

Road Map of a Common School System in Bihar

A commission to advise the Bihar government on how to go about the setting up of a common school system has submitted its report. This article discusses the recommendations of the commission regarding the norms and standards required for a CSS and the resource requirements for implementing such a system. It also briefly touches upon teacher education, principles of pedagogy, school management, and the draft of a right to education and common school system bill.

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A common school system (CSS) can be defined as a system of schools providing education of an equitable quality to all children, irrespective of their caste, creed, community, language, gender, economic condition, social status and physical or mental ability.¹ The commonness of the CSS derives from the application of common minimum norms and standards of quality education by all schools in the system. As the Kothari Commission points out, "the system should be maintained at an adequate level of quality and efficiency so that no parent would ordinarily feel any need to send his child to the institutions outside the system..."² The common minimum norms and standards ensure both the quality and equality of the system.

The most fundamental among the minimum norms is the adherence by all schools in the CSS to the values which hold together the society in which the system operates. In the Indian context, these are the principles of equality and social justice enshrined in the Indian Constitution. In addition, the system must provide the following:

- (a) Minimum infrastructure consisting of land and building; minimum number, size, design and furnishing of class rooms; drinking water and toilets; playgrounds and sports facilities; libraries, laboratories, and teaching aids; and easy access and other required facilities to children suffering from disabilities;
- (b) Well-qualified trained teachers and optimal pupil-teacher ratios;
- (c) A common curriculum framework with a core component with comparable syllabi applicable to all schools, but adequate flexibility in relation to textbooks, teaching

aids, teaching-learning process, evaluation parameters, etc;

(d) A pedagogy which is holistic and child-friendly and which has a liberating influence;

(e) A decentralised school management with adequate autonomy and representation of parents; and

(f) Common language policy.

Moreover, the CSS is based on the concept of neighbourhood schools according to which a school must admit all the children living in the neighbourhood, which is to be specified and delineated for each school.

The basic rationale of a CSS is that it promotes equality and social justice; helps in nation-building and the creation of social capital and is most conducive to providing good education. In the 19th century when the philosophical foundation of public education was being laid in Europe and the US, the CSS was introduced principally for nation-building in countries having different classes, religions and languages. As Heyneman points out, "What was at stake was the forging of a nation based not on principles of tyrannical control but, for the first time, one based on the informed consent of the governed across the full gamut of religions, classes, languages and ethnicities".³

No developed or developing country has ever achieved universalisation of elementary or secondary education without a state-funded and state-regulated well functioning CSS.⁴ This is true of all the Scandinavian countries, the US, Canada, most of the European countries, particularly Germany and France, Cuba, China and South Korea.

In India, the adoption of a CSS was first recommended by the Kothari Commission, subsequently endorsed by a number

of other commissions and committees, and twice approved unanimously by the Indian Parliament. Unfortunately, the support for the CSS has been confined to the realm of rhetoric. In practice, there has been a constant and continuing attempt to dilute and side-track the idea. This is mainly because of the dominance of the elitist class in educational policymaking in India. Parents belonging to this class send their children to exclusive schools with better infrastructure, teachers and teaching standards and have, therefore, no stake in the CSS.

The cumulative neglect of the public education system that resulted from the failure of the nation to build a CSS has now made the task of establishing such a system much more difficult than it was when the proposal was first mooted. The two formidable obstacles to building a CSS today are its massive financial implications, due in no small measure to the cumulative neglect, and the emergence in the country of a whole hierarchy of school education catering to the needs of different groups of children. However, there is no reason why a CSS cannot be established in India if there is a political will to do so.

In this context, a development of great significance was the announcement on the July 22, 2006 by the chief minister of Bihar, Nitish Kumar, in his valedictory address in a seminar on CSS held in Patna, of his government's intention to establish such a system in Bihar and to constitute a commission to advise the government on how to go about it. The commission commenced its work from September 10, 2006, and submitted its report to the chief minister on June 8, 2007, two days ahead of its nine-month term.

Norms and Standards

In its terms of reference, the commission was asked, among others, to recommend "Norms and Standards...for ensuring education of an equitable quality to all children in the State and making an assessment of its financial implications"; "to recommend a framework for Common School System from the stand-point of ensuring children's Fundamental Right to Free and Compulsory Education under Article 21A of the Constitution" and "to formulate a plan of action for implementing the Common School System in the State".

