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Congress Educational Policy and the Vidya Mandir Scheme

With the Indian National Congress in power in most of the provinces of British India, the reconstruction of the educational system for achieving national objectives became an urgent task. It was Gandhi who took the initiative and convened an All India Educational Conference at Wardha in 1937 to which he invited some well-known educationists associated with institutions of national education as well as the ministers in charge of education in the provincial governments run by the Congress. Pleading for a complete overhaul of the existing system of education he proposed to make education available to all boys and girls of school-going age. The following resolutions were passed unanimously at the conference:

1. That in the opinion of the conference, free and compulsory education be provided for seven years on a nation-wide scale;
2. That the medium of instruction be the mother tongue;
3. That the conference endorses the proposal made by Mahatma Gandhi that the process of education throughout this period should centre round some form of manual and productive work, and all the abilities to be developed or training to be given should, as far as possible, be integrally related to the central handicraft chosen with due regard to the environment of the child;
4. That the conference expects that this system of education will be gradually able to cover the remuneration of teachers.

On the lines suggested by the resolution a small committee of educationists under the chairmanship of Zakir Husain was asked to prepare a scheme of primary education in the form of a draft syllabus. In December 1937, such a syllabus was submitted under the name of Basic National Education known also as the Wardha Scheme. The committee's report clarified and even changed some of the issues raised at the conference by stating that the age-group of boys and girls for compulsory education be 7 to 14 years with the State being responsible for providing education to all of them free of charge. In the report education is linked not only with a productive craft like spinning, but also with the child's social and physical environment. Regarding the aspect of self-sufficiency it was stated that the teachers are to

be paid directly from the State treasury and should not be dependent on the likelihood of sale proceeds from the crafts production.

On the basis of the Wardha Scheme the Indian National Congress at its 51st Session in February 1938 adopted a resolution on "National Education". The Congress accepted the resolution passed at the Wardha Conference except the self-supporting aspect as the principle on which basic education should be imparted on a nation-wide scale. It also provided for bringing into existence an All India Education Board, the Hindustani Talimi Sangh, to work out a programme of basic national education.

A particular scheme of elementary education, called Vidya Mandir Scheme (VMS), was introduced in the Central Provinces and Berar (C.P.) meant to provide basic education in small villages at a nominal cost. It was the brain child of Pandit Ravi Shankar Shukla, the then Minister of Education and from July 1938 onwards the Prime Minister of the Province. ¹ The Vidya Mandir Scheme for various reasons soon started running into trouble, and the enthusiasm with which the scheme was welcomed in certain quarters quickly disappeared.

Though the overall success in implementing VMS was a minor one, it did find a much larger response in the public debate with far-reaching implications for the relations between Hindus and Muslims in C.P. and between Congress and the Muslim League at the all-India level. From its very inception the C.P. Government came under criticism regarding the treatment of Muslims of the province. The majority of their grievances from early 1938 onwards according to government's own assessment "related to the Education Department and the foremost of them was the Vidya Mandir Scheme" with additional complaints over the neglect of Urdu and compulsory participation in the singing of "Vande Mataram". ²

There were many instances, like the exclusion of Muslims from municipal district and provincial Congress committees, the neglect of Urdu or preference given to Hindu supporters in appointments, postings or access to resources creating a feeling among sections of the Muslim population of neglect, disadvantage and suppression. In autumn 1938, there was an increase of Hindu-Muslim tensions almost everywhere in the Province with the Muslim League very active and VMS agitation providing the necessary rallying cry for Muslims. In end of December 1938 Governor F. V. Wylie in a letter to Viceroy Linlithgow wrote: "My present feeling is that the agitation (against VMS - J. Oe.) is based on nothing but the general discontent of the Muslim population as being subjected to the rule - and so far as they can see to the permanent rule - of a Hindu majority" ³.

