

COMMON SCHOOL SYSTEM: DO WE HAVE AN OPTION?¹

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From Toronto to Bhopal: A Common Lesson, Two Contrary Narratives

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 province 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 (equivalent to our *dharnas*) 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 people’s solidarity and determination. 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, standards and exams) were to be merged to form larger boards in order to save money. To the parents and teachers, the larger boards signaled undermining of people’s democratic participation in decision making with consequent 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 since the early 1990s. 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.

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The explanation became apparent as I studied the Canadian school system. In Canada, the public-funded (i.e. state-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 provincial government control or interference was at its minimum, basically confined to providing a broad vision, policy guidelines, financing and monitoring. The school boards, comprising on average, 40-50 schools, were responsible and accountable for teacher appointments, placement and promotions, curriculum and textbooks, maintenance of *common* quality norms and standards, exams, monitoring and all other aspects of management, with adequate devolution of powers to individual schools.

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, Member of Parliament or a farm labour, corporate executive or a police constable – if you had a child, she would go to the public-funded neighbourhood school. Period. There was no choice. Now, this explained the people's solidarity and determination. 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 (state capital of Madhya Pradesh, India) in February 2008. About 30,000 lowly paid under-qualified and untrained para-teachers appointed on short-term contract in Sarva Shiksha Abhiyan's (SSA) 27,000 odd Education Guarantee Scheme (EGS) centres of Madhya Pradesh were on strike. Euphemistically, if not also patronizingly, 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 of the state government, 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 major roads leading to a high profile market serving the upcoming middle class of the city. Immediately thereafter, 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 of Madhya Pradesh 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, including the members of the state assemblies (MLAs) of the opposition parties – 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 government 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 in the state had fragmented the teachers' cadre into six categories – the regular teachers (declared by the then Congress Chief Minister as “a dying cadre”), Shikshakarmis, three separate cadres of Samvida Shikshaks (i.e. contract teachers) and finally the lowly *gurujis*. This neo-liberal policy framework has been basically adhered to by the present BJP government, thereby providing evidence of a consensus among otherwise battling political parties when it comes to socio-economic policies. Each teacher 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 inferior 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 central and state governments, kowtowing to the World Bank policies, have established a multi-layered school system, beginning from the mid-1980s onwards, each layer with its own teachers' cadre and meant for a separate social segment.³ This fragmentation 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. An additional exception will soon be the much-hyped 6,000 Model Schools being started by the central government under the XI Plan.⁴ Of these exclusive schools, 2,500 schools will be in Public-Private Partnership (PPP) mode – the latest ploy of the government to promote privatization by backdoor public funding. The PPP mode in school education will be *legitimized when the Draft Right to Education Bill, 2008 is passed by the Parliament*.

For all practical purposes, the state policy is now committed to making *education 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.

³For a more detailed description and analysis of the neo-liberal impact on Indian education system, 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.

⁴See Sadgopal, Anil, 'The 'Trickle Down' Trick', TEHELKA, 29 September 2007, http://www.tehelka.com/story_main34.asp?filename=Ws290907The_Trickle.asp

Few realize that, like Canada, the other rich and powerful 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 nations 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 1960s and 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 several of the 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?**

Indeed, we were also slowly moving towards a Common School System (CSS) until mid-1970s, in spite of the lack of a supportive policy framework. The only aberration until then was a handful of the so-called 'Public Schools' (may be about fifty in number), designed in the elite English tradition, serving the top echelons of the Indian privileged classes. Apart from this 'Doon School' category, there were the English-medium missionary schools for the upper middle class, their number not exceeding a few thousand, may be less than 5,000 (precise data not available to me). A substantial proportion of the people of that generation who are still leading national level institutions or services 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 the upper middle class started shifting to the private *unaided* fee-charging schools, *primarily* in pursuit of English-medium education and competition-based and career-oriented curriculum, rather than better quality of education in philosophic or pedagogical sense. No one, however, need blame this section of society since the government policies had failed (in fact, not even designed) 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 "great escape" or *Mahapalayan* is precisely what triggered the *political disempowerment* of one of the world's largest public-funded school systems (a total of 6 lakh plus in mid-1970s and about 12 lakh schools today), thereby resulting in the steady decline of its quality and consequent loss of public credibility.

