

Elementary, it's education

THE damage inflicted by the NDA Government on education goes far beyond NCERT's induction of the sangh parivar's communal, divisive and obscurantist ideology in its curriculum framework, syllabi and textbooks. CBSE-affiliated schools, where NCERT books are mandatory, constitute less than 5 per cent of the secondary and higher secondary schools in the country (the percentage would be almost half of one per cent if the elementary schools are included). This, however, does not minimise the nationwide implications of NCERT's moves to communalise education which the Common Minimum Programme has correctly identified as a priority concern.

Several other critical issues would emerge if one takes a more holistic view of the education policy. A decision taken by the previous government just before the elections poses a challenge to CMP that is yet to be recognised. This concerns the Draft Free and Compulsory Education Bill 2004.

This Draft Bill stands out as one of the most alarming policy documents ever prepared by the ministry since Independence. It attempts to (a) legitimise low quality educational streams for under-privileged sections of society; (b) provide legitimate space for extra-constitutional authorities to introduce their ideological agenda in school education while keeping them outside the purview of the constitutional framework; (c) negate the role of panchayati raj institutions; (d) promote privatisation and "corporatisation" of school education; (e) franchise parts or whole districts to corporate or religious bodies for running elementary schools; (f) shift the state's constitutional obligation towards elementary education to the parents and local communities; (g) promote "special schools" for disabled children at the cost of inclusive education; and introduce a range of other distortions. The UPA government



Undoing the damage of the NDA era demands both thought and care

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must withdraw the Draft Bill and take steps to draft it afresh.

The other recent decision by the previous government pertains to the MoU (kept secret so far) it signed with the World Bank, DfID (UK) and European Commission for a credit of mere Rs 4,710 crore over the next three years (Rs 1,570 crore a year) for its much-hyped Sarva Shiksha Abhiyan (SSA). This credit amounted to only 30 per cent of the requirement of SSA, the remaining 70 per cent being provided out of internal resources. Yet, the Bank got total control over the entire SSA through audit procedures and Joint Review Missions, dictating not just financial terms but also educational

A most laudable measure in the CMP is the proposed cess on all central taxes to finance the commitment to elementary education. This would make it possible to do away with the external aid to SSA from next year onwards and restore Parliament's supremacy in policy formulation. An additional objective of the cess should be to fulfill the cumulative gap of educational investment that has been building up for almost four decades as a consequence of inadequate investment each year since the Kothari Education Commission recommended 6 per cent of GDP as the required level of investment. The promise of raising public spending in education to 6 per cent of

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parameters and indicators. This is exactly what the Bank has been doing to our elementary education system for the past decade, with no evidence of any improvement in the ground situation. The CMP would do well to recognise the distortion and dilution of our education policy as a consequence of the external assistance the nation has accepted. The previous minister unabashedly declared that India could not educate its children unless external assistance was increased. The irony is that the external assistance to SSA amounts to mere 0.0D per cent of the current GDP level i.e. six paise out of every Rs 100 earned by India!

GDP is not new but what brings this within the realm of feasibility for the first time is this cess.

However, the CMP has not recognised the criticality of the cumulative gap. An estimate of this cumulative gap was made by the Tapas Majumdar Committee Report (1999) which computed that an average of Rs 13,700 crore per year (i.e. merely-54 paise out of Rs 100 of national income) would be required for the next ten years in order to bring all out-of-school children to the formal school system. Fulfilling this cumulative gap within a specified time frame should be the non-negotiable objective of levying the cess. This, of course, would be in

addition to the commitment of reaching the investment level of 6 per cent of GDP for the purpose of maintenance and further development of education. In doing this, the CMP will also take a clear policy stance against the farce of the multiple track system which includes alternative schooling, education guarantee centres, multi-grade teaching and "back to school camps", the latest addition being NCERT's proposal for starting correspondence courses for the 6-14 age group — all of this for children belonging to under-privileged sections.

The CMP makes no reference to the Common School System, a long-standing policy imperative to which the national education policy has committed itself thrice (1968, 1986 and 1992). Several misconceptions about the Common School System have been systematically promoted by private school lobbies. For instance, it is the farthest thing from a uniform school system. Rather, it lays the basis for responding to the rich geo-cultural diversity of the country. The UPA government may consider supporting a nation-wide debate on this issue. Advanced economies of the world, including USA, Canada, several European countries or Japan, were built on the foundation of a publicly-funded efficient school system that ensured education of equitable quality for all children. This sociological principle of educational planning, hitherto ignored in India, is the basis of the Common School System. It also flows out of the CMP's commitment to women's empowerment and "full equality of opportunity, particularly in education and employment for SCs, STs, OBCs and religious minorities". Indeed, it is the only historical option before us. The CMP can ignore this principle only at grave risk to India's survival as a civilised nation.