Educating India
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POLICY

Educating India

The BJP proposal to reform the nation's education system sparks a national debate over the place of religion in schools

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The Education Minister's conference in New Delhi began with the singing by a group of blind school children of "Sarasvati Vandana," a traditional song in praise of Sarasvati, Goddess of Learning. As soon as the song began, a dozen ministers staged a noisy walkout of the October 22 meeting, shouting protest slogans that drowned the melody of the children's voices. India's Prime Minister, Atal Behari Vajpayee, sat in stony silence, unable to give his opening speech.

At issue was a set of proposals by Human Resources Development Minister Murali Manohar Joshi to "Indianize, nationalize and spiritualize education from primary to the highest education." Sanskrit, for example, would be compulsory from class three to ten. Schools would teach more about India's early developments in science, astronomy, mathematics, etc., and introduce moral and spiritual education at all stages in all schools. It would also likely recommend the singing of "Sarasvati Vandana," in all schools (invoking the

Goddess of Learning) and "Vande Mataram" (also to the Goddess, and a famous song of India's freedom movement). The opposing ministers believed the unnamed "group of experts" cited in Joshi's recommendations were none other than nationalist Hindu supporters of the BJP, especially the Sangh Parivar organization of religious leaders and the RSS. The protesting ministers believed the proposals would destroy India's secular status. Only after Joshi withdrew the proposals did the ministers return and Vajpayee proceed with his speech.

The controversy has since continued in various public forums. Sonia Gandhi, widow of former prime minister Rajiv Gandhi and head of the opposition Congress Party, complained to Prime Minister Vajpayee that the word secularism was not even considered in the education proposal, and asked if education hitherto was "un-Indian"? The Muslim Personal Board issued a fatwa, a religious decree, against singing Vande Mataram.

Others stood with Joshi and his efforts to Indianize his nation's schooling. Sri Vishvesha Theertha Swamiji of Pejawar monastery in Kerala, for example, said, "Sarasvati Vandana has been accepted for many decades, even with the previous governments. To condemn it now clearly shows the handiwork of political opportunists."

M.Venkaiah Naidu, BJP National General secretary, agreed, "Sarasvati Vandana and Vande Mataram are not the BJP's agenda. They are the national agenda. It was sung all the time. Sarasvati Vandana was rendered on Dec 3, 1997, at the same Vigyan Bhavan, where the President and Prime Minister were

present--it was then the United Front Government. Nobody protested at that time. In 1948, in Nehru's government, Moulana Azad, as the first education minister, did not object to Sarasvati Vandana. We all begin our education with Sarasvati Vandana, the Goddess of Learning. There is no reason for communalizing it."

Nafisa Hussain, Secretary of the All-India Women's wing, BJP, and a Muslim herself, stated, "It is our national song. If there was any song that provoked the feelings of nationalism in the people, it was Vande Mataram. Sarasvati Vandana is a symbol of learning. If somebody does not want to sing it, let them not. But don't oppose it."

Prof. S. K. Ramachandra Rao, a highly regarded Vedic scholar and Orientalist, pointed out that "secularism should mean an equal honor to all religions. It should not focus attention on pitting one group against the other."

The BJP's Venkaiah Naidu defended the idea of Indianizing education. "We are trying to bring in certain basic changes so as to impart education that is useful for the citizens of our country. We want our national heroes, their history and memories, to be remembered. We want the true picture to be explained to the younger generation."

BJP governments in Uttar Pradesh, Madhya Pradesh and Rajasthan previously attempted to change the textbooks to incorporate more "Hinduistic" lessons. In U.P., students had to say "Vande Mataram" instead of "Yes, sir" when their names

were called. The recitation of "Sarasvati Vandana" was made compulsory. In 1991, Vedic mathematics was introduced in UP as a new subject, teaching the early Indian discoveries. Opposition parties accused the BJP of "saffronizing" education, that is, making it overtly Hindu oriented.

Nafisa Hussain defended the moves. "It is essential to bring back the traditional values in education. It cannot be classified as Hindu or Muslim. They are the values of the land. Teaching good things of life need not take a communal color." Indonesia, others pointed out, is a predominantly Muslim nation, but Indonesians have no hesitations in enacting stories from the Ramayana or Mahabharata. They give Sanskrit names to their children, as Sanskrit is part of their ancient heritage. The name of the first president of Indonesia was Soekarno--Sukarna in Sanskrit. His daughter's name was Meghavati--and they were Muslims by religion.

