

Closing Schools

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The news of Karnataka Government's decision of closing down around 500 government primary schools on the eve of the new year 2010 is despicable, to say the least. The state government's claim of the number of children decreasing in government schools is a consequence of a deliberate policy adopted years ago whose objective is to deteriorate the quality of government schools so that the parents of even the poor start withdrawing their children and start looking around for low-fee charging inferior private schools. This policy was first tested in 1999 in Indore, Madhya Pradesh when the state government closed down 30 government schools on the same flimsy grounds as the Karnataka government is now offering ten years later. The Indore Collector promptly converted the 30 government schools in shopping malls and police stations, ignoring the public protest. The same policy was later adopted in Delhi, Ahmedabad, Mumbai and Chennai.

The following news item appeared on International Literacy Day, 2004.

"Facing a shortage of students, the Directorate of Education has decided to close down 53 government schools, many of which are in old Delhi. This is in addition to (the) 55 schools already closed We have seen a steady decline in enrollment in government schools."

—Hindustan Times, 8th September 2004

Instead of showing concern and taking steps to improve the functioning of the government school system, the authorities seemed to be celebrating. They declared,

"The closure of the schools helps the Directorate in two ways. Firstly, the teachers can be posted in schools having few teachers. Secondly, there is saving on annual expenditure of maintenance and repairs."

—Hindustan Times, 8th September 2004

The government schools in Delhi have almost 70 percent of the school-going children of the metropolis. Close all of them and the Directorate will be helped maximally. It will save its entire annual expenditure!

Almost at the same time, the Ahmedabad city corporation closed down one of its primary schools and handed over its campus along with the buildings to a French-sponsored Society to provide education to the well-off sections of society on a 'French Pattern'! The poor people in the neighbourhood protested but no one cared.

Few would believe that the above events were not random happenings taking place due to some local aberrations or some inefficient education officers. These represented the outcome of a well-designed deliberate policy of allowing the government school system to gradually deteriorate until it is replaced by the fee-charging private schools. This is precisely what the global market forces, led by powerful international financial institutions and funding agencies, have been working for.

On behalf of the All India Forum for Right to Education (AIF-RTE), this writer fully endorses the call given by the SDMCC Forum-Karnataka to resist the state government's decision and launch a movement to "save government

schools and save the learning space for marginalised Children”. This can only be done by converting the entire school system into a Common School System wherein all schools will be genuine neighbourhood schools so that the children of all sections of society will study and socialize together as per law, irrespective of their class, caste, religion, language, locale or disabilities, physical or otherwise. After all this matter is not a local issue of Karnataka but it is part of an all-India phenomenon in which the Central Government is equally involved.

The Karnataka state government decision exposes the following:

1. The Central Government and the various state governments are pursuing a deliberate neo-liberal policy to deteriorate the quality of government schools, colleges and universities in order to expedite privatization and commercialization.
2. The so-called ‘Right to Education Act, 2009’ is a farce as its provision of 25 percent reservation in private aided and unaided schools for “children belonging to weaker section and disadvantaged group in the neighbourhood” not only legitimizes privatization but also, through its policy of reimbursement to such schools, maintains a multi-layered school system based on discrimination and pursues the neo-liberal agenda of voucher schools and public-private partnership (PPP).
3. The existence of private unaided schools (and colleges and universities as well) promotes inequality and discrimination in violation of the Articles 14 and 15 (1) of the Constitution and also provides space for backdoor transfer of public resources to the corporate and NGO sector (as evident in central government’s assistance to the high profile private *Sanskriti School* in Delhi and rapidly expanding schemes all over the country to promote private schools through PPP, low-interest loans and exemption of Income Tax to the schools as well as the parents).
4. The government has already offered higher education for negotiation at GATS and this would soon become a commitment if the offer is not withdrawn before the next round of negotiations. The next to be offered at the GATS would be secondary education and possibly, pre-primary education. All this is designed to open the doors of Indian education for Foreign Direct Investment (FDI) for unregulated profiteering. A favourable ground for this unabashed profiteering is already being prepared by inviting foreign universities by exempting them from the regulatory and monitoring-related provisions of the proposed Foreign Education Providers Bill.
5. All this is designed at promoting abdication by the Indian State of its Constitutional obligation to provide education of equitable quality to all children and youth at all stages of education from kindergarten to higher and professional education.

This decision to commoditize Indian education will make education so expensive that even the middle class will find it beyond their means to pay for it. Already, one sees the growing phenomenon of people selling their agricultural lands in order to pay for their children’s education. Or else they are forced to indulge in corrupt and other illegal practices to make quick money for sending their children to private schools and colleges.

In view of the above, the All India Forum for Right to Education (AIF-RTE) decided at its last national consultation held at the Delhi University campus on 7-8 November 2009 to resist the entire aforesaid neo-liberal agenda and build

a nation-wide movement for establishing a fully public-funded common education system “from KG to PG” which will guarantee free education of equitable quality to all sections of Indian society without any discrimination whatsoever.

The reconstruction of the education system (not patchwork schemes such as *Sarva Shiksha Abhiyan*) was considered necessary to meet the national aspirations which were shaped during the freedom struggle against British imperialism and is reflected in India’s Constitution. □□□