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CONFERENCE PAPER

Religious Education in India: Debates and Experiences

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ABSTRACT
Religious education has remained largely absent from school and university curricula in India though its significance has been underlined by a plethora of government committees on education. Its absence can be traced to the imperatives of rule, both in the colonial period, and in post Independent India, and the need to balance competing claims and pressures. This paper shows how, on the one hand, the policy of religious neutrality – and later avowed secularism – and on the other, a desire for inculcation of moral, "spiritual" and "Indian" values tended to favour a natural religion approach. This idea of natural religion though comes to be inflected with a majoritarian bias.

KEYWORDS
Macaulay, religious neutrality, missionaries, spiritual values, natural religion

Introduction

In this paper, I attempt to chart out a tentative history of religious education in India focusing broadly on debates and policies on religious instruction in schools. There are two reasons for this: firstly, I realise that a large number of panellists and participants at this conference were engaged with either teaching, or studying religious education (henceforth RE) in schools, whether its curricula or pedagogy; and secondly, how the universities understood or incorporated – or even expelled – RE in India could not be disentangled from the policies affecting RE in schools. Indeed, it is difficult to distinguish the two, and difficult to understand the experience of RE in Indian universities without the broader background. This broader background consists of many questions about the

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nature, content and purpose of education. These were questions being framed and thrashed out first in the context of colonial rule, and then in terms of the vision of a newly independent postcolonial state. Central to this was the distinctive trajectory that secularism took in India. The experience of Partition and the bloody communal violence that accompanied it, also informed it. RE is expressly absent from Indian school and university curricula. Why was this so?

Religious Education in the Colonial Period

The early years of colonial rule in India – especially till 1830s – were marked by the dominance of Orientalists, with a decided interest in Eastern religions and their sacred texts. The British established their own *madrasa* Aliyah in Calcutta in 1792 (which has recently been converted into a university) and a Sanskrit College in Benaras in 1780. These were two of the three educational institutions endowed out of Indian revenues (Lelyveld, 1984, p. 86; Chatterjee, 2011, p. 26). The encouragement to Sanskrit and Arabic was premised partly on the principle that the sacred books of Hindus and Muslims were the sources of law by which the British would govern the subjects.

However in 1835, the notorious Minute of Macaulay – Lord Thomas Babington Macaulay, son of a missionary, and Law member of Governor General's Council – reflected the increasing impatience with the East India Company's policy of Orientalism. In advocating a choking of patronage to the study of Oriental languages and literatures of "Hindus and Mohammadens", Macaulay conjoined both the Utilitarian critique led by James Mills that these studies served no purpose, and the Anglicist demand for a more vigorous Christian policy in the colony. Macaulay's grounds for putting an end to this were manifold: the uselessness of learning these languages which did not prepare the pupils for a career, or even a bare sustenance; the drag on Company funds in publishing Arabic and Sanskrit books (which he called "waste paper" reflecting his prejudice against Eastern learning); the near completion of the project of codification of law which would render unnecessary the aid of *pandits* (Brahmin scholars) and *maulvis* (learned doctors or teachers of Islamic law) to interpret the Hindu sacred texts *Shastras* and *Hedayas*; and of course the falsity of these religions.

The following paragraph from the Minute brings to us in essence what appeared to Macaulay to be innately wrong with the encouragement of "Hindu and Muslim languages":

> It is said that the Sanscrit and the Arabic are the languages in which the sacred books of a hundred millions of people are written, and that they are on that account entitled to peculiar encouragement. Assuredly it is the duty of the British Government in India to be not only tolerant but neutral on all religious questions. But to encourage the study of a literature, admitted to be of small intrinsic value, only because that literature inculcated the most serious errors on the most important subjects, is a course hardly reconcilable with reason, with morality, or even with that very neutrality which ought, as we all agree, to be sacredly preserved. It is confined that a language is barren of useful knowledge. We are

> to teach it because it is fruitful of monstrous superstitions. We are to teach false history, false astronomy, false medicine, because we find them in company with a false religion. (Macaulay, 1835)

