

A Case for Prayers in Schools

Ms Swati Aggarwal

M.Ed Final, Department of Education, University of Delhi

Abstract

This paper is a response to the criticism of prayers in the morning assembly in schools, which argues that the values that prayers promote are orthodox and regressive. For instance, many prayers eulogise the value of surrender, where the prayer often project the prayee (in this case, the students) as powerless and ignorant and say it is the almighty who provides all knowledge and power. The prayee (student) expresses surrender towards the Almighty. It seems they have no active role in their own lives. Proponents of this view find this to be antithetical to the values of our modern education system, such as independence and confidence. It is argued that such kinds of prayers make them fatalistic and pessimistic, or, in short, it teaches them to surrender. Despite the above argument, I am making a case for prayers in this article. Here I argue that surrender be interpreted as humility instead of loss of control or fatalism. Further, it would be good to teach humility to students if the concept is understood holistically.

Keywords: *compassion, humility, spirituality, human-divine relationship*

In most schools, the mornings begin with the morning assembly. All the students and teachers assemble on the ground, often sorted according to their classes and sections. They are even expected to stand in increasing order of their height. Often, there are separate rows for boys and girls. This morning ritual is repeated almost every day. It is time when the school uniforms are checked and defaulters and latecomers to be punished. Such is the nature of morning assembly, as experienced by most students.

However, the most important component of the morning assembly is the prayer. These could be prayers praising specific deities like Goddess Saraswati, Jesus Christ or just some songs showing piety to the god. This aspect of the morning prayer that connects it to specific religious beliefs has recently attracted severe criticism. It is often debated whether the morning prayers are worthy to be included in the morning assembly since they are religious and thus non-secular. In this reference, I would like to make a case for prayers and give a counterargument against one of the criticisms that prayers have attracted, viz., the values that prayers promote are orthodox and regressive.

This criticism is levelled against the prayers that point to the values they seek to impart to the

students. For instance, it is said that many prayers eulogise the value of surrender, where the words of the prayer often project the prayee (in this case, the students) as powerless and ignorant and say it is the almighty who provides all knowledge and power. For example, the lines “शुद्ध भाव से तेरा ध्यान लगाएं हम, विद्या का वरदान तुम्हीं से पाए हम ।” from the school prayer “सुबह सवेरे लेकर तेरा नाम प्रभु ।” In most prayers, the focus is not on individuality or personal well-being but also on the welfare of others and society. It seems they are taught to believe that they have no active role in their lives or nothing they do is their own doing. Proponents of this view say that this is antithetical to the values our education system seeks to imbibe: independence, self-confidence, self-worth, etc. It makes them fatalistic and pessimistic.

Before elaborating on the counterargument I propose against the above criticism, I would like to elaborate on what a prayer is and whether it holds the same meaning for adults and children. Prayer (verb) is challenging to understand, even for grown-up individuals. Still, the act of praying is such a widespread practice. It is a routine practice among most religions (and non-religions). Prayer as a concept is something most people are aware of, regardless if they pray or

not, what they believe in, or how often they pray if they do. If not god, people pray to different entities. These could be humans, trees, and others. Nevertheless, one commonality in prayers is that the prayee believes in the transcendental powers of the one being prayed to and its ability to do things we cannot do ourselves.

For adults, the answer as to why one prays could be linked to the experiences of adult life. Growing up, we see the world's realities in a different light where pain and suffering are inevitable and non-evasive experiences. We begin to contemplate the reasons and the nature of these pains and sufferings, and there is a constant struggle to evade it. Consequently, people engage with the idea of god due to their socio-cultural learnings or their lived realities. Some pray to ease their pain, some ask for help, and some merely to express gratitude. There are occasions when even the most staunch atheists claim they prayed. These were times of immense suffering, and they prayed involuntarily to a higher power for help. It feels like an innate urge. Would one involuntarily pray if they were unaware of this idea of god in the first place? This question still needs to be answered. The idea of god and prayers invoke strong reactions in people – for and against. Thus, in the end, it is a matter of belief for people. And what gives them comfort and meaning.

