



NUEPA

## National Seminar on the Common School System

*Date* : March 24-25, 2009

*Venue* : India Islamic Cultural Centre,  
Lodhi Road, New Delhi

### CONCEPT PAPER

It is widely recognized that education is a critical component of human development and organically linked to social transformation. Yet, the right to equality and equal opportunity in and through education remains a major concern in many societies. In the Indian context, too, the present crisis of deepening stratification of society was foreseen by the Education Commission (1964-66). It observed that "The social distance between the different classes, particularly between the rich and the poor, the educated and the uneducated, is large and is tending to widen (Section 1.07)". The Commission expressed a fundamental concern for education as a process of social transformation aimed at bridging the gap between the masses and the classes.

The Commission envisaged the social function of education in the context of nation-building in post-independence India. This included the role of education in (a) forging a sense of nationhood and 'unity in diversity'; and (b) building a shared citizenship for a democratic, secular and egalitarian society. Both of these functions are interwoven with the concept of the Common School System, as conceived by the Commission. Do these twin social functions still continue to inform the framework in which the Indian State formulates its education policies and programs? Or have these been replaced by the agenda of the global market? The concerns like these will be some of the critical themes that we need to address and rethink before we can build a meaningful discourse on the Common School System and its implications.

The Commission also briefly examined the international experience and noted that some form of Common School System of public education was built as a post-industrial response by the State in several developed countries. "It has also been developed, in different forms and to varying degrees, in [other] nations like the USA, France and the Scandinavian countries (Section 1.38)." We now know that the common school system of public education exists in several other countries as well, such as Russia, Germany, Japan, Canada and Cuba, despite varying economic systems or the history of political economy. Contrary to it, the Commission further observed that India has "clung" to "the traditional English system [that] has been different and has allowed good education, under private management, to be largely reserved for those who have the capacity to pay the necessary fees." However, it adds that "such a system has no valid place in the new democratic and socialistic society we desire to create (Section 1.38)" in India.

While reviewing the weaknesses inherent in the structure of Indian education, the Commission recommended that "if these evils are to be eliminated and the educational system is to become a powerful instrument of national development in general, and social and national integration in particular, we must move towards the goal of a common school system of public education (Section 1.38)." Further, the Commission recommended the concept of Neighborhood Schools (NS) which would lay the essential basis for provision of equality of access and

participation to all children. The Commission's concept of Neighborhood Schools implied that each school should be attended by all children in the neighborhood irrespective of caste, creed, community, religion, economic conditions or social status. The idea was that these Neighborhood Schools would provide education to the children without being segregated and the system "will compel the rich, privileged and powerful classes to take an interest in the system of public education and thereby bring about its early improvement (Section 10.19)."

In spite of the clarity exhibited by the Commission at the conceptual level, the idea could not be put into practice as the elite and middle classes either ignored it or mocked at it. This is the reason why the strong support extended to the concept by the Committee of Members of the Parliament (1967), constituted to consider the Commission's report, eventually fell on deaf ears and the subsequent National Policy on Education (1968) made only an ambiguous reference to it. The 1986 policy (as modified in 1992), despite resolving to implement the Common School System, instituted parallel educational layers. The consequent Programme of Action (1986/1992) did not even make a mention of the Common School System. All this has happened notwithstanding the fact that studies reveal that "the successful schools in the post-industrial era will be the ones that achieve excellence and equity simultaneously – indeed one that recognizes equity as the way to excellence."

Some of the much talked about initiatives like District Primary Education Program (DPEP), School Vouchers and Public Private Partnership (PPP) as envisaged in XI<sup>th</sup> Five-Year Plan have rendered the task of building the Common School System of public education far more complex than what it was when the Commission had first recommended it in 1966.

However, the continuing public assertion to have egalitarian school system made at least the Bihar Government to constitute the Common School System Commission in August 2006. The Commission has provided a plan of action to implement the Common

School System in the State of Bihar. In the process, the Commission declared that,

"No developed or developing country has ever achieved universalisation of elementary or secondary education without a state-funded and state-regulated well functioning Common School System, founded on the principle of neighbourhood school, in one form or the other. India is unlikely to be an exception to this historical and global experience." [Chapter 3, Section 3.2, p. 32]

The Bihar Government's Commission further observed that,

"It will not be an exaggeration to assert that none of the developed countries would have reached their present level of economic progress and prosperity without having a Common School System which enabled them not only to forge national unity and social cohesion essential for modernization, but also directly contributed to nation building and economic progress." [Chapter 3, Section 3.2, p. 32]

This is precisely why we need to explore what socio-political forces withhold India from learning from the western advanced nations. Is it merely the hierarchical and stratified structure of the Indian society or the nature of its political economy as well?

The Supreme Court's historic Unnikrishnan Judgment (1993) gave education of children "up to 14 years of age" the status of a Fundamental Right, thereby providing a new content to the assertion of Common School System (CSS). From then onwards, there has been gathering of momentum in support of the concept of Fundamental Right to Education of Equitable Quality and deciphering its crucial linkage with the Common School System based on Neighbourhood Schools.

