Religious diversity, secular ethos, and schooling in a secondary school in India

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Abstract
The present study looks at religious diversity and the role it plays in a school in India. The Constitution of India under Article 25-28 protects the freedom of religion in the country. The secular ideals are the core guiding principles of the society, which were incorporated by the 42nd Amendment to the Preamble of the Indian Constitution. Therefore, the study tries to look at religious practices, attitudes, values, and beliefs to understand religious diversity. It also tries to understand the views of parents, teachers, and students to contextualize the school ethos, culture, and schooling process. To comprehend the secular outlook and its role as envisaged in the Constitution of our country. The present study is a qualitative case study that was conducted in a public school by using observation and interviews with 30 students and ten teachers at the school from classes VI-VII each, apart from 10 interviews with parents. There is an indication that there is a secular ethos in the school. However, there are few occurrences of segregation, but on the whole, there is inclusion. The policies, practices in the school reflect resilience and tolerance, characterized by value education.

Keywords:
Diversity, religion, constitution, education, secular ethos, schooling.

1 INTRODUCTION

There has been increasing attention to the intersections of religion and education in the international literature (Davies, 2014; Edgeworth & Santoro, 2015; Grace, 2004; Jackson, 2006), but in the Indian context, it has not received much attention. This may also be due to the fact that in India, religion and education are seen as distinct as India being a ‘Secular’ State as stipulated in the Constitution of India. The Indian state looks at religion as a private affair as each person can exercise individual discretion or choice, while the state is concerned with the relation between individuals and not with one’s relation with God. Further, as enumerated in the Constitution, there is no state religion that the state will neither establish a religion of its own nor confer any special patronage upon any specific religion.

The Right to Religion is a fundamental right in the country under Article 25-28 of the Constitution. In this context, the present study tries to elucidate and understand different views of students, teachers, and parents on the secular nature of schooling in a secondary school to understand religious diversity. Further, it explores the school calendar, events, activities etc., apart from varied religious practices, beliefs, attitudes within the school to understand the school ethos. It is also to bring forth the students’ questions around the curriculum and textbooks to elucidate the diversity and secular ethos functioning.

Religious diversity has been part of the Indian culture. The secular ethos has been the core guiding principle of our society. While in ancient times, the Guru- Shishya tradition was followed and religious education was seen as part of the value system and evolving ethical, moral behavior, in the contemporary context, it is seen as part of religious diversity, which has to be inculturated as is seen as a way of respecting social and cultural life and fostering democratic citizenship (Ruttyer & Merry, 2008). At the same time, some studies have looked at the history of religion in the public sphere and highlight seminal court cases and the legal constraints of religion in public education. However, others have looked at the association of religion in public schools from curriculum viewpoints but go on to demonstrate from the science classroom that it is significant to move beyond the curriculum and look at the larger goal of inclusion, multiculturalism, and democracy. Public schools need to rethink their role towards citizens, as religion and education are tied to politics. However, we may approximate religious illiteracy and intolerance, and it is imperative to reconceptualize its role, keeping in mind the broader goals of democracy, pluralism, and education. In the discussion, emphasis is given to the broader goals of freedom, diversity, respect, and the struggles to its relevance of religion and religious identities in public schools.

Another contested area is that whether religious ideals should be debated in the curriculum in public schools in the broader question as they are not open to scrutiny, their epistemological basis, or truth claims. They are vague, abstract, and may lead to multiple interpretations. Nonetheless, they also act as links between people and society. However, in his work on religion, John Rawls argues “that consent is primary, religion cannot be imposed on all sections of the society, and it depends on self-choice.” There is a clear distinction concerning the private and public domain in terms of religion. However, as envisaged in the Constitution, the minorities have been given certain allowances under specific provisions in the Indian context.

