

The Right of Children to Free and Compulsory Education Act, 2009: The Story of a Missed Opportunity.

- Muchkund Dubey

The Right to Free and Compulsory Education Bill, 2009, was enacted into law after it was passed by both the Houses of the Indian Parliament and signed by the President of India. Its main purpose is to provide free and compulsory education for children in the age group of 6 to 14 years. There have been extensive debates on the extent to which this Act will help in implementing right to education as provided in Article 21-A of the Indian Constitution. What has been ignored in the discussions is that the Act misses the excellent opportunity provided to the nation for bringing about a radical transformation of the school education system in India.

While discussing the problems of school education in India, a few issues are repeatedly raised: absence of teachers from schools, lack of interest on the part of the parents or guardians, deficiencies in curriculum and syllabus, wrong methods of teaching etc. But these problems cannot be viewed in isolation and in a fragmented fashion. For, their roots are spread deep in the entire system. Therefore, if one wants to solve these problems, then it would be necessary to transform the entire education system. What are the systemic and fundamental problems of the Indian school education system?

Access

Firstly, there is the problem of access. School education is simply unavailable to the vast number of children in the country. During the last few decades, there has been significant progress in improving enrollment. Gross enrollment ratio (GER) from Class I to VIII was 94.9 percent and from Class I to XII, 77 percent.¹ The Government primarily relies on GER to bolster its claim for progress made in expanding school education in India. But enrollment is a very unreliable basis for assessing the degree of access to school education. Firstly, enrollment figures are generally rigged and exaggerated for various administrative and political purposes. Moreover, in order to assess the progress in

¹ Educational Statistics at a Glance, 2005-06, the Ministry of HRD, 2008.

expanding school education, it is important to take into account the figures for attendance and also for drop-out from among those who are enrolled. The attendance has generally been found to be at least 25 percent below enrollment. The drop-out rates are exorbitantly high. For the country as a whole, the drop-out rate from Class I to X was 61.6 percent; and in a State like Bihar it was above 75 percent.² Among those who drop out, the percentage of children belonging to Scheduled Castes in the country as a whole was 70.6 and of the Scheduled Tribes, 78.5.³ In Bihar, the figure was close to 90 percent for both the categories.⁴ The net result is that a sizeable percentage, as much as 30 percent, of children in the school-going age in India are out of school; the percentage is as high as 50 in Bihar (1.5 crores out of 3 crores children in the school going age group).⁵ 13% of habitations have no schools even at the primary level.⁶

Thus a huge number of children are excluded from school education. This is thus a colossal waste of human resources. Besides educational exclusion is the worst form of exclusion because it means exclusion from other walks of life and areas of activities such as livelihood, knowledge, status in society, human dignity etc. Moreover, educational exclusion becomes cumulative as it is carried over from generation to generation. For, it is seen that educated parents are more inclined to educate their children than those who are uneducated. Besides, exclusion from school education, particularly at the primary level, is a denial of human rights both in accordance with the provision in the Indian Constitution and the relevant provision of the Universal Declaration of Human Rights.

The Act sets no dateline for the universalization of education from Class I to VIII. Different datelines have been given for different purposes, which are not mutually consistent and in the absence of any plan or resources required for achieving them, it is doubtful that they would be adhered to. The most important dateline is in Section 6 of the Act which states:

“For carrying out the provisions of this Act, appropriate government and local authority shall establish, within such area or limits of neighbourhood as may be prescribed, a school, where it is not so established, within a period of three years from the commencement of this Act”.

² Ibid

³ Ibid

⁴ Report of the Common School System Commission, Government of Bihar, Patna, June 8, 2007.

⁵ Ibid

⁶ Seventh All India Education Survey, NCERT, 2005.

It is further stated that teachers will acquire the requisite qualification and prescribed training within a period of 5 years. At another place, it is laid down that pupil-teacher ratio of 40:1 prescribed in the Act, will be achieved within six months. Does this mean that all the teachers required, even though they are not qualified, will be recruited within six months? Is it at all feasible? Even if it is so, but if the schools are not there, where will they teach? This provision also implies that pupil-teacher ratio could be maintained at least until the next 5 years, by continuing the practice of appointing para-teachers or untrained teachers. The Act makes no estimate of the additional number of schools to be built, additional number of teachers to be recruited and trained, and training institutions to be created and restored. This has all been left to be determined by the appropriate government and local authority. The way the government machinery functions, it is doubtful if these tasks would be accomplished within the specified time limits. All this should have been done and additional financial requirement should have been calculated and provided for before moving the Bill in the Parliament. In the absence of the fulfillment of these requirements, the attainment of targets set in the Act and of the overall goal of universalization appears highly improbable.

