
Making Provisions for a Right to Education: Converting 'Liabilities' into 'Assets'?

According to recent news reports, the Delhi Cabinet proposes to start a residential school for children from Scheduled Castes (SC), Scheduled Tribes (ST), Other Backward Classes (OBC) and Muslim communities "in order to provide them opportunities to excel". This school shall not only be modelled along the lines of the Kalinga Institute of Social Sciences based in Bhubaneswar, but will also be managed by the institute. A MoU will be signed between the Department of the Welfare for SC/ST/OBC/Minorities and the KISS. The institute shall also provide guidelines for constructing the school in Ishapur (Najafgarh area of South-west Delhi). Most interestingly, according to Chief Minister Sheila Dikshit, the school will be expected to be "self-financing" after the first five years during which it will be financially supported by the Delhi government.

In analysing this decision, I also argue that every policy-decision regarding education can and must become a reason for us to engage not just with the most immediate questions relating to schooling, but also with the relationships between schooling, social-injustice and structural inequalities in India. I, therefore, propose to analyse role of private sector in education, and residential schools for underprivileged children in terms of the overall policy and philosophical frameworks within which they are located. I will also draw upon the discussion that took place on the e-forum of All India Forum for Right to Education (AIFRTE) 'Kagazkalam' [kagazkalam@googlegroups.com].

As Madhu Prasad (Member, Presidium-AIFRTE and former Professor, University of Delhi) rightly argues, it is not sufficient to apolitically analyse this step in terms of what it provides as compared to the existing state-government run schools or low-fee private (LFP) schools (these being the only options available to children from marginalized sections in India). An apolitical analysis fails to investigate how schooling is related to wider socioeconomic structures and processes, and the social

relations which shape children's identities and experiences inside and outside school. Such an analysis will thus misleadingly isolate questions of schooling from debates raging over the dominant economic paradigm in India, and social-political struggles over distribution of and access to resources. Instead, we need a thoroughly political reflection on the ideologies underlying this political economy of education which allows private institutes to develop as substitutes for a state-funded system of education. It is also essential to engage with the ideological assumptions underlying the curriculum and teaching-learning processes in an experiment in schooling before replicating it.

Policy issues : Conditional and ad hoc provisioning for a fundamental right

Were there a reliable and fully accountable public-funded school system in place for these children and a KISS were only an alternative to that system, it would be a very different situation. Instead, efforts like the KISS may become the only mechanism available to these children to exercise their right to education. This kind of residential and private institutes, and such Public-Private-Partnership models of schooling for underprivileged children are very likely to become an excuse for the Indian state to further withdraw from its Constitutional responsibility towards these children, a point made by several members on Kagazkalam.

Rajesh Mishra, another discussant on Kagazkalam, and member, AIF-RTE points to the most alarming aspect of the proposed school in Delhi: that the school is expected to become "self-financing" after five years. Why should this be so? Would such an approach not render this fundamental right temporary? A right only for five years, only for five batches of underprivileged children? After that they either pay for their "free" education, rely on charity, or pay through sale of the products of their vocational training? These are the sources of funding for the KISS -

corporate philanthropy, individual donations, "vocational products", and funds from the Ministry of Tribal Affairs, Government of India. Details of how the Delhi government expects the school to become self-financing are not yet clear, and we need to demand all such details before the government makes budgetary allocations for yet another layer of schools designed to weaken the existing public-funded school system.

There are quite a few problems with such a model of schooling, and of funding for schools. Firstly, it is clearly another category of schools planned to cater to a certain group of children in a certain way, which will be added to the existing hierarchical, multi-layered school system. By involving yet another set of Ministries and Departments instead of making the MHRD or the state Departments of Education fully and permanently responsible, this approach complicates issues of governance. More alarmingly, it strengthens a policy of segregating children along lines of social class, ethnicity, caste and religion. Ramesh Patnaik (Organising Secretary, AIFRTE) and Vikas Gupta (Asst. Prof. University of Delhi and Member, National Executive, AIF-RTE) both vehemently oppose such segregation. Supposedly ensuring inclusion and special opportunity, such segregation may actually prove to be seriously problematic in the long term; and having to suddenly face harsh realities of discrimination may even traumatise children when they leave school. Thirdly, their right to education does not remain an unconditional fundamental entitlement of these children any more. They have to either pay an emotional price by leaving their homes, and all that is familiar and provides a sense of rootedness and identity, or pay a financial price and attend private schools. Else, they may risk life and limb by travelling long distances in frail boats and buses along frailer bridges. Or, remain uneducated.