The above examples show the great amount of power that the school systems and teachers exercise in shaping students’ lives. The main focus is on the socialization process in schools that allow for the tacit transmission of dominant values and beliefs of the society. The liberal approach to curriculum analysis engages with the question of ‘how meaning gets produced in the classroom’. Sarkar (1996) and Sundar (2004), in their papers, describe how systematically the Shishu Mandirs, Vidyabharti schools established by Rastriya Swayamsevak Sangh (RSS) spread the Indian culture among the students. Rao, Arpitha1 shows how hidden curriculum sometimes works overtly or covertly in various school structures, affecting students’ socialization and identity formation. This demonstrates how the hidden curriculum functions, where only certain universalistic qualities are celebrated, often excluding students’ lived experiences. The main focus is on the
socialization process in schools that allow for the tacit transmission of dominant values and beliefs of the society. The curriculum at the school level engages with the question of “how meaning gets produced in the classroom?”

The above instance shows that how power plays in the school system, and there is a tacit and hidden curriculum at play, which shows the spread and development of political ideology which is related to patriotism, and the goals of the nation and countrymen through physical wellbeing like yoga and meditation and learning Sanskrit and reciting hymns, shlokas, and songs. There is acceptance of the teacher as ‘Acharya’ based on the Indian system of Guru, as the proponent of knowledge. The skills and values emphasized relate to Hindu values and ideology that teachers and parents patronize.

Religious education aims to create an understanding of diverse religions and promote respect, tolerance, social justice, and human rights. The schools can celebrate festivals and various signs and symbols on the walls, corridors in the school, prayers, songs, and ceremonies. It also puts forth that religion is a private affair to be taken care of in the family by parents and community and should be outside the purview of the school.

In another similar study conducted in South Africa, there is a clear distinction between religious education and religious instruction. At the same time, religious education is allowed and taught as a compulsory subject, namely, Life Orientation, where basic tenets, principles about different religions and religious perspectives are taught to all children. In addition, the basic tenets also include education on democracy, constitution, and human rights to provide a holistic understanding of diverse religions in South Africa. While religious instruction is not part of the national curriculum, and neither is it taught in public schools. However, it is advised that the community should be taken care of, apart from the family, parents, etc., as it is outside the purview of the school.

The article by Bisoyi (2017) in “a government school named Jawahar Navodaya Vidyalaya, Koraput, Odisha discusses the reciting of the ‘Navodaya prayer’ with folded hands and closed eyes, which was common in all schools. The pictures of ‘Saraswati’ and ‘Bharat Mata’ as the goddess of knowledge and goddess of the country to inspire the students was seen in the schools. However, there was also the ritual of chanting of ‘Krishna Yajurveda Taittiriya Upanishad’ as mandatory in the dining hall before everyone begins to eat and sees it as a form of religious indoctrination among students‘. This article puts forth that religious practices in the schools are due to the dominance of a particular religion in the society in which we live, largely reflective of the dominant culture and society.

In a recent case reported from Bihar in 2018, it was seen that segregation is practiced in the classroom, as there were different rooms and sections on religious grounds like for Hindus and Muslims, apart from caste bases like for Dalits, Other Backward caste and upper caste. In another school from Haryana, it was reported that students at primary classes had to learn two shlokas and their meaning, while for the senior classes, it went up to five or more. Similarly, Alam (2011) also states that students repeatedly recited the verses from the Quran in the Madarasa. Advani (1996) also argues in her book that textbooks are proficient enough to eulogize the diversity aspect of our nation devoid of assisting children to question the pluralistic nature of our identities in India critically.

Thapan (2014) states in the study at a government school in Delhi that students are completely immersed in the singing of religious songs, which is inculcated at school and home. “The development of boundaries at this stage is quite sharp…there is a sense of ‘my nation’ and ‘my religion’…and religious identity is linked to national identity in the choice and repetitive singing of particular kinds of songs…. assembly is used by teachers to provide their perspective on the mix between religion and everyday life” (p.164).

This first section in the paper looks at the literature review, providing a background to the study and tracing the way religious diversity is seen at schools in India. The next section describes the study design and brings forth the patterns which emerge from the study, the various narrative accounts are examined, and the conclusion follows the discussion.

