

## Let's Fix the System Instead of Opting Out

*The Statesman*

**September 27 2015**

Allahabad High Court passed an interesting order last month, directing the Chief Secretary of UP Government to ensure that from the academic year beginning 2016, children of all officials serving with the government, including judiciary, local bodies and representatives of people, must send their children to study only in government primary schools, failing which the fees paid by them to private schools should be deducted from their salaries and paid to government account. "Only then would they be serious enough to look into the requirements of these schools and ensure that they are run in good condition," the Judge had observed. Responding to a series of writ petitions on the procedures for appointment of assistant teachers in the state's primary schools, Justice Sudhir Agarwal directed the Chief Secretary to take necessary steps within six months to implement the above order and to submit a compliance report immediately after the lapse of six months. Government's response is not yet known.

Taking note of the deplorable conditions in many of the government-run primary schools, the Judge had observed that although 90 percent of the state's children study in these schools, their conditions remain 'shabby' because officials responsible for running these schools treat them in a shabby manner. The Court's logic was based on the simple common sense that government schools have become the 'last refuge of only the poor', since officials responsible for running them have the liberty to opt out and send their own children to better managed private schools without trying to fix the ails that universally afflict the government schools. If they did not have this liberty, the schools possibly would have become more functional. Officials, no longer being stakeholders, have become completely apathetic to the system.

Governments in India spend about 3.5 percent of the nation's GDP on education. Individual states spend about 10 percent of their budgets on elementary education; for UP, it comes to a whopping Rs 20000 crore a year. But the sorry state of government schools in respect of the quality of teachers as well as the minimum infrastructure and basic facilities like drinking water and sanitation hardly shows any sign of improvement. The same can also be said about the state-run hospitals and dispensaries, especially in rural areas where most of the populations live and where private health facilities are almost absent. Another judge will hopefully pass a similar order in respect of government hospitals someday.

Let the academics and legal luminaries debate whether the order is tenable or constitutional, whether it infringes on the fundamental rights of the government servants to send their children to schools of their choices or whether it was another case of judicial overreach into executive or legislative territories. Let us leave it to their higher wisdom to decide upon these issues. Let the talking heads on TV, if and when they find time from other pressing issues facing the nation like Indrani Mukherjea' case, decide whether revision of the terms of appointment of government servants by requiring them to send their children only to government schools in future would render it legally valid and binding on their part to do so. Let us also forget for a moment that the present set of government employees may not be held entirely

responsible for the abysmal deterioration in the government-run schooling system. Let us also overlook the fact that such a relief was not prayed before the Court by the petitioners either. Let us instead try to understand and appreciate the Judge's frustration and anguish.

I and my brothers, like most others belonging to our generation, attended government schools throughout. Five decades ago, private schools were far fewer in number and most parents were not affluent enough to afford them; even many of those who could often chose to send their children to government schools. Education in vernacular medium in government schools did not incapacitate us to compete at the all India level, neither did it undermine our ability and intellect in any way. One went to the school for the quality of education rather than for nice buildings and facilities; these considerations probably are true even today. But government schools have ceased to be the temples of knowledge they used to be earlier. People do not send their children to these schools any longer- I did not send mine – only those who have no option are forced to avail of their non-existent services, and they constitute the majority of our rural folks. It is here that the judgment becomes relevant.

Five decades ago, infrastructure of the government schools were as pathetic as they are now, possibly worse. But there were teachers, ill-paid, but qualified, dedicated, committed and proud of their jobs. They used to administer severe corporal punishments if one did not perform, and also offered their assistance free of cost to make learning a little easier for those who could not cope up with their lessons. Private coaching was not unheard of but not quite pervasive as of now. Government teachers are today better paid than their counterparts in most private schools and many of them remain equally knowledgeable, dedicated and committed to their jobs, but their numbers are fast diminishing. It would be unfair to hold only teachers responsible for the decay, they are perhaps equal victims of a dysfunctional system. Besides, decay has not remained confined to government schools only; nationwide, the system of delivery of public services as a whole has crumbled almost beyond repairs, along with the general erosion of values. We can of course blame the politicians, bureaucrats and others who have hijacked the system by interfering in recruitment and transfer of teachers and for leakages from the education budget – but blaming does not help in restoring the integrity and value of the system.

Enrollment in India so far has been a success story, with enrollment in primary schools reaching over 90 percent since 2009 and girls making up more than 50 percent of the new students between 2007 and 2013. But to keep the students in school is another story - 29 percent of children drop out before completing five years of primary school and only 42 percent complete the high school. With 1.4 million children in the age group 6- 11 out of school, India has the dubious distinction of ranking among the top five nations for out-of-school children. Infrastructure remains a huge problem - primary schools are short of about 700000 teachers, only 53 percent of the schools have functional girls' toilets and 26 percent have no access to drinking water. But when we talk about the quality of education in government schools, the situation becomes really ugly. The judgment was precisely aimed at this aspect, rather than the need for improved infrastructure.

The Annual Status of Education Report (ASER) 2015 conducted by the NGO Pratham Education Foundation brings out some startling facts. 32.5% of children in class II in government schools cannot recognise letters

of alphabet when they are expected to understand simple sentences easily. More than 50% studying in class V cannot read class II text books. About 40% of rural children studying in class III do not recognise numbers up to 100. Rural government schools are unable to impart these very basic educational skills at the primary and secondary levels. That was precisely why, in 2014, 52.8% of rural children in the age group 6-14 in UP went to private schools; the corresponding all India figure being 30.8%.

The huge gap between expectation and delivery is both the cause and effect of the corruption that runs through the entire system, eroding its value at every stage. Last year, more than 50 principals in Kaimur district of Bihar were suspended after they were found guilty of misappropriating funds meant for building classrooms. About 10,000 primary school teachers were dismissed last year after they failed a mandatory competency test, not being able to name the president of India and the planet closest to the Sun, among other things. 23 primary students died after consuming contaminated free mid-day meals. In Bihar, during the last decade, the appointment rules were relaxed to fill 3.62 lakh vacancies in the state's 73000 primary schools on presentation of degree certificates attested by government officials without having to write any competitive examination. After reports had surfaced that about 20,000 of them had forged their degree certificates, 779 teachers were dismissed after investigation.

This was of course not the first time that such a scandal had erupted, and not only in Bihar. The story continues to be repeated in state after state, in degrees of malfeasance that compete with each other. The officials responsible for running the system have completely abdicated their responsibility and are not affected by it, having the option of sending their children elsewhere. If they did not have this easy option, the system would certainly not have been allowed to become so decrepit. The judgment, no doubt born out of deep anguish and a sense of helplessness, only seeks to restore their accountability that has been hopelessly lost, though nothing probably will come out of it.