

Neoliberalism tightens its grip on education

Prem Singh

(This is an English version of my Hindi article published 16-17 years back in the Hindi monthly 'Yuva Samvad'. The Congress-led UPA government was in its second term in office when this article was written in Hindi. Education to the children is considered a most important and sensitive subject of the national life of a country. The UPA government, at the dictates of the regulatory global bodies of neoliberalism, enacted the Right of Children to Free and Compulsory Education (RTE) Act, 2009. By enacting this Act the UPA government, contrary to the constitutional obligations, had ascertained that the education to children of the country will be multi-layered and the same will be commercialized and marketized. In fact, this irresponsible and unconstitutional practice began with the adoption of the New Economic Policies in 1991. Both the political and intellectual elite were doing this, and continue to do so today. Their only complaint is the RSS/BJP government's communal agenda in education - without considering the fact that when education would be multi-layered, commercialized and marketized, why won't it become communalized at some point?)

This article has been reissued so that new generations can see that some intellectuals, despite the widespread sophistry during the era of corporate-communal nexus, have not abandoned their steadfast stand on the Constitution and the values of the freedom struggle. They should see that both those who falsely swear by the Constitution and those who passionately appeal to save the same are not honest. Both are complicit in creating the much touted 'New India'. The new generations should see that their New India is not going to be a Constitutional India. It is a predominantly Hindu India, with traces of Muslim India visible here and there, a Sikh India, and a Christian India. A part of it also resides in Europe and America. Within these exist numerous sub-Indias based on castes, regions, languages, tribes, etc. The umpire of the power-seeking alliances of competing Indias is the new imperialism. It sets the rules of competition.

New generations should also know that while the New India team may have suppressed the struggle for constitutional ideology and prevented it from becoming a political force, it still forcefully endures as an idea; and the struggle has not been abandoned. Needless to say, proper education would remain the foundation of that struggle. The day this struggle would be abandoned, the independent, sovereign, secular, socialist, democratic, modern India, built with the sacrifices of millions of Indians, will die.)

Alakh (awakening) by Anil Sadgopal

While Gandhi offered a penetrating reading of capitalist-imperialist civilization, he also acutely understood the mind-set of the contemporary Indian elite, drawn to its enslavement. The significance of Gandhi's concern for Swaraj - independence as individuals, as a society, and as a nation - becomes clearer when we observe today's Indian elite fleeing capitalist-imperialist slavery. Gandhi's greatest apprehension was the professional intellectuals. Today, we see the country's intellectual elite, both overtly and covertly, championing the neo-liberal agenda, which the political elite is imposing at the behest of the capitalist-imperialist establishment.

How can an intellectual elite, lacking a sense of its own freedom, care about common freedom of the nation or humanity? With the exception of a few genuine public intellectuals who have waged a struggle for the spirit of freedom against imperialist slavery, most of India's intellectuals, knowingly or unknowingly, have surrendered their freedom. This is why, over the past 20 years, the dictates of the World Bank, the International Monetary Fund, the World Trade Organization, and multinational corporations have prevailed over the Indian Constitution.

This time, I am going to discuss the neoliberal stranglehold on education, which has been a joint venture of political, bureaucratic, and intellectual elites. Here, I would focus primarily on school education. A specific and recent context is the recently enacted Right of Children to Free and Compulsory Education (RTE) Act, 2009.

The process of implementing this law began during the BJP-led NDA government, when it enacted the 86th Constitutional Amendment in 2002 to circumvent the 1993 Supreme Court decision that granted children up to 14 years of age the fundamental right to free education. Later known as the 86th Constitutional Amendment, the NDA government introduced it in the Lok Sabha on November 28, 2001, as the 93rd Amendment. Anil Sadgopal had vigorously opposed the amendment at the time. Writing in the November 28, 2001, issues of 'Rashtriya Sahara' and 'Times of India', he warned that this amendment would strip the nation's children of their right to education. Citing the clause in Article 21(a) added to Clause 3 through this amendment that states that free and compulsory education shall be provided "in such a manner as the State may by law determine", he said that this gives the government free rein and, most

importantly, provides a legal basis for the World Bank's neo-liberal policies that are infiltrating the Indian education system.