Professor Rao said, "It is extremely important to Indianize education. If we don't do it now, if we don't give Sanskrit its place of importance, the mass of Indians will know nothing of their culture. It is necessary at all levels of education that Indian poetry, literature, epics and values be incorporated. Our children must be fed on these, because their genes will appreciate it, their nature is akin to that."

This debate over education in India is complex. At least three different aspects of modern Indian life impact it: the colonial experience, specifically the British education system; the special rights granted minority religions in India with regard to education; and the puzzling propensity of Hindus in India to

send their children to Christian schools.

Today's system of education in India is patterned after the British system of the 19th century. Lord Macaulay developed it to create an educated class of Indians with a wholly European training and outlook who would serve as a buffer between the British rulers and the masses of India. He made his opinion of prior Indian accomplishments clear when he wrote, "There are no books [in India] on any subject which deserve to be compared to our own: medical doctrines which would disgrace an English farrier [a shoer of horses], astronomy which would move laughter in girls at an English Boarding school, a literature admitted to be of small intrinsic value. False history, false astronomy, false medicine, in company with a false religion."

The result today of his anti-India education system, widely adopted then and existent now, is that Indian youth can reel out with ease names of pop stars, fashion gurus, Hollywood actors and Western authors. A number of students, ranging from high school to college whom I questioned admitted that they know nothing or very little about our past heritage and achievements.

They countered nonchalantly, "What does it matter? Why should we know about the past? After all, are we not talking about the world shrinking into a global village?" Ridiculing our tradition, condemning it, is the fashion among them.

Ignorant of their past, students of botany learn that the

Swedish botanist Carolus Linnaeus was the first to classify plants and animals in logical groups. They never learn that 6,000 years ago the Rig Veda proposed classifications of plant life based on morphological characteristics, nor about the further plant work of Sage Parashara, Shanti Parva or Varahamira--long before Linnaeus.

"When we study Marketing Management, Philip Kotler in America is the guru. But the Tamil Tirukural scripture speaks of all that today's management speaks of, and yet we have not heard of it," laments Balachander, a senior marketing manager.

Students learn that Copernicus proposed the sun as the center of the solar system, but not that Aryabhata of India posited the same concept a thousand years earlier. Geometry, algebra, algorithms, plastic surgery, cataract treatment, metallurgy, ship-building and architecture--the list goes on and on. Indians made landmark contributions to humanity in fields that remain unknown to Indian students.

I never studied these either in school or college. Honestly, most of us became familiar with the name Aryabhata only after the satellite Aryabhata was launched.

Mahima, 15, told me, "When we hear about the achievements of our ancestors or the relevance of the Vedas, I do feel that we should know. But where do we get the exposure from? Schools? Home? Nobody has tried to tell us about these things. If I want to know, I don't know where to begin."

Not only science itself, but the attitude of Hindu religion toward science can be learned as children study the ancients. Professor Suryanath Kamath, an eminent historian, points out, "When Aryabhata convinced scholars that the Earth rotates on its axis and revolves around the sun, people did not condemn him. But 1,100 years later, when Galileo concluded the same thing, the Catholic Church ordered him to deny all that he said. The history of our science must be taught. It instills confidence in our youngsters that our own people have done a lot of work. It's not only the Europeans."

Some teachers I spoke to said that even in language subjects, ancient literature like that of Tulsi, Kumaravyasa or Kambham has been set aside in the name of modernist poetry and literature. "This modernist literature has no set values. Its aimless search for values cannot be prescribed for school children in whose mind new values need to be inculcated. Attending to the development of the mind of the child is forgotten," says Dr. Kamath.

The 19th century Macaulayan system of education still rules the roost in this country. The Europeans gave the curriculum. After Independence, the architects of the country's education policy were the offsprings of Macaulay's education, under the influence of European thought. No effort was made to change the textbooks. After freedom, thought was given to a qualitative change to education--but it never happened. The secular agenda kept at bay anything to do with religion. Added to this was the influence of the Marxists, who were anti-religious. Indian ethos took a backseat. Any suggestion to change the curriculum to suit the Indian milieu was--and still is--considered unwanted religious revivalism. Macaulay

education did considerable harm to the nation's cultural identity, and it has taken us a hundred years to realize that. Character building aspects of education are absent, and our youth are ready prey to the West.

Articles 29 and 30 of India's constitution give minorities the freedom to run their educational and religious institutions without government interference, but with government funds. The Bible can be taught in Christian schools, and the Koran can be taught in Muslim madrasas, but Hindus cannot be taught the Ramayana! This is not at all the situation in the truly secular United States, where no religious school receives government funds, and no religion is taught in the public, government-funded schools.

