

Systems Failure

The recent Supreme Court directive, which asked public schools in Delhi to reserve seats for underprivileged children, has focused attention on the school system in India. Anil Sadgopal, professor of education, University of Delhi, discusses the relevant issues with Archana Jahagirdar:

What is your view of the Supreme Court order asking public schools in Delhi to reserve seats for students from the economically weaker sections?

This order should have come 40 years ago. All successive governments could have taken action but none of them did irrespective of their political background or ideology. *Who's to be blamed for non-implementation of contractual obligation — the schools or the government?*

The schools had a moral responsibility as they had signed the contract. Land had been given at concessional rates as these school societies had registered themselves as being philanthropic in purpose. Where is that philanthropic purpose being fulfilled today? But it is also true that the government shirked its responsibility. If the government was giving land at concessional rates, it should have ensured that this rule was being followed. The larger point I would like to make here is that the fact that a contractual obligation wasn't being fulfilled is still a small part. The order actually points at a much bigger problem.

Could you elaborate on the last statement?

The Supreme Court has given us a historic opportunity to raise a very important question. We need to look at this order as a tool

given to us to critically look at the school system. The order is also a reminder to the policy makers that we have not been able to fulfil our constitutional obligation of equitable quality education for all children. *The argument against this order is that the economic disparity will create a serious socio-cultural problem. Comment.*

I would like to ask the management of all these schools whether they believe in developing citizenship as required by the Indian democracy or not. The Constitution has envisaged that every Indian citizen must promote equality, social justice and fair play and should respect the diversity of Indian culture. Should education not be designed to promote such a citizenship? *But the ground reality in big cities in India is vastly different from all this. Will a small child from either strata be able to handle the pressures of such top-down integration?*

That is exactly the challenge before us. Schools need to work in collaboration with parents. Education is not a commodity and even public schools would hesitate to call it that even though they treat it as such. Today, the children who go to these public schools

are unable to have a dialogue with a majority of India's children because of the language barrier. The richer sections of society have to decide that if they want to live in India in harmony, they will have to educate their children in humanistic values. *What then is the way forward?*

The Education Commission of India in its report in 1964-66 recommended the establishment of a Common School System for all children irrespective of their class, caste, religious or linguistic background. The commission stated that in order to fulfil this purpose, neighbourhood schools should be established in all localities. It also recognised that this was the only way we can promote social harmony and equality of education. The commission did not specify where the management of these schools will rest. That is important only in a limited context. But more importantly this school system would have celebrated diversity and plurality. *State-run schools in India are perceived to have failed in providing quality education. Who is to blame for this?*

If the government school system is reformed, a majority of public schools will go out of business. Even now for the last several years the best CBSE results are coming from Navodaya schools. The next best results are from Central schools. There

is ample evidence that the government has almost adopted a policy to let their school system deteriorate. In Indore, the government decided to shut down 30 schools on the rationale that very few children were left. Instead of reforming the system, they closed it down and prime school

properties were given to private players.

Are you saying that there is still a valid case for governments to run schools?

The teachers in government schools are often better paid and even better trained. Till the mid-70s government schools were far superior to public schools. Post that period, the quality of teaching in these schools started suffering. The problem is not the quality of staff but the rigid hierarchical and centralised structure of these schools. The principals aren't even empowered to take education-related decisions which demotivates a large number of teachers. The middle class which struggles to send its children to expensive public schools would be the first to send their children to government schools if they got the right quality of education there. In fact, it is the middle class which is now demanding it. In public schools quality is being defined by the western markets.

What should be the role of the government vis-a-vis schools in the private sector?

If we believe that schools must contribute to social change then we must accept the government's role as a regulator.



The Supreme Court order is also a reminder to the policy makers that we have not been able to fulfil our constitutional obligation of equitable quality education for all children.