

SECULAR SCHOOL EDUCATION: AN EXPLORATORY STUDY**Sandeep Kumar*****ABSTRACT**

The present paper explores and examines the situation of school education with reference to secularist perspective. The study is conducted in Delhi schools which are funded under MHRD scheme to strengthen the school education research programme. The basic objective of the work is to re-examine policies, school practices and teachers' perspective about secularism and secular school education. To achieve the objective various existing theoretical perspectives were analyzed critically, observation of various practices is done in school to unfold the secular and non-secular practices, and discussions have been done with school teachers to explore their views about secular school education and its need. Analysis provides a comprehensive perspective about the current situation of schools in Delhi with reference to secular perspective. Few suggestion based on analysis provide strength to the paper and left with many untied threads to explore further in this field.

Introduction

To achieve this broad objective, different theoretical explanations were expected to be analyzed critically. Not only this, observations of school practices to understand how school perceives secularism were undertaken. Another objective was to understand teachers' perspective about secularism with reference to school practice, pedagogy and so on. Finally possibilities and scope for improvement was also explored through this work objective

Constitutionally, India is a secular nation and to some extent society has accepted it; at least, at the theoretical level. At the same time, since the time of independence, the understanding of secularism in India is ambiguous. It kept changing its stand, which raises a question about the secular nature of secularism in India. It is also important to acknowledge that the very idea of secularism plays a significant role in our life in political, social and economic spheres. Acknowledging the importance of religion in life, all education policies have given consideration to the need for secular school education system. But the emerging issues associated with secularism since 1976 have created tension in Indian polity and so also in education. Thus, the concerns how education should perceive secularism has become crucial for inquiry. More specifically, many concerns associated to secularist perspective in education exist. These include concerns of closing an institution (declaring a holidays) on any religious occasion, although employees are paid for the day. This means we are accepting religious intervention in the school system, rationalization of morning prayers and other practices, text content-what should be taught and what has been incorporated in content by concerned authorities, Pedagogical concerns in a multi-cultural school and what kind of agency is used by the teacher with reference to teaching? To what extents are education policies intervening in school education? Education plays a significant role in everybody's life. Education is not merely making millions literate, it also involves teaching young people to cope with a changing society, which today means being more aware of the world than ever before, and creating a worthwhile life for themselves. And this purpose of education

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requires a secular and democratic school education. Therefore, the focus of the present work is to critically study, explore and evaluate the school practices from a secularist perspective.

Focus of the work

This paper is an outcome of the project funded under MHRD scheme to strengthen the school education research programme to explore the situation of schools with reference to its secular nature specifically in Delhi. The larger objective of the project is to explore the school education with reference to secular perspective. The idea was to understand and explore critically the existing theoretical and field based situation with regard to secular school education. To achieve this broad objective, different theoretical explanations were expected to be analyzed critically. Not only this, observations of school practices to understand how school perceives secularism were undertaken. Another objective was to understand teachers' perspective about secularism with reference to school practice, pedagogy and so on. Finally possibilities and scope for improvement was also explored through this work objective

Methodology of the Work

A qualitative research has undertaken, where interviews and observations has been used as methods of data collection. With the help of these methods, the work explores the views of school teachers and different practices of school with reference to secularist perspective. Observation was used to collect data regarding overview and general ethos of the school, morning assembly and different celebrations in school, whereas, interview was used to explore teachers understanding about secularism and secular school education which includes their perspective about secularism, education and Secularism, dealing with religious issues in class, pedagogy and secularism, perspective on the events take place in school, perspective about school assembly, space for secular practices in school and so on.

Total three schools were selected after a piolet phase. In piolet phase many school were visited and finally three were taken for final study. Total 10 teachers (TGT, Social Science) were taken in which 5 were male and 5 were female.

Discussion

It is very important to understand that education is an essential need of any society. Similarly, it is also important to know what is being given through education. As we know language monitor our thinking process, similarly, what we get in education also influence our way of thinking, perception and understanding towards issues and concerns.

It is important that school and education must provide equal and need based opportunities to all. It is also important to mention that this egalitarianism must be in practice and not only on papers. Religion is one such factor which becomes cause of discrimination. This discrimination legitimately exists in minority school (whether they called it their right) and silently but explicitly in states schools.

