

Keeping Religion out of Education

Govind Bhattacharjee

The Statesman

July 17 2015

Colleague recently returning from a visit to Tajikistan, a predominantly Muslim country with 96 percent of its estimated 8 million population practising Islam, had something very interesting to report - that Tajik law specifically prohibits, under penalty of hefty fines, children below 18 years of age from attending mosques or places of religious worship. Under the so-called "Parental Responsibility Law", parents are made responsible to ensure that underage children did not attend public religious activities with the exception of funerals; neither can they attend Hajj. Law does not prohibit parents from teaching religious beliefs to their own children in the privacy of their homes, provided the child expresses a desire to learn, but restricts home-schooling of children outside the immediate family. Law enforcement officials routinely round up children found attending mosques – the declared policy of the government being that children should be studying in schools rather than worshipping in the mosques till they are mature enough to judge by themselves.

Tajikistan's constitution provides for freedom of religion. However, religious activities are tightly controlled by the government which closely monitors the activities of religious institutions to keep them from espousing and disseminating extremist tendencies and from turning overtly political. There is no official state religion in Tajikistan. The Government controls religious activities through the Committee on Religious Affairs (CRA) and the Ministry of Education. Tajik law prescribes criminal penalties for violating restrictions on sending Tajik citizens abroad for religious education, preaching and teaching of religious doctrines and establishing ties with religious groups abroad without CRA consent. I confirmed the facts from the International Religious Freedom Report for 2013 prepared by the US Commission on International Religious freedom.

The Law of the Republic of Tajikistan "On Religion and Religious Organizations" requires compulsory registration by all mosques and religious communities to ensure that religious groups act in accordance with the law, failing which their places of worship may be forced to closure and members penalised. Imams preaching in a mosque require 'attestations' by the CRA on their knowledge of Islamic teachings and religious principles, failing which they could be dismissed. To counter religious indoctrination, the Government issues high school textbooks on the history of Islam for teaching in public schools. The law also regulates registration, size, and location of mosques, limiting the number of mosques that may be registered within a given population area. Madrassas are required to impart secular education along with religious teaching in accordance with Government prescribed curricula and standards, and are inspected and monitored strictly by the Government, any violation forcing closure.

The landlocked country of Tajikistan, surrounded by China, Kyrgyzstan, Uzbekistan and Afghanistan, was a part of the erstwhile USSR as Tajik Soviet Socialist Republic. It declared independence in 1991 after the disintegration of the Soviet Union and became the Republic of Tajikistan. Its independence was followed

by turmoil degenerating into prolonged civil war and internecine conflicts, worsening its already precarious economic situation and making the country ever more dependent on foreign aid. A comprehensive peace agreement brokered by United Nations ended the civil war in 1997, and peace returned after years of strife, following which the warring groups started entering the political arena. Sporadic attacks engineered by determined Islamic fundamentalists nevertheless continued, disrupting life and commerce. Islamists opposed to the ceasefire that had reinforced the democratic nature of the republic of Tajikistan then joined the Islamic Movement of Uzbekistan, a terrorist organisation formed in the late 1990s that draws membership from ethnic Uzbeks, Kyrgyz, Tajiks, Chechens and Uighurs. Funded mainly by migrant Uzbeks, in particular Saudi Arabia's 300,000 strong Uzbek diaspora and other Islamist and sympathetic foundations throughout the Arab world, it allied with Al-Qaeda with the stated goal of uniting Central Asia as an Islamic state ruled universally by the Sharia, much like what the ISIS is striving after. The Islamic terrorism in Tajikistan is thus a trans-national phenomenon, inspired from across the borders, with implications in many neighbouring countries. Drawing a parallel with our situation may thus not be too far-fetched, though the contours and dimensions may be vastly different.

