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MULTICULTURALISM AND EDUCATION: THE INDIAN EXPERIENCE[1]

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Abstract

This paper analyses some important issues in the interface between multiculturalism and education in India. It is divided into six parts: Part One outlines the socio-cultural diversities in the country and the responses to thereof. Parts Two, Three and Four examine respectively the federal dilemma, the language question, and the dimension of religion in education. Part Five analyses the problems and prospects of multicultural education. And Part Six reflects on the possible grammar of multicultural education in India.

> Education is the influence exercised by adult generations on those that are not yet ready for social life. Its object is to arouse and develop in the child a certain number of physical, intellectual and moral states which are demanded of him by both the political society as a whole and the special milieu for which he is specifically destined (Durkheim 1956: 71).

Worldwide, "multiculturalism" has been gaining prominence on the academic agenda of social sciences. To be sure, the idea underlying the concept of multiculturalism is not novel; it can be traced to the now out-of-fashion concept of "plural society", originally conceived by J.S. Furnivall in 1939 and developed by other scholars (see Furnivall 1948 and Smith 1965: 66-91). However, the context of the changing contours of ethnic and socio-cultural groups vis-à-vis politico-geographical boundaries has given new currency to this concept and its underlying ideology.[2]

For more than 50 years, India has celebrated and trumpeted its ethnic, cultural, religious, and linguistic plurality or "multiculturality". "Unity in diversity" has been a familiar and

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"overworked cliché" (Dube 1992: 29), used not only by politicians in India but also by her intellectuals. However, it is only since the mid-1980s that the reality of multicultural existence has been formulated and advanced as an explicit ideology. The making of an "ism" (an ideology) of multicultural existence is something more than a mere semantic shift. Essentially, it underscores the emergent reaction to the metamorphosis of nationalism in India.

Nationalism in India, as it has been conventionally understood in social sciences, referred to the movement that emerged as a reaction to the British (and more generally, the European) colonialism. It was primarily articulated and spearheaded by the Indian National Congress. It is not surprising that the exit of the British in 1947 saw political power being transferred to the Congress. The nature of this political nationalism and its centralising tendency has been the subject of analysis and interpretation by social scientists of various ideological hues.

The concern with this type of nationalism is now passé. As if reflecting this, the political fortunes of the once mighty Congress party have also dwindled. More important, the country is now engaged in reinventing the nation, and this process is willy-nilly directed by a fuzzy and controversial brand of religion-based "cultural nationalism" (euphemism for "Hindu nationalism") advocated by the Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP) and its allied quasi-political organisations. In fact, the rise of the BJP since the mid-1980s has been inversely related to the fall of the Congress,[3] and this change has come about through the medium of democratic elections.

As an ideology, multiculturalism in India is essentially a reaction to, or the antithesis of, the inevitably "majoritarian", possibly exclusivist, and potentially intolerant tendencies inherent in "cultural nationalism". It stands for an inclusive socio-political space for the plurality of ethnic, religious and cultural groups inhabiting the geopolitical area that is India. The juxtaposition between nationalism (be it "political" or "cultural") and multiculturalism constitutes the political ferment that will determine the form India takes as a nation-state.

It is in this background that we have to understand India's experience of the interface between multiculturalism and education.[4] Her proverbial socio-cultural diversities make India a laboratory case for understanding this interface, an interface that will have profound significance for her experiment with nation-building.

I. Socio-Cultural Diversities: Recognition and Responses

"The People of India" (POI), a comprehensive ethnographic survey launched by the Anthropological Survey of India (October 1985-March 1992), identified 4,635 diverse communities which are "marked by endogamy, occupation and perception" (K.S. Singh 1992: 23). While *endogamy* (a kinship principle) and *occupation* (an economic-activity category) are objectively observable criteria, *perception* is essentially a socio-psychological phenomenon that characterises a community's identity. In India, this identity has been articulated in religious, linguistic and ethnic/cultural terms.

According to the 2001 Census, an overwhelming majority of India's people identified themselves as Hindus (80.5%). Muslims (13.4%) constituted the single largest minority group, followed by Christians (2.3%), Sikhs (2.0%), Buddhists (0.8%), Jains (0.4%), and others (0.6%) in that order. While percentage is a convenient device for comparison, in a country of billion-plus people like India, it does not present the reality in all its magnitude. For example, Muslims, who constitute 13.4 per cent of the population, are 138 million in number, and in absolute numbers, India has the largest number of Muslims next only to Indonesia. As many as 385 communities profess various forms of tribal/folk religion (K.S. Singh 1993: 19).

The distribution of people in terms of their linguistic identities is more diverse than in terms of their religion: The POI survey lists 325 languages spoken by various communities, the 1991 Census identified 114 languages and 216 mother tongues with a strength of 10,000 and above, and the Eighth Schedule of the Constitution of India recognises 22 languages. According to the 1991 Census, the single largest group of people identified themselves as speakers of Hindi

(40.2%), the official language of India. Bengali (8.3%), Telugu (7.9%), Marathi (7.5%), Tamil (6.3%), Urdu (5.2%), Gujarati (4.9%), Kannada (3.9%), Malayalam (3.6%), Oriya (3.4%), Punjabi (2.8%) and Assamese (1.6%) are the other 11 languages spoken by more than 1 per cent of the population.