The Common School System Commission, Bihar, in its report, estimated that in order to universalize free and compulsory education for children in the age group 5 to 14 in 5 years, universalise education for children from Class IX to X in 8 years and to facilitate transit to Class XI to XII of 70 percent of those who will pass Class X, in 9 years, 25,900 additional primary schools, 15,500 Middle schools and 19,100 Secondary schools will have to be built. The number of additional teachers to be recruited for achieving the above goals would be 2.55 lakhs at the primary level, 3.24 lakhs at the Middle level and 4.29 lakhs at the Secondary level.⁷ It stands to reason that the very first and the most essential requirement to be fulfilled for universalizing quality school education, is to build these additional schools, recruit these additional teachers and provide training for them. As already stated, the Act does not make any attempt to quantify these requirements.

⁷ Report of the Common School System Commission, Government of Bihar, June 8, 2007.

Quality

The second systemic problem of school education in India is its abysmally poor quality. This has been attributed to a variety of factors, including poor curriculum and syllabus, deficient pedagogy, negligent teachers and parents who are unconcerned. But the real reason is the gross under-funding of school education in India. If the required magnitude of funding is available, many of the factors allegedly accountable for the poor quality of school education, would disappear. For example, it is unfair to blame teachers who are compelled to teach in a school which does not have blackboards, teaching aids, laboratories for experiment and adequate space, and which do not provide facilities or incentives for improving their skills and environment and for pedagogic innovation. Besides, as the required number of teachers are not in place, the norm of at least one teacher per class is not observed and the practice of multi-grade teaching is continuing. Moreover, a large number of teachers have no training. They are also obliged to carry out non-educational activities. The members of the Common School System Commission, Bihar, during their visits to schools, did not find any school which had a properly functioning laboratory. Thus, we simply cannot get away from the fact that the quality of school education in India is decisively influenced by the quantity or the magnitude of funding.

The most effective and important means of ensuring quality is to establish minimum norms and standards relating to all relevant aspects of school education, and ensure that they are applied uniformly to all schools. No doubt, some norms have been laid down in the Schedule attached to the Right to Free and Compulsory Education Act. But they are utterly inadequate. There is no mention in the Schedule of a number of some extremely important norms such as, distance of the school from the habitation of the child, sitting area in sq. meters per child, number of children per school, number of classes per school, furniture in the class and office rooms, teaching aides, computers, equipment in a laboratory, the qualification and training of teachers, scales of their pay and allowances and other conditions of service, including scope for promotion etc. Some norms are mentioned in the Act only as items, and against them is written the phrase "as the government may determine". This means that these norms will not be justiciable and may never be established. It also implies that the present practice of recruitment of para-

teachers and the multi-grade teaching may continue. In the absence of adequate and legally enforceable norms, it is superfluous to talk about quality.

Financial implication

The main reason for a large proportion of the children remaining out of school and the poor quality of education in schools is the under-funding of school education. Normally, the Act should have provided a Financial Memorandum which should have indicated the exact amount of resources required for giving effect to the Act. But this has not been done. The position of the government is that "it is not possible to quantify the financial requirement on this account at this stage". This statement is not correct. In the last 10 years or so, additional resources required for providing free and compulsory education to children in different age groups have been estimated several times in the country.

Two expert groups set up by the Government of India and the Common School System Commission, Bihar laid down norms and standards for providing quality education, put price tags on these norms and standards, and on that basis calculated the additional cost to be incurred for providing free and compulsory education and universalising school education, within a time-bound framework. The two expert groups set up by the Government of India confined themselves to providing free and compulsory education to children in age group 6 to 14. The Expert Group under the chairmanship of Professor Tapas Mazumdar set up by the Government of India in 1999, estimated an additional cost of Rs.13,700 crores per annum over the next 10 years for providing free and compulsory elementary education according to the norms prescribed by it. The Expert Group set up by a Committee of the Consultative Advisory Board on Education(CABE) estimated in 2004 a total additional cost of approximately Rs.73,000 crores per annum over the next 6 years for achieving the same goal. The Bihar Commission report which covered entire school education from one year of pre-primary to Class XII, estimated an additional expenditure of Rs.9,950 crores for the first year of the 9-year implementation period. Though this amount is not the average for the nine years, it is a good broad indication of the additional estimated expenditure per annum. The non-implementation of the recommendation of the expert group led by Professor Tapas Mazumdar resulted in a cumulative gap reflected in a manifold increase in the

