

Interface between Identity and Religion: Children's Negotiations at Home and School

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Abstract *From a very young age, children are exposed to religious practices, rituals and beliefs both at home and school. Experiences with religious undertones influence their everyday lives and the process of identity development, albeit in tacit ways. Home and school are two units of primary socialisation for children. The continuity-discontinuity between home and school is significant in its influence on children's perceptions of themselves and the world around them. In contemporary times where society is marked with incidents of communal strife, religious intolerance and insensitivity towards the 'other'. Although schools promote the value of secularism, schools themselves, as well as homes and society at large provide a myriad set of experiences that will build the context for children's experiences of growing up. This paper explores children's experiences of growing up while negotiating this complex interplay of experiences at home and school, through reflective life stories of young adults from urban middle class families in Delhi.*

Religion and Schooling in the Indian Context

The complex entanglement between religious beliefs and practices as well as secular moral values that Indian society promotes is often inseparable at the personal and social levels.

Secular literally means 'not connected to or belonging to any religion'. In popular parlance, in religiously heterogeneous contexts, it is also interpreted to mean as 'respecting all religions'. Where schools students are from heterogeneous religious backgrounds, secular attitudes and practices assume greater relevance. Experiential writings by Farooqui (2007) and Razzack (1991) stand testimony to schools being starkly religious places, even when the façade of secularity is maintained. One of the key practices that is integral to almost every school, and is considered secular but has the potential for a strong religious flavour, is the school assembly. Religious minority schools, quite expectedly, start the day with a prayer based in their own religion. Even in state run 'secular' schools, the school assembly is a common feature and often starts with a prayer or invocation to God that is sung by all school students in unison. (Payal, 2014)

Studying the impact that such practices have on school students from different religious backgrounds is thus warranted. Gupta's study (2008) highlights that religious commitments start early. Her work with children in Delhi, in the age group of four to eight years, highlights that religious identification begins at an early age, through socialization by family and community. Hindu and Muslim children made clear distinctions between objects, places, stories and ideas associated with 'them' and 'us'. They demonstrated acceptance and pride while talking about their family's religion. The study also brought to light the significant role played by the religious community. Children used the first person plural pronoun ('we', instead of 'I') while talking about their religious practices. The narrative descriptions in her work emphasise that religion is an integral part of everyday life for the children. The work also emphasises the collectivist manner in which religion is understood by the children.

This raises some pertinent concerns about the religious nature of schooling experiences. What role does religion play in the lives of children in schools? How do religious contexts influence the



experiences of children at school? How do religious experiences at home and school interact with each other? How do children negotiate these experiences while developing a sense of identity?

Fieldwork

The questions presented above warranted a study of experiences of school students. It was felt that reflected biographical accounts would help to develop an in-depth understanding of lived experiences of individuals at home and school. Thus, young adults were asked to reflect on their life experiences and their life stories were developed.

The sample of the study consisted of twelve participants, ensuring representation on parameters of age, gender, and religion. All participants belonged to middle class families based in Delhi. The sample was representative of the four major religious groups-Hindus, Muslims, Sikhs and Christians.

Men

Name	Age Group (in years)	Religious Orientation
Deepak	23 -26	Hindu (Dalit)
Dhruv	23 -26	Sikh
Hussain	27 -30	Muslim (Shia)
Joshua	18 -22	Christian (Catholic)
Sanjaya	27 -30	Hindu (Brahmin)
Sudhanshu	18 -22	Hindu (Jain)

Women

Name	Age Group (in years)	Religious Orientation
Farah	18 -22	Muslim (Sunni)
Harjeet	27 -30	Sikh
Mary	18 -22	Christian (Tribal)
Mridu	23 -26	Hindu (Jain)
Sufia	23 -26	Christian (converted)
Vaibhavi	27 -30	Hindu (Brahmin)

Discussion

The subsequent paragraphs present a discussion on the key dimensions of the interface between identity and religion as experienced by the participants during their growing up years. The discussion has been presented separately for men and women participants to highlight gender based trends. The influence of home and school in each of these has been interwoven within the discussion themes.

