

7 CPI(M)
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Education:
Congress-led
Government
Fails the Test



As the country prepares to go for elections for the 15th Lok Sabha, what is the record of the incumbent Congress-led government *vis-à-vis* the promises it made in its own National Common Minimum Programme (NCMP), which the Congress had claimed would be the foundation for another CMP, “Collective Maximum Performance”? An important issue which featured in the 2004 Lok Sabha elections was rolling back the twin onslaught of communalization and commercialization of education which the BJP-led regime had unleashed on the people of this country.

DETOXIFICATION OF CURRICULUM

The toxic communalism injected into textbooks brought out by the NCERT under the BJP-led NDA government was one of the big issues prior to the 2004 elections. The Left-led governments, the Left parties, several secular organisations and prominent individuals from different fields had been part of big mobilisations on this issue. Soon after the Congress-led government was formed, the Left parties raised the demand for prompt action to detoxify textbooks. As a result, the government formed the Central Advisory Board of Education including eminent persons. At their initiative a committee was formed to screen the textbooks and by and large, the shameful falsehoods about Indian history and culture injected into textbooks by the Sangh Parivar ideologues were successfully removed, thus to a large extent restoring the secular nature of the textbooks. This was a joint achievement of secular forces. However the mandate to CABE could not be fully realised because of the failure of the government to ensure its regular functioning. As far as state governments under the BJP are concerned, they continue to use communal and retrograde interpretations in many textbooks including those used in RSS-run schools. Thus the need for struggles to take the secularisation of textbooks further remains an important priority in the coming days.

6% OF GDP ON EDUCATION

Spending 6% of the country's GDP on the education sector was the

most important promise the Congress-led government made *vis-à-vis* the education sector. With the constant intervention of the Left parties and their demand to increase allocations for education, some progress was made. However, much more could and should have been done. When the UPA took office the share of total expenditure by the States and Centre on education in GDP was 2.67% (2004-05). This figure increased to 3.08% in 2008-09. In fact state governments account for a significant part of the increase. The Union government's contribution to the expenditure on education, increased from 0.42% to a mere 0.67% of GDP during the term of the Congress-led government.

On the other hand, the government promoted the commercialization of education and utterly failed to bring any social control legislations to tame the profiteering of private institutions. The most striking feature of the education sector in this country in the last five years has been the hugely escalating cost of education, from the primary level to the institutions of higher education. The scandal of high capitation fees charged by rapacious professional institutions is well known. But more recently, the proliferation of private schools from the primary level to Class 12 charging exorbitant amounts is a shocking and disturbing development which spells disaster for any country interested in inclusive growth. Private schools and colleges, with a few honourable exceptions, have literally become a law unto themselves, hiking fees at will, coercing money from hapless parents on the slightest pretext.

Thus the urgent demand for legislation to ensure social control in the fee structure, on the issue of admissions and to extend social justice through reservations in private higher educational institutions will be an urgent task before the new government. In school education also regulatory mechanisms to prevent the rampant profiteering seen now, are essential.

RIGHT TO EDUCATION BILL

The right to universal compulsory education surely must be a priority for any modern nation. Is it not a shame that even 61 years after independence, India today has over 380 million illiterate people? This

is the largest number of illiterate people in any country and in fact would become by itself the third largest country in the world by population. Almost 170 million people in the age group of 6 to 24 years are outside the ambit of any kind of education system in the country. The Left parties urged the government to enact a law for compulsory universalized education. Instead of bringing in such a law, the Congress-led government decided that it would be too costly for the central government. Instead they came up with a so-called Model Act for the Right to Education (RTE) which it wanted the state governments to finance. It was only the Left parties' opposition which prevented it. At the fag end of its tenure the UPA hurriedly tabled the RTE Bill in Parliament, which went against the main recommendations and provisions made in the draft bill by CABE. In any case the utter non-seriousness of the government about this important piece of legislation was evident when it was not even tabled for discussion in Parliament. In contrast the most anti-people of legislations were pushed through bulldozing parliamentary norms.

