ALL INDIA CONFERENCE
FOR ABOLISHING COMMERCIALISATION OF EDUCATION AND BUILDING A COMMON SCHOOL SYSTEM
on 30th June-1st July 2012 at Chennai, India

Organised by
State Platform for Common School System (SPCSS), Tamil Nadu
in association with
All India Forum for Right to Education (AIFRTE)

Venue: Valluvarkottam, Nungambakkam, Chennai

CHENNAI DECLARATION

We, the members of students, youth, teachers and women organizations, trade unions, parents' associations and school-level committees; organizations engaged in the struggle for Fundamental Right to free holistic early childhood care and cost-free education of equitable quality from pre-primary to Class XII and further for equitable access to free higher education as a democratic Right; groups fighting for equal educational rights with dignity of *dalits*, tribals, OBCs, religious and linguistic minorities, various gender identities and disabled people; jurists, social scientists, scientists, educationists, doctors, engineers, lawyers, administrators, writers, artists, journalists, researchers and other intellectuals/ professionals drawn from 20 states/ UTs of India and having assembled at Valluvarkottam in Chennai, Tamilnadu, India on 30th June-1st July 2012 for the 'All India Conference for Abolishing Commercialization of Education and Building a Common School System' hereby endorse and resolve to carry forward the following Declaration -

The historical, politico-economic and policy analysis undertaken in this Conference leads us to collectively assert that,

i) ***education has historically meant a socio-cultural process that unfolds the creative and humane potential of children and youth in the larger and collective interest of the society and, instead of maintaining status quo, plays a socially reconstructive and transformative role to fulfill civilisational aspirations for republicanism, liberty, equality, justice, human dignity, plurality, social harmony and universal peace;***

ii) ***the Constitution of India, drawing upon the legacy of rich educational discourse during the freedom struggle against British imperialism, further requires education to create citizenry for a "SOVEREIGN SOCIALIST SECULAR DEMOCRATIC REPUBLIC" and which will help build and sustain an egalitarian, just, plural and enlightened society, in consonance with the principles and values enshrined therein;***

iii) ***education system must promote pro-people national development and, at the same time, build resistance to market-dictated pro-corporate development; sensitise children and youth to people's aspirations for equitable distribution of material resources and an economic order that does not result in concentration of wealth and means of production; optimize socio-cultural and knowledge-related diversities; and help secure civil liberties and democratic rights, as guaranteed by the Constitution;***

iv) the Constitution forbids an education system that reinforces inequality, socio-economic stratification, patriarchy, religio-cultural or linguistic hegemony, discrimination and/or alienation from societal concerns;

v) the Constitution calls for building education to fight against intolerance, communalism, fascist thought or the notion of supremacy of any one community, race, religion, gender identity, culture, language or region over another or of the so-called 'normal' bodied people over 'disabled' people;

vi) hence, in the Indian context, the concept of educational quality must emerge from and defined within the above framework and in accordance with the Constitutional vision, rather than being dictated by either the global market and neo-liberal economic order or communal, sectarian and other reactionary forces;

vii) as long as commercialization of education continues, it will be impossible to provide education of the quality as defined above in either the government or the private educational institutions, from pre-primary to higher education stage;

viii) as long as the government school system does not improve, there is no possibility whatsoever to ensure education of equitable quality in the above framework to all children irrespective of their class, caste, religion, gender, language, region or disability;

ix) in order to ensure education of equitable quality to all children, the state must (a) provide free holistic early childhood care along with full support for nutrition, healthcare and socio-psychological and cultural security for children below six years of age; and also (b) pursue the historic option of establishing a fully state-funded Common School System based on Neighbourhood schools from pre-primary stage to Class XII for all children up to eighteen years of age such as to guarantee entirely cost-free education without any discrimination whatsoever and, at the same time, exclude disparities and include diversities; however, this historic option cannot be pursued without abolishing commercialization of education;

x) acknowledging the organic relationship between school education and higher education, the concept of fully state-funded Common <u>School</u> System must be designed to evolve, within a specified time-frame, into a fully state-funded Common <u>Education</u> System in order to guarantee entirely cost-free education of equitable quality from 'KG to PG';

xi) the provision of holistic early childhood care including nutrition, healthcare and security and education of equitable quality to all children and youth is the Constitutional and moral obligation of the state which alone is in a position to mobilize necessary resources – political, human, financial, technical or otherwise – for the same and must not be allowed to abdicate these in favour of corporate and market forces, religious bodies and NGOs under any excuse whatsoever; and

xii) as long as the above Common Education System along with other fundamental entitlements such as people's Right to jal-jangal-zameen (water, forest, land), jeevika (livelihood) and jnana (knowledge) is not established and enforced, the survival of India both as a democratic, progressive and peaceful society and as a sovereign nation will remain at great risk, its survival being continuously challenged by the desperate neo-liberal capital and greedy financial markets as well as the allied communal, sectarian and other reactionary forces.