Developing Religious Commitments

All the men showed a shift from an unquestioning, obedience-compliance mode of religious practice during their childhood years to a more personal conviction based approach in their young adulthood. All of them underwent a period of questioning, rethinking, and reformulation of their religious beliefs during adolescence. Sudhanshu (Jain) and Joshua (Christian) participants started rethinking and reformulation of religious beliefs after religious sermons started making sense to them during adolescence. In the other cases, the process was triggered by their personal life experiences. For Hussain, the trigger was shifting to a Muslim dominated neighbourhood with a shift in his father's job, while for Sanjaya it was moving away from a family rooted in Brahminical traditions. Deepak on the other hand developed a sense of inquiry as a result of the visible contrast between Hindu beliefs and practices which he saw at home and the scientific explanations to natural phenomena studied at school that he encountered.

All the women showed a strong tendency towards obedience and compliance to instructions given by elders about what their religious beliefs and practices ought to be. Instructions were also taken from institutions of authority such as the family, neighbourhood, school and community during childhood. By adolescence, however, they showed a shift towards the practice of religion being guided by greater personal conviction. The questioning and exploration undertaken towards one's own religion was guided by a need to arrive at rational explanations for religious practices in all their cases. Despite evidence of personal agency, all of them, except Sufia (converted Christian), continued to obediently and unquestioningly follow religious



instructions given by parents. This may be on account of social conformity pressure and their allegiance to being “good girls”. This was particularly evident in the cases of Vaibhavi (Hindu Brahmin) and Mridu (Jain). For Farah (Muslim), Harjeet (Sikh) and Mary (Christian), years of obedient practice of religious rituals was internalized as faith. Sufia, in contrast to the rest, grew up in a household where little importance was given to the practice of any particular religion by her parents, owing to their inter-religious marriage. After converting to Christianity, however, the instructions given by the priest became sacrosanct for her. Thus, obedience-compliance based religious belief and practice tend to take on a different form from childhood but continue to prevail, as was visible in life stories of all six women participants.

Thus, the interplay of experiences at home and school played an important role in the developing of religious commitments of the participants.

Experiences at School and in the Community

Educational institutions have also played a significant role in the development of religious beliefs. The men in the research study, who had studied in secular schools and colleges (Sanjaya, Deepak, Sudhanshu, and Hussain) showed greater tolerance towards other religious groups. Dhruv attended a Christian school but grew up in a secular family. The discontinuity experienced between home and school helped him develop acceptance towards multiple perspectives towards religion. Joshua, in contrast, studied in a Jesuit school and experienced continuity in religious beliefs across home and school, thereby strengthening his religious beliefs. A similar influential role can also be ascribed to the neighbourhood and community. Though Deepak and Sudhanshu studied in secular schools, the neighbourhood and community consisted of the same religious group as the family. Studying in schools that were located in the same neighbourhood provided them exposure to the same social groups at school and in the community. In turn, they experienced continuity of religious beliefs at home, school and community which led them to develop a strong religious identity. In Sudhanshu's case, it was, shifting to a different city

away from his native village that was responsible for his developing openness to religious beliefs other than his own. Likewise, Deepak became more secular when after high school he shifted to a school away from the neighbourhood.

The life stories of the women, also revealed that the school and neighbourhood have played an important role in the development of a secular attitude in them. Those who had studied in minority schools and colleges showed greater affinity towards religious practices taught in the schools. Three out of the six cases studied in Christian schools and colleges. Mary experienced a continuity in religious beliefs and practices followed by her family and by her school. The continuity helped her to strengthen her faith in Christian beliefs and practices. Sufia first came across Christianity in the college where she studied. The beliefs and practices followed in the college in addition to the vast exposure to Christianity through her friends in college were influential in her later converting to Christianity. Vaibhavi encountered a contrast between the Hindu-Brahmin rituals followed at home and the Christian teachings she came across in school. This resulted in a discontinuity between the religious atmosphere experienced at home and school. Similar discontinuities were experienced by Farah, Mridu and Harjeet who studied in secular schools. Neither of them came across the same religious teachings which were emphasised at home. All four thus learned to accept religious differences with greater ease. It may be inferred that they were socialized into an attitude of secularism.

