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The case for introducing the study of religion in India

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ABSTRACT

The author offers a brief report of introducing the study of religion in India since 1947. While doing so he refers to the Constitution of India, so-called Nehruvian Consensus, the Kothari Commission which made an important distinction between ‘religious education’ and ‘education about religion’, as well as several other bodies responsible for national policy on education, which gave a unique shape of Indian secularism.

KEYWORDS

religious education in India; education about religion; religious pluralism; ethical *vs.* religious values; religion and nationalism; secularism

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PART I

One would imagine that it would not be difficult to make a case for the study of religion in a multireligious country like India. The presence of many religions in the country would presumably predispose one to the acceptance of the idea. Such, however, is not the case. India began its life as an independent country in 1947 with a staunch commitment to secularism, a secularism which did not look upon the role of religion in public life with favour. This could well be on account of the fact that the independence of India was accompanied by its partition, on religious grounds, into India and Pakistan, which was accompanied by much blood-letting. Religion therefore came to be viewed in negative terms by the intelligentsia. Moreover, the Indian National Congress, which led the movement for Indian independence, had long opposed partition but accepted it as the price to be paid for independence. It had to justify this change in its stance to the Indian people, which it did by arguing that the division of the country into India and Pakistan was not a division between a Hindu India and a Muslim Pakistan (as Pakistan maintained), but a division between a secular India and a theocratic Pakistan. Secularism thus became a part of the founding myth of the Indian nation.

It was then enshrined in the Indian constitution, when it was adopted in 1950, in the following way so far instruction in religion was concerned:

Article 28 (1): No religious instruction shall be provided in any educational institution wholly maintained out of State funds.

(2) Nothing in clause (1) shall apply to an educational institution which is administered by the State but has been established under any endowment or trust which required that religious instruction shall be imparted in such institution.

(3) No person attending any educational institution recognized by the State or receiving aid out of State funds shall be required to take part in any religion instruction that may be imparted in such institution or to attend any religious worship that may be conducted in such institution or in any premises attached thereto unless such person or, if such person is a minor, his guardian has given consent to (Sen, 2010: 105, n. 1).

This understanding of secularism as excluding the teaching of religion was an element in what is called the Nehruvian Consensus, which constituted the intellectual legacy of Nehru and was embraced by the Indian intelligentsia in general, along with socialism and democracy.

PART II

There was, however, another stream of opinion from the time of independence onwards which was inclined to consider the non-confessional teaching of religion as fully consistent with the idea of secularism.

An early exponent of this view was Maulana Abul Kalam Azad, the education minister in the government of India. As early as January 1948 he expressed the view the government should promote the study of religion, because 'India's difficulties, unlike those of Europe and America, were not due to materialism and rationalism but rather to religious fanaticism' (Smith, 1963: 348). Such fanaticism, however, could not be curbed if religious education was left in private hands, as for private teachers 'religion means nothing but bigotry' (Smith, 1963: 348). He therefore concluded his address to the Central Advisory Board of Education in the following words:

If we want to safeguard the intellectual life of our country against this danger, it becomes all the more necessary for us not to leave the imparting of early religious education to private sources. We should rather take it under our direct care and supervision. No doubt, a foreign government had to keep itself away from religious education. But a national government cannot divest itself of undertaking this responsibility (Smith, 1963: 348–349).

The proposal however was turned down by Prime Minister Nehru and also by the Constituent Assembly as indicated by Article 28 of the Constitution.

PART III

Voices in favour of introducing religious education in the curriculum continued to be raised after the promulgation of the Constitution by people like John Matthai, S.R. Das, C. Rajgopalachari, Rukmini Devi Arundale and Dr. Sampurnanand (Smith, 1963: 349–350) but found formal expression in *The Report of the University Education Commission* of 1950. The commission was chaired by Dr. S. Radhakrishnan.

It is interesting to consider, by way of background, the reasons adduced for keeping the study of the religion out of the educational system from a purely educational point of view. This reason is expressed well in the report of the Education Commission of 1882 which observed that: 'The declared neutrality of the State forbids its connecting the institutions directly maintained by it with any one form of faith; and the other alternative of giving equal facilities in such institutions for the inculcation of all forms of faith involves practical difficulties which we believe to be insuperable' (Mahadevan, 1971: 282).

