

Can education systems be areligious?

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India, just like many other secular nations, had its own challenges in deciding the place of religion within the education system. Post-independence, Indian secularism aimed to separate religion from the state. However, the Indian variant of secularism retained a complex and multi-value-laden character. This was also reflected in the education system partly because of the position of the state and partly considering demands of effective learning.

In his book *Social Character of Learning*, Krishna Kumar discusses how the education systems intervene with the social identity of the learner. Bringing the learners' home and community values in the classroom has a constructive role to play in their learning. The educational policies in India recognise the relationship between education and community experiences, which explains their emphasis on culture in classrooms.

The National Curriculum Framework (2000, 2005) and National Education Policy (2020) acknowledge and endorse respect for all religions by inculcating awareness about different religions. The institution of District Primary Education Programme (DPEP), the School Management Committees (SMC), and several other programmes have the similar aim of including the participation of and sensitivity to local conditions in the school curriculum. Such a learning atmosphere in the school has two overlapping functions, one, giving examples of students' real-life experiences, makes a stronger base for their conceptual understanding, resulting in better cognitive growth.

Two, bringing the community experiences of the students to the class also communicates that they are welcome in the classroom with their entire being, and not just for their calculative brains. This aids their engagement in the learning process without any fear and apprehension. The background experiences, in this sense, enrich learning rather than creating disruption or disturbance. With the same rationale, countries such as Spain, Ireland, and Sweden teach religious values and morals, or comparative religions within the secular curriculum. Going a step ahead, Spain's public schools accommodate children without any restriction on religious attire or symbols.

An educational system that attempts to denigrate and exclude socio-cultural or religious symbols from schools portray the minority cultures as deficient, inferior or substandard. This inflicts psychic violence on the minority groups, thereby limiting their access to

learning. By doing this the education system that intends to reform the marginalised communities ends up pushing them further away by damaging their sense of self. USA and France are two good examples of this.

Though these countries aimed at a full separation of religion from education, researchers have found the visible presence of religious values and symbols within their schools. It has been found that schools do not object to such infiltrations by students who belong to majority groups.

This is also true for India. Religion has been found to be an integral part of state-funded schools. A closer examination and description of day-to-day practices further reveals several instances where religious values and eating habits are manifested in the school culture. Rituals like the lighting of the lamp, poojas, reciting Saraswati Vandana and Ganesha Stuthi are common. There are long leaves for certain religious festivals like Dusshera or Diwali.

The ubiquitous role of religious symbols within Indian education is normalised and goes unnoticed and unquestioned. For students from majority groups, this is not unusual. However, for students belonging to minorities, it results in alienation.

Schools are mini societies where students are trained to be part of a future society. A democratic structure in the school rhythm prepares them for their future roles. If a school or college reformative unit communicates that only certain community practices are welcome, the teachers will end up establishing and reinforcing these religious hierarchies in their transactions.

The students who live these narratives of cultural and religious supremacy are bound to reflect that as citizens, in future. And most importantly, the community that lives a cultural subordination in their student times, will grow up with the feeling of desolation. In this futile way, the marginalised community will always be blamed for being reluctant to grow and not being in the mainstream.

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