What should have happened that the wish of the makers of the Constitution, especially Dr. Ambedkar, who wanted to include the right to education among the fundamental rights in Article 3 of the Constitution, and who included it among the Directive Principles of State Policy in Article 4 of the Constitution with the resolve to achieve the right to education goal within ten years, and the Supreme Court's decision should have respected; and efforts should have undertaken to provide equal quality education to all the children of the country, even if it took sixty years. But what happened was that this fundamental right was snatched away from children through this law through the collusion of the BJP and the Congress, and the collaboration of other political parties with them.

If the country's progressive intellectuals, who are sustained by the hard-earned wealth of the country's working masses, had immediately taken action and stood up against this anti-people amendment, a separate law would surely have been enacted, consistent with the Constitution's fundamental spirit and the Supreme Court's decision. It would be better if progressive intellectuals themselves sought answers to what more important, pro-people debates they were pursuing in the meantime. I feel ashamed to express what I know. The current law is the most blatant and recent evidence of the collusion of India's mainstream politics, bureaucracy, and intellectuals in the interests of capitalist-imperialist forces against the Constitution, the Supreme Court's decision, and the country's poor children.

The extent to which Indian school education has been subjugated by the neo-liberal agenda, particularly over the past 20 years, is detailed and appropriately contextualized in Prof. Anil Sadgopal's booklet: 'Sansad Mein Shiksha Ka Adhikar Chhinane Wala Bill' (published by Kishore Bharati-Sarokar, Bhopal, 2nd edition, June 2009), referring to this law. This article, in fact, is being written to expand upon the purpose of this very booklet.

To begin with, here are some quotes from Anil Sadgopal's booklet: "In the late 1980s, Myron Weiner, a political science professor at the Massachusetts Institute of Technology in the United States, visited India to study child labour and compulsory education. In his magnum opus, 'Child and the State in India: Child Labour and Education Policy in Comparative Perspective', published in 1991, Myron Weiner wrote, " The central proposition of this study is that India's low per capita income and economic situation is less relevant as an explanation

than the belief systems of the state bureaucracy, a set of beliefs that are widely shared by educators, social activists, trade unionists, academic researchers, and, more broadly, by members of the Indian middleclass. These beliefs are held by those outside as well as those within government, by observant Hindus and by those who regard themselves as secular, and by leftists as well as by centrists and rightists. At the core of these beliefs are the Indian view of the social order, notions concerning the respective roles of upper and lower social strata, the role of education as a means of maintaining differentiations among social classes, and concerns that “excessive” and “inappropriate” education for the poor would disrupt existing social arrangements. ... Rhetoric notwithstanding, India’s policy makers have not regarded mass education as essential to India’s modernization. They have instead put resources into elite government schools, state-aided private schools, and higher education in an effort to create an educated class that is equal to educated classes in the West and that is capable of creating and managing a modern enclave economy.” (P. 1)

"In fact, this Bill is not meant to grant fundamental rights, but to take the same away. This is its true intention. Just think, can the fundamental right to education be for substandard and discriminatory education? In this sense, this bill not only openly mocks the Constitution but is also anti-education and anti-child. ... Bypassing the country's democratic traditions and replacing Parliament with the market is also a hallmark of the neo-liberal thinking that has become dominant under globalization. Just as numerous laws (such as the SEZ laws) have been enacted over the past 20 years to weaken democratic traditions and hand over water, forests, land, and livelihoods to private capital and corporate houses, this Bill, enacted in the name of the right to education, follows suit. ... In fact, this Bill is a blatant interference of the so-called free market and neo-liberal policies in our Constitution. The public must be prepared to fight to replace it with a new bill based on the foundation of the Constitution. Only then will we be able to realize the public dream of a common school system based on neighbourhood schools ... providing equitable quality education to all children without any discrimination.” (pp. 5-6).