2 Method

2.1 Research Setting

The present study is located at a public school in the capital city of India, New Delhi. It is based in West Delhi and is a qualitative case study. The term ‘public’ is part of the British legacy and is used in the Indian context while referring to schools not run by the government. They have greater autonomy concerning management and administrative control. However, they have to follow the norms, rules and regulations of the central government and state government, apart from following the norms of the affiliating board, in this case, Central Board of Secondary Education (CBSE). The school charges fee from the students is up to the senior secondary level. Data was collected from July-Dec 2018. The data reported in this paper are drawn from semi-structured interviews with ten teachers and ten parents from the school, and Focus Group Discussion with 30 students of class VI-VII conducted as part of a project on understanding religious diversity in the school, looking at practices, process, and how they are transacted at the school. The curriculum, syllabus, textbooks, attitudes, beliefs among the teachers, students, parents. The primary site of the study was a public school in New Delhi, which was chosen for the following reasons- Firstly, as being the capital and large urban city, where a large number of schools are located and the student population from diverse regions, cultural, religion is situated. Secondly, most of the studies have been carried out outside New Delhi, so it was considered most appropriate to carry out this study. The prior research in schools has been helpful in developing the present research design, given the limited literature on the issue, especially in the Indian context.

2.2 The technique of Collecting Data

The data were collected after obtaining prior permission from the principal of the school. All interviews were conducted in English. However, respondents sometimes used words in Hindi and Urdu, although they were given a choice to respond in Hindi or English. Nevertheless, most preferred to respond in English due to familiarity with Hindi; during the interview, the respondent used Hindi. In such cases, the verbatim was transcribed word to word, and original words or phrases were
retained. Initially, observations in school and different sites of the school ranging from classroom, corridors, activity rooms, and morning assembly were conducted to apprehend the school system. After the observations, students were briefed about the project and randomly asked to participate in the study. The students volunteered to be part of the study. Focus Group Discussion was conducted in a group of 2-3 members for the students, while for the teachers and parents, interviews were conducted individually. Concerning the parents, snowballing technique was used after being referred by the students themselves. The semi-structured interview schedule, which lasted from 10 to 15 minutes, ranged from assessing views on religious diversity, practices, celebrations, festivals, events organized, classroom practices, and processes at school. Although gender and varied composition from each class VI-VII were considered apart from the social class/composition when considering interviewees, the sample's composition was largely based on the informant’s voluntary involvement.

3 FINDINGS

3.1 Pattern 1: Secular Ethos, Culture, and Schooling: Curriculum and Textbooks

In India, religion and education have been kept separate. However, the debate about what should be taught in school is also dependent on the nature of the educational institution as envisaged in the Constitution of India. There are various provisions mentioned in the Constitution under Right to Religion, as mentioned on page 1. The present study is located in a secular school. However, there are various customs, traditions, ideals, symbols, songs, events, festivals which are part of the dominant religion in the country.

The informants in this pattern described that in India, the academic calendar is based on the government policies, so they get holidays for various festivals like Diwali, Holi, Id, Christmas, Dusshera, Guru Nanak’s Birthday, which indicate that persons from all faiths can practice their religious culture and traditions and celebrate with their community. There are also National Days’ like Independence Day, Republic Day, Gandhi Jayanti for which there is a holiday, but all festivals are celebrated with equal fervor in the school. Various activities like special morning assembly, in which songs, dance, poems are conducted, and various events or competitions are held. Like Rangoli, Poster Making, Group Dance etc. to celebrate the national days and festivals at school. For example, a girl Reena in class VIII enthusiastically narrated: ‘I look forward to these days as we get delicious food, fun, and enjoyment apart from being able to participate in the varied competitions and win awards and certificates at school.’

The informants narrated those religious customs, practices, and rituals performed at home and school were part of their everyday lived experiences. For example, to give an illustration, they reported reciting a prayer before eating food, putting tilak on their forehead, fasting was part of their growing up since a child. The teachings narrated by grandparents and parents inculcate moral values and virtuous behavior at home and school, which was seen as complementary.

Similarly, Anita narrated that they study Ramayana and Mahabharat as part of their curriculum in Hindi, which is useful in the socio-cultural and societal values shared by the parents. The festivals of Dusshera and Diwali are part of our core Hindu values; as the school was based on the tenets of the Hindu religion, there were, at times, references to the tenets and principles of Hinduism, and its values system, as a way of life. Overall, the emphasis was on spirituality and evolving a feeling of belonging to the community's needs and culture.

