

Discourse on Public versus Private Schools

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The recent controversy on the role of government schools (public school) in generating Naxlites versus the Private Schools producing Swayam Sevaks is an interesting issue on which there seem to be little discussion. Most of the private schools in India are strangely called as public schools. It is a misnomer. However, the debate on public education is as old age as the movement for self respect and modernization. Mahatma Phuley who is credited for the backward classes movement was the first in modern India to apprise the British about the parochial nature of English education in India. In his memorandum (reproduced in one of my books) to the Hunter Commission in 1882, Phuley questioned the rationale in restricting public education to dvijas and denying the same to shudra and ati-shudra farmers who had contributed to the education of others through special cess. School education became public in modern India after the implementation of the recommendations of Hunter Commission. Thus, the debate on public and private schools is not a new occurrence and has always been there to reflect a deep rooted prejudice against the universalisation of education in India.

The apathy and indifference in implementing the constitutional directive of providing free and compulsory education during the last five decades after independence has compelled the government to bring the RTE in 2009. The rules are prepared and individual states are asked to produce rules for the implementation of the Act. The central government has made budget provision for the RTE through Sarva Siksha Abhiyan with a provision of not less than Rs 20000 crores in each budget. In fact, policy makers have delayed the RTE for decades quoting that it would be difficult for the government to find funds for its execution. Now funds are available yet, the allocated money for SSA seem to have not been fully utilized, if spent they are stories of embezzlement. What does it really indicate?

We may for a moment get back to the cultural history of this country to understand the low levels of literacy and underdevelopment. While most of the East Asian countries including Japan through Meiji restoration have achieved almost universal literacy by the end of 19th century, the goal is still eluding us. There are still pockets of high levels of illiteracy (around 80%), while the 2011 census has estimated an average literacy of 75 percent for the country as a whole. But, illiteracy in rural areas is still a problem due to lack of schooling. It is not difficult to identify the groups and we need not spend millions on research to find out the reasons. This possibly could be attributed to our cultural ethos that invokes education as a prerogative of men and for a chosen few. This characteristic perhaps unconsciously guides our policy makers.

Therefore, we cannot find fault with some of our gurus and corporate Babas reflecting the popular sentiment. In this context, we can find Andhra Pradesh as a unique state where the dichotomy of large number of higher educational institutions simultaneously flourish with one of the lowest levels of literacy (lower than Odisha) in the country. It never pricked the conscience of policy makers and the politicians. The gap is widening due to the education market created by the policies of the government that purport to slam such tendencies particularly in elementary education. The hullabaloo of public or government school and private school is due to the well entrenched involvement of the private corporate sector in school education. Naturally, they would find ways to undermine the government schools like the statements made by some Babas in whom they have invested to create a brand value. The sentiment that government or public schools produce Naxlites would make the parents even in rural areas to withdraw their children from such schools. This would enable the private corporate sector (they have already produced a document on business possibilities in education) to enlarge its' tentacles.

Nowhere in the developed countries including the UK, USA and the OECD, is primary education left to the private sector. In the USA schooling is compulsory. The state through local governments and educational districts manages institutions with necessary funding. It is reported that the enrollment in pure private and non-profit schools in capitalist America comes to around 10 percent. Even these schools are supposed to follow certain standards laid down by the government as they are identified as denominational with church or other such groups. The situation in India particularly after the debates on compulsory primary education and Art 45 and now the RTE has become trivial. The enrolment in private schools now stands at 25 percent of the total in elementary sector. This is not an urban phenomenon. The Economic Survey 2012 mentions that enrolments in the private primary schools in rural areas range between 30 to 50 percent of the total. This is preceded by the fall in standards where 48 to 54 percent of students in Fifth standard cannot read a text book of Second standard. In the meanwhile, it is alleged that some courts have interpreted the 25 percent reservation of seats as per RTE in corporate schools include economically weaker sections. Now, it is easy for anyone to get a certificate to admit their children in corporate schools and would get the assistance from the government. The private schools are allowed to collect their dues. This has widened the net of private corporate schools both in urban and in the rural areas as the fees would be paid by government. The policy makers would soon come out with a report saying that they have accomplished the universal (MDG) target like perhaps the poverty figures?

It is disheartening to find that the situation in the school education which is supposed to produce secular and responsible citizens is totally out of focus of both the parents and the intellectuals. Most of those who are popular in public life today including the Nobel laureates were educated through the so called panchayat or municipal school. They have learnt from each other group and appreciated the diversity of the country. In fact one of my colleagues, an enlightened Muslim lady has informed me that most of the Madarasas are run in areas that are ghettos without proper infrastructure, teachers and aid from government. I am told they are run with little support from the community sometimes by the jealous so called fundamentalists as they are ones who are coming to the rescue of the poor Muslims. Therefore, the Hindus do not have an opportunity to know how they look like and what they think. It is also true about the other community. Some of the tensions in our society are due to the fact that we do not know enough about our own people due to sectarian schooling. Realizing the cultural diversity of the country, the Kothari commission on Education in 1966 recommended a common school for everybody. This has not been implemented and now all kinds of deviations with the sole aim of creating profitable investment opportunities in Education sector are being recommended by those who do not have adequate knowledge about our society and education.

India is not USA and not even Pakistan in terms of its diversity and plurality. It is exactly for this reason the British had introduced a secular grant-in-aid code for educational institutions to discourage denominational and communal orientation in education. The Indian republic stands for a secular state and the education system should comply with it through a uniform curriculum and goals. It was found in a study conducted by us about three decades ago that our education system is class oriented. A Municipal or Panchayat school is for the wretched of the earth, the so called Public school or convent for the rich and the aided school for the middle classes. The students would perhaps never meet and share the sublime dreams of our founding fathers who wished that India should emerge one day as a single Nation and not multitudes of classes and nations through schools that promote parochialism and discordant culture.