

SPIRITUAL AND RELIGIOUS EDUCATION IN A SECULAR STATE

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INTRODUCTION

The concept of secularism in education has been focus of discussion, for the reason that whether secularism includes some aspects of essence of all religions or not. Before independence, the education was mostly the subject of the kingdoms and the colonial government. Components of education, as regards their stress on programmes for development of religious awareness varied from area to area. In pre independence period, The Education Commission of 1882 stated, "That an attempt be made to prepare moral textbook, based upon fundamental principles of natural religion, such as may be taught in all Government colleges." After independence, following provisions were made in the Constitution of India.

CONSTITUTIONAL PROVISION

Article 22

"No religious instruction shall be provided in any educational institution wholly maintained out of State funds- Provided that nothing in this clause shall apply to an educational institution which is administered but has been established under an endowment or trust which requires that religious instructions shall be imparted in such institutions."

Article 25

"Subject to public order, morality and health and to the other provisions of this part all persons are equally entitled to freedom of conscience and the right freely to profess, practise and propagate religion."

EDUCATION FOR DEVELOPMENT OF SECULARISM

The National Policy on Education 1986 stated that: Education has an acculturating role. It refines sensitivities and perceptions that contribute to national cohesion, a scientific temper and independence of mind and spirit thus furthering the goals of socialism, secularism and democracy enshrined in our constitution." (p.3). it also stated that All educational programmes will be carried on in strict conformity with secular values" (p.4). In a multi-religious society, it is the duty of the State to see that its people have the necessary capacity of tolerance of each other's varying religious practices. This means that educational system should make provision for the teaching of the characteristics of various religions, from spiritual point of view. To speak spiritually, all religions aim at the same goal - attainment of truth, light, and perfection.

RELIGION

Religion is based on certain practices that have been advocated by some seers in their own life situations. Some of the sayings are area specific and population specific and some are universal transcending the border of country, race, and civilisation. Religion in narrow sense differentiates between people professing different religions. It has faith on certain creeds, customs and practices that are not found in other religions. Tagore differentiated about religion and spirituality in the following manner. He said that

"Spiritual life is the emancipation of consciousness. Through it we find immediate response of soul every where. Before we attain this life, we see men through the medium of self-interest, prejudice, or classification, because of the perpetual remoteness around us which we cannot cross over. When the veil is removed, we not only see the fleeting forms of the world, but come close to its eternal being, which is the ineffable beauty." (Tagore quoted in Das 1996, p.29)

Mere knowledge cannot make one reach God. God can be achieved by achieving perfection of the being, by refraining from evil conduct, and by achieving a steadfast mind through the control of passions. Tagore also said early days in the life of an individual needs the pure and perfect note of a spiritual ideal in order to fit him/her for the complications of later years. He was a broad-minded religious person. He hoped that a day would come when, Buddha, Christ and Mohammed can become one. "(Tagore Quoted in Das 1996, P. 81). According to Tagore,

religion is not a fractional thing that can be doled out in fixed weekly or daily measures as one among various subjects of instruction. His concept of religion is a spirituality that goes beyond sectarian difference. For him, religion is the truth of the complete being and the consciousness of the personal relationship with the infinite. It is the true centre of gravity of human life. According to Tagore scientific discoveries and inventions have been changing many rites and rituals and should continue to have impact on the human life. Unfortunately, for majority of people, religion is a particular creed, sect, cult, and religious society. This blunder could become so severe that the famous philosopher Socrates was slain in the name of the religion. "A narrow religious spirit often oppresses and impoverishes the joy and beauty of life" (Sri Aurobindo 1972a, p.165). He also said that "Organised religion has often enough in the past hounded men to crime and massacre and justified obscurantism and oppression" (Sri Aurobindo 1972a, p.111). According to Sri Aurobindo, there are two aspects of the concept religion – true religion and religionism.

