

COMMON SCHOOL SYSTEM: DO WE HAVE AN OPTION?#

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In October 1997, as I walked out of the international airport of Toronto (Ontario, Canada), my eyes caught the newspaper headlines announcing “State-wide School Teachers’ Strike’. Coming from India, this was nothing unusual. However, the next headline puzzled me. It read: “Joint Rally of Teachers and Parents.” It made no sense at all. How can the teachers and the parents join hands in a protest? In India, parents would be furious if teachers go on strike but here they were marching and shouting slogans together.

The protest was so massive that the entire state of Ontario came to a standstill for the next seven days. It was a common political issue for all. The faculty and the students of the University of Toronto extended full support. Seminars and sit-ins were held at the university campus, addressed by the leadership of the unions of school and university teachers alike and supported by student organizations and parent groups. I was amazed at this solidarity. The provincial government was under fire for two issues. First, the government had declared major budget cuts in school education. Second, the autonomous elected school boards, responsible for decentralized management of school clusters (including teacher appointments, curriculum and exams) were to be merged to form larger boards in order to save money. To the parents and teachers, the larger boards signaled decline in the quality of management.

I was in Canada to attend a conference against globalization. My hosts explained that both of these government decisions were indicative of the neo-liberal policy shifts. These were designed to increasingly result in abdication of the State’s role in the social sector, particularly education and health, eventually affecting the whole of Canada. This, however, did not explain the people’s solidarity. In India, too, similar neo-liberal policy shifts in education were evident. Yet, neither the teachers nor the parents seemed to be concerned. The educated middle class apparently did not care how the neo-liberal policies were destroying the vast government school system, with consequent increase in the pace of privatization of school education. On the contrary, the middle class, though unhappy about the increasing cost of education, implicitly supported privatization.

The explanation became apparent as I studied the Canadian school system. In Canada, the public-funded school system essentially covered the entire population and was maintained at a high level of quality. The private schools played a negligible role. In spite of public funding, the government control or interference was at its minimum. The school boards, comprising, on average, 50-60 schools, were responsible and accountable for teacher appointments, placement and promotions, curriculum and textbooks, exams, maintenance of quality and all other aspects of management.

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Each school was essentially a neighbourhood school. All children, irrespective of their socio-economic or cultural background, studied in these schools. It did not matter who you were – university professor or a factory worker, senior government official or a garbage truck driver, prime minister or a farm labour, corporate executive or a police constable – if you had a child, she would go to the neighbourhood public-funded school. Period. There was no choice. Now, this explained the people’s solidarity. This was so since the quality of education received by everybody’s children was going to be *equally but negatively* affected by the two political decisions taken by the provincial government. All citizens of Ontario had a common political stake in maintaining the quality of the public-funded school system.

An entirely contrary scenario was witnessed in Bhopal in February 2008. About 30,000 lowly paid under-qualified and untrained para-teachers appointed in Sarva Shiksha Abhiyan’s (SSA) 27,000 odd Education Guarantee Scheme (EGS) centres of Madhya Pradesh were on strike. Euphemistically called *guruji*, they were demanding regularization as teachers after several years of service. Each year they would go on strike to draw state government’s attention but to no avail. This time, however, realizing the significance of the election year, the *guruji* union decided to intensify its battle. In the beginning, the *gurujis* sat at the usual *dharna* site and were ignored. The *gurujis* then shifted their *dharna* to block one of the roads leading to a high profile market serving the upcoming middle class of the city. There was a hue and cry. The media openly criticized the state government – mind you, not for the closure of 27,000 centres in tribal, *dalit* and other backward hamlets but for its inability to keep the access to the market open. Not a word of sympathy was uttered by anyone – not even by the political leaders – either for the loss of studies suffered by 7-8 lakh poor children or the discriminatory treatment given to the *gurujis*.

What else would you expect? None of those who shop in the high profile Bhopal market, including the political leaders residing in the state capital, send their children to government schools, least of all to the inferior quality single-teacher EGS centres of SSA. Neither the powerful IAS and IPS officials nor the media personnel have any stake in the government school system. Even more deafening was the silence of the teachers’ unions. The neo-liberal policy decisions taken in the second half of 1990s had fragmented the teachers’ cadre into six categories – the regular teachers (declared by the then CM as “a dying cadre”), Shikshakarmis, three separate cadres of Samvida Shikshaks (i.e. contract teachers) and finally the lowly *gurujis*. Each cadre fought its battle separately, holding *dharnas* at different times of the year. Apart from this division of teachers’ voice, the irony is that the teachers themselves have no stake in the parallel layers of schools they teach in since their own children also go to private schools!

