

A Base Paper on the Common School System and some Questions

What is the common school system?

The National Policy on Education, 1986 says:

The Constitution embodies the principles on which the National System of Education is conceived of. The concept of a National System of Education implies that, up to a given level, all students, irrespective of caste, creed, location or sex, have access to education of a comparable quality... Effective measures will be taken in the direction of the Common School System recommended in the 1968 policy (MHRD. 1998,p. 5).

The 1968 policy had envisaged that *the common school system* would be open to all children irrespective of social, economic and other differences; adequate standards would be maintained and average parents would not ordinarily feel the need of sending their children to expensive schools outside the system. Similar systems have developed in other democracies such as the neighbourhood school system in the USA and the comprehensive schools in the UK.

How the policy has been implemented?

This is *one* of the forgotten policies of the Indian education system. No measures were announced either in the Programme of Action (POA), 1986 or the modified POA, 1992 to implement the policy on the common school system. The CAME committee had called for neighbourhood schools, qualitative improvement of education in public sector and identification of the target areas.

While reviewing the implementation of the 1986 policy the **Ramamurti** Committee (1990) considered the development of Common School System to be a Very vital component of the overall strategy for securing equity and social justice in education.' The Committee had had made three very significant recommendations, which could address the issue of equity in the Indian education system.

1. It called for the 'essential minimum legislation, particularly to dispense with early selection process, tuition fee, upitation fee etc'
2. It suggested, 'Exploring ways of including the expensive private schools into the common school system through a combination of incentives, disincentives and legislation.'
3. It called for ensuring that instruction for all is given through the medium of mother tongue at the pre-primary and primary levels.

These recommendations did not find any place when the 1986 National Policy was modified in 1992!

What **has** happened?

The PROBE (1999) has reported the forms of social dis&iminat&ri operating in the Indian school system. A system of multiple tracks' has come up providing different types of schooling opportunities to different sections of population. Poor and the disadvantaged ar% going to government schools and the well off students go to the private schools; some go to formal schools, but those for whom the formal system is **not**

'suitable' are going to the 'informal' or non-formal educational centres. There is a hierarchy of schools catering to the different groups. Some such school groups are:

- Growing number of elite schools offering international certifications
- Private fee charging schools for upper middle and rich classes
- Schools for the children of central govt., public undertakings and the defense staff (heavily subsidized)
- Schools for 'talented' rural children
- Low fee private schools in rural areas
- Govt. and municipal schools for lower middle classes
- NFE, EGS, SSA, alternative schools for the poor and disadvantaged
- Schools for child labour (non-formal type)
- Schools for the scheduled tribe (residential but sub-standard)
- Special schools for children with disabilities outside the mainstream education system

Most of these systems have developed in the name of social justice, equal opportunities and deficiency in resources. They are expected to serve the educational interests of the groups they have been established for. Are they detrimental to the principles of equal opportunity in matters of basic education? Has the Fundamental Right now guaranteed under the Constitution changed situations and could a poor child demand a school similar to the one available for the well-to-do child?

What are the implications of the failure to establish the CSS?

- There is no regular system of recording and enumerating the fee-charging private schools in elementary and secondary education, though it is quite large and is a growing sector. It has a serious impact on the issues of equity in the Indian education system (Kingdon, 1996). Panchmukhi (1983) observed that it had a tendency to 'perpetuate social inequalities and divisions'.
- Of late, private schools have gradually started opening their doors, but in the afternoon or in the school annexe in the form of learning centres, in the same premises, different tracks of school systems operate, in the name of doing something good to the poor and disadvantaged. Some schools believe that these children are not intelligent enough and cannot mix up with those coming from the richer class and could not be admitted into regular classrooms!
- Weiner (1991) while analysing the status of children in India sees education as 'an instrument for differentiation by separating children according to social class.'
- The inherent cultural apartheid, sense of elitism and absence of the dignity of labour led to the failings of Gandhi's Basic education (Panchmukhi, 1983), which had sought to alter the symmetrical

meanings of education and thereby to change the established structure of opportunities for education' (Kumar, 1994).

- The existing system of education seems to have been adversely affecting the quality of governance in the country. The seeds of superiority, hierarchy and insensitivity against the people, the poor in particular, are sown at a very early age in the existing school system in India, and that gets reflected very strongly in the governance, at each level. The system reinforces compulsion, comparison and competition that restrict options, individuality and cooperation.
- There are evidences to suggest that mixing children with different abilities and socio-economic backgrounds enhance the school standards for all (Kahelnberg, 2001). The successful schools in the post-industrial era will be ones that achieve excellence and equity simultaneously- indeed one that recognizes equity as the way to excellence¹ (Skrtic, 1991, p.233).

What is inclusive education?

- Inclusive education is concerned with reducing all exclusionary pressures and all devaluations of students whether on the basis of disability, attainment, 'race', gender, class, family structure, lifestyle or sexuality.
- Beginning with the movement to end isolation of children with disabilities in respect of education, and supported by a series of rights and education related UN declarations, the inclusive education is addressing the question of equity for *all* children and aims at systemic reforms in general education so that it is responsive to all children (Jha. 2002).
- The principle of inclusive education being accepted internationally as the best way to address diversity and equity gets addressed while implementing the concept and policy of the CSS in India.

