

The case for an Indian Education Service

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THE education domain is perhaps more complex and more challenging than many other domains of development. Being a concurrent subject under the Constitution only adds to the level of complexity. The skeptics may point out that the task before the state is impossibly huge. Disillusioned educationists after spending their lifetime trying to bring change, say with unbridled vehemence, ‘This is a decadent and dysfunctional system that can never change – at least not in our life time!’ It is a domain where it is most difficult to initiate and sustain reforms.

Yet, ask anyone who has some knowledge of India’s education system to list the critical issues that need to be set right and you will get a ready list. There will be consensus, possibly even unanimity, cutting across ideo-

logical boundaries. However, start discussing solutions and approaches to address the issue and you will encounter such a wide divergence of views that they appear almost impossible to bridge.

Experts in management argue for a systems approach as probably the only way to address the situation, pointing out that mere tweaking or addressing one element without such an approach will only shift the problem from one node of the system to another. In a highly complex system such as education, this is perhaps even more true. Much needs to be done, both holistically and simultaneously, though others feel that it would make strategic sense to choose one or two key levers of change.

The humongous task of implementing the RTE Act will probably

soon bring home the truth that the government alone would be unable to successfully meet the several challenges that the act throws up. These range from meaningful implementation of infrastructural requirements to providing financial resources for both the infrastructural resources as well as for transforming the teacher education system. The success of the RTE would almost entirely depend on being able to educate a critical mass of teachers who will make the difference to quality education.

One of the biggest challenges in creating a sustained vision for quality education is the uncertainty affecting decisionmakers, both at the political and bureaucratic level. Routinely, we see the education portfolio being held by bureaucrats who introduce diverse perspectives with such rapidity that it can best be termed as knee-jerk reactions to the objective of achieving universal quality education in a given state. The solutions being advocated by decisionmakers and generalist bureaucrats, with neither deep first-hand knowledge of the complexities of the education system nor any long-term stakes in the enterprise are unsurprisingly half-baked and often result in creating fresh problems.

The various kinds of impractical and showy public-private partnerships are symptomatic of this tendency. Though PPP is the flavour of the season, nobody seems to be thinking of how many qualified, competent and 'not profit oriented' partners will be available across the length and breadth of our wonderfully kaleidoscopic country to make the PPP a working reality.

We have many examples of longer tenure and persistent follow-up delivering great results, both on the international and domestic scene. Madhya Pradesh, for instance, regis-

tered double digit growth in percentage literacy levels in about a decade when two dedicated bureaucrats were at the helm of affairs for almost ten years. Brazil and Columbia made significant progress in their quality of education in about fifteen years when they seriously pursued a shared vision and agenda, irrespective of the political party in power.

To register both quantitative and qualitative growth in universal quality education we need people who, by virtue of their own training and genuine interest in education, have acquired a deeper perspective and understanding of the interlinkages in education. These must be people who are allowed to spend time in education, soak in the ground level complexities, build a relationship with the larger education system and achieve solid results with sustained effort. They are the people who will spend the rest of their working lives to make the education system better, people who know they have an entire career to shape and implement policies while conducting meaningful research, collecting good evidence, preparing proposals and then working through the implementation. In other words, people, who through a choice of a career, live and breathe education.

It is with this background that we argue the case for a separate specialist cadre of an 'Indian Education Service', a concept that was first envisaged in the National Policy for Education way back in 1986. Just to recall, the National Policy for Education in section 10.3 laid down the principle of an 'Indian Education Service' as under:

Section 10.3: A proper management structure in education will entail the establishment of the Indian Education Service as an all-India service. It will bring a national perspective to

this vital sector. The basic principles, functions and procedures of recruitment to this service will be decided in consultation with the state governments.

Walk into the office of the Education Commissioner or State Project Director in any state and read through the huge board listing the names of the persons who have held the post. It would be a surprise to come across even a few instances of a three year tenure. The increasing norm is of short durations, many of them abruptly cut-off with sudden transfers announced overnight. Thus, one finds an unending line of bureaucrats (read IAS officers) coming in and out of the department who, within a few months, since confidence is their strong suit, believe they know everything that ails this complex system. They are keenly aware that their tenure in this post will be brief and they feel compelled to show that they did something positive during their stint. They generally do two things: first, close down or curtail certain existing initiatives without giving them a chance (merely signalling their disinterest is indication enough) and two, initiate new schemes in the hope of creating history. And so this goes on.