The shift in the perspective brought about by independence is reflected in the following words of the Radhakrishnan Report, so to say: 'India is the meeting place of the great religions of the world and will play an increasingly prominent role in the religious life of mankind and Indian students should have an idea of India's role in the world' (Mahadevan, 1971: 283).

The contents of the report could be considered from both a theoretical and a practical point of view. On the theoretical side its conclusions could be reduced to the following four formulations:

- (1) Dogmatic religion leads to conflict; (2) religious conflict leads to a secular state;
- (3) the secular state bans only dogmatic religious instruction in state schools; (4) the state can and should provide for the teaching of universal religion (Smith, 1963: 351).

On the practical side it made the following concrete recommendations.

- (1) that all educational institutions start work with a few minutes for silent meditation;
- (2) that in the first year of the Degree course lives of the great religious leaders like Gautama the Buddha, Confucius, Zoroaster, Socrates, Jesus, Śaṅkara, Rāmānuja, Madhva, Mohammad, Kabīr, Nānak, Gāndhi, be taught;
- (3) that in the second year some selections of a universalist character from the scriptures of the world be studied;
- (4) that in the third year, the central problems of the philosophy of religion be considered (Mahadevan, 1971: 283).

The next commission to address this issue was what came to be called the Kothari Commission, an education commission (1964–1966) which was chaired by Dr. K.S. Kothari. The Kothari Commission made an important distinction between ‘religious education’ and ‘education about religion’, and explained the distinction as follows:

The former is largely concerned with the teaching of the tenets and practices of a particular religion, generally in the form in which the religious group envisages them, whereas the latter is a study of religions and religious thought from a broad point of view — the eternal quest of the spirit. [...]. It makes the point that it is necessary for a multi-religious democratic State to promote a tolerant study of religions so that its citizens can understand each other better and live amicably together (Sen, 2010: 93).

We have so far pursued the matter largely from an educational perspective. The matter, however, took a legal turn in 2002 and we shall devote the next section to exploring this dimension of the issue.

PART IV

It was argued before the supreme court in 1971, in the case *DAV College v. Punjab* that the provision for teaching the philosophy of Guru Nanak infringed upon article 28, namely, that ‘no religious instruction shall be provided in any educational institution wholly maintained out of State funds’ (Sen, 2010: 93).

In pronouncing its judgement, the Court made a distinction between religious instruction and the study of religions as follows: 'To provide for academic study of life and teaching or the philosophy and culture of any great saint of India in relation to or the impact on Indian and world civilizations cannot be considered as making provision for religious instruction' (Sen, 2010: 91). In other words, the Court was outlining a distinction between the confessional and the non-confessional or academic study of religion.

The situation got clarified further in the *Aruna Roy v. Union of India* case of 2002. The National Council of Educational Research and Training (NCERT) is a well-known governmental body associated with formulating national policy on education. When the Hindu nationalist party known as the Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP) was heading a coalition government at the centre, it came up with a National Curriculum Framework for School Education (NCFSE) in 2000, which asserted the need for 'not religious education but education about religions, their basics, the values inherent therein and also a comparative study of the philosophy of all religions' (Sen, 2010: 90). The NCFSE proposal emphasized that 'education about religions must be handled with extreme care [...] All religions therefore have to be treated with equal respect (Sarva Dharma Sambhav) and there should be no discrimination on the ground of any religion (panthanirapekshata)' (Sen, 2010: 90).

The Court rejected the contention that the suggestion of the NCFSE went against article 28 of the Indian constitution. Speaking for the court, M.B. Shah, J did so on three grounds. First, he alluded to the government committee reports which advocated value based education, including the S.B. Chavan committee which stated that religion is a 'most misused and misunderstood concept' and that 'the basics of all religions, the values therein, and also a comparative study of the philosophy of all religions should begin at the middle stage in schools and continue up to the university level' (Sen, 2010: 90–91). Next, he argued that the suggestion was consistent with article 51-A of the constitution which declares it as one of the duties of every citizen to 'promote harmony and the spirit of common brotherhood amongst all the people of India transcending religious, linguistic and regional or sectional diversities' (Sen, 2010: 91). Finally, he distinguished between religious instruction and the study of religion drawing on the *DAV v. Punjab* case.