"First question: Why is it that, despite sixty years having passed since independence, all children in the country have not received education? Answer: During the freedom struggle, a dream was conceived of abolishing Macaulay's education system and establishing a new system suited to the needs of the country's people. A revolutionary vision of new education was also presented under Gandhi's leadership. However, independent India's ruling class did not

approve of this and not only continued Macaulay's education system but also strengthened it to serve their own economic and political interests." (p. 13)

"Third question: Will the passage of the Right of Children to Free and Compulsory Education (RTE) Bill, 2008' introduced in the Rajya Sabha increase the hopes of all children to receive quality education? Answer: Absolutely not. Quite the opposite. This is because this Bill is not rooted in the Constitution but in neo-liberal capitalism and free market economy. Instead of being formulated within the context of fundamental rights, it has been written as a charity, compromising with the policy of unbridled commercialization of education. Substantial amendments would be required to incorporate it into the framework of fundamental rights. In fact, it is under Article 21(a) of the 86th Constitutional Amendment (2002), which is itself a result of neo-liberalism's infiltration of the Constitution. Remember that the Supreme Court delivered the Unnikrishnan judgment in 1993, which guaranteed the fundamental right to free and compulsory education for children up to the age of 14 (including children below the age of six) under Article 45. So why was the 86th Amendment necessary? This was necessary because the ruling class of India could not digest the Unnikrishnan decision and got an amendment made in the Constitution so that the fundamental right given by the Supreme Court could be taken away.

Article 21(a) of the 86th Constitutional Amendment took away the fundamental right to education in two ways. First, the guarantee of balanced nutrition, health, and pre-primary education that had been guaranteed to 170 million children under the age of six was taken away. Second, Article 21(a) mandated that children aged 6-14 be provided free and compulsory education "in such a manner as the State may by law determine," giving the government the right to determine the form of this fundamental right. The government does not have this power in any other fundamental right. The intention was to legislate and legitimize the distortions in education that had occurred during the District Primary Education Program (DPEP) and the Sarva Shiksha Abhiyan (SSA), so that no one could question them. Otherwise, we could have gone to court and argued that poor-quality, multi-layered education violates the Constitution's principles of equality and equal opportunity, and that a common school system should be established instead. The 86th Constitutional Amendment closed all these doors to the fight for fundamental rights. If Parliament passes this Bill in this form, these closed doors will be sealed." (pp. 20-21)

"In fact, the main struggle for education isn't simply about providing equitable quality education to everyone and preventing its privatization and commercialization. The real struggle is for control over the character of the knowledge contained in education - political, social, and cultural. You must decide what kind of India you want, and through it, what kind of world you want, and what kind of knowledge economy you would like to develop to build it. What role will the people of India play in this 'struggle and creation' of knowledge? Today, the hardworking but poor people in various regions of the country, suffering the brunt of globalization, are struggling to secure the four resources of water, forest, land, and livelihood, considering them essential for their survival. In this struggle, there is a need to develop a broad debate on the question of equitable quality education and the inclusion of the knowledge contained within it as a fifth resource. Only through this struggle will we be able to rebuild India's education in the interest of the common people. Only then will a people-oriented knowledge economy be established for global peace - not for exploitation, profit, and dominance by the global market. Only then will the Constitution-makers' dream of India's sovereignty, as a necessary condition for building a welfare state in India and advancing the fight against imperialism, be realized (p. 52).

"After the experience of the July 14, 2005 meeting, I had no logical basis left to expect anything from the Central Advisory Board of Education (CABE). Nevertheless, I continued my fight at the September 6-7, 2005 meeting, determined to expose the sham being perpetrated by the CABE in the name of democracy. This concrete experience before the general public [I request that colleagues read this eye-opening experience, recorded in the third section of the Booklet] proves that these so-called democratic bodies and forums have completely lost their credibility - their role has been reduced to simply approving decisions already made by the government. In this context, the role of intellectuals, writers, social workers, and other prominent individuals nominated to these bodies and forums is to legitimize the process of approving government decisions with their "prestigious" presence, so that the illusion of democratic consultation persists in the country. Therefore, the public must fight for their rights not in closed rooms, but on the streets, through mass movements. This is the test of intellectuals. That they should break the boundaries of their illusions and contribute their knowledge to enrich the people's movement, otherwise their credibility will also be questioned like CABE". (p. 92)