The Great Escape : Loss of a Common Political Stake

The government, kowtowing to the World Bank policies, has established a multi-layered school system from the mid-eighties onwards, each layer with its own teachers’

cadre and meant for a separate social segment.* This led to rapid deterioration of the quality of government schools during the past 15 years as all the privileged sections of society, with any political voice or lobby worth the name, shifted their children to private schools. The creamy layer among the SCs, STs, OBCs and Muslims, by and large, also followed suit. Today, the multi-layered government school system has only the weakest, mostly the marginalized *dalits*, tribals, extreme OBCs and Muslims, particularly girls in each of these sections of society. The only exception to this phenomenon is the miniscule number of elite schools like the Kendriya or Navodaya Vidyalayas of the central government and similar high profile schools set up by various state governments. *Education has become a commodity, rather than an entitlement or a Fundamental Right.* Those who can afford to buy education do and those who can't are compelled to accept the government system. Unlike Canada, there is no common political stake in the nation's education system. Even the Members of Parliament and state legislatures have hardly any interest left in the government system in spite of voting budget allocations or cuts therein year after year.

Few realize that, like Canada, other G-8 nations also have a well-functioning public-funded school system built on the principle of neighbourhood schools. This is particularly true for the USA, France, Germany and Japan, though neo-liberal policies are steadily making inroads in these countries too. Without a Common School System in some form or another, none of the developed nation would have reached where they are today. This includes U.K. which earlier boasted of its privileged grammar schools but had to move towards an inclusive Comprehensive Schools System under rising democratic pressure in the 1970s which did away with selection for admissions. What is true for the G-8 nations is also true, by and large, for the Scandinavian countries, Switzerland, China, South Korea, Cuba and former members of the Soviet Union - all of which achieved almost universal school education decades ago. This success transcends ideological history or present economic persuasion. Can India hope to be an exception to this historical experience?

We were also moving towards a Common School System (CSS) until mid-1970s. The only aberration was a handful of the so-called Public Schools, designed in the elite English tradition, serving the top echelons of the Indian privileged classes. A substantial proportion of the people of that generation who are still leading national institutions in various critical sectors had received quality education in either government, local body or *private but government-aided* schools. It was around this time that the elite and upper middle class started shifting to private *unaided* fee-charging schools, primarily in pursuit of English-medium education and competition-based and career-oriented curriculum. No one can blame this section of society since the government policies had failed to establish the relevance of either the Indian languages or the prevailing school curriculum for entry into civil services, judiciary, business or industry, S&T, and professional services. This

*For a more detailed description and analysis of the neo-liberal impact on Indian education system, please see my articles viz. (a) 'Dilution, Distortion and Diversion: A Post-Jomtien Reflection on the Education Policy' in *The Crisis of Elementary Education in India* (Ed. Ravi Kumar), SAGE Publications, New Delhi, pp. 92-136, 2006; and (b) 'Common School System and the Future of India', JANATA, Vol. 63, No. 16, May 11, 2008, pp. 1-32, Mumbai.

“great escape” is precisely what triggered the decline of the quality of one of the world’s largest public-funded school systems (a total of 12 lakh schools today).

The crisis was foreseen by the Education Commission (1964-66), popularly called the Kothari Commission, which recommended CSS as the National System of Education with a view to “bring the different social classes and groups together and thus promote the emergence of an egalitarian and integrated society.” The Commission warned that “instead of doing so, education itself is tending to increase social segregation and to perpetuate and widen class distinctions.” It further noted that “this is bad not only for the children of the poor but also for the children of the rich and the privileged groups” since “by segregating their children, such privileged parents prevent them from sharing the life and experiences of the children of the poor and coming into contact with the realities of life. also render the education of their own children *anaemic and incomplete*.” Both the 1968 and 1986 policies resolved to move towards CSS.

Common School System : Defining, Debating and Discourse Building

There are three confusions regarding CSS that are deliberately created by the powerful private school lobby, neo-liberal ideologues and the representatives of the global market forces. First, **CSS is misperceived as a uniform school system.** On the contrary, it is the present education system that follows a rigid curricular and pedagogic framework circumscribed by Boards of Examination and now international affiliations. All this has worked against children’s natural attributes such as creativity, curiosity, questioning, dissent or tendency to explore and chart new paths. It reinforces compulsion, comparison and competition that restrict options, academic freedom, co-operation and team functioning. Such a framework pushes children to adopt dishonest and immoral practices in exams. The 11th Plan is talking of using secondary education for building skilled labour force for the global market. This means even greater regimentation rooted in a mechanistic approach. Modern educational theory, however, expects each school or a cluster of schools to be able to respond to the local contexts and reflect the rich diversity across the country. The rigidity of the present system can be challenged only when flexibility, contextuality and plurality are accepted, among others, as the defining principles of CSS. Indeed, it should certainly be possible to conceive of a national system wherein, in principle, *no two schools shall be identical and each will be known for its unique conception of quality*, albeit within a broad national curriculum framework. In this sense, CSS can be visualized as the most urgently needed reform.

