

Education bill lies in cold storage

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The Times of India News Service

NEW DELHI: The much-touted and talked about legislation to make the right to free and compulsory elementary education a fundamental right is currently lying in cold storage.

Although this legislation had been in the making for several years, it was the United Front (UF) government which had pushed ahead with it and introduced it in Parliament.

However, the UF government did not last long enough to ensure the passage of the bill after tabling it. And since then, the issue has been placed on the backburner.

In fact, this matter is not really among the priorities of the BJP-led government and the present human resource development minister (HRD) Murlis Manohar Joshi is reported to be credited with the view that such a move will neither be practical nor feasible for implementing. HRD officials maintain the files on this issue have been pending and that there has been no move to revive it either.

HRD officials were, however, quick to explain that this did not imply that there was any reversal in the policy to achieve universalisation of elementary education.

Efforts, they say, are continually on to ensure that the out-of-school children are brought into the school system but the general belief is that making free and compulsory education a fundamental right is a far more complex issue than it appears.

Mr Joshi, it is reliably learnt, concurs with the view that it would be an uphill task to raise the resources required for the effective implementation of this legislation.

A special committee, set up by the UF government, had estimated that the Centre will require Rs 40,000 crore over a

period of five years to make the academic and administrative provisions for implementing this legislation.

As a token beginning, the UF government did allocate Rs 35 crore for this purpose but this money remained unspent. The BJP-led government has also made a similar provision for making elementary education a fundamental right but it is highly unlikely that these resources will be spent this time either.

India has been under tremendous pressure from the international community, particularly donor agencies, to make

elementary education a fundamental right since they believe that such a legislation would help check the growing problem of child labour.

On the flip side, it is argued that though 14 states and four Union Territories have enacted Compulsory Education Acts, these have remained unenforced due to socio-economic compulsions that keep the children away from schools.

Besides, it is also feared that the compulsion contemplated in the legislation is a compulsion on the state rather than on the parents. A section in the HRD ministry believes that the country is not yet ready for such a legislation, which will make elementary education a justifiable right, as it will only give rise to endless litigation as the people will be liable to take the state to court if they feel they are being denied their right to education.

It is argued that a regulation like this need not be introduced when large number of children do not attend school because they do not have access to schooling.

In such a case, it is said, that legislation may well result in a situation where there may be more parents in jail than children in school.