I would like to pause here and tell you something about Prof. Anil Sadgopal. He is a leading educationist of the country. His work in this field, from the ground to the academic, is extremely important. In fact, it can be called incomparable in the contemporary knowledge landscape. He has been associated with the Hoshangabad Experiment and the Jan Vigyan Jatha (JVJ) in children's education, especially in science education. He has also been a professor in the Faculty of Education at Delhi University and a fellow at the Nehru Memorial Museum and Library. His reputation lies in his persistent, fearless, and tireless struggle against the neo-liberal stranglehold that has been steadily tightening on the country's education system for the past 20 years, and continues to this day. He has conducted extensive research in this direction and exposed the reality through his articles, booklets, and lectures. He has rigorously questioned politicians, bureaucrats, and intellectuals working for them in education-related committees. He has met with leaders of leftist parties and appealed to them to intervene against the neo-liberal agenda being imposed on education at their party level. He has repeatedly approached student organizations affiliated with leftist parties, urging them to launch a movement on this issue. He has also taken the issue of education to various people's movement organizations and prominent individuals fighting against the neo-liberal agenda.

He is the first intellectual in the country to urge people's movements to include education alongside their struggles for water, forests, land and livelihood (*jal jungle zameen aur jeevika*). This is a very valid call. Indeed, if people's movements seeking coordination unite around the issue of education, it could yield very meaningful results and pave the way for a comprehensive struggle going forward.

Anil Sadgopal, while pursuing his endeavour, has not considered whether the organisations or individuals he approached are small or large. He frequently visits smaller political parties like the Samajwadi Jan Parishad (SJP) and smaller youth and student organizations like the Vidyarthi Yuvjan Sabha (VYS). He perhaps considers these two organizations to be the most vocal voices of opposition to neoliberalism. While Anil Sadgopal considers the problem of education holistically, juxtaposing the tightening grip of neo-liberalism in every sector, over the past five to six years he has devoted much of his time to critiquing and opposing the Right of Children to Free and Compulsory Education (RTE) Bill, 2008, and its background, the 86th Constitutional Amendment.

Although that Bill, validating the 86th Constitutional Amendment, has now become an Act, Anil Sadgopal hasn't given up his fight against it. He remains in the field with the same vigour, without complaining about who supported him to what extent or who didn't. He also holds no grudge against some of his one-time colleagues, academic luminaries, who never supported him in the CAGE, and who have completely sided with the government.

You've often seen pro-establishment intellectuals become overly self-absorbed. The reason for this is not a secret. They create the illusion of self-absorption to conceal from themselves and others the truth of their subservience to the system. They speak as if they are from a distant land, having no business with the system of this world! In literature, such characters are called narcissists. Often, even those opposed to the system remain fascinated by their own existence. Their fate is not much different either. Their self-absorption prevents them from expanding the reach of their struggle. They ultimately either submit to the service of authority or become suicidal!

At the beginning of part three of the booklet, Anil Sadgopal writes: "The fight for the fundamental right to education has been fought both within and outside government forums, committees, and commissions. This article records my experience fighting within a high-level government committee, the CAGE. ... Obviously, this story has been told from my perspective. Therefore, it is natural for my prejudices and predilections to be reflected in it. I have interpreted each experience within my own ideological framework. ... In this story, I have mentioned the names of a few prominent people where absolutely necessary, or have alluded to them without naming them. My intention in doing so was not to cast aspersions on any particular individual. I believe that whatever I experienced on this committee is an inevitable part of the historical period of the neo-liberal phase of capitalism." (p. 78)

It is clear that Anil Sadgopal is not self-righteous, but an intellectual who stands firm on the issue. His perceptivity extends from Marx to Gandhi. He possesses the understanding and ability to coordinate forces opposed to neo-liberalism and in favour of equality. While most intellectuals have become advocates of inclusion. That is why Anil Sadgopal is able to call this struggle the struggle of the people of India, confident that it will continue against the neo-liberal agenda and that victory will be achieved. Perhaps, this is what *alakh jagana* is all about!