additional expenditure calculated in 2004, to be incurred for achieving broadly the same purpose. If the recommendation of the second expert group also remains unimplemented, as has been the case until now, then the cumulative gap will grow further and, say, in 10 years from now, we would need an astronomically large sum of resources for universalizing elementary education. Perhaps at that time, the Government in power will raise its hand in despair and drop the whole idea of universalisation, and India will continue to stagnate for years to come at a low level of school education, both quantitatively as well as qualitatively, to the detriment of its unity and future development.

Perhaps the assumption in the Act regarding resources is that those available for the *Sarva Shiksha Abhiyan* (SSA) in the 11th Plan would suffice to meet the resources required. But the fact is that in spite of these resources having been nearly doubled in the 11th Plan as compared to the 10th Plan, they are at the level of about Rs.30,000 crores per annum, which is less than half of Rs.73,000 crores per annum of additional resources required, according to the Expert Group of the CABE Committee (2004). Even under an assumption of higher pupil-teacher ratio, the additional resources required per annum, calculated by this Expert Group, is Rs.53,500 crores per annum which is much higher than Rs.30,000 crores.

India's National Education Policy lays down the goal of setting aside at least 6 percent of GDP for expenditure on education. This target, originally recommended by the Kothari Commission, has also found place in the manifestos of almost all major political parties. But the maximum share of GDP devoted to education in India has been close to 4 percent and on most occasions the ratio has been around 3 percent. The Minister for Human Resource Development has recently conceded that the resources gap is huge, particularly when we consider the fact that in many advanced and several more developed among developing countries, expenditure on education is 10 percent or above of GDP. He has expressed the view that only the private sector can fill in the gap. He has, therefore, made a plea for public-private partnership in education.

Though private-public partnership in education has been talked about for the last few years, the progress in this direction has been negligible. Even otherwise, the record of the private sector in meeting the demand for school education is not all that

impressive, 89.1 percent of the primary schools in India were in the public sector (government and local body) and only 10.9 percent in the private sector.⁸ For upper primary schools, the percentage was 72 to 78 respectively.⁹ The enrolment from Class I to VII/VIII was 72.23 percent in government schools and only 27.61 percent in private schools.¹⁰ In the case of Bihar, the contribution of the private sector to school education at the elementary level, in terms of number of schools as well as percentage of enrollment, is below 6 percent.¹¹

If after 60 years of independence, the private schools have filled in a gap of only a little over 10 percent, so far as the total number of primary schools are concerned, there can be no assurance that they will be able to contribute significantly to providing free and compulsory education to children in the age group 6-14 and to universalising secondary education. At the current rate of their contribution, and if the State does not step in to cover the gap, we may have to wait till the end of the century for universalizing school education in India and even then it may not come about. It may take even longer to universalize secondary education, because the number of additional schools to be constructed and additional teachers to be recruited at this level is many times higher than those required for universalising elementary education. Besides, school education is a social good the provision of which is the responsibility of the State. The provision of free and compulsory education is now a fundamental right available to children in the age group 6-14. It is incumbent upon the State to ensure this right with immediate effect. It is legally and morally untenable for it to make the fulfillment of this right conditional upon the contribution of the private sector.

Discrimination

The third systemic problem of education in India is the rampant discrimination characterising it. Children of the rich and the elite have access to good quality private and special types of public schools, whereas children of the vast majority of the poor, including the minorities and marginalized groups, go to government schools which are in shambles. Thus, the class division in the society is carried over to the school system.

⁸ Education Statistics at a Glance, 2005-06, The Ministry of HRD, 2008.

⁹ Ibid

¹⁰ DISE, Flash Statistics, NUEPA, 2007-08.

¹¹ The Report of the Common School System Commission, Government of Bihar, Patna, 2007.

This has been a major contributory factor to the perpetuation and accentuation of social inequality. It also makes for bad education. For, empirical studies have demonstrated that schools which bring in children from different communities and classes provide better education and even the children of the rich and the elite stand to benefit from such a school system.