HISTORICAL CONTEXT AND PERSPECTIVE

The following outstanding features constitute the historical context and perspective of the educational crisis we face today -

- ✓ From the ancient times onwards, the dispossessed and exploited toiling classes of the Indian sub-continent have been systematically denied access to knowledge and the Right to live with dignity through rigid codification based on various criteria like birth into castes and sub-castes, being women or having physical or mental disabilities, which resulted in a highly stratified and hierarchical social order. The hegemonic influence of these prescriptive codes continued to determine the social order in the subcontinent for long regardless of the exceptional legacy or influence of egalitarian ideologies and intellectual trends of Buddhism, Jainism, Charvak, Lokayat and others.
- ✓ In this context, Buddhist contributions to questioning social stratification and hierarchical social order in a sustained manner over centuries and building enlightened and egalitarian educational institutions, even at higher education levels, are of historical significance.
- ✓ Deeply instituted structures of patriarchy intensified gender discrimination and violence against women across classes, castes, religions, regions and cultures.
- ✓ Absence of compassion marked this iniquitous social system within which the disabled were targeted as bearers of misfortune and mocked at as being less than human.
- ✓ Throughout history, in different parts of the sub-continent, sections of the toiling masses have challenged and resisted their oppressors through spontaneous and organized struggles for the Right to have access to an equitable and just share of natural resources and knowledge, in order to live with dignity in society.
- ✓ British colonialism reinforced historically established structures of stratification and oppression in order to exploit the sub-continent's rich natural resources, productive skills and diversity of knowledge forms, leading to impoverishment of the people, on the one hand, and growth of the British capital, on the other.
- ✓ Macaulay in his Minutes of 1835 instituted an education policy in support of the British *Raj* which denigrated Indian languages and knowledge, established the hegemonic influence of English as medium of colonial *'instruction'* (not *education*) and used the ploy of limitation of resources to "form a class who may be interpreters between us and the millions whom we govern - a class of persons Indian in blood and colour, but English in tastes, in opinions, in morals and in intellect. . . ."
- ✓ Rejecting Macaulayian policy framework, the pursuit for a National System of Education was grounded in the history of the freedom struggle. From mid-19th century onwards, Mahatma Jotirao Phule and Savitribai Phule questioned the role of British education in reinforcing class- and caste-based stratification and sought state's role in redefining access to education, medium of education, curricular goals and social relations. Although Dadabhai Naoroji raised the issue of universal primary education in 1880s, it was Gokhale in 1911 who demanded legislation for providing free and compulsory primary education *as a Right*. At the turn of the 20th century, rulers of princely states like Baroda, Bhopal, Gondal, Kolhapur and Travancore either supported or set up school systems to universalize free primary and/ or secondary education. The 20th century is marked by efforts of visionaries like Gandhi, Tagore and Zakir Husain to reconstruct education as a means of decolonization of mind, cultural sensitization, universal harmony and building an alternative development model i.e. alternative to the capitalist exploitative development model of the British *Raj*. Emphasizing the historic role of cultural and literary

renaissance through mother tongue, Shahid Bhagat Singh viewed educational reconstruction as an organic part of the march to building of a socialist India. Dr. B. R. Ambedkar's historic debate with Gandhi in the early 1930s introduced the radical question of class and caste in the emerging Indian education discourse and gave a new turn to the politics of education, placing the issues of equality and social justice at its centre. Throughout this long period, social reformers and educators like Syed Ahmad Khan, Ishwar Chandra Vidyasagar, Begums of Bhopal viz. Sikandar Begum, Shah Jehan Begum and Sultan Jehan Begum, Madan Mohan Malviya, Lala Lajpat Rai, Karmaveer Bhaurao Patil and many others promoted education by opening schools and colleges, often with public support. However, it was due to the radical questioning and rational social vision of thinkers and leaders like Kandukuri Veeresalingam, Narayan Guru, Iyothee Thassar, Gurajada Apparao, Singaravelar and Periyar that public consciousness could be mobilized to challenge social stratification, oppose irrational traditions and practices and advocate education as a means of modernization of society.

- ✓ Clearly, the emergence of the demand for free and compulsory education for all children as well as for higher education with equality, social justice and dignity *as a Constitutional and democratic Right* and the conception of the critical role of education in socio-economic transformation, is grounded in the history of the freedom struggle across the country.
- ✓ This rich and multi-dimensional legacy of educational discourse inherited from the freedom struggle became the source of the basic ideas for drafting education-related provisions in the Constitution under Ambedkar's visionary leadership. The transformative conception of education as envisaged in the Constitution thus paves the potential path of reconstructing the diverse Indian people into a democratic, secular, egalitarian, just and enlightened society.

Post-Independence Period

As the first Minister of Education of the Union Government after independence, Maulana Abul Kalam Azad constituted the B. G. Kher Committee in 1948 to recommend how to universalize free and compulsory elementary education. He also took initiative in conceiving and setting up a national institutional structure through the University Grants Commission, IITs, Central Institute of Education for teacher education and central institutions for promoting literature of Indian languages, music and performing arts. Nehru advocated education for scientific temper and promoted higher education institutions as sites for modernization of education. It is during the same period that E. M. S. Namboodripad and K. Kamaraj, the then Chief Ministers of Kerala and Tamilnadu respectively adopted a series of progressive measures to strengthen the government school system and universalize elementary education. In spite of these visionary beginnings, it took 17 years after independence and 4 years after the deadline set by Article 45 of the Constitution for providing free and compulsory education to all children up to the age of 14 years to constitute the Kothari Commission (1964-66) - the first Commission to examine the question of elementary education (Class I-VIII). Yet, even after three National Policies on Education of 1968, 1986 and 1992 and two high profile World Bank-sponsored programmes viz., District Primary Education Programme (1993-2002) and Sarva Shiksha Abhiyan (2000-2010), almost half the children of the relevant age group continue to be deprived of even eight years of elementary education. Of those admitted to Class I, only 15-17% are able to clear Class XII. Since higher education and professional courses (including vocational courses) require Class XII as eligibility, the vast majority of children are denied access to means of livelihood in the modern economy. The situation is even worse when the caste and religious minority break-up is looked at. Only about 10-11% OBC's and around 9% Muslims cross the Class XII barrier. Among SCs and STs, the comparable figures would be 8% and 6%

respectively. This means that almost 92% of *dalits* and 94% of tribals never become eligible for the benefits of reservation under the social justice agenda.