The Role of Disguised Neo-liberals

I have taken the liberty of quoting and explaining above lengthy excerpts from Anil Sadgopal's booklet for a specific purpose. These excerpts reveal the extent to which Indian education policy and system have fallen into the grip of neoliberalism. Just as the Constitution's ideology was distorted to fit the economy into a neo-liberal mould, the same has happened with the education system. This has not been the work of the political elite alone; they are supported by the intellectual elite of the country. Those who read this booklet in its entirety will realize that this distortion of the Constitution's ideology is being carried out not with precision but with blatant shamelessness. While today this shamelessness is more visible among politicians and bureaucrats, tomorrow intellectuals too may resort to the similar.

In this neo-liberal era, it's incredibly difficult opposing the government's neo-liberal agenda in education while discussing with a principal, a vice-chancellor, or an intellectual nominated to an important committee. Even with most teachers, they bristle when the Constitution's pledge to provide equal education to all is cited. They may be experts in their respective subjects, but they haven't read the Constitution. When apprised, they are astonished if such a Constitution exists! Despite being teachers, they are completely immersed in the beliefs of the ruling class. Myron Weiner's conclusion in 1991 has only become stronger after 20 years of the neo-liberal era.

As a member of the CAGE, Anil Sadgopal has mentioned and alluded to some scholars who supported the government on the Bill. He has also been active outside the CAGE on this Bill, and he must have experienced the intellectuals' position there as well. However, when politicians and bureaucrats are not present, intellectuals typically promise full support and struggle on any issue of public interest. If they have time from "important engagements," they may even attend some event. Their truthfulness is revealed only when they are dealt with. And that is, their assurances are false. Anil Sadgopal should also mention his experiences outside the limited scope of the CAGE in this context. This will clarify the challenges facing colleagues genuinely active in opposing neo-liberalism.

Reading the experiences of prominent intellectuals and social workers at CAGE meetings, it seems Anil Sadgopal considers them to be victims of their background. He writes, "...each individual plays a specific, predetermined role due to their socio-economic class background and their relationship with the ruling class and the market. There are some who, due to special circumstances, are able to play a progressive and pro-people role, or even try to, despite their

class background. But most people are unable to break their predetermined boundaries. With this understanding, I am not at all interested in portraying any particular individual in a negative light ... we all act according to our class background and understanding, but in another historical period, the potential hidden within each of us could be revealed and positively transform our role." (P. 78-79)

This humble submission of Prof. Anil Sadgopal can be discussed very briefly. First, what could be a more negative image than portraying a respected intellectual, his actions and decisions, as a prisoner of his background? Second, the positive emergence of hidden potential in a historical phase feels like something of a divine revelation! Third, Anil Sadgopal's booklet also hints that he considers the intellectuals who did not support him in CABE to be temporarily lost or under pressure from the government. He also harbours a hope that they will return to the cause. I wish him well for his good hopes!

Anyway, let's leave these three things aside for now. I find this very interpretation problematic. At least in the context of modern, transitional India, where hardly any background could be termed as typical. Figuratively speaking, here in India countless cats cross paths of one's life throughout life. Except for a small upper class, there is hardly any childhood, adolescence, youth, or later life in India that is shaped by a singular socio-economic background. Certainly not that of teachers. Generally, those who come from a lower economic background become teachers here. Even if they are of a higher caste or class, the poor become teachers. They have experienced deprivation. Because of such a background, they should not be a supporter of neoliberalism. After becoming a teacher, whether in a government school or a college or university, they encounter numerous students in the classroom every year with diverse but loose backgrounds that generally resemble their own. For that reason, they should not be a supporter of neoliberalism.

Dalit and tribal teachers, writers, and thinkers are even less so. Given their backgrounds, who can more fully understand the burden of the solid 'pyramid' of capitalism of neo-liberal era that has been firmly entrenched on the chest of humanity? But we all know that most Dalit intellectuals in India are supporters of neoliberalism, or rather, not opposed to it.

Professor Krishna Kumar, whom Anil Sadgopal mentions in the booklet, is a renowned intellectual and writer, not just a teacher. Even if his class position had been supportive of neoliberalism, he could have changed it through his

intellectual potency. The problem remains: why, at this particular juncture in history, Anil Sadgopal's inherent potential leads him to oppose neoliberalism, while Krishna Kumar or others from similar backgrounds support it? We believe that it is not so much the background that determines partisanship, but the conscious reflection. At least this seems to be true of intellectuals.