Muslim Opposition to the Vidya Mandir Scheme

Taking into consideration the limited impact the Vidya Mandir Scheme actually had on the dissemination of primary education and literacy in the province, one should not expect the scheme to play a prominent role in communalist controversies between Hindus and Muslims at the provincial level and within British India at large. Opposition originated in the province first with Muslim agitation confined to rural areas in Berar and to urban areas in the rest of the Province, but it soon became an issue in the public debate on education in general and between the Congress and the Muslim League and their allies in particular. From the very beginning there was outright opposition against the name of the scheme. Zakir Husain had given a note of warning in early 1938 by underlining "that there is a strong feeling against the use of the name among a section of the people in as well as

outside the province. I have taken pains to assure myself that the feeling is genuine and sincere". In an atmosphere "surcharged with suspicion and distrust", he felt the success of any new educational effort endangered. But apart from the name he thought it imperative while putting the new syllabus into operation that "every attempt will be made to see that the interests of no section of the people are neglected".⁴

In the Budget session of the C.P. Legislative Assembly in March 1938 the Leader of the Opposition and other Muslim members stated that VMS was impracticable and the name Vidya Mandir unacceptable to them as it constituted an attack on Islamic culture. They announced they would have to appeal to the Governor, if government persisted in "foisting" the scheme on Muslims.

The Nagpur branch of the Anjuman-e-Taraqi-e-Urdu in a resolution of July 1938 expressed "its strong sense of dissatisfaction on the introduction and adoption of the Vidya Mandir Scheme" requesting the Government to alter "the name as well as the scheme of 'Vidya Mandir' in a manner acceptable to the Urdu knowing public of the province".⁵

In July 1938, the C.P. and Berar Nationalist Muslim Conference submitting its resolutions to the Congress Working Committee for discussion before releasing them to the press, recorded its disappointment and concern at the introduction of the VMS without any regard to Muslim educational needs and to their unanimous protests. The conference viewed with great alarm and disappointment the treatment meted to the script and language of Muslims by the C.P. government and urged the Congress Working Committee to direct the Ministry to change its outlook and behaviour to regain confidence of the minorities and to fulfil the promise made on fundamental rights in the resolution passed in the Congress plenary session at Karachi.

In August, Muslims of Jubbulpore in a meeting protested against the Vidya Mandir Scheme for aiming at "abolishing the Urdu language, the Islam religion and the custom of the Muslims" and pursuing the "conversion of Muslims into Hinduism". Speakers characterized the word Mandir as "highly communal", asked Municipal Committees and District Councils to open Urdu primary schools wherever possible and to stop compulsory education of Muslim girls.⁶

The Provincial Muslim League had received a decided fillip by the visit of M.A. Jinnah to Jubbulpore at the beginning of 1938. It organised an Anti-Vidya Mandir Day on September 14th, when well-attended meetings were held and processions taken out at all important centres of the province. The Assembly opened on September 15th with a 5,000 Muslim procession protesting against VMS. All Muslim adjournment motions - mostly protesting against the scheme- were ruled out. At a meeting of the Council of Action of the Muslim League held at Nagpur on the 27th October, a resolution was passed recommending civil disobedience (satyagraha)⁷ against the imposition of the Vidya Mandir Scheme in view of the failure of the demonstrations and protests in the Muslim press to obtain its withdrawal and a committee was appointed to draft the programme of action.

Against the advice of Muslim League Headquarters, satyagraha started on 26th January, 1939 on the very day the Prime Minister was to open a number of Vidya Mandirs all over the Province. Groups of Muslims every day attempted to enter the Secretariat, they were arrested and detained for a few hours but no cases were produced against them in court. The satyagraha stopped only after the Prime Minister with his colleagues and the Muslim members of the C.P. Legislative Assembly met on the 7th

and 8th February 1939. Liaquat Ali Khan, Honorary Secretary of the All India Muslim League, who had asked for such a meeting on the 18th December 1938, was present and participated in the discussion and negotiations which continued on the 9th and 10th February.