"True religion is spiritual religion, that which seeks to live in the spirit, in what is beyond the intellect, beyond the aesthetic and ethical and practical being of man, and to inform and govern these members of our being by the higher light and the law of the spirit. Religionism on the contrary, entrenches itself in some narrow pietistic exaltation of the lower members or lays exclusive stress on intellectual dogmas, forms and ceremonies, on some fixed and rigid moral code, on some religio-political or religio-social system" (Sri Aurobindo 1972a pp.166-167).

According to Sri Aurobindo, the lower members of the society accept religionism with pleasure. This helps them to be exalted and raised before they can be fully spiritualised and also before they can directly feel the spirit and obey its law. The ritual of prayer, homage and ceremony has value for spiritual progress in them. If in a system, this is not allowed, such people should take recourse to meditation, devotion, or religious duty. In the modern scientific age, there should be an integration of religious aspiration and scientific inquiry.

Religious Functions in Institutions

It is a well-known fact that although the nation is a secular State, majority of the institutions perform religious functions and conduct religious prayers as per their choice. This happens because; traditionally every individual is religious in nature. Thirty years ago, the author was student at a Christian Mission managed college. At the starting of the college, there was a gathering in a gallery and the Principal used to read from Bible. Those who came late did not have to attend. Some of the non-Christian students, who came in right time and were not interested in attending the class, stood outside the building. Some teachers used to persuade them every day to attend the Bible prayer class. Such types of situations are generally found in institutions managed by religious organisations. There are also institutions where, prayers from various religions are held in the morning assembly. The author, while working as principal of a training college, was making students and teachers stand silently, while some students sang prayers from different religions spontaneously. The students and teachers of Sri Aurobindo International Centre of Education, Pondicherry that is a part of Sri Aurobindo Ashram, observe X-Mas function on 25th December. Incidentally, the Centre function as usual and does not remain closed on *Saraswati Puja* or *Ganesh Puja* days. Generally, institutions if not being run by non-Hindu religious organisations, even if they are government managed allow students to worship of Hindu god of learning Lord Ganesh and Hindu goddess of learning Devi Saraswati in the institution building. The Government institutions even collect funds from students and organise the programmes under supervision of teachers. In most of the institutions, festivals pertaining to religions of students belonging to minority groups are not performed. There is a necessity to make every institution organise a number of functions pertaining to every religion or stop having any religious function.

RELIGIOUS EDUCATION

Long ago, religious bodies provided education only. Hence, religious education found a strong base in those systems. In many countries, the State took care to decide content of religious education. Bastide (1997) has discussed about the provision for religious education in UK. It referred to early period when the stress was centred on Christianity. There have been certain recent reforms after the 1988 Act. In 1992, faith-working groups were formed by taking members from the six faith communities in UK – from Buddhism, Christianity, Hinduism, Islam, Judaism and Sikhism to select areas of study that it considered essential to gain an understanding of its religious traditions. In 1994, two models of religious education were developed. The first one is structured around the knowledge and understanding of each faith community and the second one covers the development of knowledge and understanding of the teachings of religions and how these relate to the shared human experience. In Singapore, the Government undertook the task of developing reading materials and providing training to the teachers for religious instruction. Prof. Manoj Das of Sri Aurobindo International Centre of Education, Pondicherry, who is also a storywriter of international repute, had been involved in development of reading

materials for Hindu students of Singapore. This was a project undertaken by the Government of Singapore to provide certain amount of spiritual education to every ethnic group.

Religious Education at Early Stages

The University Education Commission 1948-49 pointed out the importance of religious education at early stages of education. It stated that

“If we are not prepared to leave the scientific and literary training of the pupils to the home and the community, we cannot leave religious training to these (home and the community). The child is robbed of its full development if it receives no guidance in early years towards recognition of the religious aspects of life. If this guidance is left to homes and communities, the chances are that communal bigotry, intolerance and selfishness may increase.” (Radhakrishnan 1949, p.197)

However, the Secondary Education Commission (1952-53) gave the warning in the following words:

