

EXERCISE IN ESCAPISM?

RIGHT TO EDUCATION BILL

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One of the differences between classical liberalism and neoliberalism is that while the former called for reducing the role of the state to a minimum and replace it by private capital the latter seeks to expand the role of private capital through the state, making it authoritarian and a dedicated facilitator of its interests. The recent developments in the sphere of education need to be seen from this perspective. The efforts to confer on the state the aforementioned role seems to be nearing completion as the Constitution is being rephrased to facilitate the interests of private capital. The current Bill tabled in Parliament is the most appropriate proof of that and the Left political formations are yet to raise any objection to the way its passage is being secretly designed.

The Right of Children to Free and Compulsory Education Bill, 2008 was tabled in Rajya Sabha in the month of December 2008. It has been a long pending Bill, not because numerous objections were put to it but because it never figured as a priority for the government. And as the contents of the bill reveal, it is still not very committed on providing quality education to every child. That, needless to say, compounds the sorry state of affairs here because India, unlike many other countries in the world, had failed to establish a school education system that made education accessible to every child before the onslaught of neoliberalisation. That those other countries had succeeded on that count was mainly on account of the necessity of capital – it needed the educated labour force. It also, of course, emerged out of movements in those nations. Indian government neither felt that need nor did the movements make such a demand. Consequently, the education system came to be seen as an autonomous agency of change, a unit divorced from class struggle.

The current Bill states not only about the intentions of the authorities, it also reveals the politics of the so-called progressive and secular actors whose methodology of looking at world as a canvas made up of fragmented and non-connected particulars has further allowed capital to entrench itself. There is a discourse built in favour of the Bill by its disguised authors who have been sitting on the front benches of a politically amorphous identity called 'civil society groups' or 'citizens working for the welfare of people'. And with the expanding intellectual base of such groups and popularisation of ideas of equality and justice as outside and disconnected to the character of capitalism and the facilitator state, the borderlines at such moments between the politics of the Left and those of such agents of capital tend to get blurred, marring the possibility of an organised resistance.

That the Bill has elicited no reaction from the Left parties and trade unions is because of this neo-liberalised character of the current conjuncture. There is no national concern for the mechanisms built into the Bill to pauperise the teaching labour force. It provides sufficient ground, through its Section 23, to appoint teachers who would continue to follow the parameters of what has become known as para-teachers. While great duties are expected out of the teachers there is no provision which would define their wages or working conditions. And may be the notion of teachers as non-workers, and as 'messengers of god' obliterates any possibility of their consideration as workers howsoever much they are integrated into the market and prone to the vagaries of capital.

For the opponents of the neoliberal assault in education, the Bill would make certain things constitutional—involving teachers in non-teaching work, insufficient school infrastructure as the norm, putting onus of educating children on parents, ambiguous notion of justice vis-à-vis providing representation to 'marginalised' sections, complete neglect of issues of curriculum, pedagogy, education for disabled children and making provision of financing education vague. But what emerges from this opposition is also the need to address these issues in the dialectics of labour-capital struggle, which is missing and which can be taken up only by those who would first agree that these are inherent problems of capitalism, and it therefore needs to be understood in a context.

While the Bill ignores the most fundamental aspects of education such as pedagogy, teacher's education and working condition of teachers, it makes the intent of the Indian government amply clear. All flaws which were critiqued as schemes (for example *Sarva Shiksha Abhiyan*) will now be part of Indian Constitution. The institutionalisation of inequity will be complete and constitutional. The hopes that the champions of equality and justice were

pinning on radical changes within capitalism will be shattered in the most obnoxious fashion—passing a Bill which has lies written in it (for example, when it comes to financial provisions for providing education) and which is tabled but no public representation is invited on it as is the general practice. Hence, what the human resource and development minister writes in the 'Statement of Objects and Reasons' of the Bill regarding the beliefs and values of "equality, social justice and democracy and the creation of a just and humane society" on which the Bill is supposedly "anchored" becomes nothing more than lip-service to the rhetoric of welfarist remnants.

Given that there are problems with the way developments in education are seen and analysed in India—in complete disjunction from the struggle of the working class and other struggles against capitalist disfigurements of human existence—there is a need to resist the Bill tabled in Parliament. While one may ask whether it is really possible to tackle the issue of majoritarianism or right-wing assertions through including it in the Bill, there are still possibilities to modify the Bill in the direction of providing a better alternative to what is being promised by the Indian government. For instance, the curriculum and pedagogy detailing can be framed in such a way that there is space for critical engagement with diverse issues of inequity or communalisation. Similarly, the role and working condition of teachers as well as their education is another major area of intervention. The mechanisms suggested for bringing about justice and equality in school also needs drastic modification. Changes can be suggested at all these and more levels. These suggestions in either form—whether accepted or rejected—will highlight the contradictions of the system vis-à-vis its rhetoric of justice and equality. And these contradictions will open up new avenues of resistance in the area.

Though there are problems intrinsic to even the anti-neoliberal critique, the resistance to the Bill as of now is minimal and negligible. The reasons are amply clear – there is no organised force in the country (not even the Left teachers unions!!) which is opposed to the Bill. While silence from the NGO-brand egalitarians is well understood (as they are designed to stand by capital in the ultimate run) those sections that consider themselves opponents of capital's offensive have also withdrawn. The problem emerges from the fact that there is hardly any questioning of the logic of stratification and the process of production that shapes it. Rather, the fight is for inclusion in the existing system of stratification. The withdrawal emerges from their understanding of education as divorced from class struggle and political economy of capitalism. One can only hope that some day the anti-systemic forces of the country would emerge from their myopic understanding of how to look at developments in the education sector, relating it to the struggle of the toilers. Until then, the ruling circles would continue to score victories through Amendments in the constitution and promulgating new Acts. □□□

[Source : Jharkhand Network]