The emphasis on English literature, Western philosophy and sciences and its validation as the most valuable knowledge perforce placed Christian mission-run schools in an advantageous position. However, the English were at the same time wary of identifying their government too closely with Christianity. Thus, we see that Macaulay advised abstention from encouraging "those who are engaged in the work of converting the natives to Christianity" (Macaulay, 1835). Following him, the Despatch of 1854 authored by Wood, provided the Company's blue print of education of natives, and established the grant in aid system. It underlined that "good and secular education" would be the criteria for providing aid to schools and not instruction in Bible. The policy of religious neutrality was laid out in the following terms: the masters of government schools were not precluded from giving instruction out of school hours in the facts and doctrines of the Christian religion to any pupils who might apply for such instruction; and in the aided schools, the government would abstain from religious instruction conveyed in the schools, and the inspectors were to take no notice whatsoever of the religious doctrines which may be taught in schools (Wood's Despatch, 1854, par. 54).

Though Macaulay insisted that Sanskrit and Arabic could not claim British support either as "the languages of law" or as "the languages of religion", the consequence of this was not simply an efflorescence of missionary educational initiatives. In many regions such as the Punjab, support for what has been called vernacular Orientalism continued. Elsewhere, as in Madras, the grant support for mission schools and institutions was uneven. In fact, a complaint about the government's parsimony in this regard elicited a 50-page long letter from the Director of Public Instruction recounting the natives' fears about the proselytisation in mission school and the importance of state neutrality in matters of religion. Col. Macdonald also cited a meeting of over 6–7 thousand Hindus and Muslims in Madras in April 1859 who had appealed to the government to stop aid to mission schools and sought protection from religious instruction. The Missions on the other hand interpreted the 1854 Despatch to have provided for "the establishment of local boards of education and board schools financed from local property rates…, purely secular teaching, and grants-in-aid to voluntary societies whether they be Christian, Moslem or Hindu" (Whitehead, 2004, p. 126).

The debates reached a head by the time the Indian Education Commission was instituted in 1882 to review the progress in the field of education since Wood's Despatch of 1854. The question of religious instruction was an issue that exercised many witnesses who deposed before the Commission. A proposal was placed before the Commission that arrangements for religious instruction be permitted provided that a) parents may be enabled to withdraw children from it if they so wished; b) that the inspector and other departmental officer not interfere or examine such subjects; and c) that if there be sufficient numbers of dissenters, separate classes should be established for them. The majority in the Commission rejected this proposal because "religious feeling was so inflammable, and sectarianism so prevalent in India, that it

was **not safe** to depart from the earlier policy" despite the admission of the value of RE on all sides (Indian Education Commission, 1883, p. 129; emphasis added).

But two innovations from earlier policy were made. In the field of primary education, the Commission felt a real threat of retardation of the spread of education because parents loathed to send their wards to schools where religious instruction was compulsory. Such an exigency necessitated a departure from the policy of absolute abstention from interfering in a school's programme of religious instruction. Thus, a recommendation was made that: "it shall be open to parents to withdraw their children from attendance of such instruction without forfeiting any of the benefits of the institution" (Indian Education Commission, 1883, p. 512).

The second innovation was the recommendation to introduce moral education at the college level. But ever mindful of the difficulties of producing a curriculum which might be acceptable to all sides, the Commission urged for the preparation of a "moral textbook based upon the fundamental principles of natural religion" (Indian Education Commission, 1883, p. 307). This, as we shall see, was to become the model later too. Three caveats were added: that there should be no complaints about interference in religious beliefs; the candidates should not be called upon to declare religious beliefs; and no answer be objected on the grounds of it expressing any peculiarity of religious belief (Indian Education Commission, 1883, p. 308).

