

GUEST COLUMN

Common School System: Is There Any Other Option?

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Apart from accumulating abundant wealth, the G8 nations share something else too. These nations have a well-functioning public-funded school system founded on the principle of neighbourhood schools. Without a Common School System (CSS) in some form or another, none of them would have reached where they are today. Scandinavian countries, Switzerland, China, South Korea and Cuba achieved universal school education decades ago. This success transcends ideological history or present economic persuasion. Can India hope to be an exception to this historical experience?

We were also moving towards CSS until mid-1970s. A substantial proportion of today's academia and professionals belonging to that generation had received quality education in either government or *private but aided* schools. It was around this time that the upper middle class started shifting to private *unaided* schools, primarily in pursuit of English-medium education and competition-based and career-oriented curriculum. This is due to failure of the government policies to establish the relevance of either the Indian languages or the prevailing school curriculum for entry into careers. This "great escape" is precisely what triggered the decline of the public-funded school system.

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

There are three confusions regarding CSS. First, CSS is misperceived as a uniform school system. On the contrary, it is the present education system that follows a rigid curricular and pedagogic framework circumscribed by the Examination Boards and now international affiliations. Attributes such as compulsion, comparison and competition are reinforced, restricting choice, academic freedom and team functioning. Modern educational theory, however, expects each school or a school cluster to respond to local contexts and reflect social diversity. The rigidity can alone be challenged when flexibility, contextuality and plurality are accepted, among

others, as the defining principles of CSS. In this sense, CSS becomes the most urgently needed reform.

Secondly, CSS is myopically projected as acting against quality, talent and merit. The present system based upon paying capacity, privileges and false sense of superiority has alienated the most powerful sections of society from the government schools. As a consequence of this "great escape", the government school system has lost its voice of advocacy in policy-making fora. Further, the Structural Adjustment Programme, resulting in withdrawal of resources from the social sector, has led to a policy of 'multi-track' education justifying poor infrastructure, multi-grade teaching and para-teachers. Schemes such as World Bank's District Primary Education Programme (DPEP) and today's Sarva Shiksha Abhiyan collapsed precisely because of pursuing this design. What we need is systemic reform, rather than schemes.

Third, it is wrongly claimed that CSS will not permit a private school to retain its non-government and unaided (or aided)



character. Again, CSS implies that all schools - irrespective of the type of their management, sources of income or affiliating Boards - will fulfill their responsibility as part of a national system. All what is expected is that they operate within the Constitutional framework and function as genuine neighbourhood schools. With 86th Constitutional Amendment, 'free and compulsory' elementary education has become a Fundamental Right. This means that the very notion of fees, at least until class VIII, has become anti Constitutional!

Powerful forces of privatisation are trying to divert public attention from CSS. Private schools running 'afternoon centres', 25 per cent reservation for poor children and now the Eleventh Plan proposal of voucher system for backdoor funding of private schools, are some of the clever ways to rationalise exclusion. This will only postpone giving every child an equal opportunity to acquire knowledge, develop her potential talent and, above all, articulate her vision of India.

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