A matter of great concern and alarm is the total absence of any publicly available objective analysis within the Planning Commission or the Ministry of HRD (or their counterparts in the states/UTs) as to why successive policies and programmes have collapsed. The Right to Education Act, 2009 seems headed down the same path. It is clear that the successive governments, representing various political dispensations, blatantly ignored the lessons that a democratic government is expected to draw from previous policy failures. Rather, the ruling political class has taken the worst option of promoting private commercial players through creation of an education `market' designed to serve corporate capital on the one hand, while denying the vast majority of India's children the Right to get education of equitable quality, on the other.

Neo-Liberal Attack on Education

The first evidence of the Indian state's readiness to kowtow to the neo-liberal policy framework in education is the change made in 1985 in the name of the concerned Ministry from Ministry of Education to Ministry of Human Resource Development. This implied a change in the very purpose of education from one of social development and preparation of citizenry as envisaged in the Constitution to one of supplying skilled but slavish workforce for the global market. The ground for the neo-liberal structure in India's educational system was prepared by the National Policy on Education, 1986. It first proposed the multi-track and discriminatory system by introducing a layer of about 3 lakh Non-Formal Education (NFE) Centres of inferior quality below the mainstream government school system and another of much-hyped Navodaya Vidyalayas, one per district, above it. For the first time, there was a policy declaration that more than half of the children would not enter regular schools but would be 'taught' by the low quality NFE Centres. Again, for the first time in the government school system, the Navodaya Vidyalayas introduced the sociologically and pedagogically questionable practice of selection through merit embedded in the social privileges of upper classes and castes.

The IMF-World Bank diktat of Structural Adjustment in the early 1990s required reduction of expenditure on education which was effected by a range of measures imposed through the World Bank-sponsored District Primary Education Programme (DPEP). These included (a) replacement of regular teachers by under-qualified, untrained and under-paid instructors appointed on short-term contract ('Para-Teacher'); (b) one teacher teaching two or more classes simultaneously in a single classroom ('multi-grade teaching'); (c) promotion of multi-layered school system rooted in discrimination; (d) reducing curriculum to literacy and numeracy; and (e) declining budget allocations as % of GDP.

Implemented in 18 states and more than half of the districts, DPEP 'succeeded' within ten years in its agenda of deteriorating the quality of the government school system, leading to a significant loss of its public credibility. With this, a rapidly expanding market for private schools was opened up by the end of the 1990s, which was precisely the mandate with which World Bank intervened in India's education system. In 2000, the flaws and lacunae of DPEP were re-packaged and presented to the public under the shining label of Sarva Shiksha Abhiyan (SSA). By the time SSA ended in March 2010, the credibility of the government school system had hit the rock bottom even as the twin problems of out-of-school children and retention of those enrolled remained essentially unresolved. Its impact on state-funded higher education has been damaging, to say the least. With only 12% of the relevant age group of 18 to 24 years in post-secondary institutions, the state is able to push the

flawed argument that higher education is a private good. With this mind, the World Bank's 'user pays' principle is being firmly applied in combination with the falsehood of resource crunch, to turn knowledge into a 'tradable commodity'. In pursuance of offering higher education in 2005 for being brought under WTO's General Agreement for Trade and Services (GATS), a series of higher education Bills are being pushed presently through the Parliament in order to provide the required legal framework for facilitating global investment and corporatization of Indian higher education. Apart from increasing the cost of higher education way beyond the capacity of more than 90% of the students, the commoditization of knowledge distorts the very role of higher education in building a democratic, secular, just and enlightened society. This policy has resulted in restriction of freedom of expression and democratic space on our college and university campuses. A clear agenda of depoliticisation, in its worst sense, of the student community and the faculty in higher education is being ruthlessly pursued.

Policy support for privatization and commercialization of both school and higher education is being accelerated through Public Private Partnership (PPP). It has become the major instrumentality for direct transfer of public assets and resources to private corporations, NGOs and religious bodies that are blatantly profiteering through education. Many steps are being taken to indirectly further this trend like inclusion of special allowance in Sixth Pay Scales of government employees for sending children to expensive private schools, reimbursement of fees of SC, ST and OBC students and giving refinanced loans to students. The RTE Act, 2009 has also provided for reimbursement to private schools under the garb of "25% provision" for a minority of children (no more than 10%) from disadvantaged sections instead of utilizing these funds for improvement of the quality of government schools where the vast majority of SC, ST, and OBC children are going to pursue their education.

False Premises

The neo-liberal policy framework is being justified on the basis of a set of false premises that,

- the economic capacity of the State is limited and there is no option but to depend upon private domestic and foreign investors for funding education;
- education is a 'service' and not a Right or Entitlement and, therefore, equal provision for all need not be ensured and educational quality must be proportionate to one's capacity to pay; and
- education is a tradable commodity; hence, profiteering in education is a legitimate objective, just like in any other trade.

The neo-liberal agenda radically redefines the character and purposes of education policy. Instead of being viewed as an instrument of social transformation, education is treated as an instrument for producing human resource for corporate market needs. Therefore, the character of knowledge is to be determined by supply and demand considerations, rather than by its disciplinary requirements, welfare need of society or role in social development. This gives rise to the erroneous beliefs that,

- private agencies provide better education than public agencies, because they operate on corporate principles of cost efficiency in providing services; and
- Constitutional principles of *equality* and *social justice* can, therefore, be substituted by the neo-liberal principle of *inclusion*. This privileges a dominant market model as the *norm* and then demands that all diverse and heterogeneous productive, socio-cultural and ideological forms *conform* to this market-determined *norm*. In contrast, principles of equality and social

justice require the creation of democratic spaces, supportive ambience for analysis, debate and creative thinking and institutions for engagement on equal terms among diversities.

