

A REVIEW OF THE PROPOSED PUBLIC-PRIVATE PARTNERSHIP PROGRAMME IN ELEMENTARY EDUCATION

Strange trends are afoot in the world of elementary education. What the Congress government proposes, the Congress government itself disposes. After nearly a hundred years since G.K. Gokhale proposed (in 1910) the need to make elementary education free and compulsory, its passage in August 2009 was assumed to be an achievement, a harbinger of better tidings and times for elementary education. What was beginning to be appreciated for its potential to foster a national, public, collective good, the proposed public-private partnerships (PPP) in elementary education seeks to dismiss with its assertion of the strength of private capital to deliver public goods.

In its call to review possibilities and models for PPP, the Department of Education seems to rely on assumptions that the private sector itself and all private sectors have efficiency and accountability in-built within themselves. This assumption is asserted without any substantial evidence of the actual delivery records of private players vis-à-vis that of the public sector. For example, the stated results from varied countries do not provide us details of the actual finances allocated to the schools, variations in skills and training of teachers, role and inputs of parents, and the social and economic backgrounds of the children themselves. What is overlooked in the simplification of the poor delivery of the public system is its very erosion by and within the department itself. Even as the system has grown in numbers and reach, its management structures and processes have remained out-dated and corroded. The problems of efficiency and accountability are key problems that have resulted from the neglect of such processes in the government system and are not necessarily inevitable characteristics of all public systems. That we have examples of public education (the central schools, the IITs and IIMs) that are cited for their excellence is often not invoked in these discussions that assume the inefficiency of all public education systems.

The rationale cited for considering the PPP are questionable. Why should cost be a factor when the government has not spent more than three percent of the GDP on elementary education? Why should the government not spend more on education when the rhetoric of 'inclusive growth', the need to cater to the '*aam aadmi*' and the need to develop a 'knowledge society' are constantly invoked?

In suggesting and describing the various models and programmes under the PPP, the Department seems to overlook the fact that the nation already has the world's most varied school education system and this is the basis for a highly uneven and unequal education system. This consists of schools that range from the remote and bare Ashramshala schools to the exclusive, international schools. In between these are the range of government schools, central schools, private and aided schools, and schools run by religious organizations, which combine with a variety of school boards and medium of instruction to make for a varied and hierarchical education system. The significance of such variations and their impact itself has not been factored in and the call for a variety of new PPPs on which schools can be managed would only add to this hierarchy and differentiation of schools. What are needed urgently are not more varieties and hierarchies of schools but equal opportunities to schools which are also equal in their facilities, content, and their treatment of children.

The PPP suggested by the Department draws its source from the World Bank and from organizations that seek to infuse the rationale of capital and corporate management into the context of a system that should be oriented to delivering education as an equal and quality public good. That these would be incompatible and even antithetical to each other has been witnessed in several contexts and the limitations of the charter schools in the US are only one manifestation of this. That the opposite, that is the ability to provide equal and quality education by a public system, which can also facilitate the need to see education as the single biggest source of leveling, is also possible is evident in many countries.

Why India cannot endorse the latter and why the strengths of existing public systems, with attention to addressing problems that have only grown over the years, cannot be recognized and reworked are issues that need to be addressed.

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