Right to Education Forum (RTE Forum) organised a Meeting with Parliamentarians and Political Parties to Education Manifesto for India’s Children on December 19, 2018 in Deputy Chairman Hall at Constitution Club of India in New Delhi, which was attended by over 100 participants from 15 states of India.

Distinguished dignitaries including Mr. Ravi Prakash Verma, Member of Parliament (Rajya Sabha) from Samajwadi Party, Mr. Pradeep Tamta, Member of Parliament (Rajya Sabha) from Congress, Mr. Madhusudan Mistry, Member of Parliament (Rajya Sabha) from Congress, Mr. Javed Ali Khan, Member of Parliament (Rajya Sabha) from Samajwadi Party, Mohammed Salim, Member of Parliament (Lok Sabha) from Communist Party of India (Marxist), Mr. Balabhadra Majhi, Member of Parliament (Lok Sabha) from Biju Janata Dal, Mr. Husain Dalwai, Member of Parliament (Rajya Sabha) from Congress Party, leaders from different social movements, members of civil society attended the meeting.

The Meeting started with welcome address by Mr. Ambarish Rai, National Convener, Right to Education Forum, who extended his warm greetings to all the guests and participants. In his address, Mr. Rai said, “Over the years, the issue of education has always been pushed to backseat. As parliamentary elections are around the corner, it’s pertinent to discuss about ways to ensure that political parties include the issue of education in their election manifestoes so that all children have the right to free, compulsory and quality education. There cannot be development in the country
when millions of children are out of school. And if education doesn’t figure in the agenda of development, all the talks of inclusive and all-round development are just hollow. In fact, those who are sitting at helms and patting their backs for rapid development are actually misleading the country. They are concealing heartbreaking realities of education.”

He mentioned that eight years ago, in 2009, ‘Right to Education Act’ was enacted by the parliament after sustained efforts and continuous struggles. There was hope that all those children who are out of schools because of variety of reasons would get education as their fundamental right. He said that eight long and precious years have gone by and very meager progress has been made in this direction- Out of 1.5 million schools of this country, only 12 per cent are RTE Act compliant. He added that recently, the Human Resource Development Minister had informed the parliament that total 9 lakh and 1.10 lakh teachers’ posts are vacant at elementary level and secondary level respectively. According to another latest statistics, there are only 4 secondary schools per 100 elementary schools. And these secondary schools are situated at such a distance which is practically not accessible for girls. Situation is deplorable because we haven’t spent requisitely on education. He further reiterated that long back, in 1966, the Kothari Commission had recommended a spending of 6 per cent of the GDP on education which still hasn’t been implemented and currently India spends only 2.7 per cent of GDP on education and 61 per cent of this amount is coming through Cess that had been levied for education! He claimed that it clearly signals that there is no willingness for adequate spending on education, which is wrong and unacceptable.

Ambarish Rai mentioned that variety of discussions takes place during elections but there is hardly any talk on our basic issues like education, health, employment and agriculture etc., the situation will improve only when political parties include this issue of education in their agendas. A country should provide free and compulsory education to its children up to class 12. Even if education has to be provided through private schools, this should be done under a proper regulation. He reminded that around 1.5 lakh government schools have been closed in last few
years on various pretexts. Political parties of this nation have done many exemplary works, but it would be a great service to the nation if they collectively take the task of universalization of education.

“We have already placed a *Public Manifesto for the Education of India’s Children* for an open debate on educational scenario. I hope this will take the discussion to next level,” concluded Mr. Rai.

Initiating the discussion, Mr. Ravi Prakash Verma, Member of Parliament (Rajya Sabha) of Samajwadi Party said that more or less everyone is fighting a common battle. When the constitutional amendment was made in 2002, people were in favour of launching of a common education system. But many things changed after eight years when the Right to Education Act was finally passed by the parliament in 2010. He said that the multi – tier system of education continues. He mentioned that the enactment of this Act was done only because India is a signatory of international treaties like Millennium Development Goals (MDGs) and Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) etc. He then reiterated that it seems as if our policy makers are not connected with the roots of this nation and they are not influenced by the situation on the ground here. He mentioned that it is very sad that the government considers spending on children, who are actually our future, as a burden. A most ridiculous occurrence happened when the amendments in the Child Labour Act were being introduced. There is no categorization among children all across the globe. But here, in India, children are divided into two different categories for the sake of ‘Ease of Doing Business’. Now kids of 0 – 14 years of age are placed in child category and kids of 14 – 18 years of age are in adolescent category. Children are now allowed to work in entertainment industry and private enterprises. After one year of this amendment, a report of Thompsons Writers’ Foundation of England revealed that India is a most dangerous place for humans. It also underlined that meteoric rise of child trafficking in India. It was like ‘ Ease of Selling India Out’. He said that these trends were really tragic.
Shri Ravi Prakash Verma further mentioned that similar thing happened regarding section (16) of RTE Act. The state machinery believed that no accountability could be ensured, if a child was not failed during examination. They didn’t realize that if a child fails, it’s not his or her failure. Instead, it’s a failure of the system concerned. He stated that our country needs teachers who have a sense of belongingness with children or who connect themselves with children. He added that the bureaucratic pattern of education system is the actual problem.