A central task of the education movement shall be to demolish the above false premises of the neo-liberal agenda by engaging with the public mind in order to take our struggle forward.

FUTURE AGENDA OF STRUGGLE

Being held in Chennai and attended by representatives from all over Tamilnadu, this All India Conference feels deeply inspired by the historic mass movements of the oppressed classes and castes led by visionary thinkers and leaders like Iyothee Thassar, Singaravelar and Periyar. The movement, drawing inspiration from the Buddhist path of rationality, placed the values of equality and social justice, including gender equality and women's emancipation, at the core of the socio-political agenda of the state. It is on this foundation that Tamilnadu could build a strong state-funded school education system in the post-independence decades, with potential for growing into a Common School System. Policy measures to eliminate class- or caste-based segregation and socio-cultural or economic barriers in schools along with progressive features such as tuition-free schooling, noon meals, free uniforms and books and mother-tongue as medium of education made Tamilnadu's education policies as pace-setting for the whole country. In this context, the Conference acclaims the bold policy measures adopted by Late Kamaraj as the Chief Minister during 1950s in universalizing school education in the state.

The Conference expresses grave concern that these exemplary gains were steadily diluted due to pro-elite and neo-liberal policies adopted by the Tamilnadu state government during the recent decades. Emergence of multiple Boards became the basis of discrimination and exclusion. Over the years, the private school lobby has become so powerful as to dictate terms to the state government and openly defy court orders. ***This Conference calls upon the Government of Tamilnadu to reverse its policies of privatisation and commercialization forthwith and join hands with the people of the state to reclaim its former progressive equitable and non-discriminatory school system. Further, the Conference demands of the Government of Tamilnadu to enact its own Right to Education Act banning commercialization of school education and building a Common School System based on Neighbourhood Schools in the state, thereby putting public pressure on the other state governments to emulate the initiative.***

Having acknowledged the above Tamilnadu experience and its significance, we hereby adopt the following three-fold comprehensive agenda for our future struggles throughout the country –

- **Abolishing commercialisation of education.**
- **Establishing a fully state-funded Common School System based on Neighbourhood Schools from pre-primary stage to class XII.**
- **Building mass movement for educational transformation.**

1. Abolishing Commercialisation of Education

We recognize that the phenomenon of opening private educational institutions has now entirely lost its philanthropic character and social welfare dimension that were its hallmark during the freedom struggle as well as in the 2-3 decades following independence. Instead, with the growth of neo-liberalism, the growing pace of privatization of education as a policy has become integral to commercialization of education and represents the desperate search by the financial capital for new markets.

Hence, we resolve to,

- oppose all policies that promote privatization of educational institutions from 'KG to PG';
- fight for state's regulation and monitoring over the existing fee-collecting educational institutions of all categories and creating provision for duly empowered teachers' and parents' associations to supervise the same;
- mobilize public opinion against (a) World Bank's 'user pays' principle in education and people's other fundamental entitlements; (b) the very idea of profiteering through education; and (c) envisaging education as a private good;
- resolutely resist the dangerous policy of Public Private Partnership (PPP) in all its overt or covert forms as these are cleverly designed to transfer public funds and other critical resources (land, buildings, equipments and materials) to corporate houses, NGOs and religious bodies, apart from legitimizing latter's role in education as investors by giving them official recognition and policy support;
- reverse Supreme Court's TMA Pai Foundation Judgment (2002) either through the judicial process or an appropriate Constitutional amendment.
- amend Article 19 (1) (g) to read "[All citizens shall have the right] to practice any profession, or to carry on any occupation, trade or business, provided that the right to carry on an occupation, trade or business does not apply to education, health, water and other fundamental entitlements of the people."
- resist the market-oriented Higher Education Bills pending in the Parliament that are designed to `open up' an exclusive higher education sector for the elite for facilitating profiteering by foreign and domestic capital in accordance with the WTO-GATS agenda of commoditizing education.
- compel the government to withdraw the offer of higher education made to WTO-GATS for global trade before the Doha Rounds lest it becomes irreversible.
- retrieve and reclaim education as a public good.

2. Building State-funded Common School System Based on Neighbourhood Schools from Pre-primary Stage to Class XII

We resolve to carry forward our ongoing multi-pronged struggle in the following dimensions and forms:

A. Engaging with Constitutional and Legislative Imperatives

i) Campaign for a review of 86th Constitutional Amendment Act (2002) and, if required, its repeal followed by a fresh Constitutional amendment to guarantee *unconditional* Fundamental Right to *entirely* free education of *equitable* quality for all children up to 18 years of age (i.e. up to Class XII), including Early Childhood Care and Pre-Primary Education for children below six years of age; the amendment will exclude Article 51A (k) through which the state has managed to shift its Constitutional obligation for provision of elementary education to the parents; the amendment will further place an obligation on the state to provide equitable access to free higher (including technical) education within ten years of such an amendment.

ii) Fight for replacement of the farcical Right to Education Act, 2009 by a new Act that (a) unambiguously upholds the Preamble to the Constitution in relation to education;

