



Common schooling can ensure equality

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The principle of neighbourhood 'Common School System' will bring in social justice, equity.

The masses in India especially from the subaltern and downtrodden communities have been struggling and demanding 'free and compulsory education' as a basic right of the child. The demand has been there for more than one and a quarter century, beginning from Jyothirao Phule in his representation to the Education Commission under the chairmanship of Sir William Hunter in 1882 to this date.

The fortitude of the struggle particularly after the 1990s, owing to the 'rights' based approach, was further lucid, unambiguous and solidified to ensure quality care, protection, early childhood care and equitable quality school education to all children according to the values enshrined in the Constitution. It was also in consonance with the United Nation Convention on the Rights of the Child (UNCRC) which was ratified by India in 1992.

The struggle was further intensified in the last one and a half decades especially after the historic Supreme Court judgment in the case of Unnikrishnan v State of Andhra Pradesh in 1993. The Supreme Court, in its verdict in the case, declared the right to education as a fundamental right of every child.

Contrary to this, the Indian state, which is predominantly insensitive to children in general, and right to education in particular, has colossally failed to achieve the Constitutional mandate of providing free and compulsory education to all children within the stipulated time in the early years of independence.

Although the Commissions and Committees appointed by the state from time to time have reiterated fulfillment of the goal without any further delay, the Government of India has shelved these reports.

The Education Commission appointed by the Union government in 1964, made an observation in relation to the disparity, segregation and discrimination in educational institutions. The Commission strongly felt that the existing educational systems are reflecting and promoting the socio-economic differences between the well-to-do classes and the poor masses.

The Commission expressed great disapproval with respect to the segregation, discrimination and disparities within the educational systems and considered it undesirable from the point of social and national integration.

Thus, the Commission, in unequivocal terms, recommended that the national system of education should

adopt the 'Common School System' that abolishes any kind of segregation, disparity and discrimination and enables all children to avail themselves of a common school system which maintains comparable standards. In particular, the Commission recommended adopting successful neighbourhood school model.

The Centre completely neglected the recommendations of the Commission with respect to building a national system of education. As a consequence of this, all efforts to legitimise inferior quality education to the vast majority of children coming from the poorest strata of the society got accelerated.

As a policy, the state deliberately encouraged high fee charging private institutions to cater to the meagre needs of children coming from the upper strata of the society. Thus, the Indian state sowed the seeds of segregation, disparity and discrimination in the area of school education. It is both breach of law and the policy recommendations of the most celebrated Education Commission of India.

There is enough evidence to demonstrate unacceptable discrimination practiced by government in the field of education and to expose the hypocrisy of being projected as the champion of social justice in various international forums.

Segregation in the system

For instance, in 1986, as part of the National Policy on Education (NPE), the non-formal education stream was introduced to poor children and centre of excellence called Navodaya Schools were created for the middle and upper middle classes of the society. In fact, this resulted in further segregation within the system and divided children on class and caste basis.

This is clearly visible in the current education system in India today. It is appalling to see that the future citizens have already been divided and fragmented on the basis of their background. Can anybody divide India better than this?

In this context, the drafting committee appointed by the Government to formulate a new national education policy under the chairpersonship of T S R Subramanian, former cabinet secretary, has a major challenge. The only option left before the drafting committee at this point of time is to resist the neo-liberal policies in the area of school education.

These policies try to lease or franchise public education either through much hyped Public Private Partnership (PPP) or privatisation and commercialisation as a profiteering commodity against the very basic principle of 'social good'.

The very process of drafting the New National Education Policy should begin with a strong conviction to build a fully state funded national system of education based on the principle of neighbourhood 'Common School System' that ensures equality, equity and social justice as a prerequisite to rebuild a new India on the principles and values embodied in the Constitution.

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