POOR RECORD

As a result, the situation in education has hardly improved over the past 5 years. It is true that dropout rates decreased and more children were retained in schools, but the numbers are still unacceptably high. The Congress-led government, instead of working on the strengths of the Sarva Shiksha Abhiyan, was more keen to wind it up and to shift the burden of financial resources onto the states. The Sarva Shiksha Abhiyan saw a decline in expenditure which went down from Rs 12,020.2 crore in 2007-08 to Rs 11,940 crore in 2008-09 and has been further decreased to Rs 11,933.9 in this year's interim budget. School education continues to be in a sorry state even today because of the Congress-led government's failures in delivering on its promises. A large number of teaching positions have not been filled up on a regular basis. Instead, of lakhs of casual teachers, like parateachers, are in place who get wages even less than the minimum wage. A large number of private schools have come up, making large profits without any regulation. All government schools should be given enough inputs,

funds and infrastructure, etc., so that their status is raised to the level of Central Schools. Less than 50% girls in the country (48.22% for Class I-V and 46.99% for Class VI-VIII) are enrolled in schools today. This figure is even worse for the socially deprived sections (19.83% for SCs and 10.95% for STs). The enrollment ratio for Scheduled Caste students has in fact deteriorated from 2002-03 to 2007-08. Almost 60% of Primary Schools and 55% of all schools in the country have just three or fewer teachers. The following table shows the poor condition of schools in the country and practically no improvement during the Congress-led government's tenure.

| <i>Key indicators</i> | <i>2005-06</i> | <i>2007-08</i> |
|---|----------------|----------------|
| % distribution of schools without <i>pucca</i> building | 29.44 | 27.02 |
| % schools without girl's toilet | 62.58 | 49.45 |
| % schools without drinking water | 16.93 | 13.25 |
| % schools without boundary wall | 49.33 | 49.78 |
| % schools without computer | 89.27 | 85.75 |

Source: Flash Statistics: NUEPA

As a result, today when the Congress is making tall claims about making India a superpower, we continue to be one of the most backward countries in the field of human development. The *Human Development Report* for 2007-08 ranks India at 128th position in its Human Development Index. In fact one "achievement" the Congress-led UPA should take credit for is that things have gone from bad to worse in the last 5 years as India was ranked at least one place higher (127) in the UNDP's HDI ratings in 2004. India (HDI rank 128, adult literacy 61%) is ranked below countries like Sri Lanka (HDI rank 99, Adult Literacy 90.7), Occupied Palestinian Territories (HDI rank 106, Adult Literacy 92.4) and Botswana (HDI rank 124, Adult Literacy 81.2).

HIGHER EDUCATION

Higher education also continues to be in a sorry state of affairs in the country. Even though the Congress-led government is taking credit for expanding the higher education sector, the ground realities tell a different story. In an unprecedented move, in the last days of the

government, it announced the formation of 15 new Central Universities. Shockingly, 12 of these do not have any land, building, faculty or any other infrastructure. The only thing they do have is a Vice-Chancellor. Again in an unprecedented move, 15 VCs were appointed by one selection committee in record time! This tells its own story!

Expenditure per student in higher education continues to be abysmally low in India. Spending per student in higher education was only 400 dollars per student in 2007 in India. This is way below developed countries like USA (\$ 9,629), UK (\$ 8,502), Japan (\$ 4,830) or even developing countries like China (\$ 2,728), Russia (\$ 1,024) or Brazil (\$ 3,986). The Central Universities Bill, which was passed in this government's tenure gives sweeping powers to the Visitor (which can be misused by the executive), is also in violation of the NCMP which had promised that the autonomy and academic freedom of educational institutions would be protected.

The Congress-led government also failed to take any measures to regulate the private players in higher education, which are making huge profits by charging exorbitant fees without subscribing to any standards of quality. A legislation to this effect was sabotaged by the government. Many important political leaders in government or associated with the Congress and its allies run such institutions and make big money through exorbitantly high capitation fees, upto thirty lakhs a student for a medical seat. Thus no regulations or control were put on them.

Even government institutes saw huge fee hikes in the Congress-led government's tenure. To take an example, IIM Kolkata doubled its fees to Rs 9 lakhs last year.

The Congress party continuously attempted to open the higher education sector to foreign investment, which has not only accelerated the pace of commercialization in education, but also poses a serious threat to the intellectual self-reliance of the country. Every effort was made by the Planning Commission and the Commerce Ministry to push for a legislation to allow FDI in education. This was to honour the commitments made by Prime Minister Manmohan Singh and his selected clique to the WTO and Indo-US Joint CEO Forum. What

kind of fraud FDI in higher education involves can be estimated from the fact that of the 144 foreign providers advertising tertiary education in the newspapers, 44 were neither recognized nor accredited in their countries of origin. 110 foreign providers are operating in this country without government permission, violating UGC guidelines, but no action has been taken against them. It was the CPI(M) backed by large sections of the academic community which fought hard against the introduction of the Bill and succeeded in stopping it.

