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National Commission for Protection of Child rights proposes code of conduct for teachers

Let the state keep off schools

The National Commission for Protection of Child Rights (NCPCR) has suggested a code of regulations on the conduct of teachers in schools. A standout feature of the code is a total ban on corporal punishment. This is a welcome step, and should prod state governments to ban all forms of physical assault on students by teachers. So far, only six Indian states have banned the cane in schools. Corporal punishment is just another form of physical violence and has no place in an enlightened society

However, there is a catch in the way the code defines corporal punishment. Asking an errant child to write an imposition or calling her names are now a no-no. Parents are advised to call the police when children report such instances. This is going too far. Common sense should prevail over rigid definitions when disciplinary measures are judged. It is not always possible to make a fair judgment on the use of an adjective, especially in retrospect. What if some stupid kid — sorry, words including stupid, idiot and mindless can attract an FIR

— misuses the provision and drags a teacher to the police station? The code imagines that children — aged between six and 17 — can never be malicious and are always a disciplined lot. This is hardly the truth. Hooliganism and mass copying are regularly reported from our schools. Such students could certainly do with some discipline.

However, it is ironic that a state agency has come out with strictures against violence in class rooms. Why not some introspection instead? The Indian state unapologetically uses violence to make people conform to its political and economic vision. This is despite having innumerable laws that ban physical violence. The NCPCR code, pious intentions withstanding, is just another ploy on the part of the state to extend its control over schools as well. Finally, teachers and students are not immune to the violence in society. Imagine the Chhattisgarh government asking teachers to keep the cane away in schools while conducting a violent law and order campaign in the state. How surreal, how unreal!

Spare the children, please

The NCPCR has sent a strong message to schools. It has issued a directive to all states to crack down on all forms of corporal punishment as well as verbal humiliation of schoolchildren. Under the new directives, school officials could be put in the dock for even scolding students. Has the NCPCR gone too far? Absolutely not. In a country where corporal punishment is common in many schools, the child rights panel has done the right thing.

The need for stringent guidelines is apparent from the recurring cases of corporal punishment in schools. Even as the NCPCR code was being debated, a 12-year-old girl was beaten to pulp in a school in Gurgaon and had to be hospitalised. A teacher apparently beat the girl with a stick for not being able to answer a question. Such cases are not uncommon.

However, there are numerous instances of milder punishment that go unnoticed. There is enough evidence to suggest that teachers, including those at elite schools, physically

and verbally intimidate children, some of whom could be as young as five years old.

There is unfortunately no national law banning cruel or unusual punishment in schools. The National Policy on Education merely says that corporal punishment is not permissible. Only a few states such as Andhra Pradesh and Tamil Nadu have banned corporal punishment. The Offences Against Children Bill, where punishment in schools is one component, is yet to be ratified by Parliament.

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There are some who would say scolding of schoolchildren and verbal intimidation shouldn't be outlawed. This argument is flawed. Verbal abuse could be as damaging and humiliating for children, especially the younger ones, as physical punishment. Parents can, of course, take up instances of abuse of their children with schools. But they are too often cowed by school authorities to raise their voice. In such a situation, there is no alternative but for the state to crack the whip on schools.