

Is Education a Priority for the Political Class?



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CCS Working Paper No. 280

Summer Research Internship Programme 2012

Centre for Civil Society

Abstract

Education in India has been accepted as the motor of growth and is seen as one of the key ingredients of a developing nation, which requires more accessibility and awareness. There is, therefore a broad consensus on the importance, which civil society places on education. This research paper tries to examine and explore the priority, the political class (elected officials and candidates) places on education among a myriad of issues, whether it has been translated into an electoral issue for the political class as well as the voters. And whether there is a broad political/electoral discourse regarding education and if there are any policy initiatives correspondingly.

Introduction

Social change can be initiated through two sources. The first is the civil society and its respective agents, which includes the media, intelligentsia, NGO's, think tanks, academia, activists, charter groups etc. These are essentially defined by their voluntary participation, as opposed to holding office and power as in the case of the political class, who are broadly subsumed under the category of the state. And its agents which include the government, beauracracy etc. Education as a social issue has gathered momentum in the civil society and there is pressure on the political class to use their power to address the issue. I try to inquire here whether there has been a concerted effort by the political class to create awareness about education as an electoral issue.

Context

Right from the Kothari Commission (1965) set up by the government to give direction and lay guidelines for education in India, to the National Policy on Education (1986), to the current framework of the Right to Education act (2009), different governments have tried to formulate a comprehensive education policy, with the goal of free and compulsory education for all. Every government has tried to re-evaluate the existing policy and has set up various commissions. The National Policy on Education (1986) was the result of another such attempt, which managed to achieve some form under the government of Rajiv Gandhi. As Mathur notes.

“From the time Rajiv Gandhi took over as Prime Minister... he began to refer to the need for a new education policy. In one of his first radio broadcasts after the assumption of office, he said that ‘our educational system needs to be reconstructed as a dynamic force for national growth and integration. I intend to initiate a comprehensive review of the system and to build a national consensus on reform’¹

These sort of policy proposals emerged from individual initiatives, from leaders, ministers who held government office, and were driven by their own beliefs and ideologies. In this case, Rajiv Gandhi who believed that an emphasis on technology in higher education was the driver of progress. Similarly there

¹Mathur, 2001:232

have been ministers like M. C Chagla, V. P Naik, and more recently KapilSibal who have taken an active interest in framing an effective and comprehensive policy. However these individual initiatives have failed to transform themselves into wider policy issues that are contested and debated in the political arena. Similarly there have been governments and political parties with their respective mandates and agenda, but have done very little to make education a matter of electoral concern.

There is evidence of a relationship between the policy initiatives undertaken and a larger political/electoral discourse by the political class. One piece of evidence is the decade long debate on reservations, undertaken by the Mandal Commission and followed by the policy of quotas for OBC, implemented under V. P Singh in 1991. (Article 15(5))

“The actions of V. P Singh reflected the nature of the coalition in power, which had the support of backward and minority communities and therefore had on its agenda the contentious ‘reservation policy’”².

Likewise during the framing of the National Policy on Education in 1986, there was immense deliberation and debate that contributed to a larger narrative. One of the tools through which the policy contents were circulated was a 29 page booklet called the ‘*Challenge of Education*’ that highlighted the current status of education in the country and the recommended policy actions.

“After the initial draft was discussed with the education ministers of the state governments, over half a million copies were released to the public in English and a further half million in each of the regional languages. Debates in the upper and lower Houses of Parliament, 11 national seminars and 17 sponsored seminars were accompanied by conferences and workshops of legislators, teachers, trade union leaders, students and local authorities. The responsibility of ‘grass roots’ discussion lay with the state governments”³

² Mathur, 2001:234

³CREATE **PTA 44** - Access to Elementary Education in India: Politics, Policies and Progress

“The ‘challenge’ document was discussed in practically every educational institution between educational managers, teachers and parents. Some state governments went so far as to discuss the contents of the document and its implications for the new policy in cabinet meetings as well as state legislatures. Hundreds of knowledgeable and interested individuals wrote at length in newspapers and literally thousands of letters (which were documented later in 14 volumes) poured in from citizens. These urged the government to take radical measures to universalize elementary education and eradicate illiteracy”⁴

These two issues serve as examples of policy that are a result of a larger political narrative in case of the NPE and electoral discourse in case of the reservation policy. This research paper tries to investigate the priority the political class places on education as an electoral or/and political issue.

Electoral process

“Elections provide important spaces for a debate on policy issues that tend to draw clear and sharp distinctions between political parties, different policy options and popular choices.”⁵ They bring the electorate and their representatives together on a common platform and it is on this stage that there is an active engagement with policy issues confronting the population at large.

This research will focus on education as an electoral issue, since it is through elections, in principle that the electorate articulates its needs periodically and the government responds to the demands of the electorate through promises and policy measures. And taking education as an electoral issue, I shall see how the political class (elected officials and candidates) responds to the demands of the electorate, which will reflect the symbiotic relationship between electoral behavior and political agenda. This can also shed light on how some of the populist agendas (reservation, accountability, subsidies) of the political parties are framed.

