

Commodifying Childhood: Early Childhood Education in Neo-liberal Regimes

Md. Jawaid Hussain
Assistant Professor

Central Institute of Education, University of Delhi, New Delhi
E-mail: mjhussainjmi@gmail.com

Charu Gupta
Assistant Professor

Department of Elementary Education,
Jesus & Mary College, University of Delhi
E-mail: charuguptajun30@gmail.com

Keywords: Early Childhood Education, Neo-liberal Regimes and Education, RTE and ECE

Abstract

The quantity and quality of Early Childhood Care and Education (ECCE) in India are two important points of debate and disagreement. With the failure of the much talked about Right of Children to Free and Compulsory Education Act-2009 (RTE Act-2009) to legislate for making Early Childhood Education (ECE) a fundamental right, the dichotomy of ECE services, represented by the government and private sectors in India, has further been strengthened and legitimized.

Abdication by the state of its Constitutional obligation to ensure every child's right to health, nutrition, and pre-primary education, has let the market forces and principles define and dictate the ideals of a secure and happy childhood. With the growing privatization and commercialization, building up an "empire of consumption"; child care and education are being treated as commodities to be purchased and consumed, restricting their access to too few depending on one's purchasing capacity, thus, putting up a big question mark on the survival and life chances of majority of children.

Highlighting the policy perspectives related to early childhood care and education in India, especially in the light of 'Right of Children to Free & Compulsory Education Act-2009' (RTE-2009), this paper aims to unveil the neo-liberal agenda operating in these policies. The paper concludes by exploring a(n) (im)possibility that yet remains to come – a democratic, participative governance, constituting collective action, and political commitment and will to bring about substantial change in favor of masses and in favor of children's health and well-being as every child, when left behind leaves a question mark on democratic ideals as envisaged in the Constitution.

A child's development starting from infancy and toddlerhood (birth to 2 years) to early childhood (2 to 6 years) is marked by dramatic changes in her motor, perceptual, and intellectual capacities. This is the period when the child's body and brain enlarge in size, fine motor skills are developed, thought and language expand at an astounding pace, and the child becomes more self-controlled and self-sufficient (Berk, 2006). By the time children are 6 years of age, they typically attain the cognitive and social skills needed for organized learning activities provided by formal schooling. Although the formal schooling of children, in almost all countries of the world, begins at about 6 years of age, the last century has witnessed a rapid expansion of prekindergarten programs the world over (Slavin, 2006). The reasons for such an expansion of 'early childhood education' (ECE) programs are generally attributed to the growing industrialization, urbanization, migration, and increased participation of women in the workforce.

An increasing understanding of the critical importance of the 0 to 6 years age group and the dangers of its neglect has made early childhood development (which encompasses both early childhood care and education) an important area of concern. There is a growing understanding and advocacy that the programmes for this age group cannot and should not be confined only to promoting health and nutrition, but should also include opportunities for psycho-social development (Swaminathan, 1998).

Right to Education or Right to Exclusion?

The Constitution of India, as enforced in 1950, provided under Article 45 (Directive Principles of State Policy) for 'free and compulsory education for all children until they complete the age of 14 years'. Since there was no lower age limit, originally prescribed by Article 45, early childhood education was considered as part of this commitment and it followed that the state has the responsibility for the care and development of the young child (0 to 6 years), as well as their elementary education (beginning from 6 to 14 years). 'However, governments from 1950 onwards have clearly not adopted this interpretation and have insisted that the Constitutional provision relates only to primary education, which begins at six or five years of age' (Swaminathan, 1998; p.21). Thus, intimidated by the 1993 Supreme Court ruling (in the Unnikrishnan vs. State of Andhra Pradesh case) that the right to education is a fundamental right flowing from the Right to life in Article 21 of the Constitution, the Constitution was amended in 2002. This 86th constitutional amendment made elementary education a fundamental right, but only for the children of 6-14 years age, as it excluded the children between 0 to 6 years age group by leaving them on the will of the state, under the rewritten Article 45. This division of the span of 0-14 years into two age groups: 0-6 (Article 45) and 6-14 years (Article 21 (A)), robbed the vast majority of children between 0 to 6 years of age, the guarantee of balanced nutrition, health, and pre-primary education (Sadgopal, 2006).