In addition to the school, an influential role was also played by the community in which they grew up and lived. Farah, Sufia, Harjeet and Vaibhavi grew up in secular neighbourhoods. Growing up with a religiously heterogeneous group of friends helped them in their acceptance of religions other than their own. Mary and Mridu grew up in places where almost all families in the neighbourhood followed the same religious traditions as their own families. They thus did not have early exposure to different religions. However, celebrating festivals and participating in community functions, such as Midnight mass, Diwali melas, and the like, were



important in their role in strengthening religious beliefs as well as developing a sense of religious pride. In sharp contrast is the role played by the neighbourhood in Farah's life. Traditional Muslim practices such as '*pardah*' were not emphasised in her family. Since her neighbourhood was heterogeneous in its religious composition, she remained unaware of such practices almost all through her life. The neighbourhood broke her kinship to the Islamic community as she did not have an orthodox or parochial exposure. It is only in recent times that she has become aware of the practices followed by her extended family and community which she is critical of.

The interplay of the influences of school and community shows some interesting images. Mary grew up in a community which comprised only Catholic Christian families. Similarly, Mridu's neighbourhood comprised only Digambar Jain families. However, as against Mary, studying in a secular school Mridu came across a group of friends following different religions. As a result she was able to look at her own religious beliefs and practices critically. Mary however, having experienced continuity in religious beliefs and practices at home, school and community, seemed to have accepted Christian beliefs unquestioningly.

Interface between Identity and Religion

As against reading scriptures and ritualistic worship, all six men assigned importance to their personal relationship with God. In fact in their life stories, all of them presented personalised images of God that range from Him being a father figure, to a friend, a confidante, a guide and a support system. For many, their relationship with God also provided them space for cathartic expression. The manifest form of their relationship with God is represented by developing a connection in the form of talking to him or conversing in prayer. The more formal images of God described by the participants, which include being all encompassing, all controlling, a symbol of power, being a preserver and a rescuer, seem to be based on their learned experiences of religion, their reading of scriptures, exposure to religious discourses and the discussions they have had with friends and family. In the cases of Muslim, Jain and

Christian men (Hussain, Sudhanshu and Joshua respectively), where community practices formed an important part of religion, discussions with religious leaders (the Maulana, the Jain Gurus and the priest at the Church) have played an influential role in the formation of beliefs about religion.

All the six women recognized prayer, worship, reading scriptures, visiting religious places such as temples, churches, mosques and Gurudwaras and other rituals associated with their respective beliefs as symbols of religiosity. Most of them accepted and followed the rituals as integral to the practice of religion. However, they maintained that personal communication with God is more important than these rituals. Except Vaibhavi, although she continued to practice many such rituals such as idol worship and fasting, none of the participants questioned the necessity for ritualistic practice or the rationale behind such practices. This attitude suggests the need to conform to the image of an ideal daughter and the acceptance of scriptures and instructions as sacrosanct. Further, all the other participants, aside Sufia and Harjeet, pointed to the necessity of having a manifest, concrete form to their faith and belief.

By adolescence, four of the women interviewed expressed a tendency to question the beliefs and practices followed by their family and/or religious community. However, for all of them, which included Farah, Mridu, Harjeet and Vaibhavi, the process of questioning, rethinking and reformulation of religious beliefs remained personal and unexpressed. In fact, with respect to certain practices, the covert, silent rebellion, which some of the women experienced in their lives, was in sharp contrast to the overt compliance to rituals practiced by their families and community. This led to experiencing dilemma and persistent inner vocal speech. However, pressure for social conformity and remaining good girls in their overt behaviour took precedence over their inner experiences and thoughts. The two Christians (Sufia- converted and Mary- tribal Catholic), interestingly never experienced a period of questioning about any belief or practice prescribed by Christianity.