The Right to Education Act perpetuates the multi-layer discriminating school system in India. It legalises the currently operating four categories of schools in the country – (a) government schools, (b) aided private schools, (c) special category schools and (d) non-aided private schools. According to the Act, the government schools will provide compulsory and free education to all children in the age group of 6-14 years admitted therein, and the aided private schools will provide such education in such proportion of children admitted therein as its annual recurring aid or grant bears to its recurring annual expenses, subject to a minimum of 25 percent. The special category schools and non-aided private schools shall admit in Class I, to the extent of at least 25 percent of the strength of that class, children belonging to weaker section or disadvantaged group in the neighbourhood and provide free and compulsory elementary education till its completion. These last two categories of schools will be reimbursed expenditure so incurred by them to the extent of per child expenditure incurred by the State, or the actual amount charged from the child, whichever is less.

These provisions, apart from perpetuating the present multi-layer system of Schools, are in violation of Article 21A which calls for the provision of free and compulsory education to all children in the age group 6 to 14. 75 percent of the children in this age group in aided private schools will not be provided free and compulsory education. In the last two categories of schools, the children in this age group admitted therein, but not belonging to disadvantaged or weaker groups, will not be provided free and compulsory education and for these groups also, only 25 percent of the children will be provided free and compulsory education in these schools. This also is a violation of Article 21A.

There were two ways in which the government could have significantly mitigated, if not eliminated, the discrimination characterising the Indian school education system. The first was by establishing exhaustive and justiceable norms and standards and

applying them rigorously to all schools, both public and private, and second, by embracing and enforcing the concept of neighbourhood schools whereby the state would have delineated the neighbourhood for each school which would have been required by law to admit and educate till completion, all the children residing in the neighbourhood. In India, we have advocates of freedom of choice and freedom of profession who argue that the concept of neighbourhood school militates against the exercise of these freedoms. They forget that this concept has been applied for decades, if not centuries, in countries where democracy has taken firmer roots and where freedom is valued much more than in our country. I shall illustrate this by a personal example. When I was posted to New York in the early 1970s, I had to send my two children to a public school there. Since I stayed on 89th Street & 1st Avenue in New York, I was told that my children could go only to the nearest public school which was on the 96th Street & 2nd Avenue. This location is on the fringe of Harlem which was known for its high incidence of crime and drug addiction. But I had no choice but to send my children to this school. This was according to the law of the city and nobody complained that it was in violation of his/her fundamental rights. Apparently, individual rights cannot take precedence over the public purpose enshrined in the Constitution, of ensuring social equality. There is no reference to the concept of neighbourhood school in the Right to Education Act except that there is a provision for making reservation of 25 percent of the seats for children of weaker and disadvantaged groups coming from the neighbourhood. This is a far cry from the concept of neighbourhood schools as practised in most developed countries and a number of developing countries which have a common school system.

Education replaced by literacy

Another systemic malady which has afflicted school education in India is the transformation of the very nature and meaning of education, brought about by the forces of globalization and liberalization in which international agencies have played no small a role. In most developing countries including India, education has to a large extent been replaced by literacy for which it is strictly not necessary to go to schools. According to the new paradigm, education is defined in functional terms i.e. making the recipient qualified for the market place. In this sense, educational system as a whole has been commodified. Today, the purpose of school education is merely imparting skills of

literacy and numeracy. The basic philosophical purpose of education is to enhance the capacity of the children to comprehend, to discern, to contest what, according to them, is wrong, and to develop the urge to transform what is wrong and unjust. These philosophical goals have been set aside and replaced by the functional goal of meeting the demand of the market. Under the globalization/liberalization paradigm, schools have to a large extent been replaced by literacy and informal centres, trained teachers have been replaced by para-teachers, and the system of at least one teacher for every class and for every important subject has been replaced by multi-grade teaching. Training is no longer regarded as essential for teaching. The Government of Bihar officially notified in 1991 that training was no longer necessary as a qualification for appointment as a teacher. This whole process of the distortion of the meaning and purpose of education started systematically since the mid-1980s and has by now been completed.

This transformation of the nature of education has seriously affected its quality and has relegated to the background the concept of schooling as a means of socialization, nation-building and formation of social capital, which has been practised for centuries by important developed countries. It has also been used to rationalise non-universalization of school education and its under-funding. The Right to Education Act does not make any provision for reversing the process of the distortion of the meaning and purpose of education.