Since Article 21 (A) made the right to education contingent upon the 'manner' the state had to determine by 'law', the 'Right of Children to Free and Compulsory Education' (RTE) was enacted in 2009 with much fanfare and was euphemized as the "harbinger of a new era" for children to meet the challenges of the 21st century. Ironically, this "harbinger of new era" defines 'child' as "a male or female of the age of six to fourteen years"[RTE Act, 2009; Clause 2 (c)], implying that the children below six years are not even recognized as a 'child'! This shifts the responsibility of imparting ECCE onto the parents, leaving it on mere chance and the will of the state. The only mention ECCE finds in the RTE-2009 document is with an instrumentalist connotation and a narrow vision: "to prepare children above the age of three years for elementary education" (RTE Act, 2009; Clause 11).

The RTE Act-2009 is also in contradiction to the National Policy on Education, 1986, which recognized ECCE as 'a crucial input in the strategy of human resource development, as a feeder and support programme for primary education and also a support service for working women of the disadvantaged sections of the society'. The Act has also overlooked India's commitment to the Education For All Goals made at the Jomtien Conference (1990) and the Dakar Conference (2000), which recognizes that 'learning begins at birth' and demands for 'expanding and improving comprehensive early childhood care and education, especially for the most vulnerable and disadvantaged children'(UNESCO, 2012).

Enthused with the near universalization of elementary education (in terms of its quantitative expansion), while the nation is aiming at universalizing secondary education, a dearth of strong national policy and initiatives regarding ECCE and the state's interventions being equivalent to charitable ones, adjusts with rather than challenging neo-liberalization of services, leaving the lives of millions of children under six 'at risk'. This exclusionary and discriminatory right to education is, in fact, a neo-liberal assault on education on its brazen pursuit to control every aspect of the education – the access, quality, and content across distinct social strata. This puts a question mark on the role of the Indian state as the guardian of people's democratic rights, equitable development, and welfare and unveils the function of the state as an agent of neoliberal capital (Sadgopal, 2011).

RTE and the Gender Question in ECCE

A careful analysis further reveals how the RTE Act has turned a blind eye to the issues of the girl child and the women, making it 'anti woman'. Owing to the changes in social and economic structures, majority of women have been relegated to work in the unorganized sector, requiring long distance travel and long hours of work, thereby, increasing the incompatibility between economic activities and child care. Under such circumstances, the responsibility of the child care and domestic work is being forced upon the women (Sriram, 1998), as the girls are being viewed as 'natural assistants' in the absence of the mothers, the 'natural caregivers', thus making child rearing a private matter rather than a public responsibility. Since the onus of taking care of a child generally falls on older girl siblings and women, the exclusion of early childhood from the ambit of RTE, has robbed them of the opportunity to go to school, or work – restricting them to the domestic sphere. Thus, keeping the deep seated gender bias and pervasive patriarchal values in place and perpetuating rather than challenging such inequalities. The legislation also has serious implications for the child care workers, the 'first' teachers of the child, most of which are females. These workers will now legitimately be called mere 'volunteers', will continue to receive 'honorariums' far less than the minimum wage available to an unskilled worker, and will remain working as 'derecognized' workers in an 'unrecognized' sector. This reflects a wider bias against valuing women's contributions as intrinsic to the achievement of national policy goals while looking down upon their contribution to the field as an extension of their roles related to care and nurturance which come 'natural' to them.