Terrorism and fundamentalism do not breed in vacuum. Making of a terrorist needs years of indoctrination and radicalisation. A combination of poverty and illiteracy – usually these two go together - with religion delivers a deadly cocktail for fundamentalism to thrive. Hold of religion on the poor and uneducated usually being stronger, religion acts as a powerful catalyst to ideological mobilization of the poor. Children are especially vulnerable to this kind of indoctrination, because irrationality thrives best when the mind lacks maturity and can easily be filled with toxic thoughts. It is therefore extremely important to prevent indoctrination when the mind is not mature enough to distinguish between dogma and logic, and is susceptible to trust the Ulema or the priest when they interpret religious texts according to their own and often misplaced understanding. It is in this context that the tight religious restrictions imposed by the State in Tajikistan may be considered. Unless monitored, the mind-space of the poor children can easily become fertile breeding grounds for hatred and terrorism.

Religion has the potency to be turned into a most noxious instrument for radicalisation, unless society monitors it. A radicalised mind seeks justice in violence; it does not detest violence. The defining features of fundamentalists' ideal of an Islamic Caliphate that the ISIS, Taliban, Al Shabab or Boko Haram are trying to establish include enslavement of women, denial of freedom of thought or expression and complete intolerance of a different belief system or faith – in short, revival of a theocratic governance system steeped in the medieval times which is obviously an anathema to Muslims in India as elsewhere. Their justifications of violence is even more comical.

After the cold-blooded massacre of schoolchildren in Peshawar by a suicide squad of the Tehreek-e-Taliban-i-Pakistan, it released a photo of the murderers taken against the backdrop of a banner proclaiming the core tenet of Islam: “La ilaha illa-Allah, Muhammadun rasulullah (There is no god but God and Muhammad is his messenger)”. The very next day, seeking to justify the slaughtering of children, it quoted a Hadith that a boy with pubic hair was no longer a child!

After every massacre inflicted by terrorists, we hear impassioned condemnation of such violence by Islamic clerics and leaders, asserting that perpetrators of such terror are not true Muslims. Where then do they get their Islam from? Understandably, no religious text preaches violence - violence is inflicted by individual perpetrators, regardless of their religious affiliations. Point is who fills their minds with such hatred and xenophobia? Part of the answer may come from how we school our young.

In West Bengal, most Muslim children including a sizeable number of poor non-Muslims in rural areas attend Madrasas in the absence of an adequate network of affordable schools. There are High Madrasas that follow the prescribed syllabus formulated by the West Bengal Madrasah Board which has no religious content; Left Front Government took initiative to align their syllabus with the State Board's. There are also Senior Madrasas where Islamic theology is taught along with some modern subjects. As Nilanjana Gupta in her book "Reading with Allah: Madrasas in West Bengal" (Routledge, 2010) points out, these are in a pathetic state, and can address neither the secular nor the theological needs of the community. But both these are recognised by the Madrasa Board, unlike the third type—the Khariji Madrasas which are mostly residential. They do not take any assistance from Government. The education is primarily theological - based on Quran and Hadith.

Instruction is imparted in Arabic so that the Holy Book can be studied in original. Graduates from these Madrasas generally find employment in mosques as Ulemas, Imams and Moulavis. To the rural poor, these Madrasas are godsend as they provide free education, board and lodging to their children. Gupta points out that while some of these may have incorporated secular content in their instructions, many inculcate an insular mentality among their students. There is no quality control on the ability of instructors who can easily vitiate vulnerable young minds. Such Madrasas exist not only in India, but also in Bangladesh and Pakistan where they often morph into factories for producing fundamentalists. Should the Government exercise no control over their syllabus and instructions- to ensure that they are not teaching B for Banduk, J for Jihad and S for Shahadat (martyrdom)? We also do not know if radical Hindu outfits are running similar schools.

The guiding philosophy of a secular nation does not support the view that religious education is the only education that one needs in life. The intellectual straight-jacketing of socio-religious discourses has not allowed open debate on this question for fear of possible reprisals, as witnessed in Pakistan and Bangladesh. Radical Islamic movements today aim at substituting the legal constitutional structure in countries by Sharia laws to be enforced through the agency of Islamic state. Inoculation of educational curriculum from religious content may be a worthy step towards strengthening our defence against such medieval onslaught on liberties. It is to be understood that radical elements, irrespective of religious denominations, are products of identical mutations.