(b) guarantees Fundamental Right to education read with the relevant Directive Principles of State Policy holistically; (c) bans all forms of commercialization of education, including PPP; (d) acknowledges inter-linkages of multiple sources of bias and discrimination in society with issues such as curriculum, pedagogy, medium of education, teachers & teacher education and negative impact of market on educational quality; (e) excludes disparities and includes diversities; (f) binds the state legally to provide adequate resources in order fill up the cumulative gap and meet the new demands; and thereby (g) builds a fully state-funded Common School System based on Neighbourhood Schools within a specified time frame.

iii) Seek a public review of all existing Constitutional provisions and various laws relating to the issues of malnutrition, lack of health support for children and insecure childhood; child labour and child abuse; physical and mental disabilities; linguistic and cultural rights and impact of increasing impoverishment, displacement, migration, disemployment and unemployment on child rights, especially educational rights and build public pressure for appropriate Constitutional amendments and laws accordingly.

iv) Insist on a law that unambiguously bans all forms of child labour.

v) Compel the central and/or State/UT governments to enact a law prohibiting the transfer of land, building, equipment or any other facility of an educational institution belonging to the government or local authorities to any corporate house, religious body or NGO, irrespective of the circumstances; similar act is also required in the case of private aided or unaided educational institutions and the Trusts/ Societies operating them since their assets have been created only through student fees and other community resources in the name of education.

vi) Demand a fresh look at the issue of payment of inadequate wages to the vast majority of parents that prevents them from exercising their Right to Life with dignity as per Article 21 read with Article 43 (living wage, decent standard of life, full enjoyment of leisure, social & cultural opportunities), thereby depriving their children of healthy and secure childhood (Article 39 e, f) as well as opportunity to devote themselves to pursue education without being compelled to be engaged in child labour and domestic support activities.

vii) Taking cognizance of the miserable nutritional record in respect of pregnant women and children and the fact that the country has maximum number of stunted children in the world, who endure this disability all through their life, we note that no amount of arbitrary measures would succeed in providing Right to Education. In order to ensure, therefore, that no child is born with any disability that would constrict her life chances and readiness to access Right to Education, the state should enact a legislation to provide full nutritional and health support to the pregnant women who need it.

viii) The Central and State/UT governments are collecting taxes from the people for fulfilling their Constitutional obligations and, in the case of education, further collecting additional cess on all taxes (2% for elementary and 1% for secondary & higher education). Yet, the people are required to pay fees in both government and private educational institutions. A government that allows this practice does not have a moral right to govern. We call upon the Central Government to enact an unambiguous law to ban collection of fees for education from ‘KG to PG’ in government as well as private educational institutions, since education is a Constitutional and Democratic Right.

ix) Until a consensus is arrived at to restore education to the state list, build public opinion that the concurrent status of education should be utilized to involve all states/UTs in a collective nation-wide plan with a sense of ownership for establishing a democratic, secular, egalitarian, just and enlightened system of education, rather than to impose the Centre's decision over those of the States/UTs, as is the prevailing practice.

B. Protecting and Strengthening Government Schools

i) Resist all policies, programmes, budget allocations (especially, deductions) and periodic official orders that are aimed at diluting and distorting the government school system.

ii) Compel the government to replace the prevailing discriminatory multi-layered school system, whether in government or private sectors, by a school system with equivalent norms and standards related to infrastructure, teachers and other staff, equipment and teaching-learning aids and other curricular and extra-curricular facilities. To begin with, these norms and standards in all schools, government or private, must be raised at least to those of the Central Schools, following which further improvements will be pursued as the next agenda of struggle for enabling the schools to act as sites for providing equitable and transformative education.

iii) Extend the struggle to seek overhauling and reconstruction of curriculum and pedagogy, medium of education, evaluation and assessment (i.e. examinations) and school environment in order to transform the schools to become means of providing democratic, secular, egalitarian and enlightened education as elaborated at the beginning of this Declaration (see Section D below for details).

iv) Fight against the cynical policy of closure of government schools by state governments on the flimsy ground of declining enrolment which is primarily a consequence of policy-directed deterioration of the quality of government school system.

v) Demand replacement of multiple Boards by a single Board in each State/UT along with a common language education policy founded on mother tongue of the child in dynamic interface with multi-linguality.

vi) Resist measures of PPP and intervention by international funding agencies, corporate houses, religious bodies and NGOs in government schools, including taking over their lands and buildings to set up private schools.

vii) Expose and resist the state-led agenda of abdication of its Constitutional obligations by promoting NGO-isation of government schools and its various critical functions.

viii) Provide and also ensure access to all required support structures and facilities, including appropriately trained and paid staff in combination with Information Technology-related and other technological means, for enabling physically and mentally challenged children to learn, play and enjoy studying with dignity in regular classrooms along with other children; the retrogressive concept of home-based education for the disabled to be banned entirely.

ix) Without compromising or diluting the Constitutional obligation of the Central and State/UT governments, mobilise people, especially parents, and Panchayati Raj institutions, to monitor and fight for appropriate infrastructure, qualified, trained and properly paid teachers in adequate numbers, required curricular support and related

facilities and nutritious mid-day meals, rather than being limited by the inferior and discriminatory norms and standards prescribed in the RTE Act, 2009.

x) Do not allow the State/UT governments to use the inferior norms and standards of the RTE Act, 2009 to shift teachers and infrastructural facilities from their present location on the ground of these being extra in light of the schedule of the Act.

xi) Acknowledging people's aspirations for education beyond school, demand opening up of state-funded post-secondary institutions in adequate numbers to increase access to all types of higher education of equitable quality that is absolutely free of cost from 'KG to PG'.

xii) Struggle for steady increase of budget allocations for government school system both as percentage of the budget and GDP until the cumulative gap of investment building up steadily since 1986 policy is filled up and all requirements for providing education of equitable quality are met with; ensure that the increased budget allocations are not siphoned off to private parties through PPP.