Our hypothesis is that the health of our education system, whether for good or bad, is greatly influenced by the quality of governance and leadership that manages it. Just to provocatively underscore the importance of governance, we claim that even if the finances for education are doubled (from 3.7% to 6.5% of GDP), one will barely see any change, simply because the utilization of that money will be determined by the quality of governance and management in the system.

While it is not difficult to denigrate the bureaucracy, we also have examples of outstanding institutional

excellence being achieved through the same bureaucracy. Just think of the unrecognizable transformation of our Election Commission. A transformation of the urban landscape of Surat, Nagpur and Thane or the dramatic overhaul of some of our large public sector undertakings has similarly to be credited to the outstanding leadership by bureaucrats.

How can the education system too harness such capabilities? One way forward is the creation of a cadre such as the Indian Education Service akin to the Indian Railway Service or the Indian Defence Accounts Service or the Indian Postal Service – a cadre that joins the Indian public service system confident that their specialized knowledge will both be effectively utilized and govern their career in their chosen service domain.

Not only will education be governed and led by people who are specialists with a deeper understanding of the philosophy, sociology and psychology of education, we will have a set of people with a long-term commitment and, therefore, an incentive to continuously learn, implement, stay the course and build institutions. Moreover, even if the political system resorts to whimsical or at times vindictive transfers, the new appointments would still be from among people who understand education in a certain shared way. Since the bureaucrats know that they will have an extended stay of 25 to 35 years in the system, they may develop the patience to nurture ideas and initiatives without being in a rush to show results during a short tenure. A specialist cadre, allowed a decent run, will thus have the space to plan for and demonstrate results.

Both the Indian Railways and Indian Postal Service probably have among the largest workforce in the

country. The education system is no less. With six million teachers and another one million support staff outside the schools, it is surely among the largest departmental workforce in the world. A permanent Indian Education Service cadre will create conditions for these officers to work together and address issues that cut across states. In short, to help evolve structures and policies to address the entire gamut of concerns from recruitment and development of teachers, designing academic institutional structures, preparation of school leaders, curriculum and textbooks, and so on.

We have two cases in point. Many years ago, Andhra Pradesh had the late Nagarjuna, an IAS officer, who by choice devoted himself to the education sector. In Tamil Nadu, Vijay Kumar turned down senior promotions to remain a State Project Director to see through the design and implementation of the Activity Based Learning Scheme, an initiative that was then taken up by some more states. More recently, we have had a couple of officers in Karnataka who willingly chose multiple stints in education and attempted to implement initiatives in the belief that they have a long-term stake in that department.

A top class, stable specialist cadre of bureaucracy in every state can create a sustainable transformation. Top class is an umbrella phrase that includes domain competence, high resilience, patience and abhorrence for superficial quick fixes. A specialist cadre will create conditions where fearlessness to resist pulls and pressures will be the norm rather than an exception.

Why are we arguing for the creation of the Indian Education Service as a possible solution? It is because we believe that such an empowered and dedicated cadre for the education

domain will probably create the conditions to unleash a number of solutions which have hitherto never been spoken about or tried. An Indian Education Service bureaucrat may be emboldened to try out a range of long haul and paradigm shifting initiatives. We list some of them below.

Because of the commitment to provide a school in every habitation in the country, we have a situation where over 75% of our schools are multi-grade schools. Multi-grade teaching is obviously a suboptimal approach – and is one of the starkest examples of an inequitable approach to quality education. Can the IES bureaucrat in a particular state be bold enough to send children to a fully equipped mono-grade school, even if such a school is not within the mandated range of one kilometre? To ensure this, can he arrange public-private partnerships where a transport facility for children is a private responsibility?