SOCIAL JUSTICE AND EQUITY

On the issue of social justice, with the support of the Left parties, the Congress-led government brought an important piece of legislation to ensure reservations for OBCs in institutes of higher education as well as an increase in seats. However, the suggestion of the CPI(M) to ensure some affirmative action for the poor among other non-reserved categories was not accepted. The move was sabotaged by vested interests within the government which delayed its implementation. Required funds which were recommended by the Hamid Committee have not been given to most of the institutes and central universities to properly implement 27% OBC reservations and 54% seat increase.

Shamefully, in its last year the Congress-led government tried to reverse the constitutional provision for reservations for Scheduled Castes and Scheduled Tribes. It hurriedly brought a Bill in Parliament in December 2008 to exclude most of the central universities and institutes from the constitutionally-mandated reservation for teaching positions, except only at the entrance stage, under the garb or “promoting excellence.” This speaks volumes about the commitment of the Congress to social justice.

Also the task of implementing reservations in private educational institutes continues to be a chimera, because of lack of commitment and political will of the Congress. On the question of improving the poor educational status of Muslim minorities which has been clearly documented in the Sachar Committee report, the Congress-led government has at best paid only lip service. Most of the recommendations of the Sachar Report have not been taken

cognizance of by the government. On some issues like announcing MCM scholarships for minority students where the government repeatedly made certain commitments, no budgetary allocations were made to honour them.

EROSION OF DEMOCRATIC RIGHTS OF STUDENTS

The Congress-led government's tenure also saw an attempt to erode the democratic rights of students. The government made no efforts to implement the recommendation of the Lyngdoh Committee, which had held that elections should be held in all educational institutions including private institutes as well. Even among the 26 central universities, only 9 conduct students' union elections. On the contrary the Lyngdoh recommendations have been used to derail and delay the election process in some of the universities like JNU, which were held as a role model in that very Report. It is not surprising that some of the corporate documents on education like the Birla-Ambani Report, which have advocated depoliticization of campuses, carried greater favour with the Congress-led government.

NEGLECT OF THE YOUTH

The Congress-led government's policy towards youth is also marked by neglect and apathy. More than 30% of the country's population consists of youth today. But the government has not taken any serious measures to pay attention to their aspirations. There are no programmes to promote sports, culture, etc. The Nehru Yuva Kendra, which is under the Ministry of Youth Affairs and Sports, has been reduced to an instrument of giving political patronage to people rather than doing any productive work. Also the employment opportunities have gone from bad to worse after the global economic meltdown. Lakhs of jobs have been lost because of the slump. Even official statistics show that average employment in the country fell at 1.01 percent points per month from September 2008 to December 2008. It is estimated that by the end of this year, one crore jobs would be lost in India alone. A large number of young people who work in the modern knowledge-

based industries like call centres and IT based firms, etc., are working without any cover of labour laws or safeguards, under a continuous threat of layoffs or salary cuts. In various announcements, which have been made to tackle the crisis, no significant provisions have been made for tackling the deteriorating employment scenario. This kind of attitude also creates a fertile breeding ground for reactionary forces to create fissures and divisions taking advantage of the poor economic conditions and growing sense of insecurity. The acts of MNS which attacked unemployed youth who had come to take railway exams and other reactionary forces like Sri Ram Sene, which claim to be the representatives of youth, is a clear reflection of these tendencies.

CONCLUSION

The need to give priority to the pillars of equity, accessibility, secularism and quality in our educational system remains. The thrust towards commercialisation of education and turning educational institutions into profit-making enterprises inaccessible to the mass of our young people, pushed by the Congress-led government must be reversed. Their policies on this score have been no different than those of the BJP. The forthcoming elections give people the opportunity to ensure a reversal of these policies by voting in an alternative secular government at the Centre committed to the implementation of these goals.

Vote CPI(M)

**Strengthen the Left and Democratic Forces to
Ensure an Alternative Secular Government
at the Centre**

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