Further, if philanthropy is part of the solution for "self-financing" residential schools, then the question we need to raise is: why should these children's right to education be a function of the charity of our society's richer sections? Why should education for one section be dependent on the resources of another section instead of on public-funds? Do we not need to question the skewed distribution of resources which makes such an inherently unjust situation possible? Most importantly, what happens if and

when this corporate and individual charity comes to an end? These children's rights will be automatically terminated and the state will sit twiddling its thumbs, protesting lack of resources as usual?

Another Pointer to the Obvious Failure of RTE Act

As Madhu Prasad points out, such an ad hoc provision only shows how seriously the RTE has failed in ensuring universal access to quality education for a majority of children. If the RTE were able to guarantee quality education closer for these children close to their homes why would these children and their families opt for residential schools? That there are about sixteen thousand children at the KISS may say much that the institute can be proud of, but it certainly points to the state's failure in multiple areas. The Act cannot ensure that there will be enough good schools, and that children and parents will not be forced to take up options like private fee-charging schools or residential schools which take children away from their homes and families.

The Act neither declares education free in an unequivocal manner, nor intends to bridge the widening gaps in quality existing within our multi-layered school system. Instead, it allows the state to go on adding different categories of schools to this system. With such flaws, how can this Act ensure underprivileged children's right to equitable education which may liberate them from oppressive lives and learning-processes? It basically just pushes them further away from the state-funded system of education towards options like private fee-charging, and/or residential institutes (which may also promise other facilities such as health-care, adequate food and a safe environment).

As Harsh Mander argued on Kagazkalam, "the right to education of a child is indivisible and inseparable from her other basic rights, such as the rights to protection, food and nutrition, health care and shelter". For him, state-run residential schools are the answer for children without families to depend on, and children from underprivileged groups. However, Ramesh Patnaik, though strongly in favour of seeing all these basic rights as part of the right education, does not agree with the concept of residential schools. He argues that these schools will segregate and divide children, and allow the state to abandon its

responsibilities. Ashwini Singh, (School teacher, Faridabad & member, AIF-RTE) too argues against residential schools because they may strengthen disparities within marginalised communities. Instead, quality schooling and other basic rights provided for by the state in all neighbourhoods would truly ensure a right to education for the most marginalised children without their having to leave home. If the state can promise to deliver this to all underdeveloped and under-served areas in a time-bound manner and commit adequate funds for it, then residential schools could be an acceptable solution for the time being (except for institutionalized and street children who would need it for much longer).

Mainstreaming and marginalisation through curriculum : A look at microprocesses

The KISS does much for its 16, 500 children from tribal communities. It does not charge any fees. It provides health care, education in health and hygiene, information about infectious diseases, etc . It provides vocational training - offering training in a variety of skills which will fetch a range of opportunities and incomes . It also performs much better in both board examinations than schools run by the state government . Which is why it seem to be a good idea to replicate this experiment, and let the KISS help with managing school education elsewhere.

Though these make for a great plan to help these children survive individually within current development paradigm, nothing in these strategies or curriculum is intended to challenge this paradigm which marginalised them in the first place, or the hierarchical social order that marginalisation builds on. Problem is, we are conceiving marginalisation narrowly in terms of access to schools, and ignoring marginalisation through curriculum & pedagogy. We need to focus on whether and how school curricula deny or help voice the realities and concerns of underprivileged communities. Here are some examples of what the KISS tries to do for its students, and the related issues that should be, but are not raised in most classrooms (even apart from KISS):

1. It provides Vocational training to enter organised and unorganised sector. But, are questions regarding exploitation of rural and urban workers in unorganised sector raised? Does this training equip learners to assert their rights in current exploitative

scenario? Can it talk about market forces and state power which collude to sustain it? Learners may choose from a range of vocations, but will they be empowered to challenge the conditions under which they work? Will they be able to bring in experiences of their families and communities?

2. It teaches tribal children to preserve forests. Well, tribal communities are hardly exploiting forests even though they depend on them for survival. It is their rights and traditional ways of preserving forests which are being violated. Do teachers and textbooks talk about efforts of Dalit and tribal communities, particularly women, to organise and struggle for rights over land, forest, water?