There are many reasons why school should not be religiously biased, but two of them are very significant to discuss here. Before going to talk about these reasons, we should be very clear that we are not talking about atheist school. Because secular school does not mean who teaches that God does not exists. Present work does not get into the debate that God exists or does not; rather it will try to develop rationality about the social issues. School should provide spaces to children to understand how and what kinds of believe people have about God and then leave it up to them to decide.

Now, let's understand the two basic reasons why a school should be secular. The very *first reason* is that, for many reasons **secular schools are good for society**. In a secular school student take education together without any kind of religious biases and discrimination. Secular school will run on the idea of equity not on divide. Together they learn common subject and get space to develop scientific temper with the help of critical thinking. *The second important reason* is **secular school respects human rights**. Secular school respect the rights of learners with respective to their education because the idea of egalitarian perspective will be prevailed. Such school will not indoctrinate the learners understanding and thought. Right and human right would be flourished and exercised in school. Above mentioned two points create the case for secular education which argued for better society and respect for human beings

There are many issues come out in the analysis which has been presented earlier. The *over view of the schools* convey a very clear idea about the perspective schools carry. Except the physical space available, there are many other aspects which need to be highlighted here. There were different kinds of religious picture of Gods placed at different spaces. It was very visible in all the schools that the pictures of Nehru family were dominated. One can easily see the pictures of Jwaharlal Nehru, Indiria Gandhi, Rajiv Gandhi and so on. Very few pictures (mother land, mother Teresa, national leader) were there which were not biased from any political and religious group. It is interesting to know that principal's room was with lots of such pictures which represent a particular religious group. Classrooms are also not exceptional in this regard. But the difference is one can see picture of all the religion (Hindu, Muslim, Sikh etc.). The staffroom, in one of the schools were having many paintings hanging over the wall. Many of them were based on different festivals such as Diwali, Dashera etc. Boards displayed in the corridors were fully decorated but not with educational themes rather religious themes. One bulletin board was found across all the schools, which was dealing with social issue i.e. 'gender.' Gate of one of the school was having abig picture of 'Saraswati' and 'Tamsa ma jyotigarmaya' was written on it in curve. Not only this, the achievement board of school was also with the picture of 'Saraswati.' It can be easily said that from gate to corridors to classrooms to principal's room all were covered by picture of the Gods and political leader of one particular party, which is a very sad situation, because we claim ourselves secular.

Assembly contributes to what has been said above. As has been mentioned there were different timing of assembly in different schools. Physical education teachers were responsible for conducting assembly but other teachers help physical education teacher by rotation. There were few important and interesting common features of assemblies across the schools such as discipline, standing in queues, few selected prayers, and commands and so on. It is important to mention that there were no separate lines for girls and boys rather they have to queue themselves in a single raw (class-wise), though, it was understood that girls will stand ahead and boys behind. The prayers were also subject to question and review. Most of the prayers were towards one religion. Though, it should also be mentioned that there were prayers which were not biased but the few like 'Saraswati ma sharde', etc. were subject to worry in a secular school. Prayers were sung by students only but in one school tape-recorder was used for prayer. This school has two fixed prayers. There was variation in prayers. In two of the schools, it was also seen that the responsibility of conducting assembly was given class wise. Beating drum, photo of 'Saraswati' is the essential feature of school assembly. The thought of the day and reading newspaper was also essential part of assembly, but what is being presented as morning thought is significantly important. Few of the morning thought were like 'Ramrajye', 'Patriotism', ' Satayesaropari' and so on.

Different events were being observed and their detailed analysis has been done. It was observed that festivals related to Hindu religion were celebrated. Diwali, Dashera, Janamashtmi were explicitly or silently celebrated. But festivals related to other religion were not celebrated. Though, there is government holiday on specified festivals of different religion but school does pay more attention to selected festivals of one particular religion, such as, before 10-15 days of Diwali, school run a campaign for cleaning, but such campaign is not visible or in place for other festivals. There was clear comfortability about such celebration. It is also very important to mention that various schools have celebrated all festivals differently.

