

Perspective on education *State policy or goodwill of rich?*



In *Schindler's List*, celebrated Steven Spielberg film of the early 1990s, there is a sequence in which Oskar Schindler appeals to the 'magnanimity' of the Nazi concentration camp commander, Amon Goeth, to save the lives of Jews. Schindler tells Goeth that "the real power lies in actually pardoning people when you *know* that you can take their lives in a speck of a second". The idea appeals to Goeth for some time. He lets one recalcitrant kid off. But the Nazi commander soon gets tired of being generous and shoots the boy he let go once, over a minor mistake of not polishing a mirror properly. Schindler's failure is a tragic illustration of the limitations of appealing to the magnanimity of the powerful.

It's wrong to draw parallels with what is probably a fictitious account of one of the most horrific episodes in history. But appeals to the conscience of the powerful rarely work. In fact, such efforts sometimes even become farcical. Take for example, two somewhat different operations currently hogging media attention. One is the Teach India campaign, launched by *The Times of India* and the other an advertisement by the mobile company IDEA.

The latter first. The advert describes how lack of education can be addressed in one go by having an IDEA mobile. Technology is the panacea for a society where about half the population is still illiterate. So what if you don't have the four walls of a school, so what if there aren't any teachers, no blackboards, not a toilet even. All you have to do is to get hold of a mobile with an IDEA connection, place the gadget in an open field where all children who need education can gather and be taught by a nifty teacher holding forth in English from a well-lit Gothic structure thousands of miles away. The subjects could be as diverse as math and physical training.

The Teach India Campaign is even more ingenuous. It follows *The Times of India's* Lead India campaign, which no one remembers now, appropriately so. In times when corporates are deciding the fate of this globe (and falling like nine pins along the way), this is another crude example of marketing 'leadership'. The campaign as we know by now is an attempt to invoke the latent goodness of the middle classes to come out and teach "thousands/lakhs" of poor children who are otherwise bereft of an education. It actually provides a nice gloss over the underlying reasons behind mass illiteracy by openly denying a role for public institutions (read State) to deliver universal, free and quality education. It also tells you, very sweetly, that your students would be those whose faces would be 'black with soot' without even once reflecting that it is openly justifying child labour. This eventually paves way for rampant privatization of the education system. Of course, there will be room for some individual tokenism for the hopeless poor.

With philanthropy such as this, the government thinks it can take it easy. Its recent decisions suggest as much. Consider, for example, the vacillation over the Right to Education Bill. Drafted in 2006, the introduction of the bill in Parliament has been postponed several times. In August, the bill was referred to a group of ministers. Its introduction in Parliament seemed imminent after this group approved the bill in early October. But the Union cabinet decided to play truant. This time, the government hid behind the election commission's model code of conduct—the code prevents the government from taking major policy decisions once elections to state assemblies or the Lok Sabha are announced. With six states going to the hustings in the next two months, the government can again go slow on the bill. Meanwhile, those without access to education can go get an IDEA mobile (Avinash Kumar, India Environment Portal, 29 November 2008)