“In view of the provision of the Constitution of the secular State, religious instruction cannot be given in schools except on a voluntary basis and outside the regular school hours; such instruction should be given to the children of the particular faith and with the consent of the parents and the management concerned. In making this recommendation, we wish to emphasise that all unhealthy trends of disunity, rancour, religious hatred and bigotry should be discouraged in schools.” (Mudaliar 1953 pp. 123-124)

After the warning of the Commission, many States revised their textbooks and school programmes. Instead of trying to have all elements, which are universal and secular in nature, the curriculum was made devoid of all religious ideas. The primers written on the ideals of love, truth, light gave place to the primers written on modern developments in the field of science and technology. Thus, after a few years, it was observed that children were growing up without adequate knowledge of the moral ideas prevalent in the country.

Education About Religions

The Education Commission 1964-66 analysed the situation in relation to secularism and education and stated that “It must be remembered that owing to the ban placed on religious instruction in schools and the weakening of the home influences which, in the past, often provided such instruction, children are now growing up without any clear ideas of their own religion and with no chance of learning about others”. (Kothari 1966 p. 36). The Commission made distinction between religious education and education about religions. According to it, secularism is not anti - religious and irreligious. On the other hand, it encourages each one to follow its own religious beliefs. The Commission stated that

“1.78 Secularism and Religion

In a multi – religious society like ours, it is necessary to define the attitude of a State to religion, religious education, and the concept of secularism. The adoption of a secularist policy means that in political, economic, and social matters, all citizens, irrespective of their religious faith, will enjoy equality of rights, that no religious community will be favoured or discriminated against, and that instruction in religious dogmas will not be provided in State schools. But it is not an irreligious or anti-religious policy; it does not belittle the importance of religion as such. It gives to every citizen the fullest freedom of religious belief and worship. It is anxious to ensure good relations amongst different religious groups and to promote not only religious tolerance but also active reverence for all religions.” (Art.1.78, p.36)

“In such a society, however, one has to make a distinction between ‘religious education’ and ‘education about religions. The former is largely concerned with the teaching of the tenets and practices of a particular religion, generally in the form in which the religious groups envisage them, whereas the latter is a study of religions and religious thought from a broad point of view- the eternal quest of the spirit. It would not be practicable for a secular State with many religions to provide education in any one religion” (Art.1.79)

Hence, it may be appropriate that at every stage there may be provision for education about religions. As narrated earlier, there may be provision for singing of prayers not only from one religion but also from varieties of religions. Such type of education is imparted in a small measure in form of description about different religions found in history books. The students may be encouraged to observe appropriate religious functions in the building of the institution, in which the head of the institution and all the teachers have to participate. To day in the era of science, religions have lost their gravity. The spirituality has taken over the learned ones.

SPIRITUAL EDUCATION

Spiritualism is above religion and is free from religious differences. “Spirituality respects the freedom of the human soul, because it is itself fulfilled by freedom; and the deepest meaning of freedom is the power to expand and grow towards perfection by the law of one’s own nature, dharma” (Sri Aurobindo 1972a, p.170). “The highest spirituality indeed moves in a free and wide air far above that lower stage of seeking which is governed by religious form and dogma; it does not easily bear their limitations and, even when it admits, it transcends them; it lives in an experience which to the formal religious mind is unintelligible.” (The Mother 1987, p. 224). Sri Aurobindo had suggested that human beings should shun all lowness and narrowness in religious thoughts and experiences. They should be as broad as horizons, as loftier as Kanchhanjunga Mountain and as profounder as deepest ocean. Kothari Commission stated that education should try to bring science and the values of spirit together. Study of science will question many aspects of religion but not any aspect of spirituality. Secularism is not questioned by spirituality and vice versa. Essence of all religions is spiritual in nature. These aspects are common to all religions. A scientist can never be religious but will always be spiritual. Spiritual Education is higher than religious education. Religious education is meant for people of lower level of consciousness. Education on religions helps one understand the lower position of religion in relation to spirituality.

