

The Bogey of public private partnerships

How does neo-liberal capital recycle itself pip, seed and peel? For starters it employs copy-writers and linguists who generate words and phrases that rationalises super profits. Then it encourages establishment of Foundations that push this agenda and when it has become part of both popular vocabulary as well as popular anger and unrest, float another set of words and phrases that convey the same theme.

The mother of all neo-liberal ideas within the country, the World Bank, has thus contributed many such words to our vocabulary since the 1990s. Take the example of 'Stakeholder' and 'Road Map' for instance. The use of the word Stakeholder has been made with the great pretence that all persons involved in a particular process or activity have equal say in the matter. Thus it has talked of agrarian crisis by making an agrarian labour and the multinational seed company as equal stakeholders! Of course such a usage befuddles the matter and trivialises the crisis that the agricultural workers have been facing. On the other hand, there is no confusion with the phrase Roadmap, which has always been the road to privatisation and structural adjustment policies. Latest to join the bandwagon of neo-liberal phrases is the term public-private partnerships (PPP).

Today, we have PPP in railways, in the health services, in infrastructure building, in energy transmission and every other area where there has been government involvement. The Annual Budget of 2008 for education also brings in PPP by stating that "the government proposes to upgrade 1,396 ITIs into centres of excellence in specific trades and skills under public-private partnership." Its appearance as a scheme almost deceives into believing that it is actually an upliftment effort. The Mayawati government had gone a step ahead though and called the PPP a "new philosophy" for empowering the people of Uttar Pradesh through huge full page advertisements in newspapers soon after the Chief Minister's her birthday celebrations in January 2008. "New philosophy"! Certainly not.

So what is this PPP? According to the corporate pundits, it is the "concept of good corporate citizenship". In simpler language it basically follows the logic that the World Economic Forum has upheld, which is that "business enterprises have a central role to play" in deciding the fate of societies. It is argued by them that the requirements of developing countries like ours cannot be solved through the state sector alone and that there has to be a greater involvement of private agencies along with NGOs. So what is new about that? Nothing, because the structural adjustment policies within the country started in 1991 by Manmohan Singh as Finance Minister under the guidance of World Bank and International Monetary Fund pushed private participation in all areas where government was involved as part of a cut down in social sector spending. In another words, PPP is aggressive privatization in areas that have escaped the net till date.

In education, PPP however has serious implications and can change the very meaning and nature of education. PPP infact can be seen as the single biggest threat facing Indian education in current times. There is not a single area that has escaped the PPP net, be it pre-primary education, vocational education, secondary education or higher education. And that includes elementary education too, which is expected to be free and compulsory for all children according to constitutional provisions and the 86th amendment Act.

Frequently, privatisation of education is confused with fee increases or expansion in private institutions. But that is only part of the story. Privatisation in education comes not only with increase in private schools, colleges and educational institutions but also with a decline in public educational institutions. Over the last decade there has been a substantial fall in the government provisioning of education. The increase in absolute numbers of schools fall far short of the

growth in education requiring population. So who provides for those left out? Who else but the private bodies certainly. Hence we find a massive mushrooming of private schools in urban pockets within the country. This is not all. There has also been systematic dismantling of government schools in the name of rationalization. In Indore way back in the 90s, it was claimed that the number of students within certain government schools were falling and therein began the process of physical dismantling of government schools, which only stopped after massive protests. Privatization was carried out through outsourcing wherein certain non-academic services of educational institutions like management of hostels, clerical, security and sanitary services and even supply of mid day meals were given to private agencies.

Lately however, the trend also been towards handing over functioning of government schools to private bodies—as part of the PPP drive. Instead of only outsourcing non academic work, private agencies make themselves present in the direct day to day management of government schools and colleges, which includes taking academic decisions and intervening therein. The Central Advisory Board of Education(CABE), the highest advisory body of education that the NDA government had allowed to die and which was revived with much fan fare by the by the UPA government had members representing corporate bodies like Azim Premji Foundation, within the CABE committees. Various other smaller committees, the knowledge commission have also had corporate participation within policy level decision making. Talking of accountability—a subject that the private sector loves to talk about—the question is who were these corporate representatives accountable to while making and taking decisions?

Apart from taking educational policy decisions there is also the implementation shift towards private hands. IT giants like Microsoft, WIPRO Technologies and Lucent Technologies along with their own and others Foundations like the Azim Premji Foundation, Community and Progress (CAP) Foundation, Dr. Reddy's Foundation, the Education Development Center, the International Youth Foundation and NGOs like Pratham, and funding agencies like Ratan Tata Trust have been implementing educational exercises within government school settings. While the role of NGOs and Private companies was confined earlier to the non formal education sector and the parallel school, today it is visible in a fully funded government school. This happens in the name of consultancy for improving quality and teaching within schools. Hence there is, Intel that manages computer learning in government schools' in Delhi whereby underpaid Instructors with contractual jobs hired by private institutes teach computers in Delhi government schools. Coca Cola India manages Balwadis through the Confederation of Indian Industry(CII) which also supports the Sarva Shiksha Abhiyan(SSA). Now SSA, is also getting most of the elementary educational cess. So what is CII doing in SSA? The Reliance group too recently announced a scheme called one laptop per child through its foundation for government school children. The Azim Premji Foundation has gone ahead and started the Karnataka State Quality Assurance Organization (KSQAO) assessment. It runs a programme called the Learning Guarantee School within the government secondary schools, which also prepares the students for these assessment examinations.