All except Vaibhavi (Hindu Brahmin) believed in the concept of God as a single, omnipotent,



omnipresent force controlling the world. Apart from God as an all pervasive force, Vaibhavi also believed in the varying images of God presented by the pantheon of Hindu gods and goddesses. All of them believed in the benevolent and rewarding nature of God. At the same time they displayed an element of fear about invoking the wrath of God. Further, as was revealed in their interaction, fear introduced an element of accountability in them that inspired them to do good deeds. Barring Vaibhavi, none of the participants questioned the notion of God's power and will to punish wrong doers.

In the actual development of their religious commitments, for all except Sufia, the practice of religion was initiated out of a sense of obedience towards their parents in order to live up to the image of a 'good girl' as has been already described. As they grew up, however, their personal relationship with God took precedence over ritualistic practice of religion. The bond developed with God has been particularly significant in Vaibhavi's life. Throughout childhood and adolescence, her relationship with God filled up the void she felt because of the absence of her parents and siblings. For others, the relationship provides them space for cathartic expression. This is evident particularly in the life stories of Mridu, Sufia and Farah, who in the absence of freedom to express their views and opinions within their family and community, reached out to God as the only entity providing unconditional acceptance.

All the women reported relying on religion to provide meaning to their lives. When perplexed by the deeper questions of life such as those relating to the universe, existence, life after death and the like, they turned to religion. In addition, they also reported turning to God in search of peace and quiet. All of them viewed religion and religious practice as coping mechanisms for stress reduction. The life stories of Mridu, Farah, Sufia and Vaibhavi provide instances when they turn to God in the face of conflict, turmoil and uncertainty.

Religion and Interpersonal Relationships

While all the men embodied a secular attitude towards religion, yet most believe that their own

religion is more liberal in comparison to others. They seemed to have a sense of pride in their religious background. Religion thus constituted a significant part of their identity. Their religious beliefs, particularly, when they were younger, were influenced primarily by the views of their family members and the neighbourhood and community they grew up in.

Though most participants had never given active thought to their religious commitments, the impact of religion was visible in their everyday life. For Sudhanshu, Hussain and Joshua, weekly visits to the temple, mosque and church respectively, formed an integral part of their lives. Likewise, communication with God in the form of personal prayer or conversation was a daily ritual for all others, except Deepak. However, even in Deepak's case, there was extensive engagement with religion which was visible in the numerous discussions on topics such as the existence of God, veracity of Hindu mythology etc. In addition, the influence of some principles flowing out of religion on the lifestyles of the individuals was quite evident. For the Hindu and Jain participants, for instance, non-violence is an important principle prescribed by their religion. This translates into a culture of vegetarianism for Sudhanshu, Deepak and Sanjaya. Hussain and Sanjaya, in accordance with the Islamic tradition and Hindu-Brahminical culture, also showed great aversion to alcohol. For Joshua, assuaging of guilt through confession was an important part of life.

All the women demonstrated a secular attitude towards religious accepting people from all religions around them without any bias. They believed that all religions point to the same God, hence, they accepted all religions as equal. At the same time, with the exception of Vaibhavi, all participants carried conviction about the appropriateness and relevance of the path that they followed. The Christian and Muslim participants (Mary, Sufia and Farah) believed that they were directed on the path that they are treading by God himself and therefore, showed greater conviction in their religious beliefs. While all of them clearly stated that religion is not a criterion for them to develop friendships, except for Farah, they had a greater number of friends following the same



religion as their own. Farah, having grown up and studied in a Hindu dominated society and school, had a greater number of Hindu friends than Muslim friends.