C. Ensuring Retention of Children from Pre-primary Stage until Class XII

i) Fight for comprehensive support in the form of nutritious meals (breakfast and lunch), health services, cultural and emotional security, gender rights, linguistic rights, disability rights, discrimination-free environment and protection from all forms of child abuse, especially in the case of girls.

ii) Insist on additional and specialized support, including economic support, for enabling impoverished, unemployed or disemployed, displaced, migrant and nomadic families and disabled parents to continue to send their children to schools until they complete senior secondary education.

D. Excluding Disparities, Including Diversities: Battling Bias and Discrimination

i) Structurally incorporate the concerns of SCs/STs, OBCs, religious and linguistic minorities, women and disabled in designing the system of neighbourhood schools towards social transformation through Common School System.

ii) The RTE Act, 2009 has deliberately misconceived Neighbourhood School such that the state is at liberty to provide inferior quality schools in the neighbourhood of the vast majority of the downtrodden and the dispossessed classes and castes, thereby legitimizing discrimination and *status quo*. In contrast, the Neighbourhood School of the Common School System is a transformative concept since it calls for a legislative provision under which each school - government, local body or private - would have a prescribed constituency and all the families residing within the constituency would be obliged to send their children to the concerned school, irrespective of their class, caste, gender, religion, language, region or disability. In the case of a sizeable concentration of a particular community in an area (e.g. a *dalit* or tribal locality in villages or urban ghettoisation), it would be obligatory under law for the prescribed authority to draw the constituency such as to optimize diversity.

iii) The Common School System, in contrast to the prevailing school system, shall be designed to exclude disparities of all kinds and to include all forms of diversities, provided the diversities have been democratically negotiated and optimized.

iv) For the aforesaid purpose, it is required that the Common School System eschews the centrality, finality and rigidity of the present school system and incorporates decentralized decision-making, openness and flexibility. Hence, it is crucial that state funding is not allowed to lead to state control, as is normally the case. Instead of state control, the state shall provide an overarching policy framework. Within this broad policy and curricular framework, the Common School System will be governed in a decentralized (to be distinguished from World Bank's notion of decentralization for giving space to the market), democratic and participative mode. It is this mode of governance that lays the essential ground for optimizing cultural diversity and plurality of knowledge forms and productive skills in the classroom as well as the curriculum and pedagogy.

v) Acknowledge inter-linkages between multiple sources of bias and discrimination inbuilt in society relating to class, caste, gender, religion, language, region and disability with educational issues such as curriculum, pedagogy, medium of education, teachers & teacher education and adverse impact of market on educational quality and fight for the following changes in the socio-cultural and political character of education –

- **Curriculum and Pedagogy:** Discrimination and exclusion takes place not only because of the prevalence of the multi-layered school system but also because of the nature of the dominant curriculum and pedagogy. Rooted in middle class and upper caste values and norms, especially patriarchal, the curriculum and pedagogy are entirely alienated from the social reality, life experiences and ways of learning of the vast sections of society. Further, both the curriculum and pedagogy are being increasingly influenced by the requirements of the global market for new areas of investment, control over natural resources and ever rising profit margins. This "official knowledge" representing the interest of the ruling class and the global market is responsible for large scale exclusion and persistence of high push-out rates (no child ever drops out but is pushed out). The building of Common School System calls for challenging the "official knowledge" by creating space for pedagogic interaction with the knowledge and learning styles of the children of the masses. This agenda of resistance to "official knowledge", however, must not be construed to imply that its objectives will be achieved without the state's obligation to promote progressive values, rational thought and critical analysis. The Constitutional values also call upon the state to engage with the hegemonic influence of class, caste, race, patriarchy, language and 'normal' body while formulating the curriculum and further take cognizance of reinforcement of this influence by the neo-liberal structure and values. Clearly, in order to achieve this transformation, the examination system cannot be allowed to follow either the colonial or the now rapidly emerging neo-liberal framework. While the centrality, finality and rigidity of the present school system is being questioned, the building of Common School System requires the creation of a new curricular and pedagogic paradigm wherein the plurality of values, knowledge, productive skills and life styles of "We, the People" would have a legitimate space for influencing, tilting and eventually transforming the school in their favour.

- **Medium of Education:** Time has come to challenge Macaulay's advocacy of English as the "medium of [colonial] instruction" for the upper classes and castes that has further disempowered the historically "dispossessed and exploited toiling classes and castes of the vast Indian sub-continent". Hence, this colonial tool of discrimination and exclusion is to be replaced with the universal conception of mother tongue of the child in a multi-lingual environment as pedagogically the most appropriate "medium of education" or the "language of learning" (multi-linguality here refers to the languages spoken in child's neighbourhood,

kinship and family). It is imperative that the mother tongue along with its multi-lingual context as medium of education is introduced forthwith in all government and private schools across the country. One of the significant commonalities of the Common School System will be the plurality of mother tongues in dynamic interface with multi-linguality of child's neighbourhood. This would duly include Braille and Sign languages as well. According to this radical and dynamic conception of language education, mother tongue with a multi-lingual interface is acknowledged as the most potent medium of education to enable the child to (a) think, analyse and act; (b) acquire, internalize and transform modern knowledge critically; (c) learn other languages, including English, proficiently; (d) catalyse cultural and literary renaissance; (e) negotiate with the dominant process of alienation with advantage, thereby avoiding to be pushed-out; and (e) question and resist oppression and explore the path of liberation. Since the mother tongue of the child may not be the State/ UT language, the language policy of Common School System requires that the State/UT governments,