However, the matter is more complex for children when we look at school prayers. The criticism of school prayer argues that school prayers teach children to be under-confident. The content of most prayers is such that it centres around the idea that everything is God's doing, and in a sense, children who pray are helpless or even powerless. Children in these prayers lack agency in their lives. They are taught to be pessimistic and dependent. They are taught to accept their fate, leaving success or failure in God's hands. They teach children to surrender, which is the central theme of most prayers. For the proponents of this view, this is antithetical to education, which is supposed to teach children to develop their voice and agency to shape their own lives. In such a scenario, even a

rudimentary analysis of the central theme of prayers would lead us to believe that prayers have no place in schools and education.

However, if we reflect further and think of prayers as a way to connect with something universal, then the value promoted by the prayers is not surrender but rather a sense of humility. Humility is not the sacrifice of self or the negation of self. Fostering humility is a good thing if the children can understand the concept in its entirety. Humility is a very wholesome concept of life if examined in its entirety. Simply rejecting it by saying it snatches away the children's agency is a superficial analysis.

To illustrate this point, I would like to highlight a Sanskrit phrase, "*Idam-na-mama*", which means this is not mine, this action, this life. If we elaborate on it further, this highlights that whatever an individual does is not his own doing. Everything an individual does has bigger forces working for him. It is given to him by the almighty, the cosmos, or fate. For example, if someone has earned wealth which he feels has been earned through hard work, but at the same time, he mustn't forget the role of good fortune, enabling conditions, the ethos of hard work learned from parents, good childhood etc. remembering the role of these other forces in the success of oneself enables the individual to have humility and prevent them from being pompous and vain.

However, the further question is why this humility is essential. Most modern societies believe that the more hard you work, the more you will be rewarded. The values of free opportunity and free competition are valued. It is said that through hard work, one can achieve anything. People should be distributed rewards and resources based on their merit and abilities, i.e. the hard work they have put in. This means that no matter what position an individual is born in society, one can achieve and reach any position based on hard work. These ideas, however, stand on the false belief that everyone solely deserves the fruits of their labour. And whoever is left behind in this competitive race is because of their shortcomings. The idea of free competition says the more hard work one puts

in, the more successful one gets. It says that everyone was given the same opportunity, and thus where they end up at the end of the race is their own doing. The ones who succeed have no one but themselves to thank. This belief in free competition is, in fact, folly.

As highlighted above, there are a lot of things that contribute to one's good fortune. The idea of free competition ignores the disadvantageous position that some people inherit or are born into. For instance, they might be born into very poor families, or they might not have a very happy or stable childhood. The people who succeed in society forget these disadvantages suffered by others. They claim they have worked harder than others and deserve whatever they have.

To counter the above thought process, humility is very important. It helps us to understand our place in society and the world. It makes us realise the value of compassion and understanding for others. It prevents us from being apathetic towards others and society. Humility is very important to build a just and egalitarian society. It helps us to be more responsible citizens. Through humility, people will believe that since they are not the sole actors in their success, thus it is most natural for them to share the fruits of their labour with others because these rewards were not theirs in the first place. The ideas against free competition ask for the organisation of a just society firmly based on

the pillars of humility, compassion, and mutual respect.

The idea of humility is fundamental to being compassionate and having respect for others. It is essential to recognise the role of good luck in life, having specific talents that happen to be prized by society, and having specific opportunities and privileges to achieve success in life. This humility is a very important civic virtue we must instil in the children. Humility helps us to be compassionate and respectful, as it helps us to put ourselves in other people's shoes. Society has so much inequality and injustice that we need a spiritual and moral anchor to guide our life. Furthermore, the ultimate aim of education is also the creation of such a just society.

This is where the role of prayer comes in. In this larger analysis, the value of humility seems an important part of human existence. And if school prayers are a medium to teach those values to the students, they are not pointless. They play a very significant role in this larger analysis. However, the system of prayers needs to be rethought. The way the prayers are done currently can only somewhat fulfil their actual purpose. They have become meaningless and ritualistic. There should be a move to make them more relevant to the students, making children understand the meaning of the prayers and instilling humility in them so they can be agents of social justice when they become part of society.