

Multi-Faith Curriculum for Secular Education: Restructuring the National Curriculum Framework 2005



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Abstract

Course planners, across the globe, understand that learning as education could covertly perpetuate an ideology. So they seem to shy away from such sensitive issues as religion while identifying core components for a syllabus. However, pedagogy will have to cope with contemporary realities. In a post 9/11 world where there is a rise of right-wing religious forces targeting the schools to whittle down secular humanistic traditions and a rise and propagation of 'Creationism' and the 'Intelligent design' in the West, we need to think about religion a little more seriously. In fact, to a very large extent we owe our cultural identity to our religious allegiance. In a situation like this, we need to replace our 'need-based approach' by an 'asset-based approach' to view our socio-cultural reality which is multi-cultural, multi-ethnic and multi-religious.

Thus we suggest a multi-faith curriculum based on an "accommodation model" for implementation and practice at the secondary level. Introduction of such a model would both reinforce the secularist spirit of education and global well-being. The Indian national curriculum framework (2005), which is prevalent today, is an excellent piece of curriculum-research. The proposed asset-based approach and the introduction of a multi-faith curriculum would enrich and make it still more effective in building a secular education system.

Key words: Indian National Curriculum, Framework, Education, pedagogy, multi-faith, creationism, Intelligent Design, cultural identity, accommodation model.

Introduction

Education as a discipline, its process and product, pose a challenge in the world today. It is presented as a discipline entirely devoted to external accomplishments, mastering technology and promotion of career and prosperity. Illusory needs and illusory hopes for joy are often whetted by consumerist militant intelligence that manipulates individual dreams. This provokes one to wonder about the role education now plays in our life and in collective harmony and collective survival. Course planners, across the globe, understand that learning as education could covertly perpetuate an ideology. So, they seem to shy away from such sensitive issues as religion while identifying core components for a syllabus. However, pedagogy will have to cope with contemporary realities. In a post 9/11 world where there is a rise of right-wing religious forces targeting the schools to whittle down secular humanistic traditions and a rise and propagation of 'Creationism' and the 'Intelligent Design' in the West, we need to think about religion a little more seriously. In this context it is worthwhile to look into theistic evolutionism and intelligent design. Ingo Brigandt's essay, "Intelligent Design and the Nature of Science: Philosophical and Pedagogical Points", gives us an insight into the conflict arising out of principles of Scientific education vis-a-vis theistic evolutionism and intelligent design. Brigandt observes that, "Methodological naturalism provides a clear way to distinguish between theistic evolutionism and intelligent design. Theistic evolutionists believe that the cosmos and the laws of nature were created by God" (16). This formed the basis of creationism. Subsequently, material processes, worldly phenomena and history of life were explained using the standard resources of science and thus denied the claims of creationism. "Intelligent design proponents, in contrast, assume that there had to be some direct influence by a supernatural agent during the history of the world, and definitely

during the history of organismal life. . . . ID rejects methodological naturalism, and thus is actually opposed to the scientific approach”(16).

Brigandt further goes on to explain that, “Since many high school students tend to view evolution and religion as being in conflict, it is important to convey to them that science does not take a stance on religious matters Students can fruitfully be taught how there is a common ground in science which permits scientifically minded persons to either be religious or atheist, whereas only ID proponents and creationists view science and religion in conflict” (17). Thus a multi-faith curriculum based on an “accommodation model” can be suggested for implementation and practice at the secondary level. Introduction of such a model would both reinforce the secularist spirit of education and global well-being. The Indian national curriculum framework (2005), which is prevalent today, is an excellent piece of curriculum-research. The proposed asset-based approach and the introduction of a multi-faith curriculum would enrich and make it still more effective in building a secular education system. In such a scenario, we need to replace our ‘need-based approach’ by an ‘asset-based approach’ to view our socio-cultural reality which is multi-cultural, multi-ethnic and multi-religious. The present article is an attempt to explicate the Indian National Curriculum Framework (2005) in the context of the research in contemporary pedagogy. It will examine the current policies and practices envisaged therein, in a multicultural perspective, and determine how a multi-faith curriculum might contribute to the development of inter-faith and inter-cultural understanding. The paper has been divided into three distinct sections for explication of the thesis.

