

EYES WIDE SHUT For future voters, government's plan to improve education will be a voter issue

Quality Has Its Own Quantity



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constituting almost a tenth of registered voters in the country. Born well after the 1992 Babri Masjid demolition, these youngsters know that they need skills to get good jobs. They want more opportunities to excel in education, not more mandirs or masjids.

Nation Of Extremes

Mandir or masjid? When asked this question, 18-year-old Roli Pal, from Roshanchak village near Barabanki, Uttar Pradesh, said, firmly and unhesitatingly, "Neither."

"What will we do with another mandir or masjid?" she asked. "Instead, the government should build an institution for higher learning in Ayodhya where Hindu and Muslim youth can study together and get good education."

What a delightful answer that hits the core of India's problems. Roli's response puts Indian political leaders, who are engaged in an unending, continuous, ugly discourse with their opponents, to shame. Her response should pause those who believe that the 2019 general election will simply be decided on the basis of religion and caste.

Roli's response is a reminder, if anyone is listening, that beyond abusive epithets and name-calling, there are real economic, social, administrative and developmental challenges that need attention. Campaigning should be about informing voters how political parties would address these challenges, and not just hurling insults at opponents.

Roli, a first-time voter, has just completed her final-year BSc exam and aspires to be a nurse. Like her, there are 84 million first-time voters,

India's education system has largely catered to a small minority of students, whose parents are rich enough to send them to top schools. They live in metropolitan cities where it is possible to find schools and colleges that provide quality education. But in rural India and tier-3 cities, education quality is abysmal. This makes India a nation of extremes. Indians are among the world's best scientists, engineers, doctors, innovators and executives. Yet, 57% of Class 8 students can't divide a three-digit figure with a single-digit number.

The Right to Education Act and numerous governmental schemes have only managed to increase primary school enrollment to 100%, but there is little progress on education quality. A substantial amount of private and public sector money flows to the education sector. But except for a few islands of progress here and there, the quality of education and training in our education system remains appallingly low. According to the 2016 Annual Status of Education Report (ASER, bit.do/eSGQ5), over half of Class 5 students can't read Class 2 level textbooks and three-quarters can't read an English sentence.

Access to, and quality of, higher education is as skewed. Only one out of 10 young people have access to higher education. Due to poor quality, access to higher education does not lead to good job opportunities for all.

India Skills Report 2019 (bit.do/



FILE PHOTO

Time for Indian education to graduate

eSGRL) found that half of all Indian graduates are not employable. The only uplifting thing about this statistic is that it is a tremendous improvement from five years ago when no more than a third of Indian graduates were employable. Aspiring Minds conducted an evaluation study of 150,000 engineering students in 650 engineering colleges across the country and found that more than 80% of them were unemployable. Similar studies of other professions yield similarly dismal results.

Party Poppers

In the BJP's 2019 election campaign, Prime Minister Narendra Modi has been roundly criticised for not creating the jobs he promised five years ago. What about the failure to produce high-quality workers that industry needs?

In 2009, India participated in the Programme for International Student Assessment (PISA) and came 72nd among the 74 countries that participated. What did the then UPA government do? Did it launch a massive effort to improve education quality? No. It simply decided not to participate in the 2012 and 2015 PISA cycles. Did the Modi government act any different? No. India decided not to participate in the 2018 PISA cycle either.

Both Congress and BJP have co-

vered education in their election manifestos. The Congress manifesto continues to focus on quantity and big numbers. It aims to increase the education budget to 6% of the GDP, a target that Prime Minister Jawaharlal Nehru had set for the first Five-Year Plan.

Congress also wants to make education up to high school compulsory. The BJP manifesto is a concoction of quantity and quality. It proposes equipping every secondary classroom with smart classes via the PM Innovative Learning Program, additional 200 Kendriya Vidyalayas and Navodaya schools, and a 50% increase in seats in various institutions of higher education.

For first-time voters like Roli, how each political party, if voted to power, would increase access and improve quality of education in rural schools and tier 3 towns are issues that would impact their future. For future voters — 40% of India's population is below voting age — how the government will improve education quality is critical. Investing in the educational capabilities and skills of these future voters is what will yield the demographic dividend everyone is waiting for.

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