## Issues

The proposed Seminar has the formidable task of unfolding the Common School System of Public Education based on Neighbourhood Schools (henceforth referred to as CSS-NS) in its various dimensions and concerns. In order to do this, it would be necessary to critically engage

with several issues that are exercising the public mind. What would be the model of CSS-NS? What parameters would define and be required to build CSS-NS as a National System of Education? What parameters would define the neighbourhood of a school? What would happen to the right of the parents to exercise their choice of a school? How can the CSS-NS be aligned to our present context? What will be its curricular and pedagogic framework? What will be its language policy? How would CSS-NS ensure that the principles of equality (including gender equality and equality with respect to disability) and social justice inform the entire school ambience, especially in view of the highly stratified and hierarchical social structure? What is required to ensure that the CSS-NS provides a genuine democratic, secular and egalitarian space for socialization of children, teachers and the managers/ administrators? What would be the place of private unaided schools (recognized or unrecognized) in CSS-NS? Would the pedagogic character (in Paulo Freirian sense) of education in CSS-NS be the same as it prevails in today's school system? Or would the basic character of education have to undergo a major transformation? If so, what would be the direction of change? How do we perceive the conflict between CSS-NS, on the one hand, and privatization and commoditization of education, on the other? This is only a partial list of the issues and can be extended by the Seminar participants.

## Seminar Themes

The seminar will deliberate along the following broad themes:

- \* The emergence of the school system in India: A theoretical examination in terms of the historical conditions; socio-cultural hierarchies and constraints; linguistic and religious divisions; class relations and the character of the State; and the political economy.
- \* The state of the present school system: An analytical picture based on selected field studies, secondary data and narratives and interpreted in the shifting policy framework, with special reference to the post-Structural Adjustment phase and the neo-liberal policies.
- \* The Constitutional vision of education: Examining curricular and policy implications of concepts such as citizenship, equality and social justice; democracy and secularism; liberty of thought, expression and faith; and dignity of the individual; organic unity of Fundamental Rights and Directive Principles of State Policy; federal-state relationship; religious and linguistic rights; decentralization and democratization of governance.
- \* The Common School System Based on Neighbourhood Schools (CSS-NS): Unfolding its social function and the process of socialization; structure, elements and parameters; socio-political factors; legislative and financial compulsions; role of central/state governments, local bodies and school management committees; democratic governance; place of private unaided schools and their obligations; Boards of Education; curriculum and pedagogy; multi-linguality and its implications for a common language policy; teachers and their status and development; institutionalizing capacity for creativity, flexibility, responding to diversity and research-based innovation; and social intervention for resisting discrimination, dilution and distortion.
- \* Fundamental Right to Education of Equitable Quality vs. CSS-NS: Dimensions of debate, educational goals, social function of education, policy formulation, legislation, financing and socio-political action.
- \* The International Experience: Post-industrial experience of the growth of public school systems in selected countries and drawing lessons for India.
- \* The Common School System as a means of resisting and reversing marginalization, alienation and communalization - Locating its role in the identity debate relating to class, caste, religion, gender, language, disability and region - forging a sense of

shared democratic citizenship and envisaging education as a means of social transformation and national reconstruction.

- \* The Common School System's Political Dilemma: A system for extending the State's agenda of social reproduction for maintaining class relations and the prevailing economic order vs. a process for creating a pro-people space for critical pedagogy for building a democratic, egalitarian, secular and humane society; conceiving structures and mechanisms within or outside the school system for enlarging the public space for socio-political intervention.
- \* The State, Neo-liberal Political Economy and Education: Critical examination of the neo-liberal agenda of education and its replacement by an agenda emerging from the Constitution.

## Expected Outcomes

The following five outcomes are expected:

1. Enriched understanding of the role of historical conditions, socio-cultural hierarchies and political economy in withholding the establishment of CSS-NS.
2. Unfolding the role of CSS-NS in resisting and reversing economic marginalization, socio-cultural discrimination, political alienation and communal fragmentation of society.
3. Viewing strategic ways and means for gradual attrition of the State's agenda of social reproduction and its replacement by critical pedagogy for social transformation.
4. Elaboration of the model, parameters and elements of CSS-NS that will inform the politics of class relations, enabling policy formulation, the essential legislation, decentralized governance with devolution of power and financing of the CSS-NS.
5. Conceiving strategic structures and mechanisms, both within and outside the

education system, for socio-political intervention for shift from the prevailing multi-layered school system to CSS-NS.

## Publication

NUEPA will compile papers, notes, commentaries and other presentations after the Seminar and publish them in the form of a book.

## Venue and Dates

The Seminar will be held at the India Islamic Cultural Centre, Lodhi Road, New Delhi on March 24-25, 2009.

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