A holistic view of school education

The Right to Education Act should have covered the entire school education system including one or two years of pre-primary education, elementary education (i.e. age group 6 to 14 which is its present coverage) and secondary education. The distinction between pre-primary, elementary and secondary education may be valid from the pedagogic point of view, but this distinction becomes arbitrary when it comes to guaranteeing right of education, universalizing school education, ensuring its quality and removing discrimination. There are strong reasons for providing free and compulsory education preferably for two years and at least for one year at the pre-primary level, and also for universalizing secondary education. A Group of Experts which met at UNESCO Headquarters at the end of 2007, of which I happened to be a member, arrived at the consensus that "basic education should consist of at least nine years after pre-primary

and ideally it should extend to 12 years". In most of the advanced developing countries, like China, Mexico, South Africa, Brazil, Thailand, Indonesia, etc., the task of universalizing elementary education was accomplished a long time ago and current pre-occupation of the educational planners and policy makers is for universalizing quality secondary education.

Depriving the children in the age group, say, 4 to 6, of free and compulsory education as the Right to Education Act does, is totally arbitrary and a flagrant denial of human rights. Article 45 of the Indian Constitution directed the State to provide free and compulsory education up to the age of 14, which included children at the pre-primary level of education. The famous Unnikrishnan judgement which regarded right to education as a part of right to life, also covered children up to the age of 14.

However, when the 86th amendment to the Indian Constitution was enacted in the form of Article 21A, the Government arbitrarily – almost by a sleight of hand - excluded children in the age 0 to 6 from the ambit of the amendment. Thus, some 170 million children were disenfranchised of their right to free and compulsory education. However, this right still exists because the amended version of Article 45 states: "The State shall endeavour to provide early childhood care and education for all children until they complete the age of 6 years". If this is read with Article 21, as was done in the Unnikrishnan judgment, then the children in age group of 0-6 also enjoy the fundamental right to free and compulsory education.

The Integrated Child Development Services (ICDS) is the only programme which provides for education to children in the age group of 0 to 6, but access to services under ICDS is neither universal nor a legal right. ICDS covers only 42 percent of the children in the relevant age group. Besides, it is not a right but a service voluntarily offered by the State. Evidence shows that a good percentage of the children covered by ICDS are not enrolled under it. Besides, the delivery of prescribed services to those who are enrolled is irregular and inadequate. The education component of the ICDS is the most neglected service. It is either not delivered at all or only partially delivered. A Social Audit of the functioning of the ICDS in the District of Anantapur in Andhra Pradesh recently carried out by the Council for Social Development, bears out these facts. The foundations of our educational system will remain weak until quality pre-primary education is provided to

children in the age group of 4 to 6. Denial of right to education at the pre-primary level, will hamper our effort to develop human resources in the country.

The Act should have provided for the universalization of secondary education also i.e. for children in the age group of 15-18. The definition of a child according to the U.N. Convention on Child Rights includes children up to the age of 18. India is a party to this Convention. Moreover, the universalization of education at this level is also a logical consequence of universalizing education up to Class VIII because if secondary education is not universalized, then the children who complete Class VIII would have nowhere to go except dropping out. For, according to regulations in force in the country, a child has to pass Class XII for getting entry into any institution of higher or technical education which can qualify it for entering the job market.

It was in view of these considerations that in the Report of the Common School System Commission, Bihar, a single legislation was recommended covering school education from one year at the pre-primary level to Class XII. The Report also prescribed separate norms and standards for the three levels of school education i.e. pre-primary, elementary and secondary. Though most of the norms are common to these three levels, there are also significant differences. The Right to Education Act, therefore, should have covered the entire school education system, universalizing education from pre-primary to higher secondary level, providing free education from pre-primary to at least Class VIII, if not Class IX and X and applying norms for ensuring quality and equity, to all schools at all the three levels of school education.

Language policy

The Right to Education Act should have also included a language policy which would have provided the best opportunity for the flowering of the talents of the children and which, at the same time, would have been a major factor for uniting the country. Unfortunately, the government missed this opportunity also. The legislation has no language policy. It only states in one of the clauses that "medium of instruction shall, as far as practicable be in child's mother tongue". The inclusion of the phrase "as far as practicable" will give a *carte blanche* to private schools even at the elementary level, to continue their present practice of giving instructions through the medium of English.

Moreover, the term "mother tongue" is not defined. For example, for a child coming from the Maithili speaking region, will the mother tongue be Maithili or Hindi?

The enactment of the legislation also provided an excellent opportunity to make a beginning with the implementation of the three-language formula recommended by the Kothari Commission and included in the National Education Policy. But this opportunity has also been squandered. The language policy laid down in Annex-II to the legislation recommended by the Common School System Commission, Bihar, demonstrates that the implementation of the three-language formula is feasible, if there is a political will to do so.