Democracy, Equality and Nation-Building: Social Functions of Education

The present crisis was foreseen by the Education Commission (1964-66), popularly known as the Kothari Commission, more than four decades ago. It declared prophetically,

"Even more important is the role of education in achieving social and national integration. Indian society is hierarchical, stratified and deficient in vertical mobility. The social distance between the different classes, particularly between the rich and the poor, the educated and the uneducated, is large and is tending to widen. Our people profess a number of different religions; and the picture becomes even more complicated because of caste, an undemocratic

institution The situation, complex as it was, has been made critical by recent developments which threaten both national unity and social progress. [Section 1.07]”

Keeping in mind the conflict of interest between India’s ruling classes and an equitable education system suitable for the masses, the Commission expressed its concern,

“In a situation of the type we have in India, it is the responsibility of the education system to bring the different social classes and groups together and thus promote the emergence of an egalitarian and integrated society. But at present instead of doing so, education itself is tending to increase social segregation and to perpetuate and widen class distinctions. [Section 1.36]”

While underlining the “direct link between education, national development and prosperity”, the Commission wrote,

“Judged from this point of view, it becomes evident that the present system of education, designed to meet the needs of an imperial administration within the limitations set by a feudal and traditional society, will need radical changes if it is to meet the purposes of a modern democratic and socialistic society – changes in objectives, in content, in teaching methods, in programmes In fact, what is needed is a revolution in education which in turn will set in motion the much desired social, economic and cultural revolution. [Section 1.17]”

There is no doubt that the Commission envisaged the social function of education in the context of the nation-building project – a critical concern in post-independence India of the 1960s. The two-fold social function included the role of education in:

- (a) forging a sense of nationhood and ‘unity in diversity’; and
- (b) building a citizenship for a democratic, socialist, secular and egalitarian society.

Both of the above social functions are organically interwoven in the concept of the Common School System based on Neighbourhood Schools (CSS-NS). This perception is even more relevant in the present context of the neo-liberal assault on our education system than it was in the mid-1960s, wherein CSS-NS is now being envisaged as a means to resist unbridled privatization and commercialization of education. Further, a politically determined move towards building CSS-NS is the only way we can give content and meaning to the ongoing struggle for Fundamental Right to Education.⁵ **This is quite evident in the emerging discourse on CSS-NS which has gone way beyond the original conception of the Commission.**

Learning from the History of Public Education

In a seminal paper on the role of public education since its post-industrial beginning in the 17th century and establishment in the 18th century, initially in Europe and later in the

⁵For a critique of the Draft Right to Education Bill, 2008, see my article ‘C for Commerce’ in TEHELKA, 14 June 2008, pp. 44-45.

USA, Heyneman (2000)⁶ elaborates upon the critical significance of building social capital through education as the very basis of social cohesion and harmony in multi-ethnic societies. He argues that “education helps provide the behaviour expected under social contracts, in part through the socially heterogeneous experiences students have in the schools themselves helps provide an understanding of the expected consequences for breaking social contracts [which] comprise the social rationales for public education, and hence the social rationales for investment in public education.” Citing various researches on the early experiences of public education in the 19th century France, USA and the Netherlands, he observes,

“What was ‘at stake’ was the *forging of a nation* based not on principles of tyrannical control but, for the first time, one based on the informed consent of the governed, across the full gamut of religions, classes, language, and ethnicities from which the modern heterogeneous state was contrived.” (emphasis added)

With regard to the New England region of the United States, W.S. Dutton explained in 1848:

“The children of this country, of whatever parentage, should be educated together – be educated not as Baptists, or Methodists, or Episcopalians, or Presbyterians; not as Roman Catholics or Protestants but as Americans, as made of one blood and citizens of the same free country – *educated to be one harmonious people*. The common school system brings the children of all sects together and, by such education and by the commingling, acquaintance and fellowship, which it involves in the early unprejudiced and impressionable periods of life, *assimilates and unites them*.” (emphasis added)

Like Heyneman (2000), let us also ask what would be the socio-political cost of not building a Common School System in India. Here is the answer to this question derived from the western context. Horace Bushnell (1847) argued that not having a system of public education “would weaken the security of the nation and endanger the liberties on which it had been founded”. Bushnell stated:

“This great institution, the common school, is not only a part of the State, but it is imperiously wanted as such, for the common training of so many classes and conditions of people without common schools, the disadvantage that accrues to the State, in the loss of so much character, and so many cross ties of mutual respect and general appreciation and *the propagation of so many misunderstanding weakens immensely, the security of the State, and even its liberties*.” (emphasis added)