Necessity for Spiritual training

The University Education Commission 1948-49 stated that the education system should help the future citizens to be deeply spiritual and not narrowly religious. It pointed out importance of spiritual training in the following words: “If religion is a matter of realisation, it cannot be reached through a mere knowledge of the dogmas. It is attained through discipline, training, sadhana. What we need is not formal religious education but spiritual training” (Radhakrishnan 1949 p.204). It also stated that

“If we exclude spiritual training in our institutions, we would be untrue to our historical development.
(p.203)

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The fundamental principles of our constitution call for spiritual training. There is no State religion. All the different forms are given equal place, provided they do not lead to corrupt practices. Each one is at liberty to approach the unseen as it suits his capacity and inclination. If this is the basis of our secular state, to be secular is not to be religiously illiterate. It is to be deeply spiritual and not narrowly religious.” (Radhakrishnan 1949, p.204)

The Commission suggested that the institutions should try to create an atmosphere of simplicity and consecration in the institution and Habituating the students to right emotions and inducing them in the formation of good moral, mental and physical habits and there is possibility for development of values in students through persuasion or suggestions and personal examples, not through command or imposition.

Education on Religions at Higher Stages

The University Education Commission 1948-49 pointed out the justification for imparting education on religions at higher education stage. It said that “In universities and colleges we must develop the habit of free critical inquiry and apply the method of objective criticism not only to the beliefs and attitudes of people who differ from us but also to our own beliefs and attitudes”. The Commission suggested that in higher stages teaching of history of religions and religious institutions, comparative religion, philosophy of religion could be well studied. During the first year of the degree course the lives of the great religious leaders like Gautama the Buddha, Confucius, Zoraster, Socrates, Jesus, Samkara, Ramanuja, Madhava, Mohamad, Kabir, Nanak, Gandhi be taught. In the second year, some selections of a universalist character from the scriptures of the world can be studied. In the third year, the central problems of philosophy and religion can be studied. According to the Commission, it is helpful for the students read lives of great men, and reading of stories, which illustrate great moral and religious principles as part of the curriculum. Sri Aurobindo also said that every institution should teach the essence of religion, to live for god, for humanity, for country, for others and for oneself (Sri Aurobindo 1972b, p.212).

Practice of Silent Meditation

The University Education Commission 1948-49 Commission suggested practice of silent meditation at college level.” This would help the students make their minds free for a few moments from the distractions of daily living and attend to forces, which determine the meaning and value of life”. The practice of silent worship or meditation is found at the Sri Aurobindo International Centre of Education, Pondicherry that gives stress on spiritual not religious development. The Education Commission 1964-66 also suggested introduction of silent meditation. “We would also like to lay stress on the importance of encouraging students to meet in groups for silent meditation”

(p.35). Its practice does not require any specific space. It can be practised in every classroom, with every teacher. Tagore gave importance to meditation. He believed that meditation had many roles in development of character. Everyone should set aside fifteen minutes in the morning and fifteen minutes in the evening for that purpose. When meditation is not possible, the individuals should try to remain quiet, exert the power of self-control, even though instead of contemplating on God, they may be watching the squirrels running up the trees. Religious education in schools was to be imparted not through regular instruction but through influence. It could be best given by making a child stay in rich religious environment. It can also be given by allowing the child to live in intimate touch with nature.

CONCLUSION

According to Gandhi, all religions preach the same principles. He said, "The soul of religion is one, but it is enacted in a multitude of forms. Wise men will ignore the outward crust and see the same soul living under a variety of crusts"(Young India 25 Sept.1925). He suggested that fundamental principles of ethics common to all religions should be taught to children and that should be regarded as adequate religious instruction so far as the schools under the Wardha Scheme are concerned. According to Sri Aurobindo, whether distinct teaching in any form of religion is imparted or not, the essence of religion, to live for God, for humanity, for others and for oneself must be made ideal in every school that called itself national (Sri Aurobindo 1972, Vol.17, p.212). As discussed above spiritual education or education on religions is not anti secular. There may be standard readers prepared for the purpose. The teachers may be oriented to teach on religions so that they develop love and understanding among people belonging to different faiths.

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