Most intellectuals in the world and in India consider progress and development to be the same as those championed by capitalism. Some express their beliefs directly, others covertly. Most progressive and secular intellectuals in India are latent neo-liberals. That is, while accepting the capitalist meaning of progress and development, they sometimes pursue their goals under the guise of secularism and sometimes democracy. They are perhaps ashamed to directly admit their mental slavery to capitalism. This requires 'courage' of Madhu Kishwar, who believes that the BJP-led NDA government lost the 2004 general election because it did not implement neo-liberal reforms as quickly as expected. By this logic, the reason for the Congress-led UPA government's victory this time (2009) is that it implemented reforms quickly. Once this reality is recognized, there would be no problem.

The inner psyche of both covert and overt neo-liberals is the same, and it's easy to get a glimpse of it. Just turn the neck and look! You'll see that they've accepted that India has become what it was destined to be. Now, they must devote their talents to that in the collaboration of those who have made it so. The genuine people's movements against neoliberalism, both domestically and internationally, will soon fizzle out. Until they do, we'll keep them distracted. There's the World Social Forum (WSF)! The Naxalites will be dealt with by the state, with American assistance. Like the capitalists, every progressive mind believes that farmers and artisans will eventually be finished. "Sooner is better." If they're gone, the problems of over-population and backwardness will be solved. Then, peace will reign, just as their offspring are doing in America and prosperous European countries. There, you'll also get a glimpse that even if the bastion of capitalism collapses in America and Europe, it will remain in India. India and China will be the next pillars of capitalism!

What is your answer sir?

If someone, despite supporting the Right to Education Bill, claims he is not a supporter of neo-liberalism, he should be asked a few questions. In fact, Anil Sadgopal has simplified the matter. He should simply respond to Anil Sadgopal's booklet point by point, proving that this Law was enacted in accordance with the spirit of the Indian Constitution, not a neo-liberal agenda. During a debate

on the Bill, Krishna Kumar, in response to Anil Sadgopal's objection, said, 'Na nau man tel hoga na Radha nchegi' (Setting impossible conditions for a task). This rhetoric, to borrow Dr. Lohia's words, reflects the vileness of the Indian intelligentsia when discussing the grave problem of the country's children not receiving education even sixty years after independence. We also found him extremely careless when he described the recent Yashpal Committee report as "historic."

Nevertheless, understanding the meaning of his statement – 'Let whatever is possible happen, however it is possible. If the ideal situation hasn't been achieved in sixty years, your clamouring won't bring it about now' - let me ask some questions about this Law: After excluding children between the age of one and six and 14 and 18 from the fundamental right to education, will all the children who will be educated receive equal quality education? Will this Law significantly reduce the deeply ingrained unequal education system in the country? Will it reduce the commercialization of education? Will some regulation of profit-making schools based on government hand-outs be possible? Is the "historicity" of the Yashpal Committee report consistent with the Indian Constitution or with a neo-liberal agenda? There are many more questions, and they can be asked of any supporter of this Law who argues that, despite 60 years of struggle, children between the ages of one and 14 or 18 haven't received the right to free, compulsory, and equal quality education, then we should continue to fight for what this law has provided.

There must be an answer. There must be constructive debate on the subject. If the answer doesn't come, if debate isn't conducted, then it's self-evident that, whatever the guise, you are with neoliberalism. Your current role models are Sonia Gandhi and Manmohan Singh, and tomorrow's Rahul Gandhi. The Indian Constitution holds no meaning for you, just as it does for your leaders. You are soldiers in the struggle for inclusion, not equality.

I Would like to conclude with Anil Sadgopal's observation: "It should be clear that 'inclusion' is only invoked when the constitutional principle of equality is denied. Indeed, the Right to Education Bill introduced in the Parliament is designed around 'inclusion,' not equality." (p. 8)

(The author, associated with the socialist movement, is a former teacher at Delhi University and a former fellow at the Indian Institute of Advanced Study, Shimla.)

26-JUNE-2026