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the Central Advisory Board of Education (CABE)
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A COMPILATION OF NOTES

ON

COMMON SCHOOL SYSTEM

*(with special reference to medium of education and
NCF-2005)*

by

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Common School System

The Education Commission (1964-66) had recommended a Common School System of Public Education (CSS) as the basis of building up the National System of Education with a view to "bring the different social classes and groups together and thus promote the emergence of an egalitarian and integrated society." The Commission warned that "instead of doing so, education itself is tending to increase social segregation and to perpetuate and widen class distinctions." It further noted that "this is bad not only for the children of the poor but also for the children of the rich and the privileged groups" since "by segregating their children, such privileged parents prevent them from sharing the life and experiences of the children of the poor and coming into contact with the realities of life. . . . also render the education of their own children *anaemic and incomplete*. (emphasis added)" The Commission contended that "if these evils are to be eliminated and the education 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."

The Commission also pointed out that such a system exists "in different forms and to varying degrees" in other nations like the USA, France and the Scandinavian countries. The British system, however, was based upon privileges and discrimination but, in recent decades, under rising democratic pressure, it has steadily moved towards a comprehensive school system which is akin to the Common School System as recommended by the Commission. There are other developed countries as well like Canada and Japan that practice similar systems. It may not be an exaggeration to assert that none of the G-8 countries which met in Scotland (U.K.) last week have reached where they are without practicing the essential attributes of a Common School System. Can India hope to be an exception to this historical experience if it wishes to join the comity of developed nations?

The 1986 policy, while advocating a National System of Education, resolved that "effective measures will be taken in the direction of the Common School System recommended in the 1968 policy." Taking into consideration these policy imperatives and the contemporary emphasis on decentralisation along with the necessary flexibility in the school system to be able to respond to the contextual curricular demands, the concept of the Common School System (CSS) has itself been evolving. There are two widespread misconceptions about CSS, often promoted by its detractors, which we must deal with before going ahead. First, **CSS is misperceived as a uniform school system**. On the contrary, the Education Commission itself advocated that each institution should be "intimately involved with the local community be regarded as an individuality and given academic freedom." This guiding principle has assumed even greater significance in recent times in view of the expectation from each school or a cluster of schools to be able to respond to the local contexts and reflect the rich diversity across the country, as also advocated by the Draft National Curriculum Framework (Draft NCF-2005). The rigidity of the present school system will be adequately challenged when flexibility, contextuality and plurality are accepted, among others, as the defining principles of CSS. Indeed, if the curricular vision of the Draft NCF-2005 becomes the basis of developing CSS, it should certainly be possible to conceive of a national system wherein "*no two schools shall be identical*." Second, it is wrongly claimed that **CSS will not permit a privately managed school to retain its non-government and unaided (or aided) character**. Again, on the contrary, CSS implies that all schools – irrespective of the type of their management, sources of income or affiliating Boards of examinations – will participate and fulfill their responsibility as part of the National System of Education.

We must also note that 86th Constitutional Amendment (2002) enjoins upon the State to provide free and compulsory education to all children as a Fundamental Right. This amendment

in Part III of the Constitution has major implications for the national system of education which cannot continue to function as it has since independence. All schools in the country, including privately managed unaided (or aided) schools, are under social obligation to act as agencies of the State to fulfill the obligation flowing out of Article 21A regarding equality and social justice. This means that they have to act as genuine neighbourhood schools to provide free education to all children residing in the neighbourhood as may be prescribed by the government from time to time. The central and state governments are hence required to take concrete time-bound measures, including policy modification, in order to meet the new Constitutional obligation. This basic principle has been ignored in the Report of the Committee on "Free and Compulsory Education Bill."