3. It claims to deliver on gender equality and empowerment. Though it talks about decision-making in schools, participation in academic and extracurricular activities, access to vocational training and jobs, does it also teach to challenge deep-seated gender biases? The paper Gender Issues in Education (NCF 2005) asserts that such biases regarding marriage & motherhood, issues of control over bodies, choices, incomes, and assertion of citizenship by women, must be brought out. It argues that empowerment does not necessarily follow from education or even having jobs unless students learn to challenge norms and values in families and larger society. Further, is gender seen to be working with divisions along caste, ethnicity, religion and class?

There is difference between imparting skills and information to learners so they can act, speak and think in ways acceptable to the mainstream, and providing a critical education which helps them understand how their lives are shaped by power relations in the society, state policies and distribution of resources. The former is what most schools, and the KISS attempt. "To transform 'liabilities' into 'assets'" is one of its stated goals "and the secret to its success" . This approach is based on a particular understanding of "marginalised" and "mainstream" that also governs India's development paradigm. The understanding is that underprivileged people are a drain on the nation's resources, rather than 'productive' contributors to its growth. That they need to be trained - in skills and attitudes - to fit neatly into the machinery of a

neoliberal and globalising India. That is how they will become assets to the Indian economy. So, schooling is not about with challenging this economic paradigm or social relations, but about converting students into agents of this economy.

Further, if and when we have a more meaningful curriculum, implementing it in segregated schools would be counter-productive. Diverse realities need to be discussed in classrooms where children from diverse socioeconomic backgrounds learn together. Children need to listen to each other, understand and respect difference, and know that the same policies and worldviews shape their lives differently. It cannot be achieved in residential schools either, because they isolate individual learners from families and communities, rendering questions of structural inequality invisible and irrelevant.

Vikas Gupta and Ramesh Patnaik rightly assert that what is required is a state-funded common school system implemented through neighbourhood schools which would have common minimum standards for quality in curriculum and infrastructure. The National Curriculum Framework 2005 would do very well as a guiding document for curriculum reform. Further, the right to education must explicitly promise a right to relevant and transformative education which does not ignore concerns of socioculturally marginalised groups. Currently, the Act does not lay down any serious guidelines for curricular design or reform. The Indian state also needs to ensure that sufficient funds are devoted to curriculum planning, implementation and teacher-training.

On 'empowering' the state

An important aspect of the discussion on Kagazkalam, was the role and status of the state in this era of globalization. Educationist Martin Carnoy explains how nation-states both lose and gain as a result of globalization. They have to agree to policies which increase global competitiveness even as they lead to sociopolitical destabilization. On the other hand, they retain some powers as the ones regulating the "political climate" in which corporate capital conducts its business globally every day. However, Michael Apple, Professor of

Education, argues that within the neoliberal paradigm the state's role is precisely this - to regulate this political climate in favour of market forces.

It is in this context that Firoz Ahmad, (teacher MCD School, Delhi) and member AIF-RTE underscores the need to think of how the state can "empower" itself to act against the interests of global capital, and commit itself to systematically invest in the welfare and development of those it has kept on the margins for too long now. It has to plan for transformation to a school-system and an economic growth paradigm which do not reproduce and deepen structural inequalities and sociocultural hegemony.

Some things we can do...

One way to guard against uncritical, unthinking replication of any experiments in education is to ensure reliable and thorough research on the impact and processes of schooling in various such experiments. Indian public and policy-makers currently lack any understanding of the importance of social science research in guiding policy, a situation that needs to be urgently and systematically remedied. Education is an area of policy-making where quantitative and qualitative research into various aspects is badly needed; e.g. questions of curriculum, teacher's education and experiences, pedagogic processes; and through these, issues of access, social justice and empowerment in and through schooling. In fact, most developed countries, irrespective of their dominant economic paradigm, try to ensure that their universities continue to develop a body of research which is responsive to their major sociological concerns. And India does really need to follow suit.

A most important need of the hour though, is to build a demand for public-hearings on such policy-decisions related to education. This must become part of the larger agenda to democratize governance and decision-making given the diversities disparities in India.

Reva Yunus

(Freelance Writer & Member, Cambridge-based 'Alliance for Secular and Democratic South Asia')
e-mail: reva.yunus@gmail.com