

Education agenda for Narendra Modi

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The tactical and strategic brilliance of the campaign that the Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP) ran is visible in the election results. This also suggests that the BJP government is likely to start off on the task of governance with very clear ideas and in all likelihood with some specific plans. Nevertheless, let me suggest an agenda for school education in the form of three points on the approach and six specific agenda items. This is clearly not an exhaustive list of what is needed.

First, the approach should be to plan for a minimum of 10 years. All visible indications are that this government is indeed thinking already about the second term, so this should come naturally. A 10-year perspective is necessary for the stability and consistency of direction, without which change in education is not possible.

Second, the approach must recognize that the best of policies and intentions have not found faithful implementation on the ground, over the past few decades. The focus should be on what is getting done rather than what is getting announced. A lot of this will be about cultural changes in the system, moving to a culture of integrity, empowerment and enablement, away from rigidity, control and centralization.

Third, there must be a deep acceptance that school education is primarily the domain of the states. So the approach must be inclusive of the states, irrespective of which party is ruling in any particular state.

Now, the six specific agenda items.

First, a lot of the school education work must happen in the ministry of finance. The essence is that our public expenditure is woefully inadequate in education (and in health). Our number for school education is about 2% of GDP, that of Brazil 3.5%, let's not even look at other countries (with good education systems), where the public expenditure is 5-6% of GDP. The ability to raise public investment in education will come only from better fiscal management and growth of the overall economy. That is the primary platform on which this government has been elected, so let's assume that it will happen. And then there must be a willingness to invest in education—both school and higher education.

Second, the government must strongly and visibly reaffirm the importance of public education. This would also require an equally strong plan to improve the quality of public education. At its core, it's merely a reaffirmation of a basic idea of democracy—that public

education is foundational to democracy. It is also an acceptance of a basic economic principle that public and quasi-public goods, with substantial positive externalities, can only be delivered by robust public systems.

Third, the teacher education (B.Ed/D.Ed colleges) system must be rebuilt grounds up. This teacher education system is at the core of our problems in school education. Its curricular approach, its institutional structures, and its regulation could not be in worse shape. The Justice Verma commission has taken comprehensive stock of the issues in this matter and its recommendations are to be implemented. A very large majority (leaving a small minority of good ones) of the 16,000-odd teacher colleges have no interest in improving; they are just commercial establishments, set up to make easy money. The "owners" are often locally powerful people, who will resist all changes tooth and nail. The teacher education system reform will take courage, time and investment.

Fourth, the government of India must set up 30 "schools of education" within universities, across the country. India faces a staggering lack of capacity at the masters (and higher) levels in school education. Our numbers are in a few hundred such graduates per year, whereas (e.g.) in Canada the numbers are about 2,000 a year; consider that Canada has about 3% of our population and an already good school education system. These schools will have to offer programmes (and conduct relevant research) that prepare people to become specialists in various areas of education, e.g., curriculum development, assessment, education policy and management. Together with this, the recruitment criterion within public institutions will have to be appropriately changed.

Fifth, the 600-odd existing district institutes of education and training must be invigorated and developed. These institutions are ideally placed to take care of multiple needs of school education at the district level. This includes in-service professional development of teachers currently in service, which is perhaps the most important issue for short term (10 years is short term in education) improvement in school education.

Sixth, we must increase our investment in early childhood care, and within that specifically on early childhood education and nutrition. The vehicle for this is in place, in the form of the over a million strong network of anganwadis across the country; sustained work will be required for their improvement.

More than anything else, this agenda will require very strong political will. Given the mandate that the BJP has received, it does have the political capital to support the will that is required; we can all hope that we will see political will in action.

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