Based upon the evolving public discourse, CSS may be defined as follows:

"Common School System means the National System of Education that is founded on the principles of equality and social justice as enshrined in the Constitution and provides education of a comparable quality to all children in an equitable manner irrespective of their caste, creed, language, gender, economic or ethnic background, location or disability (physical or mental), and wherein all categories of schools – i.e. government, local body or private, both aided and unaided, or otherwise – will be obliged to (a) fulfill certain minimum infrastructural (including those relating to teachers and other staff), financial, curricular, pedagogic, linguistic and socio-cultural norms and (b) ensure free education to the children in a specified neighbourhood from an age group and/or up to a stage, as may be prescribed, while having adequate flexibility and academic freedom to explore, innovate and be creative and appropriately reflecting the geo-cultural and linguistic diversity of the country, within the broad policy guidelines and the National Curriculum Framework for School Education as approved by the Central Advisory Board of Education."

Notes:

1. The above definition is based upon a definition of CSS that was proposed to the CAGE Committee on "Free and Compulsory Education Bill" but not accepted.
2. The CAGE Committee on Universalisation of Secondary Education has acknowledged certain guiding principles and basic characteristics of a successful programme of moving towards universal and free secondary and senior secondary education that are fully consistent with the Common School System as defined above.
3. The principles underlying the concept of Inclusive Education are integral to the vision of Common School System. In the Indian context, Inclusive Education has to go beyond the Salamanca Declaration (UNESCO, 1994) and transcend the issue of disability. It must concern itself with all marginalized sections of society viz. *dalits*, tribals, religious and linguistic minorities, child labour and of course, the physically and mentally disabled and particularly the girls in each of these categories, whom the school system tends to exclude in substantial proportions. Unless this exclusionary character of Indian education is challenged, both theoretically and in practice, by application of the principles of Inclusive Education, neither the Common School System nor UEE would become a reality.

4. The educational vision reflected in the above definition of CSS has become critical for the survival of India as a sovereign State and a civilized society as the global market forces are rapidly taking over government school campuses and buildings and also impacting on the nature of knowledge inherent in the curriculum, with little concern for the Constitutional principles and the welfare of the large majority of the people (ASSOCHAM is right now lobbying with MHRD for major changes in the school system so that corporations and other private bodies can turn education into a commodity and use it for profit).

Further, the kind of paradigm shift the Draft NCF-2005 is advocating can become meaningful and sustainable only when it is implemented in all categories of schools, including the privately managed unaided schools, in the whole of the country within a declared timeframe, though a properly phased programme will be necessary. Of course, this will require a major dialogue building political exercise (reminiscent of what took place at the time of seeking nation-wide acceptance of three-language formula in 1950s and early 1960s), keeping the federal structure of the country and concurrency of education in mind. The State cannot be a mere bystander in this process but is expected to assume a proactive role of leadership in transforming the system. Otherwise the State would become superfluous and the global market forces and the social structure together will determine the character of the school system.

The essential linkage between curricular reforms and systemic reforms must be appreciated, before it is too late. And such reforms would be feasible only within the framework of a Common School System. It is also necessary to assert that **no developed or developing country has ever achieved UEE or, for that matter, Universal Secondary Education, without a strong state-funded and state-regulated Common School System.** India is unlikely to be an exception to this historical and global experience, notwithstanding the ambition of the Indian State to become a 'superpower' by 2020!

EMPOWERING THE GOVERNMENT SCHOOLS*,#

a plea for political priority for the only historical option for India

The crisis was foreseen by the Kothari Education Commission (1964-66) which unequivocally recommended the **Common School System with neighbourhood schools** as the National System of Education for all children of India. What is a Common School System? The most important feature of a Common School System is *equitable* (not *uniform*) quality of education for all types of schools, be they Government, government-aided, local body or private schools. Six essential and non-negotiable attributes of equitable quality of education need to be specified : (i) minimum physical infrastructure, including library, teaching aids, playgrounds and many other features (e.g. early childhood care centres and pre-primary schools attached to primary/elementary schools); (ii) professional quality of teachers and teacher : student ratio; (iii) diversified and flexible curriculum to reflect the geo-cultural plurality of the country, while emphasising certain core curricular features of nation-wide significance; (iv) pedagogy for holistic, child-friendly and liberative education; (v) apart from gender sensitivity, pedagogic and social empathy for the *dalits*, tribals, cultural and ethnic minorities and the physically or mentally challenged children; and (vi) de-centralised and community-controlled school system.