In all, 23 demands were raised in the conference by Muslim participants and they were submitted for the consideration of the Government "for giving an impetus to Muslim education". In April, however, the Governor reported that the Prime Minister "has no intention of implementing his agreement with Nawabzada Liaquat Ali Khan at any time in the near future".⁸ Among the demands was one with a provision for a separate Muslim inspectorate as it existed in some of the other provinces. The conclusion reached in February 1939 was that "when a suitable opportunity occurs a special officer will be placed in charge of Muslim education under the Director of Public Instruction". The Governor proposed secretly to the Prime Minister to promote a senior Muslim Inspector of Schools as Deputy Director of Public Instruction in charge of European, Anglo-Indian and Urdu Schools. This proposal and the particular demand were never met as long as the C.P. Congress Ministry was in power. Only in July 1941, the 'caretaker government' decided to "provide for the creation of such a post of Officer in charge of Muslim education in C.P".⁹

At an all India level the Vidya Mandir Scheme and the educational policy of Congress Provincial Governments in implementing the Wardha Scheme became an issue in the public debate in general and between the Congress and the Muslim League in particular. The Council of the All India Muslim League in a resolution passed in March 1938 decided to appoint a special committee to collect information about "hardship, ill-treatment and injustice that is meted out to the Muslims in various Congress Government Provinces and particularly to those who are workers of the Muslim League". With regard to the Vidya Mandir Scheme it expressed surprise "how the great champions of Indian nationalism, the Congress Ministers, could give such a communal and anti-Islamic name to a scheme of education which is meant for the children of all communities". The report claims that after the inauguration of Provincial Autonomy "Muslims in no other province have suffered so much as in the Central Provinces and Berar".¹⁰ With Urdu schools missing in districts where the number of Muslims was enough to justify the opening of such schools, with Assembly speeches delivered in Urdu but reported in Hindi only, and with no applications in Urdu being entertained by Municipal Committees, the report with reference to the Vidya Mandir Scheme concluded that it is meant for the benefit of the majority community only.

The Jamiat-i-Ulama-i-Hind, known for its pro Congress attitude, in March 1939 declared at a conference that it would not be advisable for the C.P. government to insist on the name of Vidya Mandir Scheme. It demanded from the Indian National Congress that a non-official inquiry committee be appointed "to investigate the grievances of Mussulmans in Congress Provinces". The report of a Sub-Committee appointed by the Jamiat-i-Ulama-i-Hind to consider the Wardha Scheme objected to the ultimate object of the scheme "to produce a class of educated people having the same kind of culture, faith and practices" as neither correct nor practicable. In India with her numerous religions, languages and cultures, the Jamiat argued, life is impossible without mutual good-will and tolerance, but "equally impossible is it for Mussulmans to give up their own Islamic culture and to get absorbed in a united nation, admitting of no difference between Islamic and non-Islamic cultures"¹¹.

In December 1939 the All India Muslim Educational Conference appointed a committee "to make a survey of the different systems of education in the country and to frame a comprehensive and broad-

based scheme of education suiting the special needs and requirements of the Muslims and helpful to the preservation of the distinctive features of their culture and social order".¹² Chairman of the committee was Kamal Yar Jung Bahadur who published the report in spring 1942. After presenting the history and outline of the scheme, it listed the nature and extent of the objections against the Vidya Mandir Bill. It criticised that the bill did not indicate the nature of the curriculum and made no provision for due payment of the teacher's salary in case the land did not yield good crops or the fields were not fertile. Apart from that it regarded it as humanly impossible for one teacher to teach 50 to 60 boys of different standards or to work double shift. It also thought it not advisable to extent the scheme from the very beginning to the whole province instead of starting it in a few places as an experiment. The committee objected to the name as it would give "a communal and sectarian outlook to the whole scheme". With joint electorates and the members of the Managing Committee of a Vidya Mandir elected on the basis of adult franchise, it would be "impossible for the Muslims to get a single member of their own choice" elected to such a committee. Much more regrettable however from the committee's point of view was the fact, that the scheme was destined to "keep people divided, divide the Muhammadan and Hindu boys from the very start and keep the Muhammadan and Hindu boys away from each other".¹³