Some of the students described that they wanted to listen to stories or do some activities rather than listening to the teachings or principles of school’s founder or its disciples. The other view which was expressed was from a Hindu boy; he clearly stated that ‘I am an atheist, but that discussion does not happen in school,’ it is necessary to follow or abide by any religion?

Quite a few minority students were studying in the school, which congealed very well in the varied aspects of school life and participated well. They had peers, took part in various events in the school, where or while doing academically well. There were a few instances where they felt segregated, like not celebrating Eid or allowing non-vegetarian food to school. The students were friendly and shared notes, books, and played together, etc., with them; there was considerable friendship within the class. However, the students narrated that they were not invited to their friend’s homes at birthday parties or other social events.

One of the informants mentioned that there is also conflict as to the terms and language to be used in the classroom, and ‘what is to be written in classwork, homework, and examination?” this was illustrated as in the textbook there is a reference to mother as ‘maa’ as that is the accepted and popular discourse, while there is no space to write ‘ammi’ and peers tell them to write ‘maa’ during the examination as they may lose marks otherwise. This highlights the conflicts that emerge within the classroom as part of the curriculum, textbooks, and evaluation system.

Among the students, most preferred the secular ethos of the school, and daily schedule of the school and the everyday practices in the school were built in such a way that diversity and inclusion as part of the school culture, inherent in its functioning was religious diversity which was seen as a quite broad-based and basic premise that all religions converge and human beings and its well-being is fundamental to all religions. Thus, the educational policy and the aims and objectives are secular in our nation, as it seeks to promote a rational, democratic, liberal, and contemporary welfare state. The curriculum, textbooks promote secular values and are based on promoting human values, harmony, tolerance, and cooperation among various socio-cultural and religious groups, accepting and providing safeguards for the minorities.

3.2 Pattern 2: Religion, beliefs, parenting practices: Indian Culture and Traditions

The informants in this pattern, particularly parents, suggested that their everyday life revolves around religious beliefs and rituals, and being religious is the core value they would like to inculcate among their children. School choice is also an extension and part of their socialization into Indian culture and values. Like eloquently expressed by the parent(s)-
Manoj expressed that his daughter studies in class VIII and were contented that his daughter was learning about the Indian culture, participated in the Hawan and learned Sanskrit Sholkhas, and was aware of the Hindu scriptures Ramayana and Mahabharata.

Shalini, a parent narrated that her children who were studying in Class VI and IX were learning Yoga and Meditation, and she felt it is good for health and fitness; apart from it, she said ‘the world is learning yoga and seeing it has immense benefits, so why shouldn’t we?... it is part of Hinduism and our Vedic culture.’ Most of the parents appreciated the school efforts to promote a secular outlook, as they considered it necessary as part of the Indian culture and expressed that it was part of their own beliefs and values and would like it to be inculcated in their children as well.

The teachers narrated that religion is one’s personal choice, but if the school vision and principles, tenets are such that they would like to inculcate awareness of the basic tenets of all religions, it is quite helpful for the students, as students will be away from narrow mindedness and respect each other’s culture and religion. As one of the teachers, Ritu put forth that ‘being secular means that they should love and respect each other, treat each other with kindness, compassion, gratitude and tolerance, which is part of our ancient scriptures like Ramayana, Mahabharata and Geetha’.

Anuradha said ‘the students should know about their religion, values as it has moral values, which children can’t learn as they live in nuclear family. So, it’s essential to inculcate moral and ethical values among students as it’s essential for their character building and helps them to show the right path and take correct decisions’. Another teacher teaching Maths in the school emphasized that religious teachings have a positive impact and bring peace to the class’s overall functioning. Thus, it was seen that most of the teachers and parents see it as an extension of their own beliefs, value and part of their socialization process. The school is seen as part of the process to include values and ideals which are part of their home culture and societal demands.

