NITI Aayog's 'Three Year Action Agenda'
What Is There for Education?

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A closer scrutiny of the NITI Aayog's "Three Year Action Agenda" for education and skill development agenda makes it appear a mere technical exercise towards developing a set of unfounded strategies. The overemphasis on learning outcomes, obsession with technical education, and preference for skills over basic education have missed the broader and more meaningful vision of inclusive quality education.

India's developmental planning, which started in 1951, came to a conclusion in March 2017 with the end of the Twelfth Five Year Plan. After the dissolution of the Planning Commission, the government decided to set its development priorities and instrumentalise those priorities through the NITI Aayog. One of the major mandates of the NITI Aayog is "to design strategic and long-term policy and programme frameworks and initiatives." In this direction, the NITI Aayog was advised to prepare a 15-year vision document, a seven-year strategy, and a three-year action agenda. Towards achieving this end, the NITI Aayog formulated a "Three Year Action Agenda, 2017–18 to 2019–20" in August 2017. The document proposes a set of action points for policy and institutional reforms in various sectors of the economy (NITI Aayog 2017).

Under the broad theme of "Social sector," Chapter 20 of the document presents the vision and a three-year strategy for "Education and skill development." The overarching goal of the action agenda for education is employability for India's youth. According to the document, as the current system is ill-equipped to provide the required education and skill, the action agenda has explored some alternative actions and strategies to reap the maximum benefits from the country's "demographic dividend."

Before discussing the action agenda for education in detail, at the outset it is important to highlight the current state of Indian school education as well as the higher education system to understand the context in which the three-year strategy has been visualised.

Indian Education System

The school education system in India portrays a mixed picture, with some milestones achieved and some problems yet to be addressed. India has made notable progress in increasing the gross enrolment ratio (GER). It has achieved universal enrolment in primary (I–V) education (100% in Classes 1 to 5) and near universal enrolment in upper primary education (97% in Classes 6 to 8) both for boys and girls (MHRD 2016a).

Though there is improvement in enrolment, the sector is still facing challenges pertaining to basic issues like access and retention. According to the 2011 Census, more than 65 million children in the 6–17 age group are out of school. Out of every 100 children who enrol in Class 1, about 20% dropped out before reaching Class 5 and around 47% before reaching Class 10. The dropout rate is much higher among Scheduled Tribe children (31% in primary education and 62% before reaching Class 10; MHRD 2014). A 2015 National Sample Survey Office (NSSO) survey shows economic factors as the singlemost important reason for children dropping out of or not attending school.

The persistence of the quality gap in physical infrastructure of government schools is another major reason for the high dropout rate (MoSPI 2015).

However, at present, the poor level of learning in elementary education is the gravest concern for the school education system. This has also created a preference for enrolment in private schools. As a result, thousands of private schools have sprung up across rural India in the last decade and the share of children going to private elementary schools has increased from 19% in 2006 to 31% in 2016 (ASER 2017).

The crisis in higher education is perhaps worse than the school education system. Over time, there has been an upsurge in the demand for higher education, which is reflected in the increase in enrolment and infrastructure facilities for higher education in the country. At present, India has more than 864 universities, 40,026 colleges and 11,669 stand-alone institutions across the country. The expansion of enrolment is also observed in the increased GER, from 21% in 2011–12 to 25.2% in 2016–17 (MHRD 2017). However, the GER is much below the world average (44%), and way behind that of the developed countries (58%). Along with enrolment, private colleges and universities have mushroomed; more than 77.8% colleges are being run by the private sector, catering only to 67.3% of the total enrolment. Like school education, higher education is also suffering from deterioration of quality, which has resulted in increasing unemployment among the educated. The government is also struggling to provide basic skills to millions of potential job-seekers. Moreover, with increased automation, the quality of skills imparted in the existing facilities is also becoming a serious concern.

Against this backdrop, the present article has analysed the NITI Aayog's action agenda for education and skill development.

Agenda for School Education

The chapter begins with the reforms and strategies needed for school education. The first and foremost action point towards achieving this goal is improving learning outcomes. The immediate strategies

that the NITI Aayog has put forth to achieve this goal are (i) a shift in focus of education from inputs to outcomes and implementation of outcome-based incentives, (ii) designing tools for teachers and students for effective learning, and (iii) improvement in existing governance and strategising new governance mechanisms over time.

Input to outcomes: The NITI Aayog has recommended putting in place a process for measuring learning outcomes of each child. As an immediate option, the document has suggested that the National Council of Educational Research and Training conduct a National Achievement Survey as a method for the comprehensive assessment of learning outcomes of children at the state level. The NITI Aayog has already started preparing a School Education Quality Index (SEQI), which would be used to rank schools on the basis of quality measured through tracking outcomes (NITI Aayog 2016).