The above lessons from the history of the forging of multi-ethnic nations in Europe and North America have far-reaching implications for India’s education system and our survival as a civilized society. Yet, do we have any sound rationale for disregarding this socio-political purpose of the public-funded Common School System? This question could not have been more relevant than it is today **when**

⁶Heyneman, Stephen P. (2000), ‘From the Party/State to Multiethnic Democracy: Education and Social Cohesion in Europe and Central Asia’, *Educational Evaluation and Policy Analysis*, Vol. 22, No. 2, pp. 173-191; <http://www.jstor.org/pss/1164394>

India is facing rising social, religious and ethnic tensions, likely to challenge the very dream of India as a multi-religious, multi-ethnic and multi-lingual nation.

Common School System: The Genesis of the Conception in India

The Kothari Commission noted the state of the school system in the early 1960s in the following words,

“There is thus segregation in education itself – the minority of private, fee-charging, better schools meeting the needs of the upper classes and the vast bulk of free, publicly maintained, but poor schools being utilized by the rest. What is worse, this segregation is increasing and tending to widen the gulf between the classes and the masses. [Section 1.36]”

Elaborating upon its concern for the lack of access to quality education for the masses, the Commission stated,

“Good education, instead of being available to all children, or at least to all the able children from every stratum of society, is available only to a small minority which is usually selected not on the basis of talent but on the basis of its capacity to pay fees. *The identification and development of the total national pool of ability is greatly hampered.* The position is thus undemocratic and inconsistent with the idea of an egalitarian society. [Section 1.37]” (emphasis added)

In a critical stance on the prevailing system, the Commission contends that “this is bad not only for the children of the poor but also for the children of the rich and the privileged groups.” While, in the short-run, it may enable the latter groups to “perpetuate and consolidate their position”, in the long run, “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”, and consequently “*also render the education of their own children anaemic and incomplete.* [Section 1.37]” (emphasis added).

In this backdrop, the Commission was persuaded to recommend that,

“if these evils are to be eliminated and the educational system is to become a powerful instrument of national development in general, and social and national integration in particular, we must move towards the goal of a common school system of public education (Section 1.38) . . . which will cover all parts of the country and all stages of education and strive to provide equality of access to all children. [Section 10.05]”⁷

The Commission’s concept of the Neighbourhood School “implies that each school should be attended by all children in the neighbourhood irrespective of caste, creed, community, religion, economic condition or social status, so that there would be no segregation in schools.” In support of the Neighbourhood School recommendation, the

⁷While the Kothari Commission provided a powerful rationale for moving towards a Common School System, it dithered and became ambivalent in concretizing the concept, causing much confusion in the policy discourse. An insightful discussion of the internal contradictions within the Commission and the following political developments on this issue has been provided by J. P. Naik, the Member-Secretary of the Commission, in his book, ‘The Education Commission And After’, A.P.H. Publishing Corporation, New Delhi, 1997 (initially published in 1979) on pages 94-100.

Commission advanced two other important arguments, other than its contribution to social and national integration in the following words:

“In the first place, a neighbourhood school will provide ‘good’ education to children because sharing life with common people is an essential ingredient of good education. Secondly, the establishment of such schools will compel the rich, privileged and powerful classes to take interest in the system of public education and thereby bring about its early improvement. [Section 10.19]”⁸

Apparently, both the National Policy on Education (1968) passed by a Cabinet resolution and the National Policy on Education (1986) as also its modified version in 1992, passed by the Parliament resolved to move towards CSS, as recommended by the Kothari Commission. However, *this is only the half-truth*. We shall soon return to this matter in a later section.

Linkage Between Equality and Quality

There is now increasing evidence from international research that social mixing leads to improvement of overall performance in schools (researches cited in the Report of the Common School System Commission, Bihar, 2007, Chapter 3, p. 31). In Britain, it has been observed since the 1950s that “the way to raise the achievements of all children is to have schools which incorporate a socially mixed intake with a range of abilities (Tomlinson, 2004).” In 1960s, Britain started doing away with its elitist selection system in Grammar Schools and switched over to ‘Comprehensive School System’ with reported rise in academic standards. As Skrtic (1991) noted, “the successful schools in the post-industrial era will be the ones that *achieve excellence and equity simultaneously – indeed one that recognizes equity as the way to excellence*. (emphasis added)” Studies carried out in the USA show that if poor students are mixed in middle class schools, the overall performance of all children improves (Kahlenberg, 2001).