Concerning these diversities two points need to be made: First, as Yogendra Singh (2000: 46) argues, the POI survey affirms that "the diversity of communities does not reduce the nature of sociological reality of states/union territories. More than 71 per cent of the communities are located within the boundaries of states/union territories". That is, states/union territories of India are not only linguistic and cultural categories but also sociological ones. This implies that the question of diversities within its boundaries becomes the concern of the state/union territory governments as the case may be.

Second, and more important, neither the recognition of the reality of socio-cultural plurality nor the need for or importance of its effective handling is a recent phenomenon. The British administration in India not only recognised the phenomenal diversity of its colonial subjects, but also initiated the earliest steps for their systematic documentation. Having been essentialised through such documentation, religion, caste and language became crucial determinants of political life in the decades preceding independence. The leaders of the nationalist movement had sought, though not always successfully, to relegate these diversities to the background. However, the British, as the history books tell us, skilfully adopted "divide and rule" as an effective strategy. They sowed the seeds of division and disharmony among communities, or sharpened them where they existed. Partition of India and the creation of Pakistan based on religion were only the logical culmination of the process set in motion by the British rulers. Partition has had a lasting impact on India both internally, in the management of the inter-religious relationship between the Muslims and other religious groups (mainly the Hindus), and externally, in its relationship with Pakistan.

The members of the Constituent Assembly that drafted the Constitution of India after India became independent in 1947 recognised the infinite plurality of her population and consciously adopted explicit provisions for safeguarding their rights to conserve their culture. Through the Constitution of the Republic of India, adopted by the Constituent Assembly on 26 November 1949 and which came into force on 26 January 1950, "The People of India" resolved "to secure to all its citizens: *Justice*, social, economic and political; *Liberty* of thought, expression, belief, faith and worship; *Equality* of status and opportunity; and to promote among them all *Fraternity* assuring the dignity of the individual and the unity of the Nation". Thus began India's experiment in reconciling two apparently contradictory forces, namely, nation building and multiculturalism.

Since people are the recipients of education as a resource, and the state, as a hegemonic enterprise, seeks to control its distribution, contents and orientation, the experiment to reconcile multiculturalism and nation-building has profound significance for education: On the one hand, this experiment has influenced the developments in the educational sphere; on the other hand, the developments in education have implications for the outcome of this experiment. In what follows, we shall focus on some of the important dimensions of multiculturalism and nation building as they relate to education in India.

II. The Federal Dilemma in Education: The Centre and the States

In the language of political science, India is a quasi-federal republic: The country is divided into 29 constituent states (each governed by a democratically elected state government) and six union territories (administered directly by the government of India). There is, however, a strong unitary tendency in the form of the central government (that is, the government of India), called popularly the "Centre". The central government has total control over almost 100 most important matters, including defence and foreign affairs, and shares a "Concurrent List" of about 50 subjects with state governments, retaining residual powers for any matter not listed in the Constitution. While the state governments control about 60 matters, including agriculture, land revenue, police and public welfare, they remain clearly subordinate to

the central government in most matters and during any emergency interlude.

Under the Constitution of India, education was largely the responsibility of the states, the central government being concerned only with certain areas like co-ordination and determination of standards in technical and higher education. In January 1977, through the 42nd Amendment the central government was empowered to legislate on education concurrently with the states. Though the central government thereby established supremacy over education, the hopes of a national reform in education that this amendment aroused failed to materialise. With the hegemonic Congress rule at the centre and the gradual deterioration of the relationship between the centre and some states,[5] no government at the centre could take any bold steps in the realm of education confidently.

As it stands today, school education – including primary (the first seven years), secondary (the next three years) and higher secondary (the last two years) stages of schooling – largely remains the responsibility of the states. To the extent that the states are "cultural regions", encapsulating historical, regional, linguistic, and cultural identities, they are apparently better placed to take care of the diversities of the pan-India level, especially in view of the unitary tendency of the centre. However, no state in India is culturally homogeneous and all need to address multicultural demands articulated by the respective groups, be they linguistic, religious, caste, or ethnic/cultural.

For instance, though the dominant language in a state is the essence of its identity, no state (or even union territory) is entirely homogeneous, and communication within any given state involves more than one language. "The minority languages in the state range from 5 per cent (Kerala) to nearly 85 per cent (Nagaland) of their respective populations" (Krishna 1991: 28). The same is true of religion, and more so of caste. In no state, therefore, is the educational sphere free from claims and contestations concerning recognition and incorporation of diversities, even as each state strives to attain some uniformity across within its boundary. That is, both at the centre and

the state levels there is constant balancing between multicultural demands and unitary tendencies in the sphere of education.

The ambits within which the states have to address multicultural demands in school education are, no doubt, limited by the diversities in their respective regions. However, school education is not confined to the jurisdiction of the states. The centre, too, directs and regulates an all-India system of school education under the aegis of the Central Board of Secondary Education (CBSE). There are three types of schools under this system: Kendriya Vidyalayas,[6] Navodaya Vidyalayas,[7] and other affiliated schools. The CBSE prescribes a standardised common curriculum for all schools under its umbrella. In the formulation of this curriculum, and the preparation of textbooks thereof, the National Council of Educational Research and Training (NCERT, established in September 1961), an organisation that is directly under the control of the central government's Ministry of Human Resources Development, plays an important role.

