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Advocating Secular Basis of Moral Teaching in the Government Schools During British Rule in the 19th Century

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ABSTRACT

British to avoid direct confrontation with essentially religious Indian society and also under fear that religious education would embitter relationship between Hindu and Muslim community avowed to well considered principles of neutrality in the matter of religion as well in school as in the large world outside them. However, more than the British policy of maintaining religiously neutral education in the Govt. Schools, I have concentrated in this paper on the ensuing debate over the question of provision of religious instruction for the cultivation of virtues in students. Majority of Indians supported religious education to be essential for students, while British official opposed it. The moot problem was of question of formation of character, which both (Supporters as well as opponents of religious education) felt was pivotal aim of education. While supporters argue teaching of moral instructions (for structuring of character) divorced from religion was valueless, ineffective and incapable of cultivating virtues or morals, opponents asked question of 'morals' to be understood in a different context other than being contingent upon religion, based on reason and rationality. Opponents, advocating for secular basis of morality suggested it to be explained and observed in the context of 'sphere of duty' which is co-extensive with human life, thus can't be the subject of teaching or confined to the classrooms only. It is involved in the very notion of development of habits and values and moral training through exercise of discipline, which should be nothing but a system for securing regular performance of duty. Assessing above both divergent approaches through the

objectives and meaning of education lead us to observation that building upright character subsists more on a secular basis for moral teaching than religion. Further it illuminates us in understanding that unless every citizen of India do appreciate and repose faith in the secular basis of education, India will remain always under the threat from religious fundamentalist forces.

I

British in their endeavoring to secure everlasting control and sense of mastery over Indian people sought religious neutral policy as a base of their governance in multi religious India Apart from imbibing and inheriting European political culture imbued with secular ideals and thoughts resulting in the education being separated from the clutches of religion in the Europe, British, as also for fear that religious education would embitter relationship between two major religions community Hindu and Muslim avowed to adhere to well considered principle of complete neutrality in the matter of religion, as well in school as in the large world outside that. The famous educational charter of 1854 thus established the Indian system on the only basis of religious neutrality. The principle laid down in the dispatch of 1854 regarding religious instruction has been generally maintained throughout colonial period - That education in government school should be exclusively secular and that in aided school the grant system should be based on the abstinence from religious instruction conveyed in the institutions.¹ The education committee of 1882-83 reaffirmed the principle and rejected suggestion that religious instruction, might a local option, be introduced in Board Primary schools and that equal facilities should be given in government college for the teaching of all religion.² However, British policy of secular education was found restricted to government institutions only as several compelling reasons then predominating the scenario persuaded government to provide full freedom and liberal assistance to education imparted or provided (which is mostly of religious in nature) in the private or aided schools (1) Govt was unwilling to take complete responsibility for the education of Indians and to spend more on education, thus sought the policy of encouraging private enterprise in the field of education through Grant-in-aid policy and stepped in to establish institutions only when and where it was found necessary in the absence of private efforts. (ii) British assiduously support missionary enterprise as they were found supportive to empire need- strengthening and consolidating British rule and control. Specifically during the period from 1854 to 1902 though Govt. could not of itself undertake religious teaching in its schools, the system of “

Grant-in-aid” with which it endowed the voluntary school, and its policy of maintaining complete non-interference of government in the affair of private schools and its principal activity to assist private enterprise financially and to supervise it, indirectly encouraged and supported development of religious education in the private school.”The framers of this dispatch” (1854) entertained the hope that under its provision, Hindu, and Mohammedan and Christian managers would supply, each class in its own particular way, what was already known to be a great defect of the course of instruction in Government institutions. The same hope was one of the chief reason that led the Education Commission to make and the Govt. of India to adopt the recommendation that the improvement and extension of institutions under private management be the principle care of the department.³ Consequently in most of the provinces teaching of moral instructions combined with religion, were the usual practice in private school. But as private enterprise was limited and confined mostly to missionary enterprise and the Govt. or municipal school had predominated the education of boys, so despite the freedom of education availed of by private enterprise, in the wake of growing social cultural awakening and widespread nationalist feeling in the later half of the 19th century, Indians started passing doubt over and criticizing western education provided in the government schools. Colonial education being based on the supremacy of Art, science, philosophy and literature of Europe and universal use of English as a medium of instruction, made Indian grew apprehensive about the role and nature of it. Add to their distrust and confusion, were the predominance of missionary enterprise who in collaboration with British ruler, seeking Christianization of Indian life through emphasizing on proselytization, supremacy of Christian religion and ideals, inseparable alliance between Christianity and western culture, inferior and uncivilized nature of Indian tradition and culture. Thus for Indians, British education perpetuates only the “nauseatingly materialistic, all intellectual and soul killing system,” and is not in consonance with natural ideals, national aspirations and the world-old mental characteristics” of the Indian people.⁴ Consequently increasing demand for religious instruction combined with, or to a certain extent confused with it, moral instruction accumulated over the year persuaded and prompted British Govt. to experiment with some form of religious instructions, suited to the needs of the particular community for which they were intended, in addition to secular teaching. On the subject of religious teaching, said in paragraph 12 of their letter no. 10/385, and 31 Dec. 1887 to the Govt. of United provinces- “Even in schools supported by the state something in the way of religious instruction can be effected out of school hours in accordance with established