He continued that the real tragedy, after 70 years our independence, is the kind of atmosphere which is needed for building pressure on policy makers has still not been created. Once our children are developed, the country will be developed automatically. Top class roads, multi-storied buildings and smoke emitting big industries never make a country developed. A developed country is identified with its developed, refined and empowered human resources. A serious intervention is required in our educational and academic pursuit. Undoubtedly, the government is responsible for this shoddy affair in education. He mentioned that the government should be compelled through all means to take positive initiatives. Political parties should include the issues of education in their manifestos. He also encouraged that one should move forward from dialogues and seminars and venture out to hit the streets and roads for education for all. Lakhs of people have hit the roads for their numerous negative agendas but we haven’t hit the roads for one positive agenda of education.
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Thereafter Ms. Anjela Taneja of Oxfam India, narrated the key demands mentioned in the Public Manifesto for the Education of India’s Children before the gathering.

- Extension of the purview of RTE Act from birth to 18 years, in line with the internationally recognized definition of childhood, by including early childhood care and education (ECCE), pre-school and higher secondary education as legal entitlements;
- urgent action to reverse declining expenditure on education as a share of the GDP and bring it to at least 6 per cent of GDP in line with the global education financing benchmarks and Kothari Commission recommendations;
- complete implementation of the RTE Act along with norms and standards in true letter and spirit and make the State accountable for its implementation;
- the government must invest in strengthening School Management Committee (SMCs) and community participation in education;
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- steps to address inequality in education by moving from multi-layered education system and move towards the creation of a ‘common school system’; stringent and closely monitored steps to ensure social inclusion and provision of safe and secure school environment in all schools and ECCE centres and address the specific barriers to education faced by Adivasi, Dalit, Muslim minority children and girls and children with disabilities and other vulnerable groups;
- removal of the provision in Section 3 of the Child Labour (Prohibition and Regulation) Amendment Act 2016 which legalizes child labour in ‘family enterprise’;
- concrete steps by public representatives to uphold their commitment to universal, quality, and equitable public education in safe and secure environment until 18 years of age;
- end of increasing commercialization and privatization of education and strengthen the accountability of private schools and ECCE Centres by drafting, implementing and enforcing a national regulatory framework including regulation of fees, compliance with quality norms and addressing social segregation through the growth of private provision; and strengthening of grievance redress mechanisms in instances of violations of educational rights of children

Thereafter, Mr. Ambarish Rai raised the pressing issue of merger and closure of government schools in different states and requested all MPs present in the meeting to take cognizance of this development and put pressure on the government to stop this process immediately. He asked Mr. A. K. Singh from Jharkhand to enlighten the gathering about this.

Mr. A. K. Singh told the gathering about the involvement of Boston Consultancy Group (BCG) from United States of America. The basic mandate of the BCG is to record and document the excellent models of education from different parts of the globe and sell them. The model which this Group has sold in India is from China. This model talks about how China is providing quality education to its vast population of children with the help of a very small number of schools. NITI Ayog has signed a Memorandum of Understanding (MoU) with BCG. Personnel
of BCG sit with the officials of the Education Department of a particular state to assess the distance between two government schools by conducting geo – tagging. Once the process of geo – tagging Is over, this Group recommends closure of certain government schools and the concerned state government is accepting such recommendations without any objection. Payment to this Group is being made by respective state governments as per the suggestion of NITI Ayog.

He informed that so far, as many as six thousand schools have been closed down in Jharkhand and six thousand more schools of the state are in the line of closure. Of total 39, 239 schools in the state, there is a target of closure of 20,000 schools till next November – December.

**Mr. Gautam Bandopadhyaya** from Chhattisgarh also informed that around 4, 000 schools have been closed down in his state in name of unavailability of students.

**Mr. Sangwan** representing Teachers’ Association asked, “Have we ever heard of closure of any private school? The answer is a big No. Despite violating various norms, private schools are running without any difficulty while government schools are facing closure and its teachers and students are being punished on slightest pretext.”

Participating in the discussion, **Shri. Pradeep Tamta, Member of Parliament (Rajya Sabha) of Congress Party** said that the issue of school closure has spread all across the country. In his state, Uttarakhand, the state government has evolved a formula to close down primary schools having just 10 or less than 10 students. The state government went even one step further and announced that all closed schools would be handed over to Saraswati Shishu Mandir, a chain of schools run by the organisation which is known as the ideological guiding force of the party which our prime minister belongs to. When the government was asked to explain how or from where children will come for these private schools if they are not available in sufficient numbers in the government primary schools, the government withdrew its decision.