Indian National Curriculum Framework (2005)

The NCERT, NIEPA, NCTE are institutions at the national level in India with the mandate to improve the quality of education in the schools of the country. As a response to the recommendation in the “ National Policy on Education, 1986” that the implementation of education policy and emergent trends in education should be reviewed periodically, the NCERT, an apex national agency of educational reform in India, brought out a framework first in 1988 and subsequently two NCFs (National Curriculum Framework) in 2000 and 2005. NCERT is expected to review the school curriculum as a routine activity, ensuring the highest standards of rigor and deliberative openness in the process. The present article concerns itself with the NCF 2005. Regarding the NCF, The Hindu, a national Daily, on 04 Sept. 2005, published that, “The new document, according to Prof. Kumar [the then Director NCERT], seeks to make secular democracy a robust idea”. Yet it was not beyond criticism; academics under the banner of Safdar Hashmi Memorial Trust and Communalism Combat had accused the NCERT of “toeing a politically correct line” while drafting NCF-2005, that is, the framework was accused of being a part of the then Hindu agenda that had subtly dominated discourse in educational circles during the six years of National Democratic Alliance rule. The revised document of 2005 sought to nurture an overriding national identity. The NCF took into account the

cultural diversity of the student and also was sensitive to caste and gender segregation.

Draft NCF 2005 characterizes Curriculum Framework. According to the *Draft*, “*Curriculum Framework*. . . is a plan that interprets educational aims, vis-à-vis both individual and society, to arrive at an understanding of the kinds of learning experiences schools must provide to children. . . . This plan should include the foundational assumptions and basis of choice for experiences” (66). Foundational assumptions according to the *Draft* are assumptions on which the principles of content selection, criteria for good teaching methods, material and evaluation are based. The *Draft* of NCF 2005 envisages that education should aim at a pluralistic democratic society based on justice, equality and freedom. It also takes cognizance of the fact that “the fulcrum of all educational endeavour is knowledge in its widest sense- including understanding, ways of thinking, values, and skills. (That) An educator has to assume that knowing influences belief and action” (64). Herein, sensitive teaching becomes the prerogative of the teacher. The teacher must take into consideration the socio-cultural environment of the student, as the society to which the student belongs has its own influence on the child as to what makes a desirable society. The student ‘knows’ what society has instilled and this influences his/her socio-cultural and religious ‘belief’ and behavior. In fact, the 10th point of the executive summary of the *Draft* proposes an “Inclusive Curriculum”, such that “The curriculum should respect cultural diversities and formulate policies, which will not exclude the beneficiaries of the system” (15). The *Draft* was converted to a book and published as *National Curriculum Framework 2005* in December 2005. It begins with a reiteration of the Preamble to the Constitution of India which claims India to be a ‘Sovereign Socialist Secular democratic Republic’ and resolves to secure to all its citizens social, political and economic justice; freedom of thought, expression, belief, faith and worship; equal opportunities and status in society; and fraternity, that assures the people individual dignity and unity and integrity of the nation. This sets the tone for the guiding principles for Secondary Education in India. Saying that, as “a nation we have been able to sustain a robust democratic polity” (7) the *NCF 2005* rearticulates the vision of democracy put forth by the Secondary Education Commission (1952):

“a democratic citizen should have the understanding and the intellectual integrity to sift truth from falsehood, facts from propaganda and to reject the dangerous appeal of fanaticism and prejudice . . . should neither reject the old because it is old nor accept the new because it is new, but dispassionately examine both and courageously reject what arrests the forces of justice and progress....”7.

Whereas the NCF takes into account democracy, the problems of justice, socio-cultural diversities, economic inequalities, caste, class and gender differences in educating the students, it apparently shies away from mentioning religious diversities, which is a social reality in secular pluralistic India.

Secularism and Religious intolerance

It is important to understand India as a multi-religious and secular State. In India there are at least six major practised religions, namely, Hinduism, Islam, Christianity, Sikhism, Buddhism and Jainism. According to the statistics of the census 2001, there are 80.46% Hindus, 13.43% Muslims, 2.34% Christians, 1.87% Sikhs, 0.77% Buddhists, 0.41% Jains and about 0.72% Animists or Tribals in India. The social fabric of India has been multi-religious over centuries. And it is harrowing to note that since independence India has seen rise in communalism and religious fundamentalism. It is in the interest of this discussion to note that, intermittently, since 1984 riots and death tolls due to communalism show alarming figures. (Statistics given in the Wikipedia is reflected in the table see appendix). In these riots approximately twenty-five thousand people have been killed and multiples of that displaced. This puts to question the very idea of democracy and India as a secular state. Rajeev Bhargav, in his chapter, "What is Secularism For?" in *Secularism and its Critics*, has discussed the desirability of secularism in a modern State. He champions the separation of religion and State because he argues that both are powerful institutions that command people's unqualified allegiance that may facilitate fanaticism and prejudice. According to him, "Separation is required in order to ensure a subtle and complex equalitarian system . . . to curb political and religious absolutism" (489).