In carrying out its mandate, the commission set and kept in the forefront the following overall objective:

- (i) The goal of free and compulsory education for all children in the age group 5-14 years will be reached in five years starting from April 2008, i.e., by 2012-13.
- (ii) The goal of universalising secondary education will be reached in eight years by 2015-16.
- (iii) The goal of providing facilities according to the norms of the CSS, for senior secondary level education to 70 per cent of the children completing secondary level education, will be reached by 2016-17.

The education of children in the age group of five to six years has been brought within the scope of free and compulsory education even though it is excluded from Article 21A, because it is in keeping with the intent of the constitutional provisions on early childhood care and education (ECCE),⁵ the Supreme Court's directive for universalising ECCE and India's commitment under the UN Convention on the Rights of the Child. The universalisation of secondary education (classes IX and X), as a part of the CSS, has been recommended because there will be an inevitable

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pressure for this once elementary education is universalised. The CSS has been extended to the senior secondary level and 70 per cent transition to this level has been provided because this is a legitimate part of school education and also because the completion of senior secondary education has now become a precondition for access to higher education and the world of work.

In the CSS recommended by the commission, there is a built-in provision for implementing Article 21A of the Constitution. Here, free education is assumed to be free, not only of tuition fees but also of all other charges whatsoever, and to include the supply free of cost, of textbooks, essential stationery items, school uniforms and mid-day meals.

Bihar has today 13 school types, in terms of the grades taught. In the new scheme of things, this will be reduced to only three: (a) primary schools from class I to V; (b) middle schools from class I to VIII; and (c) senior secondary schools from class IX to XII.

The commission has established a set of norms and standards for ensuring school education of equitable quality. These relate to access to schools, school land, physical infrastructure, school furniture and equipment, number of teachers required, the teacher education requirements and free and compulsory pre-elementary and elementary education. Besides, norms for curriculum, pedagogy and teaching of languages have also been established. But these do not have any significant financial implication. The following norms and standards may be highlighted:

- (i) A primary school will be provided within 1 kilometre from habitation; a middle school within 3 kilometres and a senior secondary school within 5 kilometres;
- (ii) A primary school will have a capacity of 210 students; a middle school, 440 students; and a senior secondary school, 420 students;
- (iii) Each class or section in a primary and middle school will have 40 students; at the secondary level, 40 students; and at the senior secondary level, 30 students;
- (iv) Norms relating to school land and total floor area calculated on the basis of square metres per child, have been prescribed for each category of schools;
- (v) In each primary and middle school, there will be a hall for pre-elementary children measuring 50 square metres;
- (vi) Norms have been laid down for school furniture, which includes desks, benches,

computers, library books, utensils for mid-day meals (for primary and middle schools only), equipment for games and sports, office equipment, teaching-learning equipment, etc;

(vii) There will be eight teachers in each primary school, 17 in each middle school and 20 in each senior secondary school. The derived pupil-teacher ratio in these schools will be 35:1, 30:1, and 22:1 respectively. All teachers will be trained and otherwise qualified according to the norms of the National Council for Teachers' Education (NCTE).

After establishing the norms and standards, an estimation was made of the total number of children at different levels of education, i.e. primary, middle, secondary and senior secondary who have to be enrolled and for whom education of equitable quality has to be provided. The size of school-going children in the population in each of these four age groups was estimated year-wise up to 2016-17, taking the base year data from the 2001 Census and an assumed population growth rate, moderately lower than the decadal population growth rate. The child population in all the four age groups taken together was estimated to be a little over three crore in 2007-08, gradually rising to 3.72 crore in 2016-17. Going by the available information on the capacity of existing schools, it was estimated that at most only 1.5 crore students are in schools today. Thus, in order to achieve the goals set for the CSS, the state has to bring to school the backlog of 1.5 crore children plus 72 lakh more children who will be reaching the school-going age during the next nine years. This adds up to a figure of 2.2 crore additional children to be brought to school, calling for nearly two-and-a-half times increase in the present capacity of schools in Bihar.

