laid on rational, scientific and technological education and partly to an erroneous and vague understanding of secularism, which India has promulgated as its key principle along with the acceptance of democracy. The present paper attempts to examine the concept of secularism as stated in the Constitution of India and to examine the permissibility of religious education within its scope.

Religious education is not something new. It was in vogue in the Pre-British era under the Hindu and Muslim rules. The Britishers adopted, despite the opposition of Christian missionaries, a policy of religious neutrality in order to satisfy all their subjects belonging to different religious faiths. In reply to an address by a Christian missionary, Lord William Bentinck, the Governor General said, "the fundamental principle of British rule, the compact to which the Government stands solemnly pledged, is strict neutrality. To this important maxim, policy as well as good faith have enjoined upon me the most scrupulous observance. The same maxim is particularly applicable to general education. In all schools and colleges supported by Government, this principle cannot be too strongly enforced, all interference and injudicious tampering with the religious beliefs of the students all mingling, direct or indirect teaching of Christianity with the system of instruction ought to be positively forbidden." These views were affirmed in a Despatch of the Court of Directors dated 13th April, 1858.<sup>1</sup> However, the missionaries continued to impart religious education in their own schools, and with the increase in westernization and modernization, a

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1. Aggarwal, J. C., *Progress of Education in Free India* (New Delhi: Arya Book Depot, 1973), p. 347.

large number of upper class and higher middle class Indians were attracted towards them.

The Education Commission of 1882 also appreciated the government's policy of religious neutrality. The report observes: "The declared neutrality of the State forbids its connecting the institutions directly maintained by it with any one form of faith; and the other alternative of giving equal facilities in such institutions for the inculcation of all forms of faith involves practical difficulties which we believe to be insuperable." And further, "It is true that a Government or other secular institution meets, however incompletely, the educational wants of all religious sects in any locality and thus renders it easier for them to combine for educational purpose; while a denominational college runs some risk of confining its benefits to a particular section of the community and thus of deepening the lines of difference already existing."

However, the Commission recommended that some sort of moral education should be given. It has suggested the preparation of a moral text-book based on the fundamental principles of natural religion, suitable enough to be taught in all Government and non-Government colleges; and also that the Principal or one of the Professors, in each Government and Aided Colleges, should deliver to each of the College classes, in the course of every academic session, a series of lectures on the duties of man as man and as citizen.<sup>2</sup>

But the Government was sceptical about the feasibility of any such moral education. It observed, (vide Resolution No. 10/309 dated 2 October, 1884), "It is doubtful whether such a moral text-book as is proposed could be introduced without raising a variety of burning questions; and strongly as it may be urged that a purely secular education is imperfect, it does not appear probable that a text-book of morality, sufficiently vague and colourless to be accepted by Christians, Mohammedans and Hindus would do much especially in the stage of collegiate education to remedy the defects or supply the shortcomings of such an education."

The remedy is, of course, difficult, but the inadequacy of a purely secular education has been pointed out from time to time. The Indian

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2. Report of the Education Commission, 1882, sections 8 and 9, paragraph 338.

University Commission of 1902 has also considered the question but turned down the suggestion for introducing a course in theology in view of the opposition "not to the recognition of Natural Theology as a subject of University study, but to the introduction of the Theology of any one religion into the curriculum of the University." Thus it concluded, "it is neither practicable nor expedient to make provision for a Faculty of Theology."

The memorandum on the Post-War-Educational Development in India (1943) agreed that "religion in the widest sense should inspire all education and that a curriculum devoid of all ethical basis will prove barren in the end." The Central Advisory Board at its meeting held in January 1944, recognizing the importance of religious and moral education, appointed a special committee under the chairmanship of Rt. Rev. G. D. Barne, the Bishop of Lahore, to examine the practicability of providing religious education.

The committee presented an interim report in 1945 and a further report in 1946 at the twelfth meeting of the Board held at Mysore. It stated, "After fully considering all aspects of the question the Board resolved that while they recognize the fundamental importance of spiritual and moral instruction in the building of character, the provision for such teaching except insofar as it can be provided in the normal course of secular instruction, should be the responsibility of the home and the community to which the pupil belongs."

After Independence, to safeguard for every citizen the liberty of thought, expression, belief, faith, and worship, in the preamble of the Constitution, the Constitution framers allowed the followers of different religions to set up their own educational institutions and to impart religious education in them but put a ban on any religious instruction in the institutions funded by the State. However they assured grants of aid on an objective basis to all the institutions.<sup>3</sup>

However, another state appointed Committee on Religious and Moral Instruction under the chairmanship of Sri Prakash took a firm stand in the matter, in 1959, when it said: "A serious defect in school curriculum is the absence of provision for education in moral and spiritual values. In the life of the majority of Indians, religion is a great motivating force and is intimately bound up with the formation of charac-

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3. Articles 28 and 30, *Constitution of India*.

ter and the inculcation of ethical values. A national system of education that is related to the life, needs and aspirations of the people cannot afford to ignore this purposeful force. We recommend, therefore, that conscious and organized attempts be made for imparting education in social, moral and spiritual values with the help, wherever possible, of the ethical teachings of great religions.”