Yet, the Indian exercise in policy formulation since independence, including the formidable report of the Kothari Commission, has failed to cognize this international research on the critical linkage between equality and quality. Whatever limited understanding of this issue was reflected in the 1968 and 1986 policies, howsoever ambiguous it was, disappeared altogether from 1991 onwards when the District Primary Education Programme (DPEP) and Sarva Shiksha Abhiyan (SSA) were designed under the neo-liberal policy framework imposed by the IMF-World Bank regime. The consequent damage done to India’s education system by the conversion of the previously ‘dual’ education system (noted by the Kothari Commission) into a multi-track system of inferior parallel layers – a separate layer of schooling or merely some sort ‘educational facility’ for each socio-cultural segment. No wonder, there is today ample research-based documentation demonstrating that **there is neither equality nor quality in the school system!**

⁸As already recorded in Footnote 7, the Commission’s recommendation on the Neighbourhood School, like in the case of the Common School System, revealed lack of political courage and did not match with its own convictions with regard to what constitutes “good education” and what should be the role of the “privileged and powerful classes” in the improvement of the public education system.

Dithering, Deviation and Distortion vs. Recovering and Redefining the Battleground

In spite of the clarity exhibited by the Commission at the *conceptual* level about its CSS-NS proposals, it dithered while formulating the recommendations. Although the masses in India had long aspired for *equality in and through* the education system, the elite and the middle classes invariably either ignored the idea or even mocked at it. This is precisely why the strong support extended to the concept of CSS-NS by the Committee of Members of the Parliament (1967), constituted to consider the Commission's report, fell on deaf ears. The consequent National Policy on Education (1968), approved through a Cabinet resolution, made only an ambiguous, if not entirely evasive, reference to it. A most telling observation regarding this has been made by Bihar Government's Common School System Commission (2007) in the following words:

“Unfortunately, support for the institution of a Common School System in India remained confined to the realm of rhetoric. In practice, there was a constant and continuing attempt to prevaricate, to dilute and to sidetrack the concept. The process actually began from the Kothari Commission itself. Coming to the neighbourhood schools, the Commission expressed the view that the neighbourhood school concept should be adopted *as a long-term goal* to be reached *in a well-planned programme spread over the next 20 years*. It further diluted the concept by suggesting that as a step towards establishing the Common School System in the first ten years, all primary schools should be improved to a minimum level prescribed and 10 per cent of them should be raised to a higher standard of quality (Paragraph 10.20). This was hardly the way to have imparted a real momentum to the implementation of the concept. The Kothari Commission did not go into the nitty-gritty of the minimum norms to be prescribed. The Programme of Action under the 1986 National Policy on Education made no reference to the Common School System.”

- Report of the Common School System Commission (June, 2007)
Government of Bihar
[Chapter 3, Section 3.3, p. 35]

While the masses aspired for a school system founded on equality and social justice, the Indian ruling class had other plans. As noted by the Commission's indomitable Member-Secretary, J. P. Naik (1979), this recommendation “created the most fierce controversy [in 1968] when the National Policy on Education was being drafted Consequently, we had a non-controversial but ineffective and colourless statement” in the 1968 policy. There are many cynics or vested interests today who will claim that the entire effort of the Kothari Commission stands wasted. The real motivation behind such cynical or motivated claims is to go on to declare the present struggle for CSS-NS too as being irrelevant, thus both confusing and discouraging the public mind. For this reason, it would be useful to cite Naik (1979) who made the following observation in the context of the “ineffective and colourless statement” on CSS-NS in the 1968 policy:

“What then is the value of this recommendation and its *symbolic* inclusion in the National Policy on Education? The first advantage is that the recommendation has *stimulated thinking on the subject* and drawn *pointed attention to the dual and non-national character of our education system*. Moreover, the National Policy on Education has an important ‘tactical’ role to play, viz., it should provide enough *basis for progressive elements to agitate for radical reforms in education*. The debate on the common school system

has been continuing ever since the Report of the Commission was published.” (emphasis added)