principles.”⁵ Entrusting responsibility of religious education to the local government, it was pointed out that the Government of India desired facilities for religious instruction to be given where practicable and while leaving the matter to the discretion of the Boards required that any rules framed by any district board for giving effect to the proposal should first be submitted to Govt for approval.⁶ It was made clear that” The introduction of system which might have such a far reaching results and which involves important questions relating to the principle of the observance of strict religious neutrality by Govt. should not have been permitted without a reference to the Govt. of India”⁷

In the United provinces, the education code permits religious instruction for one hour a week to the children of parents who desired it, through an instructor agreed upon by the parents, provided that the head masters have no concern in the matter save the granting of permission at the parent’s wish, to pupils to attend the classes and their punishment, should they absent themselves therefrom and provided that no teacher on the regular staff should be religious instructor. In the Punjab the code permits religious instruction on the premises of board schools out of school hours provided that it is imparted in accordance with the rules laid down by the local body, that the instruction is specifically requested by the parent, that no teacher in regular employ be compelled to teach and that no charge for such instruction be paid from public funds.”⁸ Though as suggested from various educational reports that Government limited effort in the direction of providing religious instruction did not find many taker and failed for want of support,⁹ Yet it had effected ensuing discussion and dissention over the contentious issue of indispensability of religions education.

With the growth of nationalist fervour and social and cultural consciousness, it was increasingly felt that western education introduced was defective, lopsided and mutilated for it had sapped the foundation of ancient belief and substituted no new positive sanction of moral principles. Criticizing colonial education as it tend to develop the intellectual at the expense of moral and religious faculties, majority of Indians(Hindu and Muslim alike) supported the demand for moral education based on religion as must in the government schools for securing formation of character an essential and pivotal aim of education- of the students. It was argued that cultivation of virtues- a prerequisite for building up character- could only be possible through teaching of morals based on religious instruction. Partisan of religious education observed that moral instruction is inefficient, unless impressed by the personality of the teacher, and unless based on

religion. Arguing staunchly that secular instruction could not be the chosen instrument for the production of virtues, they said- (1) historically, religion and morality have been closely connected and it is not practically easy to draw the line where one begins and the other ends. (ii) The constant historically concomitance suggests the impracticability of formulating or manufacturing an abstract system of morality in a moral syllabus or text book loosened from its historical context. (iii) The moral laws to command obedience must be invested with authority and consecrated by tradition, and it is in these qualities that the moral text books and moral lesson divorced from religion fail.¹⁰

While majority of Indians, as reflected from the newspaper, writings, speeches and reports of educational conferences advocated religious education, a band of British official such as Mr. White, Mr. Louise and Mr. Fose (The Directors of Public Instruction, United provinces for different years) vehemently opposed the idea of introducing religious education in the government schools and contested the very idea of interwoven and inseparable relationship between religion and morality by propelling the need to understand and perceive morality in the different context based on 'reason' and 'rationality, other than being contingent upon religion. Pleading for secular understanding and meaning of 'morality, they expounded- word 'Moral' connotes the sphere of duty, and sphere of duty is co-extensive with human life and for the school boy this conception of duty should apply to his whole life at school. So a teacher who conscientiously does his best to instruct his scholars, and take care that his pupil apply themselves thoroughly and conscientiously to their lessons, setting his face against idleness and slipshod work, who discipline in them habit of obedience and good behaviors, is giving them effective moral instruction as part and parcel of the intellectual instruction he imparts and thus in doing his part in building up character."¹¹

