

Overlooking the Idea of Common School in the Education Policy

VIKAS MANIAR

The Draft National Education Policy, 2019 lacks commitment to the idea of common school and encourages segregation and differentiation of schooling experiences for different socio-economic groups.

In the 1830s, Horace Mann proposed common schools, that is, tax-funded schools attended by all the children from the neighbourhood, irrespective of their social backgrounds. For Mann, such schools were crucial to fostering social harmony, political stability, and economic growth in a republican democracy. Ever since, this idea has travelled across the world. In India, it was formally proposed by the Education Commission, 1966, but the seeds of this idea can be traced back to the 1920s when the national education system took shape. M K Gandhi in his presidential address to the Indian National Congress in Belgaum in 1924, asserted,

I should not have the slightest hesitation to close down a school or college that is indifferent to the admission of non-Hindu boys or that shuts its doors against the entry of untouchable.

The Education Commission, 1966 justified the setting of such schools as follows:

Apart from social and national integration, two other important arguments can be advanced in support of the proposal. In the first place, a neighbourhood school will provide “good” education to children because sharing life with the common people is, in our opinion, an essential ingredient of good education. Secondly, the establishment of such schools will compel the rich, privileged and powerful classes to take an interest in the system of public education and thereby bring about its early improvement. (Kothari 1966)

The implementation of the idea of common schools has been fraught with difficulties. In the United States (US), the “separate but equal” schools for whites and blacks were only abolished in 1954 when they were ruled as illegal vide *Brown v Board of Education* (Kluger 2011) by the Supreme Court there. Even today, while a significant majority of the children attend neighbourhood schools in the US, the schooling experiences vary significantly from one locality to another. As schools are primarily funded by local taxes, schools in poor localities have significantly fewer resources.

In India too, the implementation of this idea has not lived up to expectations. The rampant privatisation of schooling since the 1980s has made segregated and differentiated schooling experiences a norm rather than an exception. With more than 40% of students attending private schools today (Mehta 2019), this problem has already taken endemic proportions. The government schools have been abandoned by the elite, and even private schools are highly segmented based on the capacity of their “customers” to pay. Marion Weiner (1991) has argued that a key factor responsible for this is the Indian view of the social order:

At the core of these beliefs is the Indian view of the social order, notions concerning the respective roles of upper and lower social strata, the role of education as a means of maintaining differentiation among social classes, and concerns that “excessive” and “inappropriate” education for the poor would disrupt existing social arrangements.

Commitment to Common School

Despite these difficulties, the idea of a common school was never abandoned by Indian policymakers. A commitment to common school can be found in 1968, 1986, and 1991 National Education Policies. In 2007, the Common School Commission set up by the Bihar government reaffirmed the commitment to the idea of a common school in its report. Section 12(i)(c) of the Right of Children to Free and Compulsory Education Act, 2009 (or the Right to Education Act) that requires private schools to reserve 25% seats for social and economically marginalised children was an attempt to recover some lost ground on this account.

The Draft National Education Policy, 2019, in contrast, appears to have given up on the idea of a common school. It advocates a liberalised regulatory regime based on autonomy with accountability for “public-spirited” private/philanthropic schools as well as government schools. For private schools, it proposes a “thin but tight” regulation that ensures their public-spiritedness while respecting their autonomy. The public-spiritedness of private schools would be ensured through public disclosure of financial and operational information and through governance oversight by the School Management

Vikas Maniar (vikas.maniar@apu.edu.in) teaches at the School of Education, Azim Premji University, Bengaluru.

Committees or smcs (Para 8.3.5, p 191). Private schools in this regime would have the freedom to choose their curriculum (as long as it aligns with the national/state curriculum frameworks), pedagogy, textbooks, and the examination boards. Autonomy also includes the choice of private schools in matters of admissions (Para 8.3.8, p 191).

Ensuring diversity and inclusion are left to the wisdom of the school managements. In this spirit, the draft proposes that 25% reservation for socio-economically marginalised students in private schools be reconsidered, and potentially be revoked (Para 8.4.2, p 193). Similarly, the draft also proposes a slew of reforms in the administration of government schools. Government schools would be treated at par with the private schools by the regulatory regime (Para 8.1.1, p 180) and granted autonomy in their administration through the formation of autonomous school complexes (Para 7.1.1, p 160).

This imagination of autonomy, in effect, sounds a death knell to the vision of a common school. It is likely to increase the segregation of different social groups, and will result in differentiated schooling experiences for these groups based on their ability to pay. While a focus on unshackling the government schools and ensuring public spiritedness of private school is welcome, it should not be achieved at the cost of ensuring that children from diverse backgrounds come together in a neighbourhood school that Kothari Commission saw as critical to social and national integration.

Institutional arrangements of schooling need to balance between liberty and justice. The concern that the post-RTE regulation has throttled the innovation through excessive standardisation of schooling has some merit. While the focus of this regulation was to shut down a variety of non-formal centres that passed off as schools, it has also adversely impacted innovative alternate schools that did not fit the mould of RTE. Many of these are schools that any society should strive to preserve and propagate. However, it is equally important to insist that innovations are carried out in a manner that caters to all sections of the society, particularly the most marginalised.

Second, in the process of promoting autonomy with accountability, we should be alert to the possibility of vested private interests trumping the public interest. Even today, schools are supposed to operate in the public interest, but in effect many of them operate as profit-making enterprises. If the proposed regulatory regime is unable to curb these profit-making tendencies, then we would have made a bad situation worse by encouraging more private schools that provide segregated and differentiated schooling.

Finally, one can argue for abandoning the idea of common school on pragmatic grounds. After all, common schooling has not worked effectively so far, so why not abandon the idea instead of betting on the wrong horse? This would be a mistake. The idea of inclusive and equal schooling is central to the realisation of our deeply cherished constitutional values of equality and justice, and the process of social and national integration. It should not be sacrificed at the altar of autonomy, efficiency, and the markets.

In Conclusion

While the proposals of the draft policy to provide operational autonomy to “public-spirited” private schools and government schools are laudable, there is no reason to believe that such autonomy can only be gained at the cost of segregated and differentiated schooling for different social groups in private schools. On the contrary, one of the key tests of public-spiritedness of private schools would be to ensure that they are socially inclusive. However imperfect, Section 12(i)(c) of the RTE was an attempt in this direction. These measures need to be strengthened and expanded rather than curtailed.

Many public-spirited private schools have adopted practices such as open accounting where the school budgets

are jointly decided by the parents and the school management, and different parents are charged fees in accordance with their capacity to pay. While these practices may not be scalable, it demonstrates that if we are serious about inclusion, we can arrive at workable models to make this happen. Second, the regulatory regime to ensure “public spiritedness” of private schools needs to be tight enough to ensure that they indeed serve the public rather than private interests.

The recommendation for disclosure of financial and operational information and the establishment of smcs for private schools are a step in the right direction. However, in order to be effective, the role of smcs in private schools needs to be clearly spelt out. Right now, it is unclear if smcs in private schools would participate in the governance of school finances and teacher performance reviews similar to what the draft recommends for government schools. The powers of smcs could also include participation in budgeting and approving fee hikes. Thus, what is crucial to observe is that the more the schools are accountable to the community they serve, better would be the possibility of their being public-spirited and inclusive.

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