The Indian Parliament has expressed its commitment to the Common School System twice in its resolutions on the National Policy on Education respectively in 1986 and 1992 (the 1968 policy, issued as a Cabinet resolution, was also committed to the Common School System). Yet, the concept could not be translated into practice because the political leadership and bureaucracy at all levels along with the intelligentsia found an *escape route* for their own children viz. the private school system. This shift in commitment from the Government school system to the private school system implied an increasing loss of political, bureaucratic and social will to improve the Government schools. The present policy support to privatisation and commercialisation of education amounted to legitimisation of *status quo* of disparity, discontent and disempowerment of the vast majority of Indian people.

The Central Advisory Board on Education (CABE) appointed a Committee on Common School System in 1988. The CABE Committee proposed a ten-year phase-wise programme for reconstruction of the present school system into a Common School System. In 1990, the Acharya Ramamurti Committee, constituted to review the 1986 Policy, extended the CABE Committee proposals further. The chief features of a phase-wise re-construction programme may be summarised as follows : (a) Highest political priority to improvement of both the access and the quality of the Government, local body and the government-aided schools; (b) De-centralisation of decision-making and management of schools through the Panchayati Raj framework and making the school entirely accountable to the community it serves; (c) Fulfilling the Constitutional obligation of a minimum of eight years of *elementary* education (instead of five years of *primary* education) under Article 45 to all children up to 14 years of age (including the early childhood care and pre-primary 0-6 age group); (d) Allocation of *adequate* financial resources, getting out of the '6% of GNP' trap; (e) A pedagogically and socially rational language policy for the medium of *education* (not

* This concept was first evolved and elaborated in the *LOKSHALA Programme for Universalisation of Elementary Education*, organised by Bharat Jan Vigyan Jatha with academic support from Maulana Azad Centre for Elementary and Social Education of the Department of Education, University of Delhi (March 1995).

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instruction) common to all schools, so that language becomes a means of *articulation*, rather than *imposition*; (f) A carefully constructed programme of incentives, disincentives, persuasion and eventually legislation to gradually bring the private schools into the fold of the Common School System; incentives to private schools may include grants for children from low-income groups, computed at the rate of allocation per child in Government schools, such that all children in the neighbourhood have access; disincentives may include gradual withdrawal of all hidden subsidies to private schools, like the cheap land, tax-free income and exemption from income tax on donations, teachers trained at public cost, etc.

The elite in India have always been dismissive of the concept of Common School System by mocking at it as being politically too radical and, therefore, infeasible. In contrast, the poor and the lower middle class have for long internalised the concept as the only means for their empowerment and social justice. It is an irony that such an equitable public school system has been prevalent in some form or the other in several European countries, USA and Canada. Indeed, this is the only historical option left for India for building a cohesive, secular and just society. The diversionary educational agenda including adult literacy, non-formal centres, Alternative Schools or Education Guarantee Scheme, will have to be given up. The agenda of 'Empowerment of Schools' for creation of a Common School System must receive topmost priority in national political agenda.

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Three-Language Formula

The three-language formula evolved out of a major political exercise and negotiations in the critical decade of 1950s and the early years of 1960s in response to the rising tensions with respect to different language regions of the country and the related question of cultural identity. In essence, this outcome reflected the federal spirit of our Constitution and the commitment to sustain and promote India's plural character – the essential basis of India's survival as a nation-state. It is in this background that the 1986 policy made a commitment to implement the three-language formula "more energetically and purposefully." The Draft National Curriculum Framework (Draft NCF-2005) also reiterates this position and proposes to make a renewed bid to fulfill the commitment. While, as part of this formula, a crucial responsibility befalls upon the elementary stage of education to promote mother tongue as the medium of education, it is the secondary/ senior secondary stage of education that becomes the real testing ground of the more challenging aspects of the formula. The 1986 policy also acknowledged the "uneven" implementation of the formula. The Hindi-speaking states, with their greater share in political power, have a special responsibility in responding to this challenge, especially with respect to the concept of the third language as a modern Indian language from a non-Hindi speaking region.* Concrete steps in this direction will provide a new thrust for the non-Hindi speaking states to make a fresh commitment to implement the language policy in letter and spirit. It is here that the political commitment made by the nation's leadership soon after independence to strengthen India's unity and integrity, promote inter-cultural dialogue and build an enlightened and articulate citizenship, will be redeemed.