- Naik, J.P. (1979)
in ‘The Education Commission And After’, pp. 97-98

There is no doubt that the debate has continued unabated and, with this, the conception of CSS-NS has been consciously advanced and clarified in response to the changing socio-political scenario. As evidence of this dynamic progression of ideas, let us look at the ‘Report of the Committee for Review of the National Policy on Education, 1986 (1990)’, popularly known as the Ramamurti Committee, that recommended a ten-year time frame for phased implementation of CSS-NS; significantly increased outlay for elementary education, thereby improving the government schools and transforming them into genuine Neighbourhood Schools; special allocations for schools in backward and poorer regions, urban slums, hilly tracts, deserts and marshy areas, flood-prone and draught-prone zones, coastal belts and islands; ensuring mother tongue as the medium of education at the primary level and teaching in regional languages at the secondary level; essential minimum legislation, particularly to dispense with early selection process, tuition fees, capitation fees etc.; and inclusion of the expensive private schools into the CSS-NS through a combination of incentives, disincentives and legislation. In spite of this conceptual advancement, the modification of the 1986 policy undertaken by the Parliament in 1992 stuck to the cryptic formulation of the 1986 policy viz., “Effective measures will be taken in the direction of the Common School System recommended in the 1968 policy. (Section 3.2)” As if this was not enough, the 1986 policy (as modified in 1992), though committing itself in rhetoric, deviated from CSS-NS by institutionalizing a parallel layer of inferior quality non-formal stream *below* the government school system and another parallel layer of superior quality Navodaya Vidyalayas *above* the government schools.⁹ Ironically, such *parallel layers were recommended by the Kothari Commission itself, while seeding the idea of CSS-NS in the political discourse of India!*

This, of course, is only a part of the story. What was once perceived as lack of political will of the Union Government to allocate 6% of GDP to education by 1986, as recommended by the Commission, has now become a willful decision of the State, as a consequence of the Structural Adjustment Programme imposed by IMF-World Bank under the neo-liberal framework. Both the District Primary Education Programme (1993-2002) and the Sarva Shiksha Abhiyan (2002-to date) were designed to destroy even the modicum of equality (and therefore also quality) in the school system and convert the ‘dual’ school system of the pre-neo-liberal era into a multi-layered school system, both within the government and the private school systems. This led to the expected decline of quality and the consequent loss of public credibility of the government schools in the 1990s and the present decade. As if the global market was waiting for this ‘historic’ moment to arrive, the untested and under-researched ideas like school voucher system and Public-Private Partnership have been incorporated in the XI Five Year Plan without

⁹A detailed analysis of the 1986 policy is available in my Hindi essay, ‘Shiksha Neeti Ka Sankat’, in *Shiksha Mein Badlaav Ka Sawaal*, Granth Shilpi, New Delhi, 2000, pp. 175-189; and the essay published in 2006 and mentioned in Footnote 3, marked (a).

any evidence of public debate whatsoever.¹⁰ The Draft Right to Education Bill, 2008, waiting to be placed in the Parliament, is designed to legitimize most of these deviations and distortions. All this has made the task of building the Common School System of public education founded on Neighbourhood School (CSS-NS) far more difficult, though certainly not impossible, than what it was when the Commission had first recommended it in 1966!

In this background, therefore, the political significance of the decision of the Bihar Government in August 2006 to constitute the Common School System Commission needs to be appreciated. This decision was clearly in response to the rising public pressure in Bihar and elsewhere (e.g. by People's Campaign for Common School System) for CSS-NS, building up since the mid-1990s in the context of the rapidly deteriorating conditions in the state's education system. The Bihar Commission's report has documented the extent of *cumulative neglect* over decades in the state and its impact on the school system, making it possibly the worst in the country (see Chapter 4, pp. 43-66). The frustration in the state was further heightened by the contrived claims of the so-called 'success' of the much-hyped UNICEF-sponsored Bihar Education Project (BEP) and the National Literacy Mission (NLM) during the 1990s. This indeed provided the essential ground for the leadership given by several teacher and student organizations, activist groups (especially, Bharat Jan Vigyan Jatha's Lokshala Programme) and academics to build a well-articulated social demand for radical transformation in the system. The Bihar Commission's Report, submitted in June, 2007, was able to advance the CSS-NS concept beyond where the Ramamurti Committee had stopped in 1990. For this, the credit must be given to the raised political consciousness in the state, internalized by the Report through interaction with various academic, social and political organisations. Yet, some of its recommendations, particularly those dealing with the status of teachers (Chapter 6, pp. 85-90) reflected the strain of the ongoing debate within the Commission. Admittedly, the Bihar Commission, in spite of its progressive analytical frame, could not remain entirely immune to the pressures of the neo-liberal policies being pursued by the state government during the period of its functioning, especially those relating to teacher recruitment. Hence, admittedly, certain contradictions did appear in the drafting of its recommendations. This is reminiscent, though in lesser measure, of what might have happened to the Kothari Commission, as later revealed by its Member-Secretary J.P. Naik in 1979. The fact that the state government has since *backed out of its declared public commitment* to implement the Report should neither surprise nor dishearten the proponents of CSS-NS in the country. Only those who do not understand the neo-liberal political economy and the prevailing character of the Indian State would have expected the Bihar Government to accept the radical recommendations of its CSS Commission. Also, the denial of the conceptual advancement made in the process since the Kothari Commission's report, as some cynics are liable to claim, will be politically naïve. In this Bihar narrative lies the value of **continuing to recover the battleground of CSS-NS and also defining new frontiers of the battle that increasingly engages with politics and people's movements**, just as Naik (1979) had prophesized!