In a way, both of these departures could be seen as responses to two divergent demands, which played out in the Commission. The first was possibly a concession to the demands for a conscience clause by Indian witnesses, namely, Kashinath Telang, who wrote a detailed dissent note explicating the same. The missionaries and those disposed towards the expansion of missionary education stressed that the government policy of neutrality (or of not encouraging mission schools alone) had been decidedly "injurious from a moral and religious point of view" (Indian Education Commission, 1883, p. 610). The recommendation on moral training in colleges had resulted from the pressure of this lobby. Telang, though unsuccessful in his bid for something akin to Section 7 of the British Education Act of 1870, insisted that there was no way of satisfying the demand for religious instruction. The only tow models, he argued, were either the teaching of common principles under the name of Natural Religion, or instruction in the principles of all creeds, but the practical difficulties in pursuing either of these paths offered secular education as the only "remote haven of refuge for the educationists" (Indian Education Commission, 1883, p. 610). Telang's dissent suggests that the Indian national opinion – or at least a part of it – was on the side of complete severing of any religious training or teaching from secular education.

The dilemma that RE presented to policy makers was this: recognition of the value of religious instruction as a force of morality and virtue; the demands of missions to be given preferential treatment, native fears about widespread proselytisation, the governmental expediency of maintaining communal peace, alongside the aim of massification of primary education. The compromise that resulted from these opposing pulls and pushes was the expulsion of RE from government prescribed curricula, and a sort of laissez-faire to private initiatives of various hues as long as they maintained a certain standard of secular education.

Towards Independence

As the Government of India Act 1919, and then of 1935 paved the way for greater autonomy formation of provincial governments led by Indians, especially the Congress. With the introduction of diarchy which transferred the education departments to Indian ministers, a more nationalist vision of education was put forth. In 1937, Gandhi convened a committee of educationists headed by the then principal of Jamia Millia Islamia, Dr. Zakir Hussain, to prepare a future primary education scheme. Called the Wardha Scheme, it advocated a free, compulsory and universal education for all children. A progressive document, it was adopted by the Congress in its session in 1938 as a resolution on National Education, and its provincial governments began to implement it (with little success though) (Oesterheld, 2007, p. 4).

RE remained an unresolved issue in the Wardha scheme. Of all the national leaders, Gandhi's politics has been spoken of as having a spiritual basis. In 1928, writing in *Young India*, he had said:

> A curriculum of religious instruction should include a study of the tenets of faiths other than one's own. For this purpose the students should be trained to cultivate the habit of understanding and appreciating the doctrines of various great religions of the world in a spirit of reverence and broad-minded tolerance. This if properly done would help to give them a spiritual assurance and a better appreciation of their own religion. There is one rule, however, which should always be kept in mind while studying all great religions, and that is that one should study them only through the writings of known votaries of the respective religions. (Gandhi, 1928)

Nonetheless, the Wardha scheme made no provision for RE. In fact, Gandhi justified the exclusion "because we are afraid that religions, as they are taught and practised today, lead to conflict rather than unity" (in: Oesterheld, 2007, p. 7). At a later stage too, in 1947, he rebuffed the idea that RE could be a state concern, emphasising that it must remain the sole concern of religious associations. He did however underline that fundamental ethics being common to all religions, its teaching was "undoubtedly a function of the State" (Sethi, 2010, p. 10).

Meanwhile two parallel processes were at play. The first was the appointment by the government Central Advisory Board of Education (CABE) of a committee to examine the Wardha scheme in 1938, and a separate committee in 1946 devoted exclusively to study the possibility of RE. While no consensus emerged in the first committee, the second CABE committee of 1946, in its Interim Report, recommended "as in Britain, an agreed syllabus, expert teachers, the use of prime hours of instruction and the provision for a conscience clause" (Chatterjee, 2011, p. 197). Its final report, however, deemed RE to be the responsibility of the homes and the religious community to which the pupil belonged – a result, which a disappointed Sargent contemptuously called "a small mouse" (Sargent Report, 1948, pp. 12, 226). The second process focussed on what was happening in the provinces. Many of the ministers in charge of provincial educational ministries, though avowed Congressmen, were cultural

conservatives, or positively majoritarian, subscribing to a Hindi/Hindu/Hindustan model. This deemed India to be a land of Hindus, who spoke a chaste and heavily Sanskritised Hindi shorn of all Persian influences. An illustration of this hegemonic model was the *Vidya Mandir* scheme [quite literally translated as Temples of learning] introduced by the Central Provinces, which was seen widely as a crusade to efface Islamic culture and religious heritage (Oesterheld, 2007, p. 10).