R.A.Jahagirdar in his article "Debate on Secularism", discusses the views on Secularism of T.N Madan, a prolific writer. Madan is of the opinion that "secularism is a late Christian idea and it is not indigenous to the religious cultures of India. He argues that the demand for removal of religion from public life is predicated on the view that religion is irrational" (322). He quotes Madan as saying that "in the prevailing circumstances secularism in South Asia as a generally shared credo of life is impossible, as a basis of State action impracticable, blueprint for the foreseeable future impotent . . . the search for secular elements in the cultural tradition is a futile exercise for it is not these but an ideology of secularism that is absent and is resisted" (322). That religious communities in India resist secularism is self evident in the Muslim resistance to the reform of family law, as in the Shah Bano case, the Hindu fundamentalists agitation and subsequent demolition of Babri Mosque in Ayodhya, the Sikh and Hindu riots in Punjab, killing of innocent people by Sikh terrorists, Godhra riots, Hindu Christian riots in Kandhamal and lately, the Assam violence brought about by Bengali Muslims. Madan critiques secularism with his opinion that secularism is the marginalization of religious faith and that it permits the perversion of religion that in all probability modern idea unsuited to the pious society of India and stresses the need for some form of modern secularism in the modern Indian cultural context" (323). Bhargav's argument is in keeping with the secularism of the West which arose in reaction to State in the Church. But in India the situation has been different, as religious plurality existed during the Mughals and also the British Rule. We can agree with the noted economist Amartya Sen, who in his essay 'Secularism and its Discontents' propounds the theory

of symmetric treatment to all religions. He even argues that it is hard to escape the need to see India as an integrally pluralist society and to accept the necessity of symmetric treatment and secular policies as crucial parts of that recognition.

Although, the scope of the paper limits itself to the Indian context it is worthwhile to discuss western secularism in order to understand its difference from the Indian multi-religious scenario and the need to reassess NCERT's Curriculum Framework in that light in the face of India's cultural and religious diversity and acute religious intolerance in the present day. Jahagirdar, in his essay, "Debate on Secularism", argues in favour of the separation of religion from State. He cites that, "USA was a highly religious society when the wall of separation was built; Catholic Church practically built the French society which was also intensely religious; Turkey was the heart of Islamic world. All these countries have accepted secularism as the foundation of their States" (323). But the religio-political scenario in India is not as simple as it is in the West. "The principle of secularism, in the broader interpretation endorsed in India, demands . . . symmetric treatment of different religious communities in politics and in the affairs of the state" (Sen 313). Coercion into secularism, which is in vogue, may result in absolute resistance and more communal violence. Hence, Indian secularism needs to be accommodative. At this juncture it is relevant to discuss religious intolerance. Vladimir Tomek, in his article 'Religious Tolerance and Intolerance in World Religions', discusses relevant issues regarding religious tolerance/ intolerance in the major religions of the world. He observes that, in order to avoid 'the spiral of violence' all the Holy Texts need to be re-read and reinterpreted. Tomek critiques world religions. He writes,

"It must be recognized that we must be prepared to abandon dogmas and teachings unworthy of the present age however important part of the creed they seem to be. . . . In North America, we painfully abandoned human slavery as profoundly immoral in spite of the many Biblical passages allowing, regulating and condoning it. Most denominations have abandoned the instruction to be fruitful and multiply by allowing couples to regulate their family size. . . .Early Christians were guided by the compassionate teachings of Christ. However, the situation degenerated during the 4th century CE when, following Constantine's conversion, Christianity was first accepted as a legitimate religion, and later became identified with the state. . . . In more modern times, the Bible was used to provide the European settlers with an ideology that justified exterminating Native Americans. . . . In another part of the world, Palestinian Christians are shocked when Bible is used to justify the Israeli occupation of their homeland. . . . Islam is almost entirely fundamentalist. "Under Islam it is not religion that is a part of life, but life a part of religion". . . . The original goal of *Muslim Brotherhood* was the reform of Islamic society by eliminating Western influence. . . . Its main interest seems to lie still in education, although science is considered intrinsically evil. . . .Extremist fundamentalism cannot conceive of either coexistence or political compromise. A world based on religious and political

diversity is repugnant to them. Their goal seems to be a world ruled by a theocratic dictatorship based on the Qur'an and Islam. Their teaching justifies or even requires violence, terrorism, and war against enemies, in service to Allah. . . . Buddhism, Hinduism, Jainism, and Taoism . . . (are) religions (that) have a tradition of religious tolerance and of respecting religious diversity. However, they are all able to embrace positions of violence as well as non-violence, of religious tolerance as well as of intolerance" 3-11.

