

Liberalise The Education Sector

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Having passed the 93rd Constitutional Amendment granting a fundamental right to education in the last session, Parliament will be under increasing pressure in this monsoon session to deliver on the promise - to put money where its mouth is.

Recent demonstrations in Mumbai against the increase in school fees are but a sign of the power of the fundamental right activists.

The activists too are unhappy with the 93rd Amendment that makes education free and compulsory for all children in the age group of 6-14. First, it leaves out the critical pre-school years.

An Supreme Court ruling had covered these years; the Amendment is thus retrograde. It does not define free.

Does it apply only to tuition fees, or does it also include the cost of uniform, textbooks, and supplies, may be even meals during school?

It does not guarantee a minimum quality of education. If a child is out of school, it holds parents, not the government, accountable. What a perverse fundamental right!

The government was in charge of our industry; the resultant Hindu rate of growth finally ushered in liberalisation in 1991. The government has been operating our education system since Independence.

The outcome - about a 50% literacy rate - honours it with more powers in 2002! A government that has been inefficient in producing simple goods like bread and cement is expected to efficiently deliver complex services like education and healthcare.

What ails education is not too little involvement of our government, but exactly the opposite. The licence-permit-quota (LPQ) raj that stifled our industry is suffocating the education system. To open a new school or college requires a plethora of permits and licences. Regulations on the entry, exit, and expansion of educational institutions are far more pervasive than they ever were on industry.

People with contacts and money do beat the hurdles, but not dedicated individuals and associations of simple means.

The rules on the size of playgrounds, the number of books in the library and the student-teacher ratio are enforced on private schools, but government schools violate them routinely on the excuse that they take in poor children.

Private schools for the elite are visible, but private schools for the poor go unnoticed even though they are many in number. They too cannot afford the expensive regulatory requirements.

In the name of protecting teachers, activists make it impossible for private schools for the poor to exist. The government-mandated salaries are so high that few can afford it.

In rural areas, it is common for a government school teacher to contract out teaching at half his salary. The contractor often sub-contracts at half his payment. The sub-contractor actually does the teaching at one-fourth of the original salary! No wonder government teacher jobs are auctioned.

Private schools instead get teachers to sign at the official salary, but pay the market rate. They become illegal the day they start.

In most developed countries, teacher salaries are a tad higher than the per capita income. In India, they are about 4-6 times the per capita income.

But activists damn private schools for exploitation of teachers and demand increased spending from government. South Korea and Sri Lanka have higher learning achievements, but spend less than India's 3.8 per cent of GDP on education.

The activists demand that 6% of GDP must be spent on education. Studies in the Philippines, Thailand, Brazil and the United States suggest that it is not really how much a government spends but how it spends it that determines the quality of education.

We must abolish the LPQ raj. And we must abandon the hypocrisy that education must be a non-profit business. In the Unnikrishnan judgement, the Supreme Court has declared commercialisation of education unconstitutional.

This ostrich-like attitude has blinding consequences. Sincere entrepreneurs cannot borrow commercially since their schools are supposed to be non-profitable. One can borrow for almost any purpose, except to open a school.

The government does not need to mandate syllabi, textbooks or exams. These should all be determined by schools. The same syllabus and textbook cannot be relevant in the varied environments of a city, a village and a hamlet.

Schools may consider the models offered by the government, but they should ultimately have the power of selecting and the responsibility of nurturing learning.

There should not be single board exams that are career-determining and thereby life-taking. If colleges need to know the competence of applicants, they can conduct, as most do now, their own entrance tests.

Or some aptitude test, like SAT, can attest the basic level of learning.

To unshackle the private sector, whether non-profit or for-profit, from regulations is not to demolish government education.

The management and finances of government schools should be completely decentralised and handed over to local communities. Government colleges should be made autonomous.

Colleges in Karnataka and Andhra Pradesh provide examples of successful autonomy. Most importantly, grants should be linked with the performance of government schools and colleges.

Over time, government should get out of running schools and colleges. Management should be in private and community hands.

More than 60% of primary schools in Kerala are privately managed, while the average for India is about 5%. When the first Marxist government in Kerala in 1957 tried to take over school management, widespread riots got it ultimately dismissed by Nehru.

Government financing of education must observe the principle that funds follow students in the form of scholarships or vouchers, they shouldn't be given to schools or education departments. The new finance minister should study these issues before throwing good money after bad.

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