Second, **CSS is irrationally projected as one that acts against quality, talent and merit.** On the contrary, it is the present system based upon paying capacity, privileges and false sense of superiority that has alienated the most powerful sections of society from the government schools system, if not from *Bharat* itself! As a consequence of this “great escape”, the government school system has lost its voice of advocacy at the highest fora. Political leadership, corporate executives, academia, professionals, writers and the media personnel have no vested interest left in the improvement of the quality of government schools. Further, the neo-liberal Structural Adjustment Programme imposed on the Indian economy since 1991 has resulted in steady withdrawal of resources from

the education sector, expressed as percentage of GDP. This has led to a policy of ‘multi-track’ education system based upon poor infrastructure, multi-grade teaching and para-teachers. It has meant exclusion of at least two-thirds of our children from quality education, thereby suppressing their inherent potential for contributing to social or national development. Less than a third of nation’s genetic pool is available for talent and merit development.

Third, it is wrongly claimed that **CSS will not permit a privately managed school to retain its non-government and unaided (or aided) character.** Again, CSS implies that all schools – irrespective of the type of their management, sources of income or affiliating Boards of examinations – will participate and fulfill their responsibility as part of the National System of Education. All what is expected of such schools is that they operate within the framework of the Constitution and function as genuine neighbourhood schools. With 86th Constitutional Amendment, ‘free and compulsory’ elementary education has become a Fundamental Right. This means that the very notion of fees or other contingent charges, at least until class VIII, have become anti-Constitutional! The Constitution has liberal space for philanthropy but not for commodification of education.

The Neighbourhood School and Other Essentials of CSS

Further, the CSS based on neighbourhood schools implies a heterogeneous classroom representing the diversity (along with disparity) prevailing in the neighbourhood. Only then, all sections of society, including the post powerful, will have a vested interest in improving the government school system. The neighbourhood school needs to be envisioned as *a common public space where children of diverse backgrounds can study and socialize together.* This is a pre-condition in a society like ours for *forging a sense of common citizenship* without which a healthy democracy can not function. Also, can there be a Fundamental Right to education of unequal and inferior quality education? Let me go a step further. The 86th Constitutional Amendment (2002) inserted a new Article 21A in Part III of the Constitution that made ‘Free and Compulsory education’ a Fundamental Right for the 6-14 age group children. Does the Constitution permit a Fundamental Right to education that violates the principles of equality and social justice enshrined in Articles 14, 15 and 16? Naturally, not. Given this, **do we have any option other than the CSS based on neighbourhood schools that will be in conformity with the vision of education emerging from the Constitution?**

The present school system structurally promotes discrimination. May be an example would be helpful here. The teachers of the government schools are pulled out of the schools frequently on a variety of non-teaching assignments, ranging from counting sheep and conducting Below Poverty Line Survey to organizing elections and doing the decennial Census. This implies colossal loss of teaching days. More importantly, this makes the teacher cynical about her profession and gives a misleading political message that everything else is important other than teaching children. In contrast, the private school children do not suffer any such loss. In a way, we can say that the poor children going to government schools sacrifice their education in order to sustain democracy in

India and build a data base for social development and economic planning. This discrimination against government school children (almost 90% of the children enrolled at the elementary stage) will come to a halt only when the children of the ruling elite will start going to the government schools.

Let us also realize that *any attempt to introduce curricular or pedagogic reforms, as the NCERT attempts to do periodically, in a hierarchical system is bound to increase discrimination and exclusion.* The collapse of World Bank's District Primary Education Programme (DPEP) in the nineties and now of Sarva Shiksha Abhiyan (SSA) provides historic evidence of this common sense thumb rule. Such arbitrary and temporary schemes or projects have no relevance to the crisis of education faced by the nation. This is because these schemes are not even designed to bring about any basic structural reforms that would open up space for re-construction of the endangered relationship between the child, the teacher and the curriculum. This is precisely why these schemes have failed to achieve their declared objectives. Nothing short of a radical transformation is required to move forward.