What are the arguments normally advanced against the CSS?

1. Government schools are 'bad'; quality is not good, why should I send my child there?
2. The Board results of children in government schools are always inferior to private schools?
3. Parents have a right to choose, you can't restrict choice. Can you make a law curtailing the freedom to choose a school for my child?
4. In government schools, teachers are engaged in all sorts of activities reducing the teaching time while in private schools teachers are always available for teaching. Can you ensure that such discriminatory treatment to government teachers are stopped?
5. If I have a complaint in a government school, where do I go? Who do I complain to? Why would the educational bureaucracy respond to my grievances? What is in stake for them?
6. You don't send / haven't sent your children to government schools, why do you advocate it for others?

7. Mixing children from different socio-economic background would be against the interest of both the groups. Poor children do not have healthy hygiene and their presence in private schools would culturally affect our children!
8. Who will pay for the poor children if they are given admissions into private schools?
9. Private schools accept my contributions and donations, if I want to help its development. Would the government schools do the same? And, what is guarantee that the monies are spent for what it is given and in an efficient manner?
10. Government schools have to follow the books prescribed by NCERT/SCERT and the School Boards at all stages, while private schools have more freedom to choose their textbooks. This would put my children, if admitted into government schools, into disadvantage. Would you remove such discriminatory restrictions from the government school system?
11. Children from private schools get more attention from WIP, VIP and Media, my children would not get such exposure if admitted into government schools? How do you remove such bias and discrimination?
12. What has been the practice in the developed countries; say in the USA, UK...and countries of India's size and situations, say in China?
13. You have created central schools only for central government employees, NVS for the rural elites (as the selection test eliminates poor children whose parents can't afford high cost tuitions and coaching to prepare for the tests), residential schools for tribes., special schools for the disabled- are they in consonance with the policy of the CSS? Don't you spend far more on them than ordinary government schools or even on cost per student in private schools?
14. Private schools have no legal obligation to admit children with disabilities, while under the PWD Act you would be admitting disabled children in government schools and that would adversely affect education of my child.

How some of the arguments could be countered while implementing the CSS?

1. What do you mean by 'bad' and 'quality' in education? If you talk of building and other infrastructure facilities, teachers' education and training and their salaries, many government schools have got them.
2. The Board results of private schools are better because they are highly selective in admissions and encourage private tuitions.
3. While you have a right to choose, poor children should also have a right to choose! Why should they suffer on account of poverty in matter of education, particularly the elementary education, now since it has become a fundamental right?

4. Private school teachers should also be engaged for 'national duties' such as election and census including the cattle census to equate them with the government schools if you **cant** stop the government schoolteachers being engaged for non-teaching purposes.
5. CSS is vitally linked with the government school reforms and one major reform would be to give them the same level of autonomy as available to the private schools.
6. I regret...never thought of...no body told me...I myself (most of us) did go to government schools ...we know its worth and values!
7. This argument is anti-democratic, feudalistic and not in tune with the 21st century thinking. Plethora of literature is emerging all over the world calling for accepting and respecting diversity in the society and in schools. Mixed ability groupings and heterogeneous student population give far more opportunity to schools to practice cooperative and collaborative pedagogy. The work place and societal demands are changing, so the schools should also change to responds to the requirements of the 21st century and of the information age. Such schools with heterogeneous population admitting poor children would bring in a better value system and understanding of people's need and aspirations among children from the well-to-do family.
8. Private schools should try to meet the cost on poor children's education by cross-subsidization. It could also raise donations and sponsors once they start admitting poor children from the neighbourhood *m* substantial numbers. The governments should subsidize the fees of these children to private schools.
9. Once the autonomy to government school is accepted and a mechanism on the pattern of private schools is put in place for operation of the autonomy, any donations and contributions from the parents could be accepted and utilized for the betterment of the school.
10. This is a valid argument. Government school system needs to get r.u of prescriptive textbooks from the Boards and other entities.
11. This is like the proverbial chicken-egg siory. Once YOU start sending your children, this complaint wou'd melt away. YOU constitute and influence the Media and VIP. Besides, *your* interests in government schools would take *care* of many ills of the government system you have just mentioned.
12. The USA has the neighborhood school system. The UK had similar hierarchies of the schools systems. A conscious movement for abolishing the selective grammar schools was launched and the comprehensive school system has been put in place, where there is no selection.
13. Under the CSS the pnvileged admissions in the central and similar such schools would have to be replaced by opening these schools to all.

14. The *inclusive education* movement is catching up at the international level to (a) initiate the general education/school reform process, and (b) to address the diversity in the society. Inclusive education does not mean *only* education of the disabled; it is just a component of the aspects of diversity.

Note: *The views expressed in this base paper should not be taken as views of Social Jurist. This paper is circulated by the Social Jurist with a view to generate a discourse on common school system in the context of growing commercialization in education and recently guaranteed Fundamental Right to Elementary Education incorporated into the Constitution of India.*

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