Resource Requirements

For calculating the number of schools, the norm regarding the optimum capacity of schools at the three different levels was used. Based on this criterion, the state needs 60.7 thousand primary schools and 31.0 thousand middle schools by the end of 2012-13. At the beginning of 2007-08, there were 34.8 thousand primary schools and 15.5 thousand middle schools. Thus, the universalisation of elementary education would call for the building of additional 25.9 thousand primary schools and 15.5 thousand middle schools during

the five-year period from 2008-09 to 2012-13. This means approximately 74.4 per cent increase in the number of primary schools and almost doubling of the number of middle schools.

Using the same criterion, i.e. student capacity per school, it was estimated that by the end of the implementation period, i.e. 2016-17, the state would need 21.7 thousand senior secondary schools. At present, there are only 2.6 thousand such schools. This implies the building of 19.1 thousand additional senior secondary schools. This means nearly 7.5 fold increase in the existing number of such schools.

In the next step, norms for the number of teaching as well as non-teaching staff required for each school at the three levels, were used for estimating the total strength of the required teaching and non-teaching staff. In the beginning of the base year 2007-08, there were 2.25 lakh teachers in primary schools, 1.16 lakh in middle schools and 13.1 thousand in secondary schools, totalling 3.72 lakh teachers. By 2012-13 this total strength needs to be raised to 11.2 lakh and by 2016-17 to 15.28 lakh. It is estimated that by 2012-13, 4.8 lakh primary schoolteachers and 4.40 lakh middle schoolteachers will be needed. In addition, 4.42 lakh secondary schoolteachers will be needed by 2016-17. This means that by 2012-13, the number of primary schoolteachers will require to be increased by 205 per cent and middle schoolteachers, by 440 per cent. The number of teachers in the secondary schools will have to be increased by 4.2 times the present strength by 2012-13 and 14 times by 2016-17.

The next step was to determine the unit costs of building and equipping schools, the salary of teaching and non-teaching staff and non-salary items of recurring expenditure. The practice followed by a number of institutions, programmes and reports, particularly the Central Board of Secondary Education (CBSE), Sarva Shiksha Abhiyan 2007, Bihar Education Programme 2007, the reports of the two committees on right to education under the chairpersonship of Tapas Majumdar, 1999 and 2005, and the Policy Norms of the National Education Policy, 1986, were considered. But finally the commission made its own judgment in selecting the unit costs out of these examples and in some cases made its own calculations. After establishing the unit costs, the cost of building a new school in each of the three categories was calculated. The cost

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of repairing or upgrading an existing school was estimated to be half of building a new school. Estimates were also made of the two recurring components of running a school, i.e., salary and non-salary recurring expenditure. The source for the unit costs relating to the salaries of teachers of primary and middle schools was the CAGE Committee Report on the Right to Education Bill 2004. This committee used "state level average teacher salary". This figure was adjusted against inflation since 2004. In deciding on the unit cost for the salaries of secondary schoolteachers in the trained graduate and postgraduate categories, the level was increased by Rs 2,000 and Rs 3,500 respectively, which represent the usual distances separating the three levels of salaries. A substantial part of the non-salary recurring expenditure was accounted for by the provision, free of cost, of books, stationery, school uniform and mid-day meals – the requisites of free education.

An important component of the non-recurring expenditure taken into account, is the cost to be incurred for renovating existing teacher education institutions and building new institutions in this category. These institutions have suffered most from the cumulative neglect over decades. The institutions which were supposed to be built, like the District Institute of Educational Training (DIET) were either never built or remained partially built. Existing institutions like the State Council of Educational Research and Training (SCERT), training colleges, primary teachers education centres (PTECs), block resource centres, etc., were allowed to decay to the point of becoming almost non-functional. The norms and standards include the non-recurring costs of building and renovating these institutions, the recurring costs of running them on a re-structured basis and the recurring costs of providing in-service, on-service, and induction training.