In the wake of rising fundamentalism and homicide Tomek's analysis of world religions is a pointer to the fact that no religion is above intolerance for others. The situation in certain terms has reached an impasse. With rising concern pedagogues, psychologists and researchers across the world are trying to find a way out of this impasse leading to collective harmony and collective survival. It has been much discussed and debated upon and finally concluded that education is the only force that can liberate humanity from such impasse. Social cohesion can be achieved taking cognizance of the importance of religion in education which will be able to address the religious plurality and diversity through Multi-faith education. "In 1270, during his last stay in Paris, Thomas Aquinas wrote a work titled *On the Unity of the Intellect Against the Averroists*. . . including the doctrines that man possesses two separate and distinct modes of knowledge-the rational and the religious-and that philosophy is anterior and superior to religion, the latter being truth adapted to the limited understanding of the people" (Beum 48). These two modes of knowledge taken together contribute towards an integrated personality steeped richly in tradition. Robert Beum in his article "Educational Secularism: The Origins", expresses his concern about secular education. He says, "that in practice modern secular education is virtually identical with **state** education; second, that the tremendous expansion of secular education reflects the growth of disbelief and religious indifference among modern populations. Secular education is in the control of the state, and states are founded upon the principle of self-perpetuation and self-interest" (50). This is possibly the root cause of devaluation of collective harmony, where 'truth, honesty and universal receptiveness' (50) is done away with. Plural democracies like Australia, America, France, England and India over the last century have been facing religiously marked intercultural conflicts. After research on education and social cohesion nations in the West and Australia have resorted to move away from both special religious education and a denial of the presence of religion in social life to a more inclusive mode, i.e., including studies on multi-faith, a non-denominational approach to world religion and beliefs. "British and European studies . . . indicate that children with some education *about* religion are more tolerant than those without such instruction . . . have shown that study of religion helps to develop inclusive attitudes towards cultural difference. This challenges earlier research linking the teaching of religion to increased prejudice" (Bryne 26). Teaching of religion should not be confused with religious instruction. Religious education, especially, multi-faith religious

education calls for education in the concepts of practised religions and in the range of belief systems that exist therein. The function of pedagogy here should be to assist students to know something about the diversities of belief systems of different religions; the significance of individual freedom of choice and practice; and how these bear on the community.

Suggestions and recommendation

This paper suggests a restructuring of the Indian National Curriculum Framework 2005 seeking to accommodate multi-faith religious education with rational scientific education. The NCF 2005, keeping in view the larger problems of secularism and democracy faced in the changing world, should understand the changing meaning of secularism and be more inclusive rather than exclusive. Omission of facts about religion, in a multi-religious country like India, can give students the false impression that the religious life is insignificant or unimportant. Remaining politically silent about religion may inform that there is something wrong in acknowledging it. As we know, absence and presence are binaries. Absence of mention of religion in the curriculum may imply acute presence of religious sentiments and misgivings in the mind. This might lead to revival of fundamentalism and religious intolerance under which the world is reeling at present. Hence, studying about religion, its basic symbols, concepts and practises sensitizes students and makes them appreciate the value of religious liberty. It promotes cross-cultural understanding which is vital to democracy and world peace. Multi-faith education will make inter-faith communication possible despite conflict between competing paradigms. Education should seek to encourage children to question, to criticise, to investigate, to challenge, to debate, to evaluate and to be able to make decisions and choices about their future adult lives. There are common elements in religions like, truth, goodness, and values etc. that are understood by students from various religious discourses thereby rendering inter-cultural understanding possible. The curriculum should be so designed that "the religious education syllabus should be used to enlarge and deepen the pupils' understanding of religion by studying world religions, and by exploring those elements in human experience which raise questions about life's ultimate meaning and value. This involves informing pupils in a descriptive, critical and experiential manner about what religion is, and increasing their sensitivity to the areas of experience from which a religious view of life may arise. It should stimulate within pupils, and assist them in the search for, a personal view of meaning in life, whilst enabling them to understand the beliefs and commitments of others" (The Birmingham Agreed Syllabus, quoted in the *Swann Report*, 1985. 484). Rational scientific thinking is important but equally important is conceptual thinking that makes for a positive, healthy and wholesome personality. According to The Psychology of Learning, "Conceptual thinking means something quite different than the learning of skills or the mastery of content and concepts. It involves the discovery of meaningful patterns, the formulation of generalizations, and constructing arguments that are located in a larger disciplinary conversation" (3).

