

The Role of Education to Foster Religious Harmony

From the Perspective of a College Principal

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Education in India must acknowledge and express the great strength of Indian society – that of its diversity. Plurality connotes differences but when viewed as contributing to the richness of society, an integration of the different groups, through acceptance and understanding and through joint action for the common good, leads to the strength of the society. This perspective must start at the level of educational institutions which contribute so much to the worldview of our children.

The first effort of a Principal, therefore, must be to bring a variety of students into campus, reflecting the diversity of the population. A conscious effort is required here, as dominant social groups would tend to monopolize good educational institutions. The Constitution of India and Government policy come to our aid in affirmative action provisions for minorities and for the socially disadvantaged sections of society. If these are applied in a meaningful manner, the student population will reflect the diversity of Indian society and here begins the first opportunity to learn integration. Across the world this has been found to be an effective way of breaking down barriers between communities – whether racial or religious. The Institution also needs to give support to those disadvantaged, through financial, academic and social interaction support and evidence shows that once a level playing field is provided, such students fare as well as any other. The God-given potential of each child does not show any discrimination!

The core of fostering religious harmony is to get students to understand the beauty of religious beliefs and practices other than one's own and to enter into the meaning system of one's companions belonging to another faith. Formal and structured sessions, exposing each student to some of the different mainline religions, are essential to break through the stereotypes that all of us build up in our interactions in society. Audio-visuals, if done well, can be a starting point but the personal sharing of what is meaningful to a companion belonging to another religious tradition, helps in evoking empathy. When the heart is touched

by personal sharing, the mind is challenged to change its stereotypes and misconceptions about religions other than one's own. These structured sessions need to be part of the core curriculum and not an optional part of it – and this is where the backing of the Principal comes in good use. No student should be allowed to take the attitude of disinterest, since respect for the other is at the heart of all good education and of good civil behaviour and it cannot be treated as an optional. Religions are ways of experiencing the divine and our religious experience can only be enhanced by our openness to other religious traditions, while remaining committed to our own tradition.

Educational institutions also give young people the opportunity to work together at common projects across religious lines, thereby building up bonds with others who are different from their way of thinking and acting. A good educational institution gives importance to co-curricular and extra-curricular activities, which involve much interaction among students. Care needs to be taken by the Faculty and Management, to make sure the groups formed are not on community or socio-economic lines, as these will lead to cliques. For instance, cultural festivals organised by most Colleges, are excellent training grounds for fostering communal understanding and harmony, if the student teams working to organize the festival consist of students of different religious backgrounds. This is where emotional bonds are built which last the test of time, as alumni have often expressed. The religious fault lines of society cannot be easily exploited if one has friends in the other community.

The role of the Principal in policy setting and in raising finances for many of these activities and facilities is an important component in fostering religious harmony. Especially in a situation where the Principal has to do much fire fighting and giving attention to other academic and administrative tasks, good leadership will make time for this precious task. The future of our country and the world itself is dependent on good education fostering human integration - building a family of humankind.