Despite the absence of a serious contemplation about religious beliefs and practices, the influence of religious beliefs is visible in the lives of all the participants. All of them lay great emphasis on periodical visits to places of worship, be it the temple, the mosque, the church or the Gurudwara. Prayer, worship and personal communication with God also form part of the everyday lives. Mary, Sufia, Farah and Harjeet also laid great emphasis on periodical reading of the scriptures. Vaibhavi and Mridu felt that religious books and scriptures need not be read regularly and so tended to read them only out of their personal interest.

In the absence of close relationships with family and friends, all the women reported finding comfort in their relationship with God. The religious practices they followed played an important role in maintaining their sense of psychological well being. Prayer, reading scriptures, visiting places of worship helped them develop a sense of peace and calm. The belief that ritualistic practice would please God and persuade Him to reward and fulfil wishes often led to relief in tension and stress. All of them reported visiting places of worship along with establishing a personal communication with God in the face of trouble and turmoil. Sufia, Mary and Farah also find comfort in reading religious books like the Bible and the Koran.

A sharp contrast could be seen between the Christian participants and others. Both Christians found solace in their religious community and in times of trouble, often confided in the people that they met regularly at the Church. Vaibhavi's life story also presents a similar image. Her regular visits to the meeting of Bharat Soka Gakkai (a sect of Buddhism) provided her with a sense of belongingness. It may be inferred that in religions where community based practices are emphasised, followers find greater comfort in unconditional acceptance by the community.

Concluding Note

While all participants have shown a tendency to

move from an obedience-compliance based religious practice to one based on personal conviction, women showed greater obedience in following religious practices of the family and the community. For women, the shift to personal conviction was based more on faith arising out of internalization of the beliefs of the family through years of unquestioned practice. The men in the study showed a greater tendency to look for rational explanations for religious beliefs and practices. Personal conviction was therefore based on objective reflection and acceptance or rejection of the practices of their families and communities. Where reading scriptures was given importance by both men and women, the latter showed greater tendency for subjective and faith based reading rather than a search for rational explanations. (Hussain and Farah are cases in point.) Women also showed greater reliance on family and community and the tendency to live up to the image of a 'good girl' than the men in the study.

It was seen that most of them (excepting Hussain and Vaibhavi) did not give any conscious thought to their religious commitments. All of them respected all religions and accepted people from other religious groups in their lives. However, despite a secular identity, they also displayed a sense of pride in their own religious identities. Barring Sufia, who belonged to a family of mixed religious parenting, none of the participants showed openness to conversion to other religions. It may thus be concluded that the process of arriving at religious commitments is closely intertwined with the process of identity development. Most participants depend on their religious beliefs and practices for coping with stress, need satiation, wish fulfilment and cathartic expression, as was explained in the earlier section.

With respect to schooling, it was found that all participants found the experiences at schooling to have a religious flavour. Where there was continuity between experiences at home and school, participants reported greater conviction to religious commitments. In the face of conflict between religious experiences at home and school, the participants reported experiencing greater doubt and engaged in questioning their religious



commitments at home. Even where schooling was in secular schools, the schools served as important places for exposure to people from heterogeneous religious backgrounds. Education also led participants to question religious beliefs and practices from a rational orientation. Thus, it was evident that the schooling process closely intertwined with experiences at home and community in developing religious commitments and a sense of identity.

References

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- Stark and Glock (1962) advanced the notion of religious commitments as a multi dimensional term. They suggested that religious commitments could be a meaningful way to know a person's sense of religion and the meaning that it holds in their lives. Accordingly, they have elaborated on the different dimensions of religious commitment. Religious belief is the ideological dimension of religious commitment. It refers to the content of the individual's belief. Religious Practice is the behaviour expected of an individual committed to a particular religion. Religious Feeling is the experiential dimension of religious commitment, which consists of the emotions, states of consciousness, or sense of well being, dread, freedom, or guilt that are part of a person's religiousness. Religious Effects refer to the influence of religious commitments on a person's everyday behaviour. Religious Knowledge refers to what a person knows about his/her belief.*
- The paper is based on empirical work undertaken by author as part of M.Phil (Education) programme in Central Institute of Education, University of Delhi.*