Not surprisingly, the curriculum and textbooks of NCERT have become a bone of contention ever since "cultural nationalism", which had been hitherto advocated by the BJP and its allied quasi-political organisations, came to be implemented by the National Democratic Alliance government led by the BJP in 1999 (see SAHMAT 2002 and Kumkum Roy 2002). Opposition parties, mainly those with Left leanings, and the self-proclaimed sentinels of secularism have been critical of the so-called "saffronisation"[8] of education. The matter has been taken up at the highest level of the judiciary, namely, the Supreme Court of India. The states in which parties or coalitions opposed to the BJP ideology were in power have categorically eschewed the use of NCERT curricula or textbooks or selectively used them in their school systems.

Apart from the CBSE school system, the open schooling under the authority of the National Open School (established in November 1989) and the schools affiliated to the Council for the Indian School Certificate Examinations (CISCE) – the Indian Council of Secondary Education (ICSE) and the Indian School Certificate (ISC) examinations at the end of Standards X and XII, respectively - and the Indian Public Schools Conference (IPSC, formed in October 1939)

are other school systems with an all-India span. While these systems prescribe their own curricula and textbooks, the IPSC-affiliated schools have considerable freedom in using textbooks of their choice.

Although the National Open School is an autonomous body, it is under the constant influence of the central government. Nevertheless, given the extra-mural nature of schooling it offers, and its limited (about 220,000 students) and dispersed coverage, its unitary strain has seldom been controversial. The schools affiliated to other all India umbrella bodies such as CISCE and IPSC are invariably run by religious minority groups, especially Christian, or some foundations. These schools generally cater to the elite sections of the population. They enjoy considerable flexibility in what they teach (curriculum) and how it is taught (pedagogy). Considering the elite tag attached to the certificates by these school systems, students from other religious groups seldom have any problem with the religious orientation of these schools.

To provide a new initiative and a special thrust to achieve universalisation of elementary education, the central government launched the District Primary Education Programme in 1994. This programme envisaged decentralised management, participatory process, empowerment and capacity building at all levels. It was implemented through state-level registered societies, and the expenditure was shared by the central and the state governments in the ratio of 85:15. The emphasis on decentralisation and participatory processes in the programme was expected to foster and promote multiculturalism. This programme was superseded by the Sarva Siksha Abhiyan in 2001.

The situation concerning higher education is more complicated. In India, the term "higher education" suggests too much of a homogeneity, glossing over the enormous structural and functional diversities within the system. Broadly defined, it includes the entire spectrum of education beyond 12 years of formal schooling. As for their structure, the most Indian universities belong to the *affiliating* type which, besides their own departments of studies, have a large number of colleges affiliated to them. As for their legal status and

regulative responsibility, the universities are of three types: the central universities (established by an act of Parliament, and regulated directly by the central government's Ministry of Human Resource Development), state universities (established by an act of state assemblies, and regulated by the respective state governments), and institutions "deemed-to-be-universities" under Section 3 of the University Grants Commission Act 1956. Besides, the central government has conferred upon 11 university-level institutions the status of "institutions of national importance". Furthermore, there are eight open universities and 41institutes or directorates of distance education functioning under conventional universities. In India, the concept of private universities is nascent.

The question of multiculturalism inevitably crops up in the sphere of higher education, too. As in school education, in higher education also, the state governments seek to safeguard their regional interests vis-à-vis the unitary thrust of the central government. The opposition from some states, especially those opposed to the ideology of "cultural nationalism" propounded by the BJP, to some courses of study (e.g., astrology and priestcraft) proposed to be introduced in universities and colleges is a case in point. But then, the state governments have to contend with multicultural demands faced by the universities established by them. Even so, internally the state universities tend to be parochial and inward looking, as compared with central universities and national level institutions which are broad based, expansive and outward looking. We may note, however, that the state universities cannot pursue their parochial ends beyond a particular limit, as they are humiliatingly dependent financially on the central government. Furthermore, ineffective as they no doubt have been, the national-level bodies like the University Grants Commission (UGC, established in 1956) and National Assessment and Accreditation Council (NAAC, established in 1994) try to rein the state universities.

III. The Language Question in Education: Colonial Legacy and Post-Colonial Dilemma

The earliest attempt to impart education in India, as it exists today, can be traced to the missionary activities following the establishment of the East India Company and the measures adopted by Warren

Hastings as early as 1773. The protracted controversy that this generated – between the "Anglicists" commending a western course and the "Orientalists" favouring an indigenous direction – was finally resolved by William Bentinck in favour of the Anglicist orientation, barely a month after Thomas Babington Macaulay had penned his (in)famous *Minute* (on 2 February 1835). His policy was reaffirmed by Charles Wood's *Despatch* (of 19 July 1854), and with minor modifications continued throughout the British rule.

The system of education that the British introduced was modelled after the system prevalent in their mother country. The striking feature of this educational transplantation was English, which was not only taught as a language but also became the medium of instruction. While the secondary school certificate examination was conducted only in English till 1937, English was almost exclusively used at the university stage right through the colonial period. The excessive emphasis on the mastering of English as a language often eclipsed the purpose of education: it encouraged mechanical learning through memorising and discouraged inquisitiveness and an experimental bent of mind. There was a simultaneous devaluation of the indigenous languages, and a sad neglect of their development.

The spread of national awakening and the growing prospects of independence brought to the fore the question of the national language and the replacement of English by Indian languages in education. A definite result of the nationalist movement and the efforts of the Hindi zealots to impose that language on all non-Hindi speaking states after independence has been the "ideologisation" of Hindi in the six Hindi-speaking states, and the glorification of the respective regional languages in the non-Hindi-speaking states. Linguistic ethnocentrism has now taken deep roots in several states.

