


A new development mantra for politicians

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Dear politician, you have shown us that bijli-sadak-paani (BSP, electricity-roads-water) has been a winning mantra for elections. Voters test the delivery of electoral promises of inclusive development or vikas (development) against the reality of BSP. A good track record on BSP has got parties re-elected in states.

But in the third decade of the 21st century, BSP is table-stakes in the electoral game. If you are (with) the ruling party, you are unlikely to win only on BSP. And if you are (in) the opposition, you have no chance of winning on a promise of BSP, especially if the ruling party has done even a half-decent job on it. You need an energizing new mantra. It must also cut through the fluff, really mattering to everyone in the kasba, basti (town, settlement) and farm.

Let me propose this new mantra for you: SSS, which is shiksha-swasthya-suraksha (education-health-safety). Safety will get women voters for you, even more than prohibition. Good health services will provide deliverance from human misery and unbearable economic burden, for every household. Education is the most important aspiration in almost every family today, meeting it will glue voters to you for three to four election cycles. You are way smarter than most of us and already know the importance of SSS.

I suspect that you have not embraced this strategy because you are unsure of its return-on-investment factored for feasibility. You may need a little bit more help in devising the winning electoral equation with education and health than you did with BSP. It was so much more physical and simple with BSP, and with substantial opportunities to keep everyone happy with their fair share of the cut. In this unsolicited letter of advice to you, I will only make the case for education. There are others who have the expertise to make the case for health.

This missive has a 10-point programme for shiksha, based on three principles. First, the actions suggested are actually required to improve school education. And if pursued with vigour and tenacity, will show visible results. Second, these actions do not require big increases in government expenditure, small increases combined with efficiency will be enough. Third, the graft-chain in school education is like petty change in the overall scale of political funding, so dispensing with some of it will not even be noticed. But these are required to make educational change happen, enabling the electoral dividend of shiksha. The specific 10-point programme follows.

1. Energize and rally public school teachers. Empathize with them and support them. This is not a dishonest strategy, but the treatment that teachers truly deserve. Most of them are a dedicated lot, falsely and unjustly vilified. Change in education will be brought about by teachers—you need them to be enthusiastic leaders of change. For this you need to invest in their capacity development on a sustained basis, and foster a culture where they are treated with respect. This action requires virtually zero incremental expenditure, and will have the greatest educational and electoral returns.
2. Recruit and fill vacant positions of teachers rapidly. Do this with the greatest honesty. If your fiscal situation is precarious, recruit on three-year contracts with lower salaries, which get automatically converted to standard public school employment terms, unless the teacher has been truant. Focus on regions and areas with poor teacher-student ratios. Transfer teachers there or staff through recruitment.
3. Make the local language the medium of instruction, but start English as a subject from class I.
4. Improve textbooks, from classes I-VIII. I am sure you will want your parties' ideology to have play. But don't do that at the cost of the quality of books. It is not so difficult to achieve both objectives, unless the book-writing committees are full of only incompetent ideologues.
5. Frontline managers can enable or stall every effort. Empower good officials at the district and block levels. Sideline the corrupt.
6. Methodically organize schools in clusters to share resources, including teachers. Done well, it needs no money, and will also have a cultural effect. Get these clusters to own and help with anganwadis, early childhood care has a huge impact on all outcomes.
7. Make sure that the following reach on time—they are usually delayed for months, with no benefit to anyone:
 - a. Basic school supplies: school uniforms, cycles for girls, textbooks and grains for mid-day meals.
 - b. Funds allocated to schools, especially for the electricity bill and ingredients for the mid-day meal that have to be bought in the local market.
8. Don't let private schools fleece the public. Regulate them lightly but tightly. And ensure that they maintain basic hygiene and safety.
9. Run a massive programme of panchayat engagement through the existing school management committees. Get them to repair the buildings and to make sure that there is good water supply. Get them seriously into first-level school governance.
10. Brand this whole effort and communicate relentlessly and directly to the people.

For your next election cycle, I have the next 10-point programme ready. I am available pro bono, for detailing and helping you with this programme. I have no party preferences, so long as you are committing to SSS.

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