Shri Pradeep Tamta further added that currently, two important bills are pending before parliament. One is related to relaxation in teachers’ training. And the other is about an
 amendment in the Section (16) of the RTE Act about ‘no – detention’. Both are contradictory to each other. The government hasn’t fulfilled its responsibility towards education. Instead of strengthening of basic education, the government is now ruining it. He said whatever we see in politics is actually a reflection of society. Here, Legends have stories about a king beheading a person who yearned for knowledge or a Guru (teacher) took off the thumb of his disciple from downtrodden community who dared to learn archery. This kind of tradition is still there in some other forms. He said that as a society we have to hammer on such basic anomalies since education is not an isolated matter and it has its roots in the society. Babasaheb Ambedkar had also underlined this fact and was of the view that everything should be analyzed in totality. The road to universalization of education is not easy. He reminisced the day when the Right to Education (RTE) Act was introduced and passed in the parliament and everybody, either from treasury or opposition benches, applauded it by thumping the desk. It was a rare moment. However, he added, that today Section (16) is being seen as a villain. Poor people, particularly from weaker sections, are being misled that their children are not faring well in education only because they are not appearing in examinations thanks to the ‘no – detention’ policy. Everybody is pointing fingers on Section (16), but nobody is discussing Section (29), which has the provision for cumulative assessment of the students. What steps the government has taken for proper implementation of Section (29). The government is silent on it. Nobody is asking to increase the number of teachers. Nobody is demanding funds for school buildings. He added, “We are in solidarity with the demand of extension of the purview of RTE Act from birth to 18 years. We will definitely raise our voice for it on every relevant platform including parliament.”

In his address, Mr. Javed Ali Khan, Member of Parliament (Rajya Sabha) of Samajwadi Party said that it is heartening to see that the number of those who are concerned for education of children is growing with each passing day. Earlier, people were neither conscious for education nor were ready for any action in this direction. Governments, too, were not very serious about this. Even politicians used to take this issue very casually. When the RTE Act was
passed, it was established clearly that the number of people working for education is not so small. He assured that his party was in solidarity with the 12 – point demands mentioned in *Public Manifesto for the Education of India’s Children*. However, he confessed that initially he was in favour of abolition of ‘no – detention’ policy as he used to think that a child should not unnecessarily remain in school, if he or she fails to learn. But he admitted that he was wrong. He mentioned that his perception was changed once he consulted his leaders, Prof. Ram Gopal Yadavji and Ravi Prakash Vermaji. He said that he has realized now that it will be an injustice to a child, if he is kicked out of his school in the name of poor ‘learning outcome’. It’s imperative to keep him in school and provide him a chance to become an educated person.

Expressing his views, **Mohammed Salim, Member of Parliament (Lok Sabha) of Communist Party of India (Marxist)** said, that one thing was very clear. The issue of free, compulsory and quality education is a political issue. This can’t be possible to make it a national issue by ignoring or by-passing state specific concerns related to education. The issue of agrarian crisis was also there. But it became a national issue only when farmers’ associations of different states and other organisations came together and hit the streets. It happened only when farmers walked barefooted. Urban India and middle class people, who normally buy their groceries and vegetables from malls, realized the seriousness of the issue only when they watched poor farmers walking with bleeding ankles for miles. In last few years, education and health have emerged as a lucrative business that yields high return. That’s the reason why, handsome investments have been made in these two sectors. Particularly, education has become a favourite place for ‘ease of doing businesses. For this, they have a good weapon ‘quality’. So, there is an urgent need to save education from the ‘sharks’. If one opens the daily newspaper, one will find more advertisements of educational institution than that of the furnitures. He added that he was with the demand of ‘stop commercialization of education’. The ‘Directive Principles’ of Indian Constitution talks about universalization of education and the directives of the government is to ‘percolate the education’. There is a big gap between these two. A triangle of quality, equity and equality is
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essential for education. And this is because quality doesn’t stand alone. Without equality there can’t be quality. But today, the government has converted equality into ‘e – quality’ and the talks of free laptop and wi-fi distribution are part of it. However he was not a pessimist he added. The process of school closure has been continuing since last one decade. The idea behind this move is contraction instead of expansion of education. Since ages education in India has been seen from class angle, not from mass angle. But the Right to Education (RTE) Act has reversed this trend and has seen it from mass angle. He said that their demand was simple - spend of 10 per cent of the budget on education and this comes to 6 per cent of GDP.

Investment in education is a long term investment for nation building. If investment is made in education today, its dividend can be reaped after 20-25 years only. He added that they lost middle class support in Bengal only because they supported ‘no – detention’ policy and ‘education in mother-tongue’. A lot of hue and cry was made arguing that this will ruin the education forever. But today, education system from primary to university level is being demolished altogether. It is important to create a broader platform with other like-minded organisations to take out a march to save our education, Mohammad Salim added.