In all the states, especially the non-Hindi-speaking ones, there has been considerable ongoing controversy about the instruction of languages. The context of the debate on language instruction at the school level is provided by the "three language formula", which was adopted as part of the National Education Policy in 1968. According to this formula, every secondary school student must compulsorily learn at least three languages. In the non-Hindi-speaking states these three

languages are: one's mother tongue or regional language (L1), Hindi as the national language (L2), and English as a foreign language (L3). In the Hindi-speaking states English will be L2 and one of the modern Indian languages listed in the Eighth Schedule of the Constitution L3. While all the states accepted this policy in principle, it has either not been implemented (as in Tamil Nadu) or been implemented half-heartedly (as in Andhra Pradesh and Karnataka) or as a sham (as in Uttar Pradesh and Bihar).

As can be expected, linguistic chauvinism has adverse consequences for linguistic minorities living in a state, raising questions of constitutional safeguards, just as it opens new arenas of social confrontation. In Karnataka, a prolonged agitation led by the protagonists of Kannada had led the government of Karnataka in 1982 to pass an order that made the teaching of Kannada compulsory at the primary school level, and accorded Kannada the sole "first language" status.[9] This order did not find favour with those who wanted the freedom to choose the language of study, and particularly with the educational institutions run by linguistic minorities, who challenged its constitutional validity. The High Court of Karnataka upheld the contention of these institutions and struck down the government order in January 1989.

A status survey of language instruction in the country revealed that, of the 1,652 mother tongues listed by the 1961 Census, only 51 languages are spoken by more than 100,000 people each. Of these 51 languages, 16 have no script of their own, and only the remaining 35 languages are accepted as media of instruction at the school level (see Chaturvedi and Mahale 1976; Chaturvedi and Singh 1981). D.P. Pattanayak (1981: xii) hypothesises that the disjunction between the home languages and the school language is responsible not only for wastage and stagnation but also for "the development of a low self-image and lower achievement all through education in the schools". This is more piquant considering that, despite the great diversity of languages, the people of India are mostly monolingual.

Concerning higher education, in the mid-1960s the *Report of the Education Commission (1964-66)* emphasised the need "to move energetically in the direction of adopting the regional languages as

media of education …" (Ministry of Education 1971: 527). However, English has not only persisted but is still the predominant medium of instruction, especially at the postgraduate level and in science and professional courses. The progress in the switch over from English as the medium of instruction, though still insignificant, is better in Hindi than in other regional languages. Even so such a switch over is mostly confined to arts, education, and to some extent to basic science courses at the undergraduate level. A review of the trends in the medium of instruction in higher education concluded that "a complete switch over to the regional languages as media of instruction at all levels and in all courses is not a possibility in the foreseeable future" (Jayaram 1993: 112).

Any attempt by the government to force the pace of the switch over to the regional languages as media of instruction is politically resisted through students' agitations and legally stalled by invoking the constitutional guarantees, especially those meant for the linguistic minorities. In May 1971, the Constitution Bench of the Supreme Court of India held that no university in the country could declare a particular regional language as the sole medium of instruction and examination, as it would infringe the rights enshrined in the Constitution.

Systematic data on the preferences of the medium of instruction of students, and of parents for their wards, are hard to come by. The Review Commission of Universities in Karnataka also "found widespread preference among students, even from rural areas, for the English medium" (Government of Karnataka 1980: 5). How much is such a preference for English as the medium of instruction characteristic of university students in the Hindi-speaking states is difficult to state. Nevertheless, the pronounced preference for English rather than the regional language as the medium of instruction in some states calls for some explanation. From the point of view of education, easier access to the large body of technical literature, and greater scope for and facility of communication are often stressed. From the point of view of the students, the perception of more and better employment opportunities, and the possibility of greater mobility within and outside the country seem important. A combination of these two sets of factors seems to infuse among students "a fear of being treated as an inferior category among the educated, unless the courses are taken in the

English medium", and this fear is an important factor in their aversion to the regional language medium (Government of Karnataka 1980: 5).

Selective bilingualism is often advocated as a transitory policy option. The introduction of the regional language as the medium of instruction in one or two subjects/papers, with the option given to the students to answer the examination either in English or in the regional language, is an element of such a policy. While selective bilingualism is apparently a more democratic measure, its consequences are not likely to be necessarily egalitarian. The variety of standards that is inevitable in the transitory period coupled with the fact that command over languages (such as English, for instance) constitutes an important socio-economic and political asset, would result in the emergence of at least three categories of elite, educated respectively in English, Hindi and the regional language medium, and results in differential exploitation of resources by them. Thus, at least in the transitory period the process is more likely to contribute to the reproduction of inequality across various cultural groups.

Whatever may be the medium of instruction, English can be given up only at grave peril to the educational system in India. This is vindicated by the fact that, even in countries which have been politically and culturally distant from the English-speaking world, ever more people are learning English as a first foreign language. This is being realised even in those states (not only Hindi-speaking ones) in India which had been politically antipathetic till recently to the continuation of English in education in any form, as it is a manifestation of the "cultural imperialism" of the West. It is interesting that in spite of the official efforts at banishment of English in these states, and notwithstanding their conscious promotion of Hindi/regional languages there, English has not only survived but even seems to be thriving. English is still the most widely known second language followed by Hindi, and in fact, more Indians want to learn it today than ever before.

IV. Religion and Education: The Minority Rights

It is well known that, in India, the primordial identities and interests rooted in religion and caste have a determining influence on social and political life. During the colonial era, the leaders of the nationalist

movement had sought, though not always successfully, to relegate them to the background. The dawn of independence brought them to the fore, and the adoption of the republican form of democracy converted them into significant pivots around which group interests could be articulated and major confrontations could jell.