4 DISCUSSION

The study provides an overview of religious diversity which exists in a school. It helps to understand that religious belief is a lived reality and reflect societal demands. It tries to show the dominance of popular discourse on religion, apart from the role of parents and their value system, attitudes, beliefs to embrace family religious values and related societal values. This brings forth the relationship between parent and child and the socialization in a family, which is part of the family ethos and cultural norms, apart from the student’s socialization and the role of the community and societal values. The parenting style and the relationships within the family play an important role in decisions and imparting moral and ethical values. However, some critical voices emerge from the narratives, which question, appreciate, and acknowledge the diversity of different religions in our country.

The voices of the informants highlighted that student lived experiences and their relationship with wider societal demands and their own ‘family’. Their own family traditions, beliefs, traditions, values were predominant about religious beliefs and traditions. However, it is not to say that the student’s ‘agency’ is missing. What is seen is that students were able to comprehend and understand the everyday experience, relate it to their community and societal context, and analyze and engage with their lived experiences critically.

It is also to acknowledge that, whether overtly or covertly, some practices, rituals, traditions, and customs will become part of the school culture. However, whether it will lead to indoctrination or not is not correct. The findings suggest that the selection of the school rests with the parents, it was brought forth in the interviews that parents choose the school deliberately, as the school’s vision and ideology is similar to their views and values at home. In their accounts, the informants referred to ‘being religious’ as part of their upbringing and way of life, as it was weaved together in their social life.

In his study, Siegel (1970) has shown that “family, peer groups with their child-rearing practices, style of interpersonal interaction, affect child’s socialization”. The secular outlook and respecting diversity were the core value which teachers appreciated, students and parents and religion were seen to inculcate morals and ethics to grow up as a responsible and good ‘human being’ and participate in the democratic process in the country. It was seen that there was a sense of value inculcation, behavioral norms, morals, and ethics play a crucial role in the socialization of the young by the family as well as the school in varied ways. This is similar to Apple's (2004) work on hidden curriculum. The hidden curriculum in schools’ functions to reinforce norms and rules, and it is expected that students will internalize them. In addition, the culture of the school reflected value inculcation and secular ethos and wanted that students and teacher respect diversity, inclusion, and values enumerated in the Constitution. The educational policy and the aims and objectives are secular in our nation, as it seeks to promote a rational, democratic, liberal, and contemporary welfare state.

The discourse on religion and education has always been dominated by pluralism, while in India, the secular ethos and freedom with respect to religion have been the core. However, the study highlights the role and agency of the respondents and the role played by family and society in embracing religion and religious values. The parents appreciated the school’s role in socializing the young and evolving secular values in them by organizing, celebrating various activities, festivals, events etc. Apart from it, varied religious and cultural practices are part of the wider policy of RTE, social justice, and Constitution embedded in the school system.

5 CONCLUSION

We may all be diverse, but we are all human; the basic tenets and teachings of all religions teach the same; what is crucial is to discuss about ‘humanity, as religion discusses the wellbeing of human beings at its core. The present study has given us insight into the religious practices, symbols, rituals, beliefs, and the views of teachers, parents, and students from a public school at the secondary school level in New Delhi, India. More pointedly, it helps us understand their everyday lives at school, whether they exert any ‘agency’ or not? What are the different forms and kinds of negotiations and
resistance that take place in the school? The various norms, traditions, and rituals embedded in school culture overtly or covertly, however, whether it or they lead to indoctrination or is seen as a way of nation building, have been discussed with empirical insights from the field.

Based on our foregoing reflections, we conclude that it is important for public schools to inculcate secular ethos and incorporate teachings of religious ideals and provisions in our Constitution in the curriculum. Further, diversity and pluralism must be respected, celebrated, and appreciated, as it is a part of Indian culture and democratic values. The study is based in a secondary school; there is a need to conduct a wider study in varied kinds of school, in some more states of the country, to provide varied perspectives and impetus for future research. Further research is needed to look into minority schools and its influence on students to comprehend the secular ethos of school(s). (All the participants in the study have been assigned pseudonyms to protect their identity, and there is no conflict of interest.)

REFERENCES