The aggregate expenditure required for building the CSS was obtained by adding up the different components of non-recurring and recurring items of expenditure. As many as 23 tables have been used for arriving at this figure. Most of the tables give figures for each of the nine-year implementation period. Thus, there is complete year-wise phased plan for implementing the CSS. The total estimated expenditure comes up to Rs 2,04,650.7 crore or an average of Rs 22,739 crore per annum, at 2007-08 prices. In order to get an idea of the additional resources to be

mobilised, it was necessary to deduct from the year-wise estimates of the total expenditure, the amounts that the state government would be spending on school education on a year-to-year basis. The projected public expenditure on school education for the year 2008-09 is Rs 6,555.3 crore, and the required expenditure for that year for implementing the CSS is estimated to be Rs 17,254.9 crore. Thus, the additional expenditure during the first year of the implementation period, i.e., 2008-09, is estimated to be Rs 10,699.6 crore. By the end of the implementation period, i.e., in the year 2016-17, the additional expenditure will increase to Rs 23,867.5 crore. The average per annum additional expenditure will be Rs 17,221.5 crore. The projected expenditure for the year 2008-09 will be 32.2 per cent of the total public expenditure projected for that year or approximately 61 per cent more than the total estimated expenditure on school education that year.⁶

These figures may appear daunting, but they are by no means surprising. Given the magnitude of the task of reconstructing the school education system in Bihar, mobilisation of resources for it on this scale is absolutely essential. There has been a cumulative neglect of school education all over the country but this has been more rampant and on a larger scale in Bihar. For decades before 2006, very few new schools were built; only a handful of new teachers were recruited; training of teachers was totally neglected and teacher education institutions were allowed to decay. The financial implications of the CSS cannot but be commensurate with the physical task of bringing the huge backlog of children to schools, building new schools for this purpose, and recruiting and training additional teachers.

Resource Mobilisation

It may also be emphasised that this financial implication would have been largely taken care of if the Kothari Commission's recommendation in 1965-66, to devote 6 per cent of India's GDP to education would have been implemented. Several political parties, including the United Progressive Alliance (UPA), and successive central governments in power have committed themselves to this target. Taking India's present GDP at Rs 42 lakh crore, 6 per cent of it comes to Rs 2.52 lakh crore. Seventy-five per cent of this amount, which according to the

present trend should be available for school education, comes to Rs 1.89 lakh crore. A share of 8.3 per cent of it for Bihar, which is proportionate to Bihar's population to the total population of India, yields an amount of Rs 15,700 crore for school education in Bihar. This falls short of the total expenditure estimated by the commission for the year 2008-09 by only Rs 1,748 crore, an amount which should not be difficult to mobilise. Thus, the best chance for Bihar to build a CSS lies in the nation implementing the 6 per cent target suggested more than 40 years ago.

No doubt the state government itself is also expected to contribute to the achievement of the 6 per cent target. This places an onus on the Bihar government to reprioritise its budget outlays. For this purpose, the commission has suggested an increase in the share of expenditure for school education, of the total budget expenditure, from the present level of 13 per cent to 20 per cent. If this is done, then the additional resources to be mobilised for implementing the CSS will come down to Rs 8,923.5 crore in 2008-09. The bulk of these additional resources should be provided by the central government both by reprioritisation of current outlays and by raising additional resources by taxation. The commission has suggested that the chief minister of Bihar should go on a special mission to the prime minister and seek the central government's assistance for meeting at least 50 per cent of the additional cost of the CSS. In addition, the commission has made the following recommendations for the mobilisation of additional resources:

- (a) All assistance under Sarva Shiksha Abhiyan should be provided within the framework of the CSS;
- (b) The ministry of science and technology and NIIT should be approached for providing computers to schools in the CSS, and NABARD should be approached to set up laboratories in the schools and teacher education institutions;
- (c) National financial institutions, particularly banks, which have opened a window for lending for social development, should be approached to provide loans to the state as their contribution for building the CSS;
- (d) The rural and urban community should be called upon to help in building schools, mainly through donation of land and by providing other components of the infrastructure;
- (e) All schemes and plans in the state not consistent with the approach of the CSS

should be discontinued and the resources thus released utilised for financing the CSS. These would include closing the schools and hostels run by the department of social welfare and union ministry of labour and not allowing additional Kendriya Vidyalayas or Navodaya Vidyalayas to be opened in the state.

In assessing the magnitude of the task for mobilising additional resources, it is essential to bear in mind the great significance from the point of view of both the state and the nation, of the venture of CSS that the state would be embarking upon. It would contribute greatly to nation-building, national unity and bringing equality in the educational system. It would also lay the most comprehensive foundation for human resources development in the state, which will pave the path for the future growth and prosperity of the state and the nation as a whole.