The criticism and rejection of the educational policy of provincial governments became one of the main planks of the All India Muslim League for rallying support among the Muslim electorate and in attacking the policy of the Indian National Congress from 1937 onwards. Strongly disapproving of the Vidya Mandir as well as of the Wardha Scheme and often substituting one for the other, the issue of education with its direct impact on personality, family and identity proved to be a suitable tool in the hands of League politicians for communitarian mobilization and for bridging intra Muslim conflicts. The Vidya Mandir Scheme in Muslim perception became a symbol for establishing a religiously coloured communal dominance of a Hindu majority through the medium of education. As it was assumed to undermine the cultural distinctiveness of Indian Muslims, the idea of developing a distinct type of education based on Islamic religion and Muslim culture got prominence from the 1940ies onwards in congruence with demanding a separate homeland for Indian Muslims.

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Notes

[1] Before joining office Ravi Shankar Shukla was a government servant, headmaster of a high school and a successful lawyer. He commanded the largest following as a Congress leader in the Hindi districts of the Province which he was touring to launch the Vidya Mandir Scheme immediately after becoming Minister of Education in July 1937. British officials describe him as an orthodox Hindu and definitely anti-Muslim, exhibiting marked communalism and favouring his caste people by giving promotions or appointments to a large number of them (British Library, Oriental and India Office Collections, henceforth BL, OIOC, Mss Eu F 125/60).

[2] Report on the State and Progress of Education in the Central Provinces and Berar for the Year 1937-38, Nagpur: Government Printing 1940, p, 44. Muslims perceived the term Vidya Mandir as '(Hindu) Temple of Learning'. They objected to the compulsory singing of the song 'Vande Mataram'

as they understood it as part of the novel 'Anandamath' by Bankim Chandra Chattopadhyay containing communal passages.

The President of the Municipal Committee Saugor warned the Muslim students of the Municipal High School that they would be expelled from the school if they did not join in singing 'Vande Mataram' (Madhya Pradesh State Archives - henceforth MPSA - Government Central Provinces and Berar - henceforth GCPB - /Political and Military Department, File No. 108/1938). A local board in Berar issued a circular to all headmasters of Marathi and Urdu schools to the effect that in future "the 'Vande Mataram' song should be recited daily at the time of prayer". With Muslims taking strong exception, the C.P. Government stated in a memorandum to all Commissioners in April 1939 that local boards can permit the singing of this song in schools under their management, they should however "not compel the Muslim pupils either to sing it or to remain present when it is sung against their will" (MPSA, GCPB/Education Department, File No. 3-70/1939).

[3] BL, OIOC Mss Eu F 125.

[4] Report of the Kamal Yar Jung Education Committee, n.p. 1942, p.117.

[5] Nehru Memorial Museum and Library (Manuscript Section), All India Congress Committee G 13 to 4/1938.

[6] MPSA, GCPB/Political and Military Department, File N0. 194/1938.

[7] Satyagraha: insistence on/or zeal for truth. Non-violent opposition.

[8] BL, OIOC Mss Eu F 125/60.

[9] MPSA, CPBG/Education Department, File No.3(b)-82/1941.

[10] Report of the Inquiry Committee Appointed by the Council of the All-India Muslim League to Inquire into Muslim Grievances in Congress Provinces. Published by Liaquat Ali Khan, Lucknow 1938, p. 59.

[11] NMML, AICC G-51/1939-40.

[12] Report of the Kamal Yar Jung Education Committee, p.1.

[13] Ibid, p.119.

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Schlagworte