The perceived need of the privileged sections of society, particularly during 1970s, to study through the medium of English, thereby violating the three-language formula, possibly constituted the single major motivation for promoting private unaided schools. Draft NCF-2005 has rightly advocated not only the mother tongue as the medium of education (not *instruction*) but also a multi-lingual approach to language education. While acknowledging the widespread aspiration to become proficient in English, NCF-2005 emphasises that "English education would be meaningful only when it succeeds in finding its place along with other Indian languages (Draft NCF-2005, Section 3.1.5, p.37)." *Is this rational approach possible without a Common School System*, which includes the private unaided schools? CABE's deliberations would remain incomplete without considering this issue in entirety.

In this context, we should recommend that the Central Government take the initiative of setting up an effective and adequately funded structure and process for promoting inter-language translation of the highest quality material available in different languages of India. An active role of the States/UTs will be critical to the success of this central initiative. This process must also cover the word class material available globally in the languages of different countries and make it available widely in all major Indian languages. India's capacity in the field of IT should prove to be of special asset in this respect, provided urgent political attention is paid to this issue. It would be only appropriate if this inter-language endeavour would include Braille and computer-aided facilities for making quality material available to the disabled children also. Apart from enriching communication and understanding among different language regions of the country, the availability of such material in Indian languages will go a long way in enriching the quality of education not just at the school education level but at the higher education level as well.

[Note: Let us avoid using the colonial term "instruction". What we are talking about is "education" and not "instruction". For instance, English for the vast majority in India

*Tamilnadu's continued insistence on two-language formula needs to be viewed in the context of the non-implementation of the concept of the third language by the Hindi-speaking states.

or, for that matter, the state language in the case of linguistic minorities (e.g. Bangla for the Hindi-speaking population of Howrah, Hindi for the Oriya-speaking children of the Bastar region in Chhattisgarh on the border of Orissa or Marathi for Tamil-speaking people in Mumbai) can be the "medium of *instruction*" at the primary stage but the mother tongue (in the three instances cited here i.e. Hindi, Oriya and Tamil respectively) will be the "medium of *education*"!]

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Post-script with respect to National Curriculum Framework-2005 (NCF-2005)

Since this note on Common School System was submitted to CABE at its meeting held on 14-15 July 2005, all references to NCF-2005 are to the Draft NCF-2005. This draft was approved at the CABE meeting held on 6-7 September 2005, following a rather brief but heated public debate on several issues. In this context, the following four issues need to be highlighted:

- NCF-2005 did not accept the essential linkage between curricular reforms and systemic reforms. This means that NCF-2005 expects improvement in the quality of education without the required structural changes.
- NCF-2005 gave only an ambiguous support to the concept of the Common School System. Yet, it uses the rhetoric of equality and social justice and 'commits' itself to the principles enshrined in the Constitution.
- The commitment evident in Draft NCF-2005 for educating children through their mother tongue, at least at the primary stage, seems to have been diluted in NCF-2005 by substituting the notion of Home Language(s) in place of mother tongue (NCF-2005, Sections 3.1.1, 3.1.2). This is apparently aimed at appeasing the private school lobby and allowing the privileged sections of society to claim that their children's Home Language is English. This substitution will enable the private unaided schools to maintain the *status quo*. Be as it may, the lack of commitment in NCF-2005 to move towards a Common School System makes all talk of multilingual approach and learning through mother tongue farcical.
- Similarly, many of the curricular and pedagogic proposals in NCF-2005 lose their meaning without a Common School System as they will become discriminatory against the girls, disabled children and children of *dalits*, tribals and minorities i.e. against almost two-thirds of the children in the relevant age group. Ideas like emphasis on local knowledge, reduction of the burden of comprehension, work-based education, learning through heritage craft and others can be practiced without debilitating children from under-privileged sections only if these are situated in a Common School System.

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