Let us briefly list eight essential conditions for building the CSS that will apply equally to the government-run elite schools and the private unaided schools:

1. All schools to be neighbourhood schools with a defined neighbourhood. Diversity would be optimized while delineating the neighbourhood.
2. All schools to fulfill a set of minimum Norms and Standards with respect to the infrastructure, teacher quality and status, pupil:teacher ratio, non-teaching staff, potable water, electricity and telephone, toilets, supporting systems for the disabled, teaching aids, ICT facilities, library and laboratory, playground and play equipment, facilities for fine arts and performing arts, curriculum and pedagogy and all other parameters for ensuring quality education.
3. As per Article 21A of the Constitution, all schools to provide absolutely *Free* education from nursery stage to Class VIII. As per Article 41 and its interpretation by the Supreme Court's Unnikrishnan Judgment (1993), the government to regulate the fee structure of all schools, especially the private unaided schools, from Class IX to XII, preventing profiteering, parking of funds and income tax evasion.
4. All schools to follow the National Curriculum Framework (NCF) that would be reviewed from time to time. NCF will define a core curriculum that would be common to all schools except that the regional diversity will be appropriately reflected in the elements of the Core Curriculum. Apart from the core, there will be ample latitude and flexibility in the rest of the NCF to design curriculum at the level of the states, districts, Blocks or even the village panchayats in accordance with the local socio-cultural milieu, provided the broad principles of NCF are maintained. This would make it possible to institutionalize a decentralized practice of designing of curriculum, syllabi, textbooks, teaching-learning process and assessment such that the process would appropriately reflect the rich geo-cultural diversity of the country while maintaining a balance with the concepts critical for developing a national and global vision. The above framework also

provides adequate space for curricular innovation, experimentation and even dissent at the level of the individual schools, teachers and students.

5. A common policy of language education founded on the principle of multi-lingualism of the vast majority of India's children and the mother tongue's critical role in the learning process, including the learning of the state/UT language as well as Hindi and English.
6. The curriculum, pedagogy, textbooks and the school ambience to ensure that no child feels excluded or marginalized due to the presentation of SCs, STs, extreme OBCs, minorities and the disabled and the women in each of these sections in a negative image. Inclusive education implies that the contribution made by all sections of society to the freedom movement and to the building of the post-independence India is appropriately brought alive in the school.
7. Critical Pedagogy to guide the transformation of the present multi-layered hierarchical school system into the CSS based on neighbourhood schools, since the CSS implies much more than a structural change; it implies an education that liberates the child's mind, enabling her to resist injustice, deconstruct capitalism and neo-liberalism and struggle for social transformation.
8. Each school to have a management committee of its own, with at least 75% of the members being the parents of the children attending the concerned school; SCs, STs, OBCs and the minorities to have proportionate representation; and half of the members to be women. The functions and duties of the committee to be well-defined through a law.

If the above concept of the CSS and neighbourhood schooling requires a legislation by the Parliament, then this must be made into an urgent issue of a nation-wide political struggle. In light of the long-delayed Right to Education Bill, it may be worthwhile to seek to redraft the Bill with a vision of systemic transformation for building the CSS based on neighbourhood schools (see my article in TEHELKA, 14th June 2008).

Concluding Remarks

To be sure, there are powerful forces trying to divert public attention from the Common School agenda through clever devices. These include private schools running 'afternoon centres' for the poor, 25% reservation provision in the Draft Right to Education Bill 2008 for poor children of the neighbourhood in private schools and now the 11th Plan proposal of school vouchers and public-private partnership for backdoor funding of private schools out of public funds. These are ways of justifying and legitimizing the present exclusionary system. We have to also learn to identify and resist the market fundamentalists and neo-liberal consultants in the academia, media, policy making and their fellow-traveller NGOs who are working overtime to push the neo-liberal ideology in Indian education system in particular and the economic and democratic life in general.

The struggle for equality *in and through* education can't be delinked either from the struggle for *jal-jangal-zameen* and *jeevika* or from the struggle for social

transformation. The evolving discourse on Common School System will also have to deal with the eternal question: Can such a radical systemic transformation in education take place without a socialist revolution? While we may not have a clear answer, an operating thesis may be debated. This may not be seen as the proverbial chicken and egg question. Instead, a dynamic relationship based upon dialectical materialism between educational and socialist transformation may be assumed for moving forward. Both are democratic struggles in which the participation of the masses is critical and must be advanced together. The impact of participation in these struggles on the critical consciousness of the people must not be under-estimated.

This then provides a preliminary framework for developing a pedagogy of reconstruction of socio-economic and democratic institutions in the country. This includes the educational system. While debating theories and building strategies, we need to have clarity on the basic issue. By postponing the Common School System functioning through neighbourhood schools, we would only postpone giving every child an equal opportunity to fully develop her potential for knowledge acquisition, internalisation of humane and democratic values and, above all, articulation of her own vision of India. The reference to articulation of child's vision implies a socio-political construction contoured by Critical Pedagogy, even if the vision conflicts with today's so-called 'mainstream' vision rooted in class, caste, cultural, linguistic, regional and patriarchal hegemony, increasingly reinforced by neo-liberalism. All this is essential groundwork for political struggle. We may re-iterate, even if not over-emphasise, that the Common School System is the only educational framework known to us which will enable us to forge a sense of common citizenship to wage a united struggle for a democratic, socialist, egalitarian and secular society.

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