In his address, Mr. Balabhadra Majhi, Member of Parliament (Lok Sabha) of Biju Janata Dal said that this government is bringing a new education policy. In the concluding paragraph of the draft of this proposed new policy, it is written that there are evidences from world over that situation has deteriorated wherever education is privatized. In my comment over that draft, I wrote that since the government itself has conceded that privatization of education has triggered deterioration in situation, he hoped the government will take over all private schools in a phased manner. He said that he sincerely believed that people or voters are the real masters in a democracy. Everything will be set right, If public mount pressure on the government for education.
Mr. Husain Dalwai, Member of Parliament (Rajya Sabha) of Congress Party, in his speech, said that first and foremost, there is no question of differences with 12-point demands mentioned in the Public Manifesto for the Education of India’s Children. The issue of education is seen here in caste perspective. The present government is a casteist government. They firmly believe that there is no need to provide education to the people of lower castes. Children of upper caste and class go to English – medium schools. The language of instruction is English. Entire atmosphere is English oriented be it bureaucracy and judiciary. In other words, only English knowing or speaking selected few of upper caste run the show. Attempts of abolition of ‘No-Detention’ policy should be seen in the light of caste also. There is no commitment among teachers to educate poor children. Dr. Lohia used to say that there should be equality in education. All these aspects of the issue should also be raised with equal intensity and vigour. Undoubtedly, a big movement is needed to save the education. It is imperative to build a Mahagathbandhan (Grand Alliance) on education. A demand should be made that in every village 2 acre land should be spared for school and playground for children.

After Mr. Dalwai’s address, Mr. Ambarish Rai invited participants to ask their questions to all M.Ps present. Ms. Alka Singh from Save the Children raised a question of education for children living in tea – gardens and non – implementation of national policy for children.

Mr. Ashok of CACL requested all M.Ps to raise all these issues during their public meetings as well so that adequate pressure could be created on the government.

Mr. Rajneesh, Associate Editor, The Citizen wanted to know from all M.P.s about their party’s stand on common school system.

In his concluding address, Mr. Madhusudan Mistry, Member of Parliament (Rajya Sabha) of Congress Party said that by and large, everyone is grappling with three issues. First is related to resource allocation. Everybody wants that minimum 6 per cent of the GDP must be allocated to education. Second issue is role of states and relation between the Centre and the states as
education figure in the concurrent list. And third issue is related to implementation and is of administrative nature. These all are the matters of governance. All depends of political will. In Govt. of India budget, there are two heads. One is Charged expenditure and other is Voted expenditure. Charged expenditure is related to constitutional authorities. President, Judges of Supreme Court, Governance and Election Commission come under the Charged expenditure. These expenditures can be discussed in the parliament, but no Cut-Motion is allowed on it. Voted expenditures are discussed in the parliament and Cut – Motion is allowed on it. If a Cut – Motion is passed by the parliament against any expenditure proposal of the government, it is treated as no-confidence against the incumbent government and that government has to go. The government revenue comes from Corporate tax, Income tax, Liquor tax and GST etc. Majority of the state governments have imposed maximum rates on liquor tax. Now the point is how this fund collected through these taxes is spent. Of this fund, 25 - 30 per cent is spent on internal loans. This is committed expense, it can’t be touched. Charged expenditure also can’t be touched. 17 per cent goes to the employees of the Centre government. 17 per cent goes to defence sector. In the nutshell, there is 70 per cent expenditure which can hardly be touched. He said that he was explaining all this only because it would help the gathering in chalking out the strategy in future. From rest of 30 per cent of the fund all departments compete with each other to extract maximum for meeting their needs. Now the question is where education stands in all this? It’s clear that allocation for education should be increased. And it depends of the political will of the party which wants to come in power. Another aspect is who prepares the budget? Undoubtedly, budget is prepared by the bureaucracy. And if one wants an expenditure of 6 of the GDP on education, then what should be the GDP? Again the question of political will comes. That’s why, he always said not to ignore or hate politicians, he added. Rather, they should be associated with. They will prove beneficial for the cause. As the chairman of manifesto committee, he prepared an excellent manifesto for his party in Gujarat. They made many positive promises. But they didn’t come to power. Then what happened to the manifesto was the question. It became meaningless. So, there are three choices. Either one should openly associate
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with a political party or help a political party from outside or join a political party of one’s choice and bring it in power to realize your cause and goal. One has to influence the leadership about one’s cause. One should know how to use one’s members of parliament. He requested the gathering to take interest in politics. In US, in Senate, there is an Education Caucus. He asked if there was such caucus in India? So, it’s imperative to have one’s likeminded people in political parties and the government to take care of one’s cause.