- provide all necessary support for equitable development of the languages of the linguistic minorities as curricular languages, at least in the early years of elementary education;
- envisage Braille and Sign languages as 'languages of the linguistic minorities' and provide all necessary support, including IT-related technologies and appropriately trained staff, in order to develop them as curricular languages;
- develop appropriate pedagogy to enable children of linguistic minorities to have the option of switching to State's language as their medium of education in all subjects until they complete senior secondary education; however, in case of languages of the Eighth Schedule, the children must also have the option of continuing education in their mother tongues in all subjects at all levels, including higher education; and
- In light of the perspective on medium of education and language education elaborated above, the State/UT governments may consider, if necessary and appropriate, introducing other languages in schools at pedagogically appropriate stage(s), in accordance with the aspirations and needs of the people to be consulted through debates organized by both the state and non-state bodies.

However, the Central and State/UT governments are required to jointly undertake the following additional and urgent measures with a view to make Indian languages a powerful tool of learning, knowledge generation, cultural advancement and exploring an alternative model of development:

- ✓ Ensure that a common language education policy, with the inherent diversity as indicated above, is implemented in all schools, government or otherwise, throughout the country and gradually extend the policy in a planned manner to higher education (including technical education) as well.
- ✓ Create a fully empowered and well-resourced National Translation Commission that would have the mandate of identifying and translating the highest form of literature, texts, documents or research papers in any discipline from each of the Indian languages of the Eighth Schedule into the rest of the languages and also doing the same from all major languages of the world and bringing global knowledge into all languages of the Eighth Schedule.
- ✓ Implement a time-bound programme to ensure use of the Eighth Schedule languages at all levels of legislature, executive, judiciary, science & technology and business.

- ✓ Accord political attention and financial resources to make IT friendly to all Indian languages on a priority basis so that the prevailing sense of difficulty and discrimination in using IT for Indian languages, in comparison to English, is eliminated.
- ✓ Formulate/ design all required laws, programmes and schemes to ensure that no citizen faces discrimination while her/ his knowledge in mother tongue is evaluated for higher education and/or employment and the same is accessible through one's mother tongue in interface with multi-linguality.
- ✓ Based upon the above commitments, a common National Policy on Languages is formulated and implemented.

- **Teachers and Teacher Education:** As Kothari Commission (1966) declared, "The destiny of India is now being shaped in her classrooms." If the teacher is to play her/his decisive role in 'shaping the classrooms', she/he has to be accorded the highest social status and priority in preparing her/his to meet this crucial task of social development. Hence, the following policy-level decisions are required:
  - ✓ All teachers, without exception, must be fully qualified and appropriately 'trained' (i.e. educated) before recruitment and paid a regular salary scale with social security that is comparable throughout the country, as is the case with senior government officers. This implies that the neo-liberal policy being implemented since mid-1990s to appoint under-qualified, untrained and under-paid 'para-teachers' on short-term contract through Panchayati Raj institutions is to be reversed forthwith.
  - ✓ The required Constitutional amendment must be made and law enacted in order to ensure that no teacher is ever asked, except in cases of a calamity, to do any non-teaching task, including elections, census and other non-teaching duties. This means that the anti-educational and discriminatory provision (Section 27) of the RTE Act, 2009 requiring only government school teachers to undertake non-teaching tasks like elections and census is repealed forthwith. In case it is contended that election and census are crucial for democracy and development of the country and necessarily require the engagement of the teachers at least in supervisory roles (i.e. not for conduction), this provision must then apply equitably to the teachers of both the government and private schools, aided or unaided, so that the children of the government schools do not face discrimination in their studies.
  - ✓ In order to carry out the educational transformation agenda of the Common School System, it is imperative that a new kind of teacher would have to be prepared who would be culturally transformed to relate with the children of the downtrodden and dispossessed classes and castes, especially girls and disabled, with dignity and respond to the expected curricular and pedagogic challenge of drawing upon their life experience and knowledge in the classroom. For this, the prevailing outdated teacher education programmes (Diploma in Elementary Education, B.Ed. and M.Ed. and the recently introduced Teacher Eligibility Test) would need to be radically restructured and teacher education institutions to be transformed into vibrant state-funded institutions of pedagogic creativity and cultural transformation. Clearly, there would then be no space for the money-minting commercialized institutions promoted by the state in the private sector.

- ✓ For creating the above teacher education institutions, the present universities and colleges, from where these teachers graduate, would themselves need radical overhauling and a renewed commitment for required funding by the state.

3. Building Mass Movement for Educational Transformation

The comprehensive analysis in the Declaration has provided ample evidence that the state has decided to abdicate its Constitutional obligations and stand on the side of the desperate financial capital and greedy global market forces. The history of the struggle since the mid-19th century for Right to education of equitable quality through a state-funded public education system from 'KG to PG' and fresh neo-liberal attacks mounted rapidly by the state during the past two decades leave no option for us but to build a nation-wide people's movement based on mass consciousness. It may further be noted that the democratic space for negotiating with and convincing the state of the rationality of one's proposals for policy changes through participation in the government committees stands entirely eroded. In democratic polity, therefore, a peaceful resistance movement within the Constitutional framework would indeed be a legitimate path.

The objective of our struggle may be elaborated in the following three dimensions:

1. **The transformative goals for building a National System of Education** for providing democratic, egalitarian, secular and enlightened education through a fully state-funded public education system from 'KG to PG' which ensures cost-free education of equitable quality without any discrimination whatsoever and includes pluralities.

