

## High time we debate role of Public and Private Schools

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Tenth class student, Santosh Reddy of a private school in Karimnagar in Telengana state had signaled last week another phenomena in the offing in the country similar to farmers suicides. The boy suicided in front of a running train on being humiliated by his school for failing to pay school fees and for class teacher making him for that reason standup outside the classroom. He recorded all this on a mobile phone before suiciding that he was doing so as his farmer family cannot afford and do not have the money to pay the tuition fees. Three days later this week Sivaramakrishna too suicided for same reason in another village in Mehaboobnagar district.

That one of the two key reasons for farmers getting indebted is hospital costs and educational expenditure of children is known but this is first time in the country that a child suicided for not able to pay school fees. This incident is likely to echo across the country leading for more such attempts. As such this incident should not be brushed aside as an inconsequential one. It calls for serious view of the emerging scenario.

I wonder why when primary and upper primary education was made free some years ago first for girls and then for all, why private schools are allowed to continue charge fees in addition to capitation fees by many private schools informally? Some State Governments

have even made entire High School education free. On the other, most of the private schools have been increasing tuition fees frequently as if there is no one to question and no checks are there on admissions conditions, infrastructure required and standards for outcomes. On the contrary instances are galore of Governments pampering private education threatening the very future of public schools. This is despite the RTE Act of 2009. Provides for free and compulsory education to all children upto fourteen years.

This Santosh Reddy suicide episode should remind us what has been going in the country without a public debate on education policies. Public schools, nurtured over the decades by State and Central Governments, have been flagship of the country's development endeavors. Not only there is no fee in public schools, children are also provided free midday meal, books, and even uniform. Most of the public schools have basic infrastructure, trained teachers and there is system of supervision and periodic reviews. And they operate in an open entry for one and all and exist in difficult terrains too. That in some public schools some teachers are not regularly attending or quality of education is not up to mark should not mean they need to be replaced by private schools, operating more on business lines and with no concern for equity and socio-economic development aspects of the country. Santosh Reddy and Sivaramakrishna suicides should not go unheeded.

To expand their empires private school managements tend to defame public schools with all kind of arguments and accusations. They are spreading the argument that accomplishments of public schools are not comparable to those of private schools. The agencies and the departments concerned with educational standards at primary and secondary level are taking a passive view. Going against the objectives of RTE Act, some State Governments have even announced plans to close down some public schools instead of intensifying efforts for increased enrollment.

In the process the country is heading for "a free for all" education scenario. As three prominent researchers in education, Kiran Bhatti, Anuradha De and Rathin Roy has noted in a recent EPW article, public schools are being "simplistically compared" with private schools, "based on a undifferentiated reading of budgets and learning outcomes". It is high time that a national debate is held on the role and relevance of public and private schools in the country.

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