Partition of India on the eve of independence in August 1947, and the creation of Pakistan based on religion, had resulted in a violent turmoil and a permanent cleavage between the majority Hindus and the minority Muslims. Playing the card of political nationalism and adopting a policy of keeping the religious minorities in good humour, the successive Congress party governments at the centre ignored the incipient subterranean majoritarian ideology and assumedly kept the politics of religious confrontation at bay. However, the situation started changing with the decline of the legitimacy of Congress party in the aftermath of the infamous Emergency era (1975-77) and the ascendancy of the BJP, a right-wing Hindu nationalist party.

The rise of the BJP as the single largest political party has profound significance for the political dynamics of modern India. The success of the BJP lies in articulating the nationalist imagination in religious and cultural terms, confirming the strong affinity between "nationalist imagining" and "religious imagining" emphasised by Benedict Anderson (1983: 19). To the extent that the BJP seeks to articulate the aspirations of the Hindus, nebulous and heterogeneous as their religion may be,[10] and consolidate their religious/cultural identity, the trend towards "majoritarianism" is discernible.

The trend towards Hindu majoritarianism in a country where the Hindus constitute the overwhelming majority (80.5%) of the population is only to be expected. It is, however, viewed, and justifiably so, with suspicion and apprehension by the minorities. The growing psychology of fear among them is to be understood in this context. Apart from turning communalism, defined as the "antagonistic mobilisation of one religious community against another" (Ludden 1996: 1), into a perennial problem, the majoritarian "cultural nationalism" has resulted in contestations over every issue involving religion, including education.

It must be pointed out that, in India, contrary to common belief, neither the Muslims nor the Christians constitute a socially homogeneous community. Both are characterised by regional and linguistic variations and highly unequal systems of social stratification with caste-like formations. Among both these communities, religion has functioned as an effective ideological apparatus, insulating the contradictions within the community. However, a major distinction between the Muslims and the Christians in India worth noting is that, while religion "never imparted a socio-cultural identity to the Christians" (Rodrigues 1989: 254), it has fostered such an identity among the Muslims, an identity that is both "self-defined" and "other recognised". This is explained by the convergence and jelling of ethnicity and socio-economic status over a period, which accentuated ethnic distinction and awareness (see Phadnis 1990: 19). This fact should be borne in mind while discussing and interpreting the differential ethnic responses of the Muslims and the Christians in almost every realm, including education.

Very little macro-level data are available on the educational situation among the religious minorities in India. As a conscious policy to arrest divisive tendencies, the Census of India no more presents data on literacy, education or occupation according to religion. Available data on the educational situation among the Muslims show that at the high school level and higher, the Muslims are at least three to four times behind other communities. The enrolment of Muslim children in primary schools is generally poor, even in those areas where the Muslims constitute a majority. A significant majority of those enrolled attend Muslim schools or Urdu-medium schools wherever such schools exist. The enrolment of Muslim girls is extremely low. Moreover, the drop-out rate is much higher for Muslim students as compared with their non-Muslim counterparts. Not surprisingly, the Muslims are reported to have one of the lowest literacy rates in India.

It is often argued that only a very small section of the Muslim population looks forward to the charmed realm of professions or government employment through higher education. The projection of the problems of this small section of the community as the problems of the entire community is therefore held to be unjustified (see Saxena 1989: 156-57). This argument is also sought to be buttressed by the

fact that even among the Hindus the educational opportunities are unequally distributed. This position is tantamount to generalising the problem of educational backwardness at the societal level and ignoring its religious dimension. Though such a generalisation is valid from the vantage point of class analysis, one can hardly ignore the glaring educational backwardness of the Muslims as a minority community *per se*. This position is particularly disquieting in view of the contrasting educational situation among the Christians.

Of the various spheres of activity on which the Christian missionaries in India put an indelible stamp, education is the foremost. They established, generally as an extension of the Church, schools and colleges over the length and breadth of the country, many of which rank among the best even today. More important, unlike the Muslims, the Christians did not have any cultural or religious inhibitions in accepting Western education. A large number of Christian boys and girls received education in the missionary institutions. Thus, along with the Brahmins and other upper caste Hindus, the Christians too could get ahead in the sphere of education and thereby take advantage of the emerging economic opportunities in modern India. This explains the favourable educational situation of the Christians as compared with that of the Muslims, and even to that among the Hindus.

It is important to note that partition, which impacted the Muslim ethnicity significantly, hardly affected the ethnicity of Christians. Nevertheless, the Christians have benefited immensely from the Constitutional provisions safeguarding minority rights,[11] provisions incorporated keeping primarily the Muslims in mind. The phenomenal success of a small Christian minority in the realm of education as compared to the halting advancement of the large Muslim minority can also be explained by elucidating an economic postulate of the principle of "minority effect".[12] As Ratna Naidu (1980: 33) puts it, the "opportunities open to a minority seem also to be related to its size". She quotes economist A.M. Khusro, who found that "the majority gets opportunities roughly proportional to its population, a small minority more than proportional and a large minority less than proportional to its numbers".