Statutory Commission for school education

Finally, the Act should have created a mechanism vested with the overall responsibility of overseeing progress in the restructuring of school education, bringing about improvements, through research and public discussion, in the norms and standards included in the Act, adjudicating disputes where called upon to do so, and being the Court of Last Appeal so far as the implementation of the Act is concerned. This should have been possible only by establishing a fully empowered judicial or quasi-judicial Commission. The Government seems to be very keen to set up such a Commission for higher education, which is perhaps needed and for which there is considerable public support. However, such a Commission is needed equally, if not more importantly for school education. In lieu of this, the Act provides for the establishment of a Central as well as State Advisory Councils. This is hardly likely to serve the purpose. Such Advisory Councils are vested with very limited powers. Their membership is in the nature of patronage or favour bestowed by political leaders, and in most cases, there advice is seldom sought or sought only as a public relations and politically motivated exercise.

Policy recommendations

The implicit policy recommendations in the above paragraphs can be summarised as follows:

- (a) For the nation as a whole and for each State, a plan for achieving universalization of school education, within a time bound framework, should be drawn up. The time limit should not exceed 5 years for children

up to the age of 14, because education in the age group 6 to 14 years has become a fundamental right.

- (b) Education has to be free and compulsory for the children in the age group of 6 to 14 years, according to Article 21A. There is a strong reason for its becoming so for at least one year at the pre-primary level and also for the children in the age group of 15 to 16 years.
- (c) Detailed, specific and legally enforceable norms and standards should be established to ensure both quality and equity in school education.
- (d) An annual plan should be prepared and implemented for building schools, recruiting teachers, providing teacher training, expanding and upgrading teacher training institutes and applying other norms and standards.
- (e) A price tag should be put on each norm, which should be the basis for calculating the additional expenditure to be incurred for revamping the school education system of India.
- (f) There should be a legal requirement for applying both the norms and standards and for providing the resources for this purpose. These resources should be one of the first charges on the budget of the Centre and the State governments on par with expenditure for the implementation of other fundamental rights.
- (g) School education should be based on the concept of neighbourhood schools whereby the State should declare the neighbourhood for each school, which should be required by law to admit and educate till completion, all the children in the required age group residing in the neighbourhood.
- (h) A high-level mechanism in the form of a Statutory Commission should be set up which should be vested with the responsibility for overseeing progress in school education, for being the Last Court of Appeal, for adjudicating where called upon to do so and for improving, through research and public discussion, the norms and standards.

A school system based on the above parameters is called the common school system. It has been practised by almost all developed nations around the globe. In India, there has been no interest in building such a school system, mainly because of the influence in policy making of elitist class which manages to send its children to high fee-charging private schools and special category schools.

A deliberate attempt is being made, mainly by the private school lobbies, to spread the canard that such a system does not permit the running of private schools and, therefore, imposes uniformity and prevents experimentation and innovation so far as curriculum, syllabus and pedagogy are concerned. This is farthest from the truth. The fact is that there is full scope for the existence and even expansion of private schools in a common school system, subject to the condition that they, like government schools, must also apply the norms and standards legally laid down and subject themselves to inspection by the agents of the high-level commission on school education. The private schools have to provide free and compulsory education at least to the children in the age group 6 to 14. It should be clear that their function essentially is to provide good education which does not leave scope for making profit and that in the ultimate analysis, the responsibility for universalising equitable and quality education rests squarely on the State.

Seen in the light of the above, several of the measures adopted or announced by the government recently for improving access to and quality of school education are redundant and designed to serve mainly political purpose. They are also devices to distract attention from the systemic problems. For example, if the norm to build a primary school at a distance of a kilometer from the habitation of children, a middle school at a distance of three kilometers and a secondary school at a distance of five kilometers is applied, there is no need to build hostels, including for children of the minority and the marginalised groups.

If school education is provided free of cost in the comprehensive sense of the term, there is no need to provide scholarships. If the principle of neighbourhood is applied, reservation of a particular percentage of seats for the children of the poor households in private schools is not necessary because the private schools will have to

admit all the children from the neighbourhood and provide free and compulsory education according to the legal provisions made by the State. It is for the State to work out in consultation with the private schools the basis of burden sharing. Similarly, if the norms and standards are strictly applied with the provision of adequate resources for this purpose, it will no longer be necessary to establish model schools on a selective basis, because all the nearly 12 lakh schools in the system would become model schools and not only 6,000, that is one model school for each block, as proposed by the Prime Minister of India.

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