¹⁰For a comprehensive critique of XI Five Year Plan's push for Public-Private Partnership in education and school vouchers, see my Hindi article, 'Sarvajanic 'Sajhedaaree' Ya Loot', *Shiksha-Vimarsh*, Jaipur, Rajasthan, January-April, 2008, pp. 68-96.

Common School System: Misconceiving the Discourse

There are three confusions regarding CSS-NS that are deliberately created by the powerful private school lobby, neo-liberal ideologues and the representatives of the global market forces, especially the internationally funded NGOs. First, **CSS-NS 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 XI Plan is unashamedly talking of using secondary education for building skilled labour force for the global market. This means even greater regimentation rooted in a mechanistic approach informed by the universally discredited behavioural paradigm of educational psychology. 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 and interweave the knowledge and consciousness thus gained with the global reality and a humane worldview. 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-NS. 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-NS can be visualized as the most urgently needed educational reform in India.

Second, **CSS-NS 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 vast government school 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 echelons of Indian democracy. 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 (one teacher teaching five classes simultaneously) and para-teachers. It has meant exclusion (termed 'drop-out' by the government) of at least one-third and more than half of our children from education by Class V and Class VIII respectively, thereby suppressing their inherent potential for contributing to social or national development. *Almost nine out of ten children who enter Class I 'drop-out' (or are pushed-out) before reaching Class XII.* Even less pass the Class XII public exam and become available for higher education and professional courses. **Thus, only a miniscule proportion of the nation's genetic pool is available for talent and merit development in the present system.** The impact of this exclusion was evident in the Beijing Olympics (2008) when India was celebrating its single gold

medal in comparison to China's more than fifty gold medals. China made nine years of education a Fundamental Right in 1986 and provided it through a public-funded school system based on equal opportunity and participation. It was here that China started its systematic programme of building athletes, swimmers and other sportspeople, tapping a substantial proportion of the nation's genetic pool. This is the lesson that India needs to learn from China, the latter's ruthless pursuit of neo-liberal economic policies notwithstanding!

Third, it is wrongly claimed that **CSS-NS will not permit a privately managed school to retain its non-government and unaided (or aided) character.** Again, CSS-NS 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 that is expected of such schools is that they operate within the framework of the Constitution and function as genuine Neighbourhood Schools. With Supreme Court's Unnikrishnan Judgment (1993) and also the 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-NS

Further, the CSS based on Neighbourhood Schools (CSS-NS) 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.¹¹ 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 (CSS-NS) that will be in conformity with the vision of education emerging from the Constitution?**

¹¹It is noteworthy that the 86th Constitutional Amendment (2002) was *designed to dilute and distort* the impact of Supreme Court's Unnikrishnan Judgment (1993). It excluded 17 crore children below six years of age from the Fundamental Right and enabled the State to arbitrarily define the Fundamental Right through the conditionality placed in the consequent Article 21A viz. "as the State may, by law, determine." The manifold lacunae and contradictions in the Draft Right to Education Bill, 2008 are precisely a result of this conditionality in the new Article 21A, empowering the Indian State to interpret the notion of Fundamental Right in the neo-liberal framework (see my article in TEHELKA, 14 June 2008).