Legislative Debates

The question of RE came up once again when the Constitution was being drafted (29 Aug 1947 – 26 Nov 1949). Article 28(1) of the Constitution, expressly forbids the provision of religious instruction in any educational institution wholly maintained out of state funds. At the same time, however, different articles, namely, 28(2), 29 and 30(1), allow the setting up and functioning of schools and institutions of higher education by religious minorities, and even the receipt of grant in aid from the government, as long as these do not discriminate on the basis of religion in admissions. It is interesting to trace the route through which the drafters arrived at these articles.

Article 28 was originally clause 16 of the Report of the Advisory Committee on Fundamental Rights, which was placed before the Constituent Assembly in August 1947. It read:

> No person attending any school maintained or receiving aid out of public funds shall be compelled to take part in any religious instruction that may be given in the school or to attend religious workshop held in the school or in premises attached thereto.

Clearly, in its original form, it did not envision expelling religion from schools, whether aided or government, only that no one would be compelled to participate in such instructions. There were two sorts of objections to this. The first amendment moved by Purnima Banerjee rued that there were a large number of educational institutions run on religious lines (*maktabs* and *pathshalas*, corresponding to Islamic and Hindu institutions respectively) who impart to students "fanaticism and religious bigotry", which could only be allayed a governmental control of the curriculum. A state which hoped to stay united (remember the background of Partition) – no matter how secular – required that its children must learn to appreciate the religion of another. Only a syllabus of such a type may be the bulwark against exclusivism (Constituent Assembly Debates (CAD), 5.67). She therefore proposed the addition of this paragraph as explanation, "[a]ll religious education given in educational institutions receiving Statewide will be in the nature of the elementary philosophy of comparative religions calculated to broaden the pupils' mind rather than such as will foster sectarian exclusiveness" (CAD, 5.46.66). Renuka Ray, on the other hand, sought to bring unequivocal exclusion of RE with her amendment, "[n]o denominational religious instruction shall be provided in schools maintained by the State. No person attending any school or educational institution recognised or aided by the State shall be compelled to attend any such

religious instruction" (CAD, 5.46.70). Ray's proposal received a greater reception and approval from the members whilst Purnima Banerjee's proposal was deemed controversial.

What would be the contours of such a comparative religion – questions raised by members Mahboob Ali Baig Sahib Bahadur – and what would it mean for rights being promised to the minorities to run their educational institutions, and further, what would be the implications of the proposed "unification of all religions" for the constitutional rights of minorities were all questions that were raised (CAD, 5.46.77-80). Another member, K. M. Munshi, also warned that disputes over the precise content and nature of elementary philosophy of comparative religions would lead to litigation, with the courts expected to pronounce whether the syllabus was of comparative kind, or belonged to one specific religion; and further, if such a syllabus would broaden or narrow the outlook of students. Therefore, Munshi cautioned that the adoption of comparative religions as a dictum could never become justiciable, but would only lead to considerable confusion and legal *imbroglio* (CAD, 5.46.83,86-87).

The second amendment, though more popular, was referred to a subcommittee which would report to the drafting committee. When the article suitably amended finally appeared for discussion in the Constituent Assembly, there were several amendments of different shades. On the one hand were those like Shiban Lal Saksena who resented the exclusion of religion on account of protection afforded to minorities. While minorities should not be compelled to have religious instruction against their wishes, the District education boards should not be barred from teaching the children of the majority community Gita and Ramayana, he felt. On the other hand were members like K. T. Shah who thought the provisions against teaching of religion to be too loosely worded and sought them to be made more stringent. B. R. Ambedkar's response to these was threefold: First that the monies generated from general taxation could not be used to provide any particular RE; the second factor militating against the provision of RE was the preponderance of religions and sects in India, and finally, he reminded the house that "unfortunately the religions which prevail in this country are not merely non-social; so far as their mutual relations are concerned, they are anti-social". Thus, he concluded that in "laying down in article 22(1) that in State institutions there shall be no religious instruction, we have in my judgment travelled the path of complete safety" (CAD, 7.68.159-163). [I am not going here into the discussions about aided schools run by religious communities covered under 28(2) now]. In the course of the discussion, Ambedkar distinguished between religious instruction and study of religions, and stressed that it was only the former, which was prohibited.