⁴ Sarup, 1986

⁵ Srinivasulu: political articulation and policy discourse in AP, Vol - XXXIX No. 34, August 21, 2004 , EPW.

The focus will be on the pre-election process (2009 National elections) which includes campaigning through pamphlets, speeches and manifestos. And to find whether education figures as a specific issue or agenda. This is only a very small part of the election process that happens. However these and other documents (debate transcripts, reports) serve as the concrete stand of political parties with reference to policy issues. . A comparative study of the stands of different political parties will help understand their active engagement with the issue and put in perspective their effort. Speeches at rallies and campaigns serve as effective, convincing means of communication to persuade the masses. A study of this will help discern the rhetoric of the campaign message, and the priority given to education and if they are backed by any policies or program.

Content Analysis table

MANIFESTO	BSP(2009)	BJP(2009)	CONG(2009)	CPIM(2009)	NCP(2009)	AIADMK(2009)
<i>Physical attributes</i>						
A. Where does the section on education lie?	2	1&2	2 & 3	2	2	2
B What are the issues mentioned alongside education?	4 reservation	3	4 economic growth	1 & 2	1	3
C Number of sentences talking about education vaguely or specifically?	1	4	3	2	4	1
C1 Number of sentences talking about employment, vaguely or specifically?	1	3	1	2	3	
C2 Number of sentences talking about health, vaguely or specifically?	0	3	1	1	1	
D How many times do the words education/numeracy/literacy occur?	1	4	1	2	2	1
<i>Categorical attributes</i>						
E Which sector does the manifesto primarily talk about?	3	1,2&3	1 & 3	1	4 (all, vague)	1
G Is there a reference to the budget/money allocated to education/programme?	2	1 6%, (9%)	2	1 6%	2	2

H Is there a reference to policy initiatives?	1 SavitribaiFuleBalikaShiksha MadadYojna	1 new national policy on educat ion	2	2	2	1 (12 point plan)
I What are the subsidies offered?	2 & 4(Cash & bicycles)	3	2 & 3	4 none	2	1,2 & 4(laptops)
J What stand is mentioned with regard to reservations/social justice ?	1 & 2	2 & 4	1 & 2 (OBC, GIRL FEE)	1 & 2	1,2 & 4	nthn
L is universal primary education emphasized?	2	1	2	1 RTE, SSA	1 (nothing)	1
M Are there references to skill development/employability/adult education?	1	1	1 National skills develop ment mission	2	1 Multi skill develop ment program mes	2
N Is there a reference to quality and accessibility?	2	1	1 (qualiy)	1 (quality)	2	1 (vague)
O Is education for women emphasized?	1	2	2	2	2	2
P What is the focus of the manifesto/speech?	Social justice	Literat e India, powerf ul India	Social justice	Rights, Primary educati on	Employa bilty	Incentivisi ng primary education
Q what is the goal of education mentioned as?	None	Empowerment	none	Human development		

These are the categories through which the speeches/manifestos of the 6 major parties (BSP, BJP, CONG, CPIM, AIADMK, NCP) during the April-May 2009 elections have been analyzed and also the 2 major parties in the 2012 state elections of 2 states (Punjab & U. P) respectively. The questions for the categories have been divided into physical attributes, categorical attributes and thematic attributes. Questions A-D deal with the relative frequency of education and its positional importance as to where does the section on education in the manifesto lie? How many statements/sentences talk about education? What are the issues discussed alongside it? The categorical attributes address the question of this research paper and try to assess the priority that is placed on education by asking questions pertaining to budgetary allocation, policy initiatives, emphasis on universal education, reservations, women's education etc. Questions P&Q try to determine the dominant theme running through the text.

Summary

The typical manifesto usually consists of a preface, which outlines the broad philosophy of the political party, the significance of the incumbent elections and more often than not criticizes the other parties. It is followed by the party's achievements and its plan of action or promises. Education is usually mentioned in the plan of action and proposals of the party. It is discussed prominently in the preface of the BJP manifesto, written piquantly by the then HRD Minister Murli Manohar Joshi, and speaks at length about the cultural heritage and the indigenous education system that existed in India. The other issues which are most commonly discussed along education are that of health, youth empowerment and social justice.

On an average there are about 13 sentences that talk about education vaguely or specifically, which includes vague references about the importance of education to specific policy measures such as budgetary allocations or universal primary education. The words education and literacy figure on an average of 28 times, with the highest in the BJP manifesto at 44 and lowest in the AIADMK manifesto with 14.

Primary and higher education are talked about across different manifestos, except the BSP which only talks about higher education. However, there is visible emphasis on alternative education (except CPIM,

AIADMK) that focuses on skill development, adult education etc. The Congress manifesto talks about the National Skills Development Mission, while the NCP manifesto talks about Multi Skill Development Program's. Meanwhile, BSP manifesto does not lay emphasis on Universal primary education or RTE, but talks about women's education and reservations for backward castes through their *Savitribai Fule Balika Shiksha Madad Yojna*. There is a broad consensus across all parties on the need for reservations in education for backward classes, scheduled castes and tribes. Different party's stands are delineated by which group they advocate as the beneficiaries of these policies. Similarly, promises of scholarships, free laptops, tablets, cycles, uniform and books also form their agenda. The policies and promises which are more tangible in nature and appeal to different group identities, often become the slogans for populist agenda of parties. One can see how the Sachhar committee's recommendations are often invoked with an explicit intention of garnering votes, while significant policy measures like NPE(1986) and RTE(2009) are given a miss. Similarly, most of the manifestos fail to mention the budgets allocated for specific schemes and the total expenditure on education, which is usually pegged at 6% of the total budget.

