New Tuticorin Elementary School Forfeits State Aid to Teach Religion As Part of Daily Curriculum
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As an academic institution, the small Sakthi Vinayagar Hindu Vidyalaya (school) of Tuticorin, South India, merits no special attention. But, unlike thousands of other similar elementary schools in India, the recently formed Sakthi Vinayagar Vidyalaya has had the courage to decline state aid in order to maintain its right to teach Saivism to the children.

Still, aren't there hundreds of Hindu schools and institutions of higher learning throughout India, the homeland of Hinduism? Isn't Hinduism taught in all of them? According the Dr. P. John Philip, political scientist and a former Principal Secretary of the University Grants Commission of India (1956-1970), the answer to both of these questions would have to be: actually, no. In a recent interview Dr. Philip, presently a Fellow at the East West Center in Honolulu, Hawaii, elucidated: "To define a school in India as Hindu or another as Christian or Muslim is in fact somewhat misleading. According to the Constitution of India all educational institutions must abide by secular and non-religious guidelines in their official charters and curriculums. Their basis must be academic and not for the purpose of religious proselytization." He explained that though they may carry Hindu, Christian or Muslim names, their curriculums and entrance requirements may in no way show favor to one religion. All courses or programs that teach the specific teachings and practices of one religion in a narrow or orthodox sense, must be made optional and extracurricular. For example, he said that in a Christian high school there may be a church service in the chapel before the classes begin, but by law of Hindu students do not have to attend. Naturally, he commented, "All religious schools have as one of their aims and goals the perpetuation of their particular faith, but this can only occur on a informal basis between teacher and student, not through an organized curriculum..." Another source adds, however, that practically speaking, such informal or indirect influence and indoctrination is a powerful force acting in favor of the religion under which any school in Asia is managed; acting as a positive force or a negative one, depending on whether students and parents are members of the religion being promulgated by the administration.

Asked when and how this secularization of Indian education took place, Dr. Philip answered, "The educational system in India was put on an official secular basis at the time of independence to prevent religious feuding in the educational sphere and free the leading institutions to make the optimum academic, non-religious growth for the economic benefit of India and the individuals concerned."

The Sakthi Vinayakar Vidayalaya of Tuticorin has broken with the modern conventional pattern and returned to an older pattern, the pattern of the religious gurukulam, where separating the secular from the religious was unheard of. It teaches Saivite Hinduism openly and to all its students, including the practices and in-depth knowledge of the faith. In evidence of this, a recent visitor to the Tuticorin school reported that "Pictures of God Siva adorn each classroom and remind them that God is everywhere, that God is part of education, that religion is the basis of life. Upon this platform a child accrues knowledge to be used at a later time as part of performing his Hindu dharma."

The school is the achievement and the dream of three men: Mr. V.V. Gurusamy, Professor K. Palanisamy, the late Mr. A.P.C. Veerabahu - all of Tuticorin - with the blessings of H.H. Sivaya Subramuniyaswami of Hawaii. Mr. Gurusamy explained that, "Here in Tuticorin we had never heard of a Hindu school or college. Almost all the colleges were Christian schools, but after I came into contact with Mr. Palanisamy we had a feeling, a desire, that we should start a Hindu school in this area." Soon after that, he continued, "Mr. A.P.C. Veerabahu was kind enough to donate the land, so we thought that was a good beginning, and I somehow or another made up the money...to put up the school." Professor Palanisamy, Professor of Tamil at Commorage College of Tuticorin, whom Mr. Gurusamy attributes with 99% of the efforts of organizing and developing the project, said it was the visit of H.H. Sivaya Subramuniyaswami in December of 1981 that catalyzed the school, a visit which coincided with their thoughts and discussions. During the guru's visit he spoke strongly of the great need for Saivite schools and encouraged them to start one in Tutircorin. Within one year, by January, 1982, a start had been made, with 3 rooms and two levels of kindergarden classes being held, and enrollment at 90 children. By January of 1983, a new standard had been added and the enrollment had soared to 230, with the addition of new facilities. Their goal is to add one grade each year, up to the 16-year student level. Quality of the overall education is of primary concern and being kept at a very high standard.

"Public support in Tuticorin for the school is tremendous," Prof. Palanisamy said proudly. Still, so far all of the financial burden has been carried by Mr. Gurusamy alone. He said he has given so far a total of 500,000 Rupees (approximately U.S.

$50,000). He continues to give each year as expenses continue, but his resources have been strained to the limit, he feels. So he is seeking help from other sources, other philanthropists, and from wherever it might come, even from other countries, in the form of materials or in the form of money.

Though it seems an uphill battle, Prof. Palanisamy says they are determined not to seek any help from the government, because of the secular restraints and regulations that they would be required to follow. But Mr. Gurusamy is used to uphill battles. Orphaned at the age of 16, having completed school to but the second standard, he built his wealth from the ground up with his own hard work and self-discipline. He started out as a lorry (truck) operator at 16 and by age thirty he had built up his own transport company. Now, his colleagues say that though he is a great and highly influential man, still he remains a simple and humble man, and a helpful man to all. Each year he gives more than a hundred thousand rupees to schools and temples. His wife is known as the most religious lady in the town, and one who, it is said, is "always following in her husband's footsteps, always thinking in his way of thought."

Though to date the question of future finances is in some question, like a powerful magnet this little prototype school is attracting the attention of other people with similar interests, in hopes that this "committee" can help them set up schools. Mr. Gurusamy said that officials of the Thermal Power Plant of Tuticorin, an industry-centered community, recently asked this established school committee to help them establish a second Hindu school, and had provided a building and some of the finances. A small scale "branch" school was inaugurated there with 24 students, and up to 200 are expected by next year. He said that two other proposals, though, had to be declined, realizing the risk of spreading energies and resources too thin.

Indeed, their effort is bold - a courageous example which portends a new consciousness among Saivites in India, one which recognizes the plight of Hindu children being raised in Christian-run-schools, and which offers Saivite families a practical solution which does not compromise the quality of education.

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