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 a 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 in CSS-NS.¹²

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 1990s 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-NS that will apply equally to the government-run elite schools (e.g. Kendriya & Navodaya Vidyalayas and the XI Plan's 6,000 Model Schools) as well as the private unaided schools:

1. All schools to be neighbourhood schools with a defined neighbourhood. *Diversity must be optimized by legislation* 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 (ramps, Braille & sign language), teaching aids, ICT facilities, library and laboratory, playground and athletic & play equipment, facilities for fine arts and performing arts, curriculum and pedagogy and all other parameters for ensuring quality education.
3. According to Supreme Court's Unnikrishnan Judgment (1993) as well as the 86th Constitutional Amendment, all schools to provide absolutely *Free* education from the nursery stage to Class VIII. As per Article 41 in the Constitution and its

¹²Unfortunately, instead of putting a halt to this discrimination against the government school children, the Draft Right to Education Bill, 2008 legitimises it.

- creative interpretation by the Unnikrishnan Judgment¹³, 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. Basically rooted in the three-language formula, recommended by the Kothari Commission and the 1986 policy, the Bihar Common School System Commission has proposed a concretized plan of language education in the multi-lingual society of the state and recommended a law (as part of the overall CSS Act) to ensure its equitable implementation in all schools, including private unaided schools.¹⁴
 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 stereotype image. Inclusive education¹⁵ in the context of the curriculum implies, among other things, that the contribution made by all sections of society

¹³The Unnikrishnan Judgment (1993) declares that, as per Article 41, the Right to Education exists even after the age of 14 years (i.e. after Class VIII) but is limited by the "economic capacity and [stage of] development" of the State. This implies that the **State can not offer the reason of the limitation of its economic capacity when it comes to allocating funds for elementary education!**

¹⁴See Report of the Common School System Commission (2007), Government of Bihar, Patna, Section 5.6, pp. 81-84 and Chapter 14, Schedule II of the recommended Act.

¹⁵Extreme care needs to be exercised while using the now popular term of 'Inclusive Education' since it has basically come from the international discourse promoted by the World Bank-UN agencies during the past two decades. Not surprisingly, it is frequently used in the neo-liberal framework wherein it means 'inclusion' through special provisions or support system for a fraction of the population (freeships or scholarships, 25% reservation in private schools, school vouchers, special schools like the 6,000 Model Schools) while maintaining the structural inequality and injustice of the system. The 'Inclusive Education' discourse, therefore, must not be seen as a substitute of the Constitutional discourse founded on equality and building of a socialistic 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-NS based on neighbourhood schools, since the CSS-NS 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.¹⁶

If the above concept of the CSS and neighbourhood schooling requires legislation by the Parliament, then this must be made into an urgent issue of a nation-wide political struggle. In this respect, 'The Bihar Right to Education and Common School System (Equality, Excellence and Social Justice) Bill, 2007', recommended by Bihar's Common School System Commission (2007), may be a useful starting point of debate and policy review. 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-NS, rather than further queer the political pitch by introducing a neo-liberal Bill in the Parliament that is sure to increase the violations of the Constitutional framework and *indefinitely postpone the goal of universal school education of equitable quality*.¹⁷

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 XI Plan's twin proposals of school vouchers¹⁸ 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

¹⁶Such a law was recommended in the Report of the Common School System Commission (2007), Government of Bihar, Patna, Chapter 8, Section 8.1, pp. 101-103, and its Annexures I and II, pp. 108-120.

¹⁷It is quite clear that the hidden agenda of the Draft Bill is to snatch away the Right already gained by the children through Supreme Court's Unnikrishnan Judgment (1993) and further to legitimize the ongoing privatization and commercialization of school education. It is also designed to divert political attention away from the struggle for establishing a Common School System based on Neighbourhood Schools (see my article in TEHELKA, 14th June 2008).

¹⁸Interestingly, the 25% reservation provision in the Draft Right to Education Bill, 2008 is quite akin to the School Voucher conception, as practiced in two Latin American countries (Chile and Colombia) and two cities of USA (Milwaukee, Wisconsin and Cleveland, Ohio). Both are designed to promote private schools through public funding and replace the agenda of the Common School System based on Neighbourhood Schools for guaranteeing education of equitable quality for all by *Inclusive Education for the few* – a framework promoted by the neo-liberal guru late Prof. Milton Friedman of the Chicago School.

the market fundamentalists and neo-liberal consultants in the academia, media, policy making and their fellow-traveller internationally funded NGOs who are working overtime to push the neo-liberal ideology in the 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 informed by 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 need to 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, including the school 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 in order to wage a united struggle for a democratic, socialist, egalitarian and secular society in India.

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