The judgment in the *Aruna Roy* case was severely criticized by Martha Nussbaum, who declared that 'justice Manharlal Bhikanlal Shah's majority opinion is one of the weakest pieces of legal argumentation that has recently emerged from the Supreme Court of India' (Sen, 2010: 92). Her two main criticisms of the judgment seem to be that (1) according to the court, religion is the 'foundation for value based survival of human beings in a civilized society' (Nussbaum, 2008: 274). According to Nussbaum this represents a 'slide from ethical values to religious values' (Sen, 2010: 94). And further that (2) the

study of religion was connected in the judgment with the destiny of the nation as in the following words:

[...] the lives of the Indian people have been enriched by integration of various religions and that is the strength of this nation. Whatever kind of people come to India either for shelter or as aggressors, India has tried to accept the best part of their religions. As a result a composite culture gradually developed in India and enriched the lives of Indians (Sen, 2010: 94).

This statement was made by Dharmadhikari in his concurring judgment. These arguments possess force. The academic study of religion is academic — it is not meant to be didactic or syncretic. The points can, however, be refined in such a way as to be consistent with the academic study of religion by arguing that these need not be the intended results of the study although they are foreseeable results. Similarly, one could identify two sources of value formation in the modern world — the liberal secular tradition and the religions of the world. Instead of conflating the two, one could see the latter as reinforcing the former. Similarly, one could see the study of religion as foreseeably strengthening the spiritual dimension of life, as distinguished from the religious dimension of life. It is quite clear therefore that the study of religion has been deemed both educationally desirable and legally permissible. All that remains to be done is to introduce it.

In the next few sections I would like to examine some issues arising out of the previous discussion: (1) in arguing for the study of religion, to what extent have arguments been made which have parallels in the West and to what extent are they unique to India; (2) what typically Indian contour or colour the study of religion might acquire when pursued in India and (3) what implication will its introduction have for India secularism, especially as it was Indian secularism of a particular brand which opposed its introduction in the first place.

PART V

A particular kind of distinction has been persistently invoked, sometimes in slightly different guises, when the case for the study of religion has been made in India both outside and within the court. Sometimes it takes the form of a distinction between 'religious instruction' and 'religious education' (Sen, 2010: 90), sometimes between 'religious instruction' and the 'study of religion' (Sen, 2010: 91) and sometimes between 'religious education' and 'education about religions' (Sen, 2010: 93). All these attempts at distinguishing between the terms involved seem like different attempts to articulate or formulate the same distinction. This is the distinction between religion as it is taught in a confessional setting, and religion as it is taught in a non-confessional

or academic setting. There is a clear resonance here of a similar distinction drawn in the West between 'studying religion' and 'studying about religion'. The study of religion, when introduced in an academic setting in the U.S.A, attracted the same charges as it does now in India. The case went to the courts and they made a distinction similar to the one in India. I do not know to what extent the Western experience was drawn upon during the discussions in India and its examination could constitute a fascinating study, for if it turns out that the Indian legal tradition came up with it on its own, then we would have a surprising, and perhaps interesting parallel on our hands. In any case, this particular argument has a clear Western resonance, if not a clear Western connection.¹

Other arguments, however, seem to have an Indian flavour. The idea that one should engage in the study of religion to promote common brotherhood reflects a very Indian sentiment. I am not suggesting that people in the West may not have also thought that such study might promote common brotherhood, but while it could be a foreseeable consequence of such study, one wonders to what extent it might have been so intended in the West, pace Max Müller (Müller, 1892: 29–60, esp. 60).

Another Indian feature is the distinction between dogma and philosophy sometimes invoked in this context. Thus the Radhakrishnan Report states:

There is a difference between the preaching of dogma and a philosophical study of religion. While the former is precluded, the latter is permitted. There shall be no sectarian indoctrination in State institutions. But history of religion and of religious institutions, comparative religion, philosophy of religion can all be studied even in institutions maintained wholly out of State funds (Sen, 2010: 93).

A third Indian feature is provided by the invocation of the word *dharmā*. This point comes out clearly in the concurring judgment of, Dharmadhikari, J in *Aruna Roy v. Union of India*. His position is summarized by Ronojoy Sen as follows:

¹ The distinction was already drawn by Dr. B.R. Ambedkar, who had studied in the U.K. and U.S.A. during the Constituent Assembly debates. He explained while discussing what was to become article 28: 'It is therefore not proper to say that by this article we have altogether barred religious education. Religious instruction has been left to be taught and be given by each community according to its aims and objects subject to certain conditions. All that is barred is this, that the State in the institutions maintained by it wholly out of public funds, shall not be free to give religious instructions'. When asked whether the study of Hindu scriptures constituted religious instruction, he replied: 'Religious instruction must be distinguished from research or study. Those are two different things. For instance, as far as Islam religion is concerned, it means that you believe in one god, that you believe that Pagambar the Prophet is the last Prophet and soon, in other words what is called "dogma"' (Sen, 2010: 92, emphasis added).