Arguing against religious education to be essential for cultivation of morals, opponents proposed that exploration of genesis of morality suggest its being principally produced by habit and moral training secured through the exercise of discipline involving active attitude on the part of person. Thus as morality lies in the very notion of discipline which should be nothing but a system for securing the regular performance of duty, so it can't be even the subject of teaching Mr. Fose (Director of Public Instruction, United provinces) was so much against to the idea of moral teaching that he wrote: I believe that the way of progress in "removing the defects of the present system of education and influencing the rising generation for good" lies not in any sudden extension of so called moral instruction but in gradually

improving the quality of instruction, strengthening the discipline and what is secret of both-raising the standard of character and capacity in the teaching profession.”¹² It is clear that the educational department had been consistently opposed to the scheme of religious instructions in Government schools and had merely carried out the orders of Government

Colonial govt. in order to correct alleged defect of education declared the ‘Formation of character’ to be the main objective of education policy through the resolution of 1913, and acceded to provide direct moral instruction and practices the incorporation of moral teaching in the Government system by means of a general text book incorporating secular moral lessons i.e. not imbibed from or influenced by any religion. But as she had pledged irrevocably to religious neutrality, it became near impossible for her to provide morality sanctioned under religion. Further, it was also thought that granting for equal opportunity in the government and municipal schools for parallel instruction in the various faiths would not meet the special case of the Hindus and might possibly complicate the position of mission school. Besides it, there was a larger truth about the impossibility of having a common religious teaching acceptable to various denominations or rival faiths lurking behind the Government education policy.

II

Though it seemed that the moot question of conflict between the partisan and opponent of religious education was the question of formation of character and Government tried to resolve it through declaring the formation of character and the training of good and productive citizen as the main task of education and the achievement of it through the good and effective method within the limits prescribed by economy and public opinion,”¹³ but the larger question lurking beneath the contention-recognition of the source from where the legitimacy of the morality of education should be derived- which could of deciding and judgemental in value on the moot question of conflict, remained deliberately unanswered and unrecognized And it is to seek answer to the very question universal understanding of education ought to be explored.

Universal understanding of the objective and meaning of education suggest essence of education lies in the realization of its main goal ‘The integral formation of man’, which is subdivided into three parts (1) Personal growth The growth of his unique personality; (ii) His adjustment to the environment and integration into community, society and nation; (iii) World citizenship - His acceptance of responsibility in

the universal brotherhood of man at the international level (i.e. Appreciation for fundamental rights, international understanding and cooperation and peace.) “Accomplishment of the goals/objectives can be assessed through the development of virtues - knowledge, attitude, values, skills and habits- based on reason’ in a man. It is in this very essence of education lies the source of “Moral or virtues of education Thus the legitimacy of morality of education ought to be derived from the essential realization of the goal of education deeply rooted in the experience of ultimate human concern - securing human good through the system of securing the regular performance of duty.

As Comprehensive understanding of education suggest in more than obvious way that cultivation of morals/ virtues for the formation of character subsist more on secular basis of moral teaching than religion, British uninterestedness for religious education and efforts for retaining the policy of religiously neutral education in government schools deemed more appropriate and just, and helped though inadvertently, in laying the foundation for secular education in India. Principal Paranje of the Fergusson college at Poona, in arguing at the Bombay educational conference for a secular basis for moral teaching, rightly observed-In times like ours where landmarks that were but yesterday regarded as perennial are being removed today and are likely to be forgotten tomorrow, it is best not to cling to too many rocks, The one solid rock on which we can rest is our own reason. If eating pork is a heinous sin with one set of people, beef with another, and many meat at all with a third, how can the alleged basis of morality be regarded as absolute Especially when, as in India, there are various religion, each religion divided into innumerable sect, and each sect divided into many separate section, when the feeling aroused by any religious question is of a pitch which can hereby be conceived in western countries, when the responsibility of a man is inverse ratio to the number of people, he is able to associate with without coming into conflict with the prevailing religious ideas, it will be seen that less we have to do with religion in moulding the character of young children the better for our national being. Let boys be taught to see that there is some principles which they can all believe irrespective of the fact that they belong to our religion or several. It is only in this way that our various races can be brought closer together.”¹⁵

III

The disapproval of religious education in Government schools by British in the multi religious, multicultural cast based feudal society of India where before the advent of colonial rule, education imparted was of mostly religious in nature and was delivered according to the specific

caste with the complete denial of access to education for lower caste and women, seemed cast important influence in shaping the secular tradition and character of education in modern Indian state. Further, British official's opinion and efforts regarding resolution of the moot problem of question of character through advocating secular basis for moral teaching in complete dissociation with religion, provided gainful understanding for contemporary India besieged by the growing threat of religious fundamentalism/ fanaticism that, unless every citizen of India do appreciate and repose trust in secular understanding of education or secular basis of morality, secular foundation of India will continue to reel under threat from religious fundamentalist forces.

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