The NCF should be restructured and designed to cultivate intellectual curiosity, and an interest in grappling with the aesthetic, ethical, political, and social implications of ideas. "Deep learning entails examining facts and ideas critically, relating new and older knowledge, linking ideas together, and constructing novel conceptual structures. It involves the ability to place isolated, unlinked facts into larger conceptual structures" (3). It should consider didactic teaching emphasizing the transfer of information. Pedagogy should involve 'Transformational teaching' which is "much more self-conscious about its objectives and methods. It adopts a learner-centered rather than an instructor-centered approach. It makes students privy to the instructor's larger goals and expectations. It prepares students to understand that they will receive challenging feedback. It cultivates reflective learning by giving students opportunities to reflect on the learning process. It gives students assignments that they find meaningful, involving case studies, real-world data and problems, research and inquiry, and the public display of their findings" (3). Rationality and compassion are enhanced when students come face to face with real world examples that serve as simulation for them. It becomes easier for them to relate through active learning in the form of class presentations, group projects and discussions. An inclusive and stimulating environment encourages students to actively participate in learning rather than resist. "Fostering such an environment requires an instructor to be acutely sensitive to individual differences and make sure that students understand the instructor's expectations and goals, as well as the steps the student must take to meet these objectives. In addition to promoting sensitivity, an inclusive classroom encourages dialogue, a process that might include collaborative inquiry, peer criticism, and intellectual give-and-take" (4) which is the objective of a Multi-faith Curriculum.

The major goal of the proposed Multi-Faith curriculum should be to address the growing need for collaboration across faiths and educational institutions to deepen understanding and enhance the teaching of justice and peacemaking. The teacher should be sensitive and understand the interplay between curriculum and classroom activities. Sometimes whatever is written in the curriculum is not exactly what happens in the classroom. Whereas, discussions about school subjects are often based on the written curriculum and on the assumption that the curriculum is carried out in every detail, the teaching of multi-faith religion would have to be more experimental and innovative. Teaching and learning should be participatory and interactive. Two kinds of Curriculum, namely, the *Operational Curriculum* and the *Experiential Curriculum* are effective in teaching such complex and sensitive issues. The *Operational Curriculum* is what actually goes on in school and in the classroom and the *Experiential Curriculum* is how the learners experience the teaching in the classroom, and what they actually learn. Like India, Norway and South Africa also face the challenges and possibilities of plural society. It would be in the interest of this paper to see how Norway and South Africa are dealing with such challenge by incorporating multi-

faith education into their National Curriculums from the primary level itself. "As a growing multicultural society Norway continually faces the challenges of plurality. In 1997 a new curriculum for primary and lower secondary school was therefore introduced. The emphasis is . . . on all the other main religions as well as philosophy and secular world views. The subject, called KRL (Christianity, Religion, Life stances) is compulsory for all children, whether they are Lutheran, Roman Catholic, Hindu, Muslim or atheist. Cultural understanding, tolerance, dialogue and identity building are in focus. At the same time the curriculum documents are based on an essentialist understanding of culture, which means that the cultural heritage is seen as something given and absolute, something to be handed over to the next generation, almost as it is. In this perspective individual identity is seen as developed in encounter with the cultural heritage . . . The educational policy in the post-apartheid South Africa reflects this double aim: unity and diversity, expressed by the slogan "Unity in Diversity". The new integrated school system aims at taking the social, ethnic, cultural and religious challenges of the new South Africa seriously" (Bredlid and Nicolaisen 2-3). The NCF could take its cue from the curriculums of Norway and South Africa and consider restructuring, accommodating religion.

Shared pedagogical strategies, tools, and resources could be useful in deepening our discoveries about teaching and learning the art of peace-building. Teaching can be done through storytelling and role playing. "The teacher can introduce the story not as part of a religious tradition, but simply as a story. A consequence of this is that stories from all traditions can help people understand their own lives. For example, we can think of the Bible as a holy book with stories meant for use in the religious context. But we can also regard the Bible as a book full of stories about existential human problems and conditions: about relations between people, between human beings and nature, about the meaning of life. . . . Ramayana . . . a religious book for Hindus . . . can give much also to non-Hindus. It is a book about love, marriage, intrigues, about the relations between spouses, between parents, step-parents and children, between brothers - and so on" (5-6).

Conclusion

As a conclusion it can be pointed out that it will be in the interest of the nation to respond to the need of the hour in pluralistic India. The prevailing NCF which addresses modern scientific education and takes under its blanket considerations of social and gender discrimination for a "robust democratic polity", must also take into account religious tolerance which has been India's asset. The NCF designers, therefore, should include a *multi-faith curriculum* based on an "accommodation model" for implementation and practice at all levels, especially, the secondary level. Introduction of such a model would both reinforce the secularist spirit of education and global well-being.

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