Emerging from the above examples is the story of the private permeating the public education system today. It is gradually taking it over, administration, academics, assessments, examinations, everything. However that is not all. What is fundamental to all this is the manner in which the government is subsidising the private sector's take over of public education within the country. While land has been given for long to private educational institutions at subsidized rates with an undertaking for freeships for poorer children—that has been almost always been flouted—there are also tax rebates that are available. Importantly the government is actually paying for the businesses to test potential markets, all free of cost. In publicity websites for 'The Quality Education and Skills Training Alliance (QUEST)' programme implemented by Indian and

American technology corporations with NGOs and funded by United States Agency for International Development (USAID), an NGO head declares, “Quality education is a major business opportunity. The alliance allows us to match corporate interests and resources with educational needs.” And here lies the truth. The private partners with the public because “Education is a big business opportunity.” If the market is viable the companies expand and take over and if it is unviable then they just move away, during which the public infrastructure has been fairly dismantled leaving people with either no option or with third rate private options. The PPP is being called win-win because NGOs gain as their project areas expand, the companies gain as their current businesses get a good image and future markets among children for their products expand, the government’s gains as it discards responsibility to the poor in the country. After all the wins what is not mentioned is that it is public education which loses and that too through a process by which the public themselves have paid for the dismantling of their educational system.

This dismantling then gets reported in highly publicized studies and surveys (like the Annual Status of Education Report (ASER) of Pratham) of NGOs and think tanks wherein it is declared that more and more people are sending their children to private schools. True they are, but the point is why they are sending them there. Instead of answering that what is pushed as a solution is more privatization through PPP. The eventual step of privatization is now being pushed through the PPP’s model of voucher system in education. It suggests that poor parents be given vouchers so that they can buy appropriate education for their children in a school of their choice be it private or public. What it implies is that government’s role in educational provision be reduced to providing subsidies through vouchers for poor children who are taken private schools. The Chief Minister and Education Minister of Delhi already set the ball rolling in July 2007 when they participated in initiation of this as an experiment within schools. This is being tried out in other states as well. An adoption of this would mean private schools for poor children. And that would be the ultimate “expansion of business opportunity” for the companies, the ultimate expansion of neo-liberal capital in the arena of education.

But of course poor children will get poor private schools and certainly not the elite private schools, because government will only subsidize that much. It will be schools where children are beaten up into a coma for non-compliance, as in the case of Rinki, a school girl in a low end Delhi private school. It will be schools where teachers would be under so much pressure to give output that they would not care what is being taught as much as in ensuring that they contractual jobs are not lost. It will be schools where the content will be driven by super profits. The curriculum will be decided not by the teachers or the pupil or even within the country. It could be an alien curriculum preparing students to be slaves in call centres—It has already started happening in Karnataka, Uttarakhand, Madhya Pradesh where Azim Premji Foundation decides ‘quality’ tests and assessments and thereby also content to be taught. It will be like the joint curriculum projects of UK-India Education and Research Initiative funded by the notorious multinational company like Shell and others and being implemented in Kendriya Vidyalayas and Navodaya Vidyalas. But most likely, the poor private schools will be places poor children will be taught to remain poor and become pliant labour for the neo-liberal market.

The private partnership in public schools are not interested in the larger objectives of social transformation and liberating the minds of the people. If it seeks anything, it is to enslave the mind and body to the market. It is in this dark and grim scenario that educational enrolment figures are expanding. Retention may also increase but the point is where is this education taking the large mass of the poor in this country? It appears from the way PPP model is progressing, it will be towards further mental slavery.

Hence along with the need to build up struggles against every act of public-private partnership that comes to light, there is also a need to go back to the retrieving, modifying and strengthening the Common School System. Educationists have worked on what these schools should be like. It

has been suggested that they should be a school system that are fully government funded and within neighbourhoods open to all children and thereby having access to equal opportunities and founded on the principles of equality and social justice, offering equitable quality in education to all children irrespective of their caste, creed, language, gender, economic or ethnic background, location or disability (physical or mental), and wherein they fulfill minimum infrastructural requirements (including those relating to teachers and other staff, financial, curricular, pedagogic, linguistic and socio-cultural norms) and yet would have adequate flexibility and academic freedom to explore and innovate according to geo-cultural and linguistic diversity of the country. Providing equal opportunities in education to all children through a Common School system is neither impossible nor far fetched for a country that can give special exemptions to multinational companies to set up special economic and educational zones, that can subsidise the educational business ventures of private agencies and which can waive the debts of corporate houses as non performing assets and which supposedly has an economy booming at 8 and 9 percent economic growth.

Way back in the 1960s , the Kothari Commission had found that no country in the developed world could reach their positions without having invested a minimum of 6 percent of their GDP in education. In the current century, even a 6 percent of GDP is far below the requirements. The demand today should be for not only increase in budgetary allocation but also ensuring that people's money being collected through educational cess and other taxation be truly spent on public education and not for subsidizing the expansion of the private within the public school system as it is happening through the public private partnerships.

-- Radhika Menon