Nonetheless, the issue of RE refused to disappear. Immediately after the CAD took place, a committee to look into university education was appointed. Headed by S. Radhakrishnan, Spalding Professor of Eastern Religions and Ethics at the University of Oxford, it devoted considerable time on discussing RE. The Radhakrishnan Commission set out the agenda of RE in the following poetic terms:

> We teach religious dogmas not to provoke doubts of questions but to give comfort to the human spirit. To introduce these studies in a University is to make a sharp

> break with the critical methods of inquiry followed in other disciplines of the curriculum. To prescribe dogmatic religions in a community of many different faiths is to revive the religious controversies of the past. To turn the students over to theologians of different denominations for instruction in the conflicting systems of salvation is to undermine that fellowship of learning which defines a college or a university. (p. 256)

And yet, to "exclude spiritual training" would be being "untrue to our whole historical development" and to negate "the beauty and mystery of the universe, the meaning of life and death, the aspirations of the inner soul, that sad feeling of the wistful minded that beyond the world of positive knowledge there is a realm of forces unseen which we can feel but never know completely (Radhakrishnan Commission, 1963, pp. 260–261). It thus recommended that:

> (1) all educational institutions start work with a few minutes for silent meditation;
> (2) in the first year of the Degree course lives of the great religious leaders like Gautama the Buddha, Confucius, Zoroaster, Socrates, Jesus, Somkara, Ramanuja, Madhava, Mohammad, Kabir, Nanak, Gandhi, be taught;
> (3) in the second year some selections of a universalist, character from the Scriptures of the world be studied;
> (4) in the third year, the central problems of the philosophy of religion be considered. (Radhakrishnan Commission, 1963, p. 265)

The issue of religious instruction in schools was first dealt with in detail in the *Report of the Committee on Religious and Moral Instruction* (also known as the Sri Prakasa Committee) submitted to the Ministry of Education as early as in 1960. It advocated an "objective, comparative and sympathetic study of all the important religions of India" (extracted in Biswas and Agrawal, 1986, p. 612). The imperative of the Sri Prakasa Committee in making such a recommendation – as indeed of the other Committees and their recommendations such as the Kothari Commission in 1966 – was the task of "nation-building" and the forging of a "national consciousness". The task of RE could not be left to the home and community alone, the Sri Prakasa Committee argued, as this would result in limited understanding of one's own faith, ignorance of other faiths and blind prejudice towards others. *Report of the Kothari Commission* (1966), mulling over the nature of education that a secular state in a multi-religious democracy may impart, distinguished between "religious education" and "education about religions". It lamented 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 idea of their own religion and with no chance of learning about others". It thus recommended that a "period or two a week should be allotted to education in moral and spiritual values in an organized attempt to develop the character of the pupils and inculcate in them a respect for religions other than their own". (cited in Ayyar, 2017, pp. 299–300)

None of these recommendations were followed. The *81st Report on Value Based Education* (also called the SB Chavan Committee) submitted its report to the Parliament in 1999. "Values" was the locus of the SB Chavan Committee report. Value education was of supremely civic importance, as it would foster national integration and make students aware that the basic concept behind every religion is common. It would repel the overwhelming influence of western culture. But what precisely would these values be: they were indigenous and national values but seen deriving from "ultimate reality supreme power or self-consciousness to which man orients himself" (The 81st Report on Value Based Education, 1999). Ancient *gurukuls* (traditional Hindu educational institutions) were invoked as models of a value based educational system.