Children are to be promoted automatically up to grade eight under the RTE Act dispensation. Will the empowered bureaucrat use this clause as an opportunity to provide teachers autonomy and freedom to organize children in learning groups rather than the artificial grouping of a class? If there are no exams and automatic promotion, will the bureaucrat have the long range vision to institutionalize an independent assessment of school quality on a periodic basis? Even if the initial results reveal weaknesses in the system, the IES cadre officer would know that s/he has the time and space to set in motion corrective measures.

Will the bureaucrat take decisions to participate in international assessment tests – something that India has till recently refused to do in an ostrich like manner? Performance

based recognition, promotions or disincentives for teachers, teacher educators and administrators could also be attempted – something that everyone in the system has stayed away from.

Community participation and aspirations can acquire a completely different meaning under a specialist bureaucrat. A vast majority of our School Development Monitoring Committees (SDMC) do not know their role and responsibilities and those who do want to participate are kept at a distance by insecure teachers. A community is a complex and heterogeneous group and it takes decades to get a cohesive community to act on issues of education. The Azim Premji Foundation has just seen this through a four year programme of 'community-school engagement' that was tried in 76 villages in Karnataka. Instead of loading the committees with complex responsibilities, why not simply ask them to monitor just three things: A red flag if children attendance is less than 75%; a red flag if any teacher is absent, and a red flag if the headmaster is absent. Using such a measure, the bold bureaucrat will be able to telecast every day (like the weather bulletin) a list of all those districts where more than a certain percentage of schools have red flags.

Education is the most critical process for those who can neither afford the economic cost of good education nor the social cost of poor education. And, therefore, the need is to pick and choose partners who not only bring specific competencies to an identified need or task, but can also ensure that although the partners might be for-profit enterprises, they cannot be in it for a profit or 'brand/market share building' motive. A patient, career IES officer with a lifetime stake will arguably exercise critical judgment in such

PPP initiatives. A permanent IES cadre will be able to ensure that only meaningful PPPs that are long lasting and provide a specific value add are entered into.

When we recently raised the issue of setting up an Indian Education Service as recommended by the National Policy for Education with an eminent political leader, he was dismissive of the concept, saying, 'It would be another cadre like IAS.' His skepticism was not unfounded. We cannot, with full confidence, claim that the current IAS is functioning in the manner originally visualized. Therefore, we have to learn from it and ensure that the integrity of purpose for creating the IES is zealously guarded.

Management science teaches us that for innovation and genuine, well-intentioned experiments with a view to evolving long-term solutions to several problems in a complex system that has an unprecedented scale, we must create an environment where people are not afraid to make mistakes. More often than not, good governance is enabled by greater freedom that is inextricably tied to greater responsibility and accountability. Introducing the Indian Education Service could well be a watershed event that may have positive ripple effects on other areas such as urban governance and town planning, health management, water and electricity management and so on, which too are specialist domains currently being supervised by generalists.

There are a few states in India that have experimented with a State Education Service. The experience is that such state education service officers manage the respective education systems at cluster, block and district level in a significantly superior manner, as compared to people that are

simply promotees from the teacher and headmaster categories. However, these states barely invest in preparing the people in this state cadre. Selection is merely based on appearing for and passing a relatively uncomplicated test. The state plays no role in guiding, coaching and educating these people, but only conducts the test.

It is our submission that at a national level, the selection and coaching of those seeking to join the IES needs to be rigorous. The process must make it difficult for a candidate to be recognized as an IES cadre officer. It must factor in attributes such as 'desire to make social impact, understand the purpose of education, understand several intricate issues in education beginning from curriculum development, classroom practices, assessment practices, pre-school education, inclusive education, technology in education, among others.

In addition, the IES officer must have a sound understanding of philosophy, economics, anthropology, public policy and management, child psychology etc. If we accept that the quality of education can only improve if we have teachers who are experts, scientists, researchers etc., senior IES personnel who are required to supervise these people must have distinctly superior knowledge of the issues.

In summary, India can become a developed nation only if it addresses the quality and scale of education in a manner such that it becomes a leader in knowledge creation and management. A system involving upwards of 250 million children in 1.3 million schools, requires state of the art leadership to manage the system. We must therefore invest in creating such leadership, empower it and give it the status to match the challenge. The creation of an IES is one such powerful solution.