2. **Immediate Demands against neo-liberal attacks** such as fighting for replacement of RTE Act, 2009 by a fresh Act within the framework of a state-funded Common School System based on Neighbourhood Schools, abolishing of all forms of PPP or asking for holding up all market-oriented higher education Bills in Parliament in abeyance until a nation-wide public debate is conducted.

3. **Substantial elements in the transformative national-level goals** include seeking prohibition of commercialization of education, abolishing all forms of child labour and demanding to raise the level of all government schools as per the norms and standards of the Central Schools as a pre-requisite for building a National System of Education.

The struggle may be envisaged as a three-tier struggle:

i) In the first instance, we have to fight against new attacks on the existing meager Rights e.g. reversing state government orders of school closures; resisting handing over of whole or parts of government school campuses or other facilities to private bodies; or building public opinion against higher education bills designed to pave the way for WTO-GATS agenda.

ii) We have to organize struggles to achieve demands that constitute substantial elements of transformative goals national-level goals (see list above).

iii) We should prepare for a protracted struggle for the transformative goal of establishing a state-funded public education system from 'KG to PG', including Common School System based on Neighbourhood Schools.

These struggles have to be conducted at three levels almost simultaneously viz, all-India level, state- or district-level and at the level of educational institutions, depending upon the emergent issues and the potential of mobilization of public opinion.

Role of Students, Teachers and People's Organizations

The people of India were fighting for a democratic, egalitarian, secular and patriotic education system during the pre-independence period. They had hoped that such an education system would be established after independence. Their hopes were essentially belied. Precisely because of this, the struggle of the people continued even after independence for an education system that guarantees education of equitable quality for all without discrimination, promotes social mobility of the disadvantaged and catalyses social transformation. While the Radhakrishnan Commission Report (1948) on higher education, Mudaliar Commission Report (1952) on secondary education and Kothari Commission Report (1966) on the entire education system gave some relief to the people, their pro-people aspects were hardly implemented with sincerity. Rather, in 1980s, the Union Government, with the state governments falling in line, initiated fresh attacks on meager and hard won educational rights of the people. A comprehensive attack was made on education by the National Policy on Education, 1986 (NPE-1986). The policy institutionalized retrogressive ideas such as privatization, along with eliticisation, of higher education, parallel layers of school education, reducing education to skill training after elementary stage in the name of vocationalisation, attacks on campus democracy and, last but not the least, introducing obscurantist ideas in the name of 'Indian ethos'. Several organizations of students, teachers and democratic sections of the people waged new struggles against these maladies. While privatisation of education was continued unabated by successive governments at the centre, the BJP-led governments both at center and states in 1990s attempted to communalise education along with commercialization. The struggles against the increasing trends of commercialization, communalisation and centralization in policy making and destruction of campus democracy continue to be waged to date.

Continuing in this spirit, the Chennai Declaration calls upon all democratic organizations of students, teachers, parents and different sections of society to intensify their struggles for preservation, restoration and extension of educational rights until the cherished goal of a democratic education system is achieved. The teachers and teachers' organizations in government, local body and government-aided institutions have got a special obligation. On the one hand, the people expect them to do their moral duty with the highest of commitment in spite of the deteriorating supportive conditions and work environment in these institutions in order to educate the children and youth of the masses and instill democratic, egalitarian, secular and other progressive values in them. On the other hand, they are also expected to lead the struggle for transformation of the education system. Not fulfilling these expectations would amount to falling in the trap of the neo-liberal attack on the government education system.

We further call upon the parents' organizations not to confine their struggles only against unjustified fee hikes but also to stand up for the rights of the teachers and students in the private institutions. They must also realize that good education cannot be delivered through the medium of the market. The private institutions are, by and large, miseducating the children and youth by equating education with performance indices, rather than with knowledge, values and societal concerns. The parents' organisation of the private schools may do a great service to the society by establishing linkages with the parents of government institutions and work in solidarity with them to fight for transformation of the education system. In Tamilnadu, the parents' organisation of private schools have indeed set an inspiring example by converting their anti-fee hike struggle to a struggle for Common School System.

The students organizations can become harbingers of the movement and act as catalysts for taking forward the process of mobilizing people in democratic struggles for social transformation. We appeal to the progressive intellectuals to associate with the movement reclaiming people's

educational rights and not to succumb to manipulation by the state in the name of its farcical 'inclusive agenda'. This Declaration realizes deeply that the struggle for educational rights of the people must be inter-linked with the struggles being waged by the people all over the country against neo-liberal attacks on their democratic rights over *Jal- Jangal-Zameen* and *Jeevika* (water, forest, land and livelihood).

Looking Ahead with Hope and Faith

Undoubtedly, the forces of financial capital and global market we are up against are formidable. History, however, assures us that no dominant force, howsoever powerful, could last long enough by ignoring the will of the people. Presently, people have been overwhelmed by the devious and deceitful propaganda unleashed by the government for the past two decades with euphemistic phrases like 'education for all', 'education guarantee' and 'sarva shiksha abhiyan' and now 'right to education', 'right to information', 'right to food' or 'inclusive growth' but they would soon realize that these were neither guarantees nor Rights nor inclusion; rather in reality they meant precisely their denial, if not even withdrawal of whatever little was previously available. Strategically, therefore, we would continue to span out to the people, learn from them and, in turn, educate them and involve them into numerous struggles that would ensue in relation to the implementation of various neo-liberal laws and programmes. However, being acutely aware of the revolutionary potential of our struggle, we would not stop short of completely winning the real Rights of education of equitable quality and a democratic education system, which may indeed mean the defeat of the vile neoliberal system itself. Victory is ahead of the struggling people!

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