In a concurring judgment, Dharmadhikari, J said, 'The academic study of the teaching and the philosophy of any great saint such as Kabir, Guru Nanak and Mahavir was held to be not prohibited by Article 28(1) of the Constitution'. He, however, admitted that there was a 'very thin dividing line' between imparting of religious education and study of religions. Dharmadhikari gets around this problem by positing that the Indian concept of dharma differs from religion as understood in the West. According to him, in the concept of dharma 'different faiths, sects and schools of thoughts merely are different ways of knowing truth which is one'. This allows for the teaching of religious education, which would mean 'approaching the many religions of the world with an attitude of understanding'. He stressed that this understanding of religion is essential for a multi-religious society such as India (Sen, 2010: 91).

PART VI

This leads up to the next point — how might the academic study of religion in India develop, as it evolves. It might be fair to say that it will remain linked in the Indian mind with the ideas of human brotherhood and religious universalism, though not necessarily with the idea of a universal religion. These ideals may not affect the actual study of religion but will continue to constitute the affective side of the enterprise. Almost all discussions of it, both legal or otherwise, seem to invoke this, though none does it so unambiguously as Mahatma Gandhi:

I hold that it is the duty of every cultured man or woman to read sympathetically the scriptures of the world. If we are to respect others' religions as we would have them to respect our own, a friendly study of the world's religions is a sacred duty. We need not dread, upon our grown up children, the influence of scriptures other than our own. We liberalize their outlook upon life by encouraging them to study freely all that is clean. Fear there would be when someone reads his own scriptures to young people with the intention secretly or openly of converting them. He must then be biased in favour of his own scriptures. For myself, I regard my study of and reverence for the Bible, the Qur'an, and the other scriptures to be wholly consistent with my claim to be a staunch *Sanatani* Hindu. He is no *Sanatani* Hindu who is narrow, bigoted and considers evil to be good if it has the sanction of antiquity and it to be found supported in any Sanskrit book. I claim to be a staunch *Sanatani* Hindu because, though I reject all that offends my moral sense, I find the Hindu scriptures to satisfy the needs of the soul. My respectful study of other religions has not abated my reverence for or my faith in the Hindu scriptures. They have indeed left their deep mark upon my understanding of the Hindu scriptures. They have broadened my view of life. They have enabled me to understand more clearly many an obscure passage in the Hindu scriptures (Gandhi, 1958: 237).

Thus the study of religion, while serving a practical purpose, is likely to retain a somewhat idealistic orientation.

PART VII

Ronojoy Sen observes perceptively, in relation to Indian secularism, that Indian secularism could be seen as ‘oscillating between *sarvadharmā sambhava* and *dharmā nirpekṣhata*’ (Sen, 2010: 94). The form of Indian secularism which associated it with *sarvadharmā sambhāva* or equal respect of all religions, represents the Gandhian understanding of it. According to this understanding the state sees religion as playing a positive role in public life, while itself remaining equidistant from particular religious traditions. Such an understanding of secularism inclines towards religious pluralism as a value and promotes it. The other understanding of Indian secularism is represented by the Sanskrit term *dharmā nirpekṣatā* or religious neutrality. It represents the Nehruvian understanding of it, which would limit the role of religion in the public square in the interest of science and a modern polity.²

It could be argued that *Aruna Roy* judgment ‘consciously aims at the former’ (Sen, 2010: 94). Thus Dharmadhikari in his concurring judgment stated: ‘The real meaning of secularism in the language of Gandhi is *sarva dharmā sambhava* meaning equal treatment and respect of all religions, but we have misunderstood the meaning of religion as *sarva dharmā sambhava* meaning the negation of all religions’ (Sen, 2010: 97). He goes on to cite Mahatma Gandhi to the effect that

[...] a curriculum of religious education should include a study of the tenets of faiths other than one’s own. For this purpose the student 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 broadminded tolerance (Sen, 2010: 97).

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² For more on this see Sharma, 1993: 53.