Finally, the efforts of the Muslim leadership (including invoking the constitutional guarantees for minorities) have been primarily directed at safeguarding the religious interests of the community and at resisting any felt assaults on its socio-religious identity. But, in the case of the Christians, as Valerian Rodrigues (1989: 260-61) has argued with reference to the Catholic hierarchy in the Dakshina Kannada district of Karnataka, their educational institutions (as also other institutions such as hospitals) are the key instruments through which "the Church hierarchy wields its clout in the society at large", apart from being the principal means of socio-economic advancement for the Church members.

The problem of Muslim educational backwardness is aggravated by the sense of insecurity of the Muslim community consequent upon partition of the country, as also the suspicion to which they are subjected by the praxis of cultural nationalism.[13] It is a problem that has to be tackled primarily in ethnic terms. This necessarily implies that serious and sincere efforts must be made not only to reduce ethnic inequalities but also convince the Muslim minority that this is indeed being done. Pursuing of the revised Programme of Action (1992), in 1993-94, the central government launched two new schemes: (1) Area Intensive Programme for Educationally Backward Minorities, a scheme that gives intensive attention to educational development in areas identified as having large concentration of educationally backward religious minorities, and (2) Financial Assistance for Modernisation of Madrasa Education, a scheme that encourages the traditional Muslim educational institutions like the *madrasa* and *maktabs* to introduce science, mathematics, social studies, Hindi and English in their curriculum.

In the ultimate analysis, however, the impetus for the educational progress of the Muslims has to come from within the community itself, just as it has come about in the case of the Christians and other religious minorities. M.R.A. Baig (1974), a reputed Muslim intellectual, has traced the roots of the community's stagnation to the general orthodoxy imposed upon it by the intermingling of religion and socio-economic issues. Thus, it cannot be denied that the immense responsibility of carving out a progressive world-view to draw the Muslims into the mainstream of national life and ensure their progress

within it lies with the leadership of the community itself. The quintessential element of this progressive world-view has to be modern education.

V. Multicultural Education: Problems and Prospects

As noted earlier, India is a multicultural country *par excellence*; its diversities are socio-historically rooted and politically entrenched. In such a country, nation building is a problematic exercise: it involves fostering national unity, on the one hand, and addressing cultural specificities of the country's multifarious communities, on the other. For the political managers, whatever their ideological orientation, the task of balancing between the majoritarian strain for uniformity and the multiculturality of the populace is daunting indeed. The problems and prospects of multicultural education in India have to be understood in the background of this socio-political challenge.

In the preceding three sections, we have examined the relation between multiculturalism and education from the vantage point of egalitarianism or the equality of opportunities. The issue was discussed keeping in view the constitutional guarantees as they relate to the principles of federalism (or centre-states relationship) and the rights of the linguistic and religious minorities. Important as it obviously is, the problem of equality of educational opportunities does not exhaust multiculturalism's concern with education. In what follows let us analyse two salient issues of multicultural education in India, namely, symbolic representation of different communities and cultures, and religious instruction in schools.

There is no gainsaying that, in inter-community dynamics, especially in the context of cultural differences and majority-minority relations, apart from the considerations of material possessions and availability of opportunities, the socio-psychological phenomenon of identity of the community and its symbolic representation becomes important. Often, the claims and counterclaims for symbolic representation are more important than material concerns. Thus, not surprisingly, the first issue concerning multicultural education consists of the symbolic representation of different communities in the curriculum and textbooks. This is particularly so in subjects such as history, social sciences or social studies, and the languages.

During the colonial period, the curricula and the textbooks used were filtered through the western, particularly the British, lens. They were indifferent to or prejudiced against the native cultures, philosophy, events and heroes of India. The textbooks were mostly written by British authors or by Indian authors who would toe the British line. These textbooks were imported into India or published by branch agencies that had their head offices in Great Britain. For sometime after independence too, the implanted curricula and imported textbooks remained in currency in Indian education. However, gradually, becoming conscious of their biases and prejudices, these curricula and textbooks were replaced to present a "correct" picture from an Indian nationalist point of view.

As the euphoria of independence and nationalism (vis-à-vis the British colonialism) began waning and sub-nationalism and cultural differences raised their heads, representations and interpretations in curricula and textbooks became contentious. A reference to the contentions about the curricula and textbooks prepared by the NCERT, under the influence of the central government committed to the ideology of "cultural nationalism", was made earlier. However, such contentions are not restricted to the NCERT textbooks. School curricula and textbooks have been equally contentious within each state, highlighting essential multiculturality of the population across the country.

The contentions in curricula and textbooks concern the cultural space allocated to specific communities or cultural groupings. They concern the representation of the "heroes" or champions of the community, region or locality and their role or contribution to the national, regional or local life. They may also concern the representation of key events – the freedom struggle, reform movements, cultural contributions – in which the community had a role. Since the symbolic meaning that these "heroes" and events carry for different communities or cultural groupings is not necessarily shared by others, the interpretation of their representations in textbooks often becomes controversial and lead to agitations and even violence. In India, thus, addressing multiculturalism in curriculum development and preparation of textbooks is challenging.

The second point of contestation has centred on religious instruction in schools. In the case of schools run by minority religious communities, the constitutional provisions guarantee their right to impart religious instruction. While the Muslim *madrasas* have religious instruction as their primary objective, given their excessive religious orientation and often the use of Urdu as the medium of instruction, schools run by the Muslims, seldom have children belonging to other religious communities. The educational institutions run by the Christians, whatever be the denomination (the Roman Catholic or Jesuit, Protestant Missionaries, or others), are broad based in their student intake, as these institutions are more open, and often western too, in their orientation. In these institutions, while religious instruction is invariably provided for Christian students (or at least those belonging to the particular denomination), non-Christian students are offered a veiled and less objectionable form of religious instruction, euphemistically called "moral education".