The dominant themes running through these manifestos range from Human resource development, youth empowerment to social justice. With party's like the BJP and NCP talking of empowerment and employability, while the Congress and BSP talking of social justice.

Right to Education (2009)

The Right to Education Act was passed by the parliament on 4th August 2009 and came into force on 1st April 2010, while the elections happened in the months of April-May 2009 preceded by campaigns of the political parties. Although the bill was shelved as the parliament was not in session before the new government was formed, R. T. E does not manage to find reference in any of the political party's manifestoes except the CPIM manifesto, as it clearly states "Enacting the Right to Education bill" in its section on education. There is no evident explanation for the absence of the R. T. E among other party's manifesto as a significant cornerstone in education policy. There is no mention about the proposed bill, its formulation or its merits anywhere in the campaign. Neither are there any appropriations and claimants to the formulation of the policy. As Dyer comments in the case of the Operation Blackboard (1987) that the

“Successful implementation of the scheme would legitimize the Ministry’s new role.”⁶

The successful implementation of an existing scheme would grant legitimacy to the government in the eyes of the electorate, as to the fact that the issue is being addressed. This sort of legitimization is found in the Congress manifesto as it claims that “It has imparted a new momentum to the “*SarvaShikshaAbhyaan*” for primary education” which was the existing scheme introduced by the BJP government. There is always an implicit political motive in the implementation of such schemes. Again as Dyer observes that

“There was the overt agenda of educational changes; and there was also a more covert agenda of political maneuvering. The presence of the second jeopardized the intention of the first, and was an important dynamic of policy implementation”⁷

And as a result there is very little or no emphasis on universal primary education.

A campaign message contains important points about major policy and national issues, which affect the voters at large. This message is repeated throughout the campaign to create a lasting impression on the voters. Different elections have had different campaign messages reflecting the mood and demands of the electorate. The persistent issues in the 2009 elections were regarding the state of the economy, national security and accountability.

The Congress party’s campaign message is centered around the theme of social justice and empowerment and to form a government of the ‘*Aamaadmi*’, the ‘*dalit*’ and the ‘*kisaan*’ for which schemes such as *Rozgaryojana*, NREGA, loan waiver and Mid-day meal find mention. The R. T. E is only briefly mentioned in a press conference by Rahul Gandhi in Kolkatta as a policy that is being worked upon. But apart from the press conference with its informed crowd, there is no reference to education by Rahul Gandhi in the big rally’s across U. P. While the BJP campaign message is focused on the issues of national security, accountability and economic growth, and its continuation of the India Shining

⁶ (Dyer, 2000:162).

⁷ Dyer, 2000:162).

campaign. Their star campaigner, Narendra Modi also fails to whip up his oratory and rhetoric about the need for education. The surreptitious absence of R. T. E throughout the campaign process in 2009 raises questions about different party's will and resolve with primary education as one of the agendas on the campaign. In fact, even in the 2012 state elections, there is no rhetoric or reference with regards to education despite the RTE now in place.

The former education minister V. P Naik lamented that "No political party was seriously committed to a radical reconstruction of elementary education, that radical action lay only in the realm of populism and populist slogans and that elementary education was not 'a political reality in the sense that the country has yet to understand the price to be paid for it'"⁸

Conclusion

Clearly primary education fails to find any reference in the campaign message of different political parties. This would imply that it is not a significant issue to be discussed and addressed to the common public. And also mean that there is no demand for education by the masses, that education is not a concern. However, this is not the case as there is a high enrollment rate in small private schools. Therefore education can be perceived a pertinent social problem which hasn't yet become an 'electoral issue', an issue that is perhaps less contestable than employment or empowerment in elections.

Despite various efforts from civil society towards implementation of RTE, there have been no substantial results, As these efforts are not sustained and brought in the realm of politics, using the mechanism of periodical elections. The longer that education takes to become a political issue, the chances of it being an effective and important public good are bleak. As the chairperson of NCPCR, ShanthaSinha quotes "with political commitment, we can skip timelines to make sure the RTE reaches every child in this country."

⁸*The Education Commission and After*, Naik (1982: 44)

For education to become a significant electoral issue, it has to be further politicized. One possible solution is to mobilize people in local communities and approach their local councilor, M. L. A, have referendums to provide children with basic and decent education. Another solution could be to have NGO's campaign during elections and create awareness among voters to demand education as a public good. Academia and journalists can also undertake a detailed manifesto analysis during elections to delineate the stands of political party's with respect to education. This will, therefore contribute to a larger political/electoral discourse about education and for it to become an issue of our daily lives and parlance such as necessary civic amenities or corruption for that matter in the recent years.

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