Referring to the constitutional provisions that religious instruction given in institutions under any endowment or trust should not be interfered with even if such institutions are helped by the State, the Committee suggested that the type of instruction, which it recommends, should be imparted in all institutions and this would be no departure from principles embodied in the Constitutions. The Education Commission (1964-66), along with its other recommendations, suggested that educational reconstruction should take into account moral education and inculcation of a sense of social responsibility. Thus it can be seen, in the historical context, that there has been a persistent ambivalent attitude towards religious education. While its need cannot be denied, at the same time the spirit of secularism has to be preserved.

A misinterpretation of secularism has created some more confusion. In one sense ‘secular’ is the polar opposite of ‘sacred’, as it comprises only rational and scientific facts and is divorced from any mystical, transcendental and theological notions whatsoever. Often, keeping this sense in mind, people plead for education which is completely free from religious instruction. Such a separation is indeed felt desirable in communist countries. In one of his writings Lenin demanded of people to stand for the complete separation of the Church from the State, and the School from the Church.<sup>4</sup> If we call this secularism, then it is impregnated with a negative attitude towards all religions. To make this negative aspect even more explicit in the words of Lenin, “The revolutionary proletariat will succeed in making religion a really private affair, so far as the state is concerned. And in this political system, cleansed of medieval mildew the proletariat will wage a broad and open struggle for the elimination of economic slavery, the true source of the religious humbugging of mankind.”<sup>5</sup>

Did the Constitution want India to be secular in that sense? K.G. Saiyidain, the leading educationist who was associated for long with

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4. Lenin V. I., *On Religion*, (Moscow : Progress Publishers, 1978), p. 9.

5. *Ibid.*, p. 11.

the educational policy-making pertinently remarked, "May I suggest, to begin with, that a secular State does not mean an anti-religious or ir-religious or un-religious State? It only means that such a State is not wedded to any particular religion and cannot favour or give preferential treatment to any group of citizens on the basis of their religious affiliations. It endeavours to secure equality of rights and opportunity to people of all faiths, including the right to profess the faith of one's own choice. With this fundamental principle in mind there can be no question of any basic antagonism between a secular State and Religions."<sup>6</sup> This was the reason why the Constitution did not object to religious instruction in non-government educational institutions and thus recognized the rights of different communities to profess their faiths.

But there is still a lacuna in this policy about which Humayun Kabir cautioned many years ago: "Not only do we suffer from a lack of intellectual integration of the different systems of belief that are found in India but we lack even the basic requirement of a national system of education. Its absence is one of the main reasons why so many Indians exhibit even today a regional linguistic or communal outlook."<sup>7</sup> The religious education imparted in different traditional systems has at times given rise to a superstitious,<sup>8</sup> orthodox, sectarian and fanatic outlook among their pupils. The rise in communalism is one of the indicatives of this.

At the same time, it is practically difficult to teach all the religions together. Even an ardent believer like Gandhi when asked about the place of religious education in Wardha Scheme, said "We have left out the teaching of religions from the Wardha Scheme of education because we are afraid that religions as they are taught and practised today, lead to conflict rather than unity. But, on the other hand, I hold that the truths that are common to all religions can and should be taught to all children." In answering a correspondent he wrote, "I regarded it as fatal to the growth of a friendly spirit among the children belonging to the different faiths, if they are taught either that their reli-

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6. Saiyidain, K. G., *The faith of an Educationist: A Plea for Human Values* (Bombay: Asia Publishing House, 1965), p. 112.

7. Humayun Kabir, *Indian Philosophy of Education* (Bombay: Asia publishing House, 1964), p. 70.

8. Rao, V.K.R.V., *Education and Human Resource Development*, (Bombay Allied Publishers, 1966), p. 107.

gion is superior to every other or that it is the only true religion. If that exclusive spirit is to pervade the nation, the necessary corollary would be that there should be separate schools for every denomination with freedom to each to decry every other, or that the mention of religion must be entirely prohibited. The result of such a policy is too dreadful to contemplate. Fundamental principles of ethics are common to all religions. These should certainly be taught to the children and that should be regarded as adequate religious instruction so far as the schools under the Wardha Scheme are concerned.”<sup>9</sup>

In summing up, it can be added here that even if the objective of ethical and spiritual development of children through mere verbal and mass-level religious instruction in general education is unattainable, a comparative religious education is indispensable. The education which is guided by a secular viewpoint, that is, respect towards all religions, will only make students truly secular. If the people are sectarian and communal, the true secular state will not have been realized.

Here we may accept the observations of another leading educationist, D.S. Kothari<sup>10</sup> “The greatest contribution of the West is no doubt science and technology. What the world desperately needs today is a creative and symbiotic combination of science and non-violence, science and spiritualism, so that man can progress towards the realization of what Huxley has called the ‘fulfilment society’ based not on power and exploitation, but on scientific knowledge, humanism and humanness.”

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9. M.K. Gandhi, ‘Harijan’ 16 July, 1938.

10. Kothari, D.S., *Education, Science and National Development*. (Bombay: Asia Publishing House, 1970). pp. 87-88.