

Waiting for freedom in education



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The Centre for Civil Society hosted its 6th Annual School Choice [National Conference](#) on Friday at the India Habitat Center, [New Delhi](#). The theme for this year's [conference](#) was 'Freedom in [Education](#)'.

Various organisations working in the education space have been advocating for freedom in education. The concept of freedom in the educational context is quite vast and has multiple aspects to it including curricular freedom, freedom to private and independent educators to run schools etc. The conference addressed critical issues like who are the beneficiaries/ stakeholders in education, what we mean by 'freedom', what are the things that undermine freedom, what are the policies that promote freedom and what role does the state play in the same?

In his opening address, Secretary to Chief Minister, Uttar Pradesh Parthasarathy Sen Sharma, said that “there is a delink between policy and research which is affecting the sector and this gap needs to be urgently bridged by platforms like this.” Further elaborating on the idea of choice and freedom, he said that there is an inherent tension between maintaining quality standards and the desire to give the choice to the parents, however, he concluded by saying “in my personal opinion, recognition system for the private schools can be made easier so that alternative schools can come up.” He focused on the need of an ecosystem where the ‘choice’ can be made in a more informed fashion.

This was followed by a session on Perspectives of Freedom in [Education](#). Parth J Shah, President, Centre for Civil Society took the floor to explore Indian perspectives, and said that “Freedom in [education](#) is important because each child is unique. Standardised inputs will [lead](#) to different outcomes. One thing that undermines freedom is the doubt that parents don’t have the capacity to make the right choices for their children.”

Further taking on the discussion to global perspectives, Swaminathan Aiyar, Consulting Editor to Economic Times said that while the case for free choice is very clear, we must also help parents make informed choices by making all information available to them. Right now, for instance, there seems to be a mad rush to send children to English-medium schools, without an understanding of how learning in a foreign language compares to learning in a native tongue.

Through an exploration of dimensions to freedom in education, the conference sought to understand, how different stakeholders across the world perceive freedom and the existing models that empower parents and students to exercise freedom in education. Appreciating the centrality of government and policy in choice as well as freedom in education, the conference also looked at what policy framework can help enhance this freedom.

Jayaprakash Narayan, President, Loksatta Party, while speaking on regulation and independence in education said that “we need to save children from the RTE [Act](#). Right to [Education Act](#) has no focus on outcomes. It created a license raj in education. But India’s poor have rejected it.

There is 9% decline in government school enrolment and 40% increase in private school enrolment since 2009. 26% kids in Std * cannot read a Std [2](#) passage. 54% kids in Std 8 cannot do division. Indian kids are falling further behind global standards. A flawed law did more damage than good. Parental choice and competition, measurement of outcomes and real accountability is the key to change. RTE must be amended without delay”

The conference hosted other big names in education sector like Erica Taraporevala, Prema Rangachary, Director, Vidya Vanam, Namita Dalmia from Central Square Foundation, Dr Manisha Priyam from NEUPA and K Satyanarayan from New Horizon Media.

Citizen Journalist and activist.

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