However, the situation in government schools and non-minority grant-in-aid private schools (that is, schools receiving financial assistance from the government) is problematic. These schools have to think of a religion-neutral moral/value education, which is difficult; or smuggle in Hindu religious instruction, if it is not objected to; or eschew religious instruction altogether, in case of confrontation, real or anticipated. But sometimes, in these schools, the practice of commencing the day's work with prayers or recitation of national songs, or even the national anthem, has been objected to on religious grounds and provoked controversy. Similarly, most government and grant-in-aid private schools display the photographs or idols of Hindu gods or goddesses in their premises, especially that of Saraswathi, the goddess of learning. This too, has sometimes become a matter of controversy. There are also cases of teachers and students belonging to minority communities demanding a prayer-break during school/college hours and a place for prayers within the school/college premises.

It must be noted that contestations over the cultural content of education have increased in number and intensity during the last 25 years. These contestations have not remained democratic in spirit and confined to public discourse in the media or the legislature or petitions in the courts. They have resulted in political mobilisation and protests,

often becoming violent. That such contestations are now more than ever before is explained by the fact that, with the spread of educational facilities, the composition of teachers and students has been becoming ever more heterogeneous. The entrance of the first generation of students and teachers from the communities and cultural groupings which had no exposure to education earlier, and their becoming culturally assertive and engaging in identity politics are significant developments in the Indian educational scene. Furthermore, there is now greater heterogeneity between the teachers and the taught and greater scope for the interplay of multifarious belief and value systems. It is in this context that we have to understand the controversy over the central government's prescriptions for "strengthening culture and values in education" and directions for teaching fundamental duties as part of the school/college curriculum (see Anupama Roy 2003).

Before concluding this section, we should allude to a different strain of educational thought and development in India. À la Ivan Illich and Paulo Freire, it has been argued by some scholars that school, as it exists as a model for learning in Indian society, is inappropriate to the diversity of its cultures and structures at the local level: "... ideologically it is the notion of schooling that stands as a barrier to the development of learning and that it is to the liberation of learning that we should give due attention as we also ponder on more general social liberation" (Shotton 1998: 62). Drawing from the traditional Indian teaching-learning systems (e.g., the *Guru-Shishya Parampara*) and the educational philosophy of Sri Aurobindo, Mahatma Gandhi, Jiddu Krishnamurti, and Rabindranath Tagore, there have emerged alternative educational initiatives in Indian tradition.[14] Significant as these alternative politico-educational projects are, given their circumscribed approach and extremely limited coverage (excepting the literacy campaigns/programmes, perhaps), one tends to be sceptical about their being a realistic solution to the educational challenge confronting contemporary India.

VI. Epilogue: Towards a Grammar of Multicultural Education

By surviving as a single political entity for more than five and half decades, India has belied the prophets of pessimism[15]. More important, but for the brief dark interregnum of the Emergency era in the mid-

1970s, her track record as a functioning democracy, with the largest electorate in the world, has been enviable. Democratic politics, no doubt, has a tendency to politicise all aspects of life, including region, language and religion. Accordingly, nation building in India has necessarily implied the need to address the question of reconciling effectively majoritarianism and multiculturalism.

Since diversity of cultures is an existential reality of India, multiculturalism appears to be her ineluctable ideological option. This, however, does not gainsay the importance of national unity. The relation between unity and diversity is complementary, rather than antagonistic – "unity in diversity", as the cliché encapsulates succinctly. One cannot be exaggerated without jeopardising the other. Paradoxical as it may sound, however, it appears on closer scrutiny that diverse cultures need an underlying unity, for the singularity of each culture is meaningful only in the context of general unity. However, what diversity can benefit from unity neither is automatic nor can it be taken-for-granted. It calls for a constant vigil against encroachment of one's cultural rights and a willingness to make sacrifices for coexistence. This is more easily said than done.

Education has a significant role in multiculturalism as in nation building: After all, before entering the adult world, it is within educational institutions that children and adolescents first encounter and negotiate the reality of cultural diversity. It is often asked, whether such diversity is a bane or boon for the education of children. The consequences of diversity could be beneficial: it may contribute to "creative problem solving, growth in cognitive and moral reasoning, increased perspective-taking ability, improved relationships, and general sophistication in interacting and working with peers from a variety of cultural and ethnic backgrounds". The consequences could be harmful, too: it may result in "closed-minded rejection of new information; increased egocentrism; and negative relationships characterised by hostility, rejection, divisiveness, scapegoating, bullying, stereotyping, and prejudice". As such, cultural diversity in education may increase or lower academic achievement and productivity depending upon other exigent circumstances (see Johnson and Johnson 2002: 1-2).

The Indian experience informs us that assertions, contentions and demands of multiculturalism will continue; just as the strain for unity and uniformity will remain pressed with vigour. Those concerned with the formulation of educational policies and programmes, as also those in charge of the implementation of these policies and programmes, have to be extra-sensitive to the demands of multiculturalism in education and the problems of multicultural education. It is important to bear in mind that there is no ready made or straitjacket formula for multicultural education. The grammar of multicultural education has been and will continue to evolve over a period, making adjustments and readjustments, constantly addressing and accommodating the new demands and gradually forging and stabilising the national framework

Notes

1 This is a revised version of the Keynote Address delivered at the International Conference on Globalisation and Multicultural Perspectives in Education, organised by the School of Educational Studies, Universiti Sains Malaysia, Penang on 3-4 December 2003.