But the real irony of the situation regarding minority schools is the Hindus' avid desire to send their children to Christian schools--more popularly called "convent schools." It began with the British Raj, the fascination for everything English--the uniform, the style, the accent, the discipline, etc. The cream of society sent their children to these schools (but not to Muslim ones). After the British left the country, the craze for sending children to convent schools increased. There was a perception that children graduating out of these schools would join the elitist crowd. It is an observed trend that Hindu students who attend these schools become less knowledgeable of their religions and and less committed to it.

Convent schools mushroomed, with every road-corner school giving a suffix of "convent" to their name. This craze of Anglicized English education spread to the villages, too, where

the rural folk dreamed of listening to their children speak English. A few prominent Christian school officials I spoke to denied that religion is a part of their training. "We have our own prayers--like different schools are at liberty to choose their own prayer. But we don't compel our students to sing from the Bible or attend the church."

But I have personally witnessed convent schools making it mandatory for their students to attend church, involve themselves in activities related to Christmas, and contribute money towards Mother's Day. Some years ago students studying in these schools were not permitted to wear bindis and flowers. No one protested such blatant intrusion on personal rights. Parents avoided taking up this issue with the school management, fearing victimization of their children.

"There has been a cultural division of the country into upper castes and others," explains Professor Rao, "and it has so happened that the upper castes have been identified with Indian culture. The lower castes clamor to get what is best in the world--and that is English and English education. So the moment they hear of Indianizing education, they suspect an upper caste plot to keep them down--hence with the collusion of the leftist parties, try to stem the tide of Hinduization."

But there are public schools that did teach Hindu values to their Hindu students. As a child, I remember changing over to a very moderate school, Sri Sarasvati Vidya Mandir in Bangalore, after studying in a convent school for three years. Our prayers included shlokas from Vedas and songs to Sarasvati. My friends and classmates spoke the regional

language rather than accented English. It was a big cultural gap, but I found myself comfortable in this environment. We looked forward to the Friday evening Sarasvati puja, when we all sang bhajanas and devotional songs as one of the teachers performed the puja. With great enthusiasm we celebrated the annual Ganesha puja at school every year.

A large section of people in the field of education and those out of it are making a hue and cry that India will be a backward country if it subscribes to the traditional Indian values. This was the argument, made with sincerity after Independence, that keeping tradition would prevent modernization. There continue to be secular-conscious people who feel it is irrelevant to speak of Indianizing education. They express fears of unrest and more divisions in society and hence prefer not to have anything to do with Hindu culture. But it is also becoming clear that "modernization" does not bring contented lives, and Indians witness affluent Westerners turning toward Indian tradition to find meaning in their own lives.

There are people, such as myself who question, "What is wrong in teaching the Vedas and Upanishads in schools, as it relates to the life of Indians? Indian legends, especially folk art, abound in stories of Rama and Krishna. If controversies are created solely to stir emotions, then objections beyond logic overwhelm any sane discussion on where to draw a line between what is Hinduistic and what is not. Should we then discount philosophers like Will Durant, Thoreau and Emerson, who were influenced by the Indian philosophy?"

Confucius said, "If you plan for a year, plant a seed. If for ten

years, plant a tree. If for one hundred years, teach the people." Thus there is no higher priority than our children's education.

Controversial Praise Of The Goddess

Vande Mataram

Written by Bankim Chandra and set to music by Rabindranath Tagore, it is India's official song, given in Sanskrit and Sri Aurobindo's English translation.

Come, Mother of India! I bow to thee, Mother, richly-watered, richly-fruited, cool with the winds of the south, dark with the crops of the harvests, the Mother! Her nights rejoicing in the glory of the moonlight, Her lands clothed beautifully with Her trees in flowering bloom, sweet of laughter, sweet of speech, the Mother, giver of boons, giver of bliss.

Sarasvati Vandana

The song that caused the uproar at the education conference is sung in most Indian schools today.

O Divine Virtuous Goddess Sarasvati. We bow to your feet. O Goddess of Speech, the all-pervading with cosmic vibrations, we surrender at your Divine feet.

O Goddess, shelter to the seeker, blessed of the Three Worlds, worshiped by divine seers. Your melody is with the nine aesthetic senses and divine poetry, adorned by the varied

tastes of learning.

O the one seated on the throne of swan, O the one endowed by white complexion pure as snow and moon, the one seated on the white lotus, remove from us lethargy and expand our horizon of vision.

O Goddess, you are the embodiment of artistic skills and string of knowledge. O the one holding the divine book of learning and the vina, we submit ourselves in entirety at your lotus feet. O Goddess, remove from our minds the poison of hatred.