

NOTE

Education is a Commodity

A Correspondent writes :

THE FIVE HIGHER EDUCATION bills that are currently pending in the parliament are sure recipe for crippling the education system. These bills (in abridged form) are :

- 1) The Foreign Educational Institutions Bill-2010;
- 2) The Educational Tribunals Bill-2010;
- 3) The National Accreditation Bill-2010;
- 4) The Prohibition of Unfair Practices Bill-2010; and
- 5) The National Council for Higher Education and Research Bill-2011.

If these bills once implemented will have serious and irreversible consequences for public education in the country. There has been very little public debate on these bills, and the least one expects in a vibrant democracy is to let democratic processes have a say in how people design their public education institutions.

The above mentioned bills are formulated on the basis of the following premises :

- a) The economic capacity of the State is limited, resulting in resource crunch for education; there is thus no option but to depend upon private and foreign sources for funding education.
- b) Private agencies, compared to public agencies, can render better, efficient and cost effective services.
- c) The Constitutional principles of equality and social justice can be replaced by the much talked about concept called inclusion.
- d) Education is a private good and a tradable commodity, profiteering through education is a legitimate objective, just like in any other trade; therefore, it is valid that quality education is proportionate to one's capacity to pay.
- e) Education is an instrument for producing human resources for corporate needs; therefore, the character of knowledge should be determined by market, rather than by the developmental needs of society.

There is need for public debate on these premises because a lot of experts believe that these bills will :

- a) Open the flood gates to Foreign Direct Investment in higher education and reduce education into a tradable commodity;
- b) Tribunalise Justice (as opposed to approaching established legal courts) in the field of education. There is widespread fear that tribunals could come under corporate control much more easily and constitutional guarantees could be flouted.
- c) Reduce 'National Assessment and Accreditation Council (NAAC)', a public authority, to a position where it becomes one of numerous private agencies that may result in widespread corruption.
- d) Establish an 'independent regulatory' authority in Higher Education (IRA in HE) in line with WTO guidelines, with a different name 'NCHER'. This NCHER will be independent from the democratic domain of the people and may regulate the 'trade in education service' in the interest of foreign and domestic corporate houses.

Teachers and students in various public educational institutions of the country, strongly feel that it is hasty on the part of the union government to introduce these bills in the parliament without initiating a public dialogue on this issue. Concerned citizens demand an immediate withdrawal of all the bills introduced in parliament in their present form and conduct a nationwide debate involving teachers, educationists, students, and other public intellectuals. But Manmohan Singh government is not listening. And higher education, even graduate-level college education, is becoming a high-value commodity beyond the reach of ordinary middle-class people, not to speak of lower middle class and the poor. Higher education will become an exclusive domain for high-income groups. □□□