Inequitable Access, Unequal Futures

The quantity and quality of ECCE in India are important points of debate and disagreement. While the need of universalizing ECCE services in the country is immense, the access of the masses to such services has largely been poor and inequitable, leading to unequal future gains. With the setting up of *balwadis* in the 1950s and the launch of Integrated Child Development Scheme (ICDS) programme in the mid 1970s, to the proliferation of the private 'for-profit' organizations providing 'pre primary education', there has been a considerable dichotomization of ECCE services in terms of their purposes, approaches and content. As Mina Swaminathan (1998) puts it, "while the mass programme (ICDS), at least pays lip service to holistic aims, and is focused on the child, the private sector is clearly limited to education, interpreted in its narrowest and most formal sense, and geared towards institutions" (p.18). Thus, the failure of the RTE Act-2009 to legislate for making ECE a fundamental right, has further strengthened and legitimized the dichotomy of ECE services.

In the absence of any standard, guidance for curriculum, and regulation from the government, these private 'for profit' providers of pre primary education—a downward extension of primary education— which originally catered to the aspiring middle classes of the urban and semi-urban areas have now spread their wings to rural areas, where they find new markets for selling their commodity — pre primary education.

Commoditization of ECCE: The Neo-liberal Links

The government sector programmes, such as ICDS, the only hope for the millions of children disintitiled of their right to education, suffer from serious issues of access and quality.

There has been a relative negligence of the children falling between 0 to 3 years age group in the government run *Anganwadis*, which have been degenerated into mere feeding centres, and thus are often referred to as '*Khitchdi Centres*' (*pindibadi*), '*broth centres*', '*or*' '*laddoo centres*', as the centres to collect daily meal, with no provision for early learning (Streuli et. al., 2011).

On the other hand, the private sector has come up with 'baby parking lots' and 'preschools' to cater to the needs of urban working parents. Such early childhood institutions can be thought of as businesses competing in a private market, reducing child care to a commodity and treating parents as consumers (Moss, 2007). The kindergarten 'shops' provide for sponsored mobility to those who can afford, by

acting as one of the 'earliest escalators' to the bigger 'shops', as most of them are tied to for-profit elite schools. This growing privatization and commercialization of pre primary education has built an 'empire of consumption', which treats child care and education as commodities to be purchased and consumed, restricting their access to too few depending on one's purchasing capacity, thus, putting up a big question mark on the survival and life chances of majority of children. Thus, it would not be a mere rhetoric to say that the destiny of India is no longer being shaped in its classrooms, but in the unfettered markets by trans-national corporate houses; the market sovereignty supplanting the state sovereignty!

The drastic changes witnessed at policy level, such as cutting the budget for state-funded early childhood care and education, are rooted in the neoliberalization of services and pervasive market forces. In the present era of economic liberalization and globalization, 'there can be only one kind of value: market value; one kind of success: profit; one kind of existence: commodities; and one kind of social relationship: markets' (Grossberg, L., 2005; as quoted in Giroux, 2009). Therefore, 'children now inhabit a cultural landscape in which they can only recognize themselves in terms preferred by the market' (Giroux, 2009).

Ironically, in a society where every aspect of development is being measured through the economic lens of Gross National Product, the nation's increasing growth rates have not led to a corresponding increase in the state's commitment on social sectors and towards its young citizens. A careful analysis of the budgetary allocations made for various sectors of social development reveals the truth of the state's commitment towards its citizens and their overall development.

It follows that instead of prioritizing the nation's resources, economy, policies, laws and schemes in favor of masses, each of these has been prioritizing market economy, commercialization and privatization catering to neo-liberal economic agenda; wherein the state has nothing to spare except a lame excuse of the lack of financial resources for its children, its 'supreme national assets' (as declared in National Policy of Children, 1974). It goes without saying that the equitable ECCE provisions have the potential to bridge the gap between the privileged few and the poor and the marginalized majority. However, the RTE's denial of the child's right to a safe and secure childhood has actually rendered vulnerable majority even more vulnerable and further pushing them into the ghettos. Without strong regulatory measures, we open the floodgates to inequality, with the children from poorer backgrounds being most at risk.