National events were also celebrated like Gandhi Jayanti, 15th August etc. Though, these national festivals are also colored with religious taste when Sarasvati vandnaetc were presented by learners. The way events and students were selected for the celebration was questionable. Those who were already good in performance were selected and others were just left to be audience. Not only this, events were also decided by only few teachers, where, learners had no voice. The distribution of activity are also gendered, such as, songs were given to girls and skit to boys. Therefore, it can be said that celebrated events in school can be questioned and critiqued with reference to their secular perspective.

What was observed in school in general and particularly in assembly has been substantiated by **teachers' interviews**, though the responses were varied but some common themes has been presented. Teachers' views clearly showed that they have fine theoretical understanding about secularism but it cannot be said sufficient because their perspective is limited to what constitution says. What beyond that, has not been thought by them exclusively and extensively? The relationship between education and secularism has been discussed by teacher, where, few said education provides better understanding about secularism, whereas, other said, it does not. Teachers had shared their difficulties in dealing with religious issues in class. They like to ignore them or dismiss the issue or discuss outside the class with individual students. Most of the teachers accepted that they are not equipped with the knowledge and pedagogy to deal with such issues in class. Some of them also mentioned that they had to face tough time for resolving such issues. There was a contrast of two types in responses given by teachers with reference to relationship between pedagogy and secularism. First, they said they dismiss issues in class but here they said they are secular in terms of pedagogy. Second, they said they are secular as far as teaching is concern, but, simultaneously could not reply much when asked to describe how they are secular. Therefore, their understanding of using secular perspective in teaching is limited to their perspective about secularism.

Along with teaching, their views are not synchronized about activities taking place in school. Few of them said the kind of activities happens in school are absolutely fine, whereas, others said, they are biased toward one particular caste, class, gender and religion. The second few stated examples of celebrating festivals, prayers in assembly and overt outlook of the school. Teachers' interpersonal relations were found well in routine work but not in terms of religious perspective. Most of them said that they do not share their religious faith, beliefs and activities among colleagues. A simple wish on a particular day was found enough for the teachers. Here, some of them mentioned we are secular, than why should we discuss such activities in school. Some of the teachers pointed out the unhealthy process of assembly, where they highlighted few prayers those are biased. Along with this, they said why do we worship few Gods in school and in assembly? Teachers said school organized many such events which cannot be called secular. For this they pointed out different kinds of celebrations in school.

Here, it is important to raise few questions to school system. Those are discussed below:

Teaching all learners:

What and how a school provides opportunities to learner to learn is very basic question can be asked to our schools. Does our school provide that space? Or we can say does school teach all students or not?

Respecting learners 'differences:

We are living in a multi-cultural society with various diversities. One can see diversities in terms of their class, caste, gender, religion, and region and so on. In such a situation do our teachers respect these differences or no? These differences may also be in terms of their special needs.

Rejecting prejudices:

We all are governed by many prejudices which are constituted on the basis of our thinking, perception and socialization and experiences. How does a teacher control his/her prejudices and biases and deal with the class in an egalitarian perspective? They do it or not? What could be the harm if they are not dealing with them effectively?

Favoring social justice:

What is the basic ideology and philosophy of school? Does it work on the principle of only personal development or work more toward social justice? What kinds of opportunities are provided to learner to develop as a social member of the society, where, rights and responsibilities move together? How does teacher provide and favour social justice is another important question to be asked?

Choosing secular material:

Except text books, what kinds of material are used by teachers in the class, is very important? How teacher select that material and how it is transacted to the learners? This selection of material greatly influence learner understanding about social concerns such as secularism.

Culturally sensitive teaching:

It is a fact that one can see the representation of entire Indian culture in one school. But how this representation is dealt in school is a very significant question. Does all cultures are given equal representation and respect or one is given more preference over others? How does teachers deals with these concerns in class? What kinds of question teachers ask? What kinds of examples teachers used?

Tolerance:

In a society which is full of diversity should provide opportunities to develop benevolence and tolerance in learner, where, they all learn to listen and accept each other's along with their ideas. Does our school provide such spaces and opportunities?

Concluding

Present work reaches to the three main arguments. *First*, the understanding of secularism is not similar in teachers, school and other educational personals. How the very idea of secularism will be perceived, depends on the agency which implement it or where it is to be implemented, such as government schools, private school, minority schools and so on. The work presents a schema of useful perspective about secular school education for better national and global citizens, coexistence, tolerance, and transformative actions which will surely facilitate to develop a secular school. Present work also highlights

the issues concerned with the very idea of developing a framework of secular school system. Further, it highlighted the hinders in developing and creating secular state and educational institution, which lead us towards an egalitarian society, which will be based on social inclusion and will be able to avoid uneven development of the nation.