2 Significantly, *The Fontana Dictionary of Modern Thought* (edited by Bullock and Stallybrass) published in 1977 carried no entry on "multiculturalism", but *The New Fontana Dictionary of Modern Thought* (edited by Bullock and Trombley) published in 1999 has a prominent entry on this item by Andrew J. Miller (see Bullock and Trombley 1999: 550). Laconically, we may define a multicultural society as a society composed of people who belong to different cultures. However, it is important to recognise their cultural differences "as springing from a universally shared attachment of importance to culture and to an implicit acknowledgement of the equality of all cultures" (Watson 2002: 2).

3 In the Lok Sabha (the Lower House of India's Parliament) elections held in 1984, the BJP won only two seats. Increasing its tally steadily over the successive elections, it has now emerged as the single largest political party in the country. That the BJP has been able to garner "votes that have been let loose from the shredded net of Congress" (Ludden 1996: 18) is explained, at least partly, by its ability to sell the ideology of "cultural nationalism". This is a political phenomenon that can hardly be brushed aside.

4 In writing this paper, I have drawn on my earlier work on multiculturalism and nation building (2000), the language question in higher education (1993), and the educational backwardness of Indian Muslims (1990).

[5] In view of India's quasi-federalism and her project to build a centralised nation-state going awry, some political scientists justifiably argue that there is an imminent need "to rethink our federal polity and plural society in order to design a *federal India* which can successfully combine 'federalism' and 'pluralism' in the institutional framework of '*self rule with shared rule*'" (Khan 1997: v).

[6] *Kendriya Vidyalayas* (central schools, established since 1963) are mainly intended to cater to children of the employees of the central government agencies, public sector undertakings, and armed forces - employees who are periodically transferred across the country. But they are open to local residents subject to the availability of vacancies. There are 877 such schools (some outside the country, too) catering to 750,000 students. They are managed by Kendriya Vidyalaya Sangathan, an autonomous body set up by the central government's Ministry of Education in December 1965.

[7] *Navodaya Vidyalayas* (model schools, launched in 1985-86) are intended to provide "good quality modern education" to talented children from the rural areas. Admission to these residential schools commences at VI Standard and is based on an entrance test conducted by the National Council of Educational Research and Training (NCERT). There are 389 such schools, at least one in each district (administrative zone) of every state.

[8] "Saffronisation" is a euphemism for the majoritarian exclusivist "Hindu nationalism". It is often used as a sobriquet to dub the ideological praxis of the BJP and its allied quasi-political organisations like the Rashtriya Swayamsevak Sangh (RSS).

[9] In educational parlance, "first language" is a new expression put together through a sort of back-formation from the familiar concept of a second language. Its vogue may be traced to the Gokak Committee Report in Karnataka state, which, in seeking to stress the primacy of Kannada in the language curricula in the schools, found it necessary to avoid any mixing up of the two concepts of "mother tongue" and "regional language".

[10] David Ludden (1996: 7) has argued that "the ideas that define Hinduism as a religion ... deeply discourage the formation of a collective Hindu religious identity among believers and practitioners. Hindu identity is multiple, by definition ...". Nevertheless, it should be recognised that Hindu identity can be and has been selectively articulated at various levels, depending upon the context and the other identities in question.

[11] Besides Fundamental Rights enshrined for all citizens irrespective of religion, caste or creed, Articles 29 and 30 of the Constitution of India specifically guarantee the rights of minorities to conserve their "distinct

language, script and culture" and "to establish and administer educational institutions of their choice".

[12] Naidu (1980: 33) cites historian B.B. Misra's coinage of the term "minority effect" to refer to that fact that "in the pre-Independence Indian states wherever the minority community had the least concentration, they were more urban, more educated and more vigorous as a community as compared to the states where they were numerically in the majority".

[13] Krishna Kumar (2002) has drawn attention to the selective narrations, contrary imaginations and contrasting interpretations of the freedom struggle in the school texts currently used in India and Pakistan. The dead weight of unrelenting hostility implicit in the Indian school texts is not without implications for the Muslim minority there.

[14] John Robert Shotton (1998: Ch. 3) has surveyed the alternative educational initiatives in India by classifying them into three general types: (1) Learner-centred literacy projects: Jan Vigyan Manch, Bihar; Dungarpur Total Literacy Campaign (TLC), Rajasthan; Ernakulam Total Literacy Programme, Kerala; TLC, Tamil Nadu; and TLC, Haryana. (2) Rural-based Development Education Schemes: Charvaha Vidyalaya, Turki, Bihar; PROPEL, Maharashtra; Shiksha Karmi Project, Rajasthan; and Lok Jumbish Project, Rajasthan. (3) Experimental Schools: Mirambika, Sri Aurobindo Ashram, New Delhi; Bangalore Education Centre (The Valley School), Mumbai Centre, Rajghat Education Centre (Varanasi), Rishi Valley Education Centre (near Madanapalle in Andhra Pradesh), and The School KFI (Chennai) run by the Krishnamurti Foundation India; Neel Bagh School, Andhra Pradesh; Deepalaya Education Society, New Delhi; and Bhubaneswar School, Orissa.

[15] One may recall here that Selig S. Harrison 's (1960: 3) analysis of the "the most dangerous decades" of post-independence India begins with Suniti Kumar Chatterji's ominous warning that she "stands the risk of being split into a number of totalitarian small nationalities".

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