The Way Forward

This paper has sought to unveil the neo-liberal agenda operating in the policies related to early childhood care and education in India, especially in the light of Right to Education Act-2009. The paper highlights how abdication by the state of its Constitutional obligation to ensure every child's right to health, nutrition, and pre-primary education has let market forces and principles define and dictate the ideals of a secure and happy childhood. Because of unequal access, thus reducing the child rights to privileges meant for a 'few', not a right to 'all', the Constitutional ideals of equality and social justice are circumvented.

Therefore, what needs to be done is bringing ECCE into the framework of the Universalisation of Elementary Education, thus, mainstreaming child care and education. This can be successfully achieved through a collective public action combined with political commitment and will; wherein all the stakeholders work in distinct yet complementary ways. Further, what needs to be done is re-asserting national sovereignty in policy formulation through genuine grassroots movement, supported by the progressive sections of society and infused with a consciousness of the dangers inherent in this neo-liberal assault (Sadgopal, 2006). This has to be complemented with the democratization of public institutions, structures and processes and whole hearted investments to actualize the rights of children (Sinha, 2007).

Therefore, the way forward, is to make the governance of the country democratic and participative, in its true sense. This will help bring about substantial change in favor of masses and in favor of children's health and well-being as every child, when left behind leaves a question mark on democratic ideals as envisaged in the Constitution.

Acknowledgement

This paper is a modified version of the paper presented in the *International Conference on Early Childhood Development: Small Steps to a Bright Future* organized by Centre for Early Childhood Development & Research, Jamia Millia Islamia, New Delhi. The authors acknowledge the valuable inputs given by the chairperson of the session and the participants present.

References

1. Berk, L. E. (2006). *Child Development*. 7th edition. New Delhi: Pearson Education, Inc.
2. Giroux, Henry A. (2009). 'Commodifying Kids: The Forgotten Crisis'. *Truthout*, 3 April, 2009.
3. Government of India (2009). *The Right of Children to Free and Compulsory Education Act, 2009*. New Delhi, India, Ministry of Human Resource Development.
4. Moss, P. (2007). *Bringing Politics into the Nursery: Early Childhood Education as a Democratic Practice*. Working Paper 43. Bernard van Leer Foundation: The Hague, The Netherlands.
5. Sadgopal, A. (2006). 'Dilution, Distortion and Diversion: A Post-Jomtien Reflection on Education Policy'. In Ravi Kumar (ed.), *The Crisis of Elementary Education in India* (pp. 92-136). New Delhi: Sage Publications.
6. Sadgopal, A. (2011). 'Neoliberal Act'. *Frontline* Vol. 28, Issue 14.
7. Sinha, S. (October 8-9, 2007). "A Legal Framework for Protection of Rights of Children in the 0-6 Years." Vigyan Bhawan Annexe, New Delhi: NCPCR, Conference.
8. Slavin, R. E. (2006). *Educational Psychology: Theory and Practice*. 8th edition. Boston: Pearson.
9. Sriram, R. (1998). 'Women's Empowerment and Child Care: The Interface'. In Swaminathan, Mina (ed.), *The First Five Years: A Critical Perspective on Early Childhood Care and Education in India* (pp. 240 – 271). New Delhi: Sage Publications.
10. Streuli, N., Vennam, U. & Woodhead, M. (2011). *Increasing Choice or Inequality? – Pathways through Early Education in Andhra Pradesh, India*. Working Paper 58. Bernard van Leer Foundation: The Hague, The Netherlands.
11. Swaminathan, M. (1998). (ed.), *The First Five Years: A Critical Perspective on Early Childhood Care and Education in India*. New Delhi: Sage Publications.
12. Swaminathan, M. (2001). 'Delegitimising Childhood'. *The Hindu*, 7th Oct. 2001.