Second, the work argues that strategy or the way we implement is as important as content or policy in itself. The difference between these two will increase the possibility of not implementation of the idea or policy. For this, it is necessary that a kind of empathetic environment need to be created of both academicians and bureaucrats, so that, a balance approach can be adapted to create a secular education system nationwide. But school teachers and principals have to play a major role in this regard. Their active participation will surely control the unexpected non secular happenings in the school and classrooms.

Third, it is important to understand that individuals influence the secularist implication as per their social location. Individuals actually do action in the field. Therefore, it is very important to understand how an individual perceives secularism and where it is to be implemented. It also implies that the person going to implement secular understanding have some fear from the social context he/she belongs to.

Emerged Characteristics of Secular Education

There are various characteristics emerged during analysis and review of literature about secular education. Identified characteristics are discussed below:

- *Moral outlook*: education must carry a moral outlook which is secular and carry no biases based on any particular religion. There must be some general outline for moral principles and perspective, which will be able to convey the spirit of secular moral understanding.
- *Development of wider vision*: secular does not restricted to the term religion only rather it has more extensive meaning associated with it. It is also associated with the neutral process of development where no discrimination exists.
- *Pluralistic outlook*: Following pluralistic outlook and approach is also associated with the notion of secular education. Pluralistic approach here means to provide spaces to all existing approaches to understand any concept or phenomenon. It will provide a comprehensive outlook to education.
- *Democratic values*: Using democratic values will make education secular because secularism is also one of the important values of democracy. It is significantly important to respect the democratic values not only in curriculum but also in teaching-learning process and evaluation.
- *Cultural development*: Education should provide space for cultural development. It will happen when all the cultures will be appreciated and given equal opportunities for development. It is the responsibility of education to provide equal spaces to all the cultures.
- *Synthesis of spiritual and material*: Knowing the importance of spiritual values, it is also important to think and work towards materialistic values. The synthesis of both will develop a better outline of the education.
- *Humanitarianism*: Secular perspective is subsumed the humanitarianism. Person should be human and humanistic with reference to their thinking and action. Education should impart this perspective in learner so that humanistic society can be developed.

- *Secular aims:* Aims of education should be secular where no religion should be given more importance over others. Doing this defeat the very purpose of education and get defeated in developing a secular human being and therefore, secular society.
- *Multiple curriculum:* It seems to be little tough but very important to have multiple curriculum where learners may have choice to choose the curriculum they like to study. This will allow celebrating diversity in a pluralistic society like India.

The present Indian educational system should create a social climate in the country, in which secular values are sought to be promoted effectively and enthusiastically. It should also promote secular attitudes and values through its broad based aims, curriculum, enlightened teachers and appropriate activities, progressivism, rationality, freedom from bigotry and equal respect for all religion.

Suggestions

Significant Points emerged regarding secular perspective

Some of the specific points which emerged regarding secular perspective from literature review, school observations and interaction with teachers can be understood as below:

- There should not be any established state religion.
- There should be one law for all and its application should not be governed on the basis of religion.
- Individuals should neither be disadvantaged nor discriminated because of their religion or belief, or perspective.
- Freedom of expression cannot be restricted because of religious practices
- The state, cannot expresses religious beliefs or preferences.
- The state cannot be included in, fund or promote religious activities or practices.
- No religion or person can be given any privilege over other religion or person.
- The state should not intervene in the setting up or functioning/running of any institution related to any religion.

Reason for Imparting Secular Education

- Secular education develops a moral human beings
- Secular education helps in the development of liberal attitudes and values
- It develops wider vision in citizen
- It develops an attitude of appreciation and understanding of others point of view
- It develops democratic values and humanistic outlook
- Secular education works as a treatment or counter for fundamentalists.

In a multi religious country like India, the spirit of secularism is to be developed in order to maintain the unity and integrity of the nation. Education should play a positive role in preparing people for a secular society and a purposeful life. We hope secularism will develop in to a stronger force leading to the social unity of India when institutionalized religions gradually lose their coercive hold on the young generations.

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