The Idea of Religion

Perhaps because the multiplicity of religions and creeds in the country, and the pragmatic need to keep peace, most policymakers gravitated towards the idea of a universal or natural religion. If committees instituted by colonial government identified ethics and morals derived from the common core of religions as the subject worthy of study (though never enforced), we see Purnima Banerjee's proposal not very different. The Radhakrishnan Commission spoke of an "Indian" outlook on religions, which in their view was not inconsistent with Constitutional principles. It held that religion is neither creed, nor emotion nor a ceremony, but a realisation which can be apprehended not by beliefs but "by their fruits". And if religion was a matter of realisation, then its vehicles were to be training, discipline and *sadhna* (spiritual practices).

This received its most cogent form in a judicial pronouncement in 2002. In 2000, the right-wing BJP (Bharatiya Janata Party or Indian Peoples' Party) government had proposed a New Curriculum Framework (NCF) which sought to give prominent place to RE. Again, the terminology was not new – students were to be made aware that the essence of all religions was common. It also proposed a new "spiritual quotient" and placed a premium on the learning of Sanskrit. A group of civil society activists approached the Supreme Court expressing the apprehension that the NCF would pave the way for "saffronisation of education" (a term commonly used by secular and left academics and activists to denote exclusivist communalisation), and that it fundamentally militated against the settled principle inhering in Article 28 (Shah, 2002). The Supreme Court dismissed the petition holding that NCF did not violate the principle of secularism (Shah, 2002; all citations below from it).

What interests me most here is also the definition of religion that emerges from this judgment. Justice Shah approvingly quoted a judgment ([1960] 9 SCC 548), to demonstrate a distinction between religion and *dharma*, "143. Our dharma is said to be 'Sanatana' i.e. one which has eternal values; one which is neither time-bound nor space-bound. It is because of this that Rig Veda has referred to the existence 'Sanatan Dharmani'. 'It is crystal clear', he concluded, 'that the word' 'religion' has different shades and colours. Important shade is dharma (duty). That is to say, duty towards the society and the soul". Here again we find the belief that there is an Indian sense of religion, which is compatible with secularism.

His brother judge, J. Dharmadhikari, insists on distinguishing religious instruction from RE. It is the former, which is prohibited in a secular state – the latter that should introduce pupils to religious philosophies without indoctrinating them, or curbing their independent thinking is to be encouraged. It is an experiment which needs caution and vigil. Though he leaves it to the educationists to frame such a curriculum, its contours are not entirely absent in his judgment. RE would be the "teaching of philosophies of religions with more emphasis on study of *essential* moral and spiritual thoughts contained in various religions" and would have no place for the "teaching of rituals, observances, customs and traditions and other *non-essential* observances or modes of worship" (emphasis added). The identification of morality, philosophy and nebulous spirituality as essential cores of religion and observances as non-essential or peripheral; or the primacy of doctrine over practice, has been a dominant mode of judicial thinking on religion, and we see it being repeated here.

The imprint of Phenomenology of Religions in his fervent hope that RE be premised on Religious Pluralism is obvious. In this conception of religious pluralism, world religions are viewed as embodying "different perceptions and conceptions of and correspondingly different responses to, the Real or Ultimate". Nonetheless as for J. Shah, for him too, the English word "religion" is inadequate in fully conveying "the Indian concept of religion", which is *dharma*. He writes: "Hindus believe in Vedas. The word 'Dharma' has a very wide meaning." Note how quickly the Indian concept of religion elides into a Hindu, Vedic one, and how *sanatan dharma* comes to stand in for natural religion: "Dharma or righteousness is elemental and fundamental in all nations, periods and times. For example truth, love, compassion are human virtues. This is what Hindu call Sanatan Dharma meaning religion which is immutable, constant, living permanent and ever in existence".

Conclusion

Thus, the model of RE in post Independent India remained this: the official banishment of RE from the curriculum; lack of any discussion among educationists on what might constitute a proper RE curriculum, and deriving from it a moral frame tending towards Natural Religion; and finally, despite the exclusion of RE, the cementing and naturalisation of a majoritarian idea of religion, culture and Indian-ness.

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