Teacher Education

It is futile to think of quality education through a CSS without having in place fully functional top class teacher education institutions with adequate capacity and wherewithal to meet the entire teacher education requirement over the nine-year implementation period and beyond. The commission has, therefore, prepared a three-year plan of structural and process-oriented transformation of the entire system of teacher education in order to respond to the challenge of moving towards the CSS. The SCERT will be restructured as an autonomous academic institution. All the nominal 37 DIETs and 23 PTECs will be upgraded to full-fledged 60 DIETs. The research programmes of both SCERT and DIETs will be thoroughly revamped. The present block resource centres (BRCs) will be converted into block education centres or Prakhand Shiksha Kendras (PSKs). They will function as an academic extension of DIETs, engaged in teacher education, material development and research. The plan envisages the construction of 249 new and strengthening of all 533 PSKs.

The present Cluster Resource Centres will be transformed into Cluster Teacher Forum or Sankul Shikshak Manch (SSM) which will bring together teachers belonging to all schools in a specified areas and provide them a platform for sharing experience and fostering peer group interaction and learning. A major innovation proposed is to make the teachers through

the SSM, responsible for school inspection which is redesignated as "comprehensive academic supervision". This will replace school inspection by officials of the education department.

Another major innovation suggested by the commission is that the curriculum of all the primary and middle schools of the state should be transformed within the next five years on the basis of the Gandhian pedagogic principle of acquiring knowledge, building values and developing skills, through productive work. The existing 391 Buniyadi Vidyalayas (basic education schools) will be used as "lab schools" for this purpose. In 150 of these vidyalayas, Buniyadi Education Curriculum Development Centres will be established. These centres will be responsible for developing context – specific work-centred curriculum for the elementary stage of education, to begin with. A Basic Education Resource Cell will be created within SCERT to guide and coordinate the teacher education and curriculum development work in these centres. The commission has also calculated the existing and required capacities for BEd level teacher education and recommended the expansion and creation of additional capacities through universities, constituent colleges and private BEd colleges.

Recommendations have also been made for restructuring departmental and field level administration of school education and reconstituting school management committees based on the principles of democracy, decentralisation and heavy representation of parents, particularly mothers. Two almost identical draft legislations for the management of schools, one for primary and middle schools and the other for secondary schools, have been proposed.

Finally, a comprehensive legislation entitled Bihar Right to Education and Common School System Bill has been prepared for possible adoption by the Bihar legislature. The bill encapsulates in a formal and legal language the theoretical and conceptual premises behind the CSS and spells out the rights and obligations of the parties involved, i e, the children, the state, the teachers and the schools. The bill provides for the constitution of a State Commission for School Education, which will have the responsibility, among others, of monitoring the implementation of the Act, recommending suitable measures and acting as a court of last appeal in relation to any grievance regarding non-implementation

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of any provision of the Act. In the proposed legislation the rights and obligations of different parties are based on the latest thinking on education and pedagogy, and the principles of international law. **EPW**

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Notes

1 This definition draws heavily from that contained in the *Report of the Education Commission* (1964-66), also known as the Kothari Commission report.

2 Kothari Commission Report, paragraph 10.05.

3 Stephen P Heyneman (2000): *From the Party/State to Multiethnic Democracy: Education and Social Cohesion in Europe and Central Asia*, Educational Evaluation and Policy Analysis, Vol 22, No 2, pp 173-91.

4 Anil Sadgopal, 'Right to Education, State and the Neoliberal Assault', paper prepared for the conference organised by the People's Campaign for the Common School System in collaboration with the Institute of Human Rights Education, Madurai, Tamil Nadu, at India Social Forum, New Delhi, November 2006.

5 Article 39(f), the Supreme Court's Unnikrishnan judgment of 1993, and amended Article 45.

6 During 2004-05 to 2007-08, the total public expenditure has grown at 17.6 per cent per annum and expenditure on school education has grown at 16.8 per cent per annum. The average share of expenditure on school education has been 13 per cent. Both total public expenditure and public expenditure on school education are assumed to grow at 15 per cent per annum. The share of expenditure on school education in total public expenditure remains unaltered at 13 per cent.