The document envisions the "Right to Education" as the "Right to Learning" and emphasises the modification of the Right to Education (RTE) Act from its input approach to an outcome approach. To implement this, the NITI Aayog has recommended that each state devise its own learning indicators and design a measurement system for each child. The action agenda strongly advocates the removal/relaxing of the otherwise mandatory norms—like pupil–teacher ratio, infrastructure norms related to school buildings and playgrounds, etc—from the RTE Act and, instead, highlights the need to focus on outcomes.

The document critically assesses the RTE Act for its input approach and holds it responsible for the continuing deterioration in learning outcomes. Though poor learning outcomes is a serious concern, ignoring the supply-side bottlenecks and considering learning outcomes as an isolated area of intervention can never help achieve the expected results. The agenda has talked about the hollowing out of public schools, but issues like the existence of 7.5% single-teacher schools, 4.2% single-classroom schools (NUEPA 2016), more than 5 lakh vacant teacher posts, and 20% of teachers untrained at the

elementary level (MHRD 2016b) have not been discussed in the document. Rather, referring to some "select" studies (most of which are based on randomised evaluation), the document argues that better infrastructure, lower pupil–teacher ratio, higher teacher salary, or better teacher training are ineffective policy measures for improving learning outcomes in the present context.

The agenda has rightly identified the role of pedagogy in improving learning outcomes. Pedagogic efforts for primary classes to a large extent also depend on the significant expansion of early childhood care and education (ECCE). Surprisingly, there is no substantial discussion on ECCE in the vision document. Instead of strengthening the implementation of the National Curriculum Framework in a comprehensive manner, the action agenda proposes technology-driven pedagogy as an alternative, which does not leverage the strengths of the existing framework.

Tools for teachers and students: The action agenda proposes the designing of tools both for teachers and students, but the possible strategies discussed are only for students. The agenda presents a number of compelling reasons for introducing information and communication tools for effective learning. It has suggested using computer-based tools for evidence-based learning in the coming three years. It has also proposed launching a time-bound national programme for strengthening the foundation of education through developing basic reading and numeracy skills among children. The agenda

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underscores the critical need to appoint local contractual tutors to mobilise services under the programme. A pilot system of technology-enabled "exam on demand" is another critical suggestion offered by the NITI Aayog, especially for children who are availing secondary education. However, to establish the need for examinations, the NITI Aayog's choice of words in stating that the no-detention policy under the RTE Act results in "mass cheating" by students at higher grade is unacceptable.

The government's desire to leverage technology-aided education to improve learning efficiency requires a strong digital network and an ability to provide reliable end-to-end e-services (last mile connectivity) (Krishna and Dehejia 2017). There were only 57.3% elementary schools that had an electricity connection and only 26% of the schools had a computer (NUEPA 2016). Moreover, there is no evidence for whether these 26% schools have the required number of computers. Therefore, in the absence of adequate infrastructure, too much focus on a technology-driven education policy raises serious questions on the feasibility of availing benefits from such services. These suggested reforms also reflect a fundamental shift in thinking about education and its purposes. The larger idea of education as an integral component of human development is being diluted by the idea of developing a skilled workforce.

Improved governance: To improve the quality quotient of schools, the action agenda has called for advancement in existing governance. A few proposals are particularly noteworthy. Instead of a single-window service by the Ministry of Education, the NITI Aayog has suggested piloting a new model of governance where different functions like policymaking, regulation, and provision are to be delivered by different functionaries. More autonomy as well as more accountability to the Directorate of Education could have been one possible suggestion for the provision of education to enhance its transparency. The document proposes the regulation of schools on the basis of transparency and outcomes, and a uniform regulation mechanism for both government and

private schools. In this direction, a number of governance indicators, like school leadership, basic monitoring by administrators, transparent teacher appointment system, teacher absenteeism, etc, have been identified to construct the SEQI.

The action agenda has also suggested exploring new governance mechanisms, like public–private partnership (PPP) models, education vouchers, or local government-led purchasing of school services, to address the problem of hollowed out public schools and high per pupil expenditure incurred by governments.

While advocating for PPP or education vouchers, it would be worthwhile for the NITI Aayog to draw lessons from the analogous experience already existing within the current system. For example, Section 12(1)(c) of the RTE Act makes it mandatory for all private schools to reserve 25% of the seats for children belonging to socially disadvantaged and economically weaker sections, and the cost will be reimbursed by the government. This is effectively a voucher-based school choice system and it has been experienced that governments have failed to implement this norm in the private schools across the states. Studies have also shown that there was no significant difference in learning outcomes between children who won a voucher to a local private school and those who remained in government schools (APF 2013). Proposing the PPP model or school vouchers as a viable solution for better quality education, in fact, detracts from the need to spend more money on public education.

Agenda for Higher Education

Besides school education, the action agenda has also listed five immediate strategies to reform the higher education sector. The first recommendation revolves around creating a list of 20 world-class universities (10 public and 10 private) with complete autonomy. To achieve this target, the NITI Aayog has suggested following Singapore and China's model of transforming a select number of universities into "world class" science and technology powerhouses. The NITI Aayog has suggested that, of these 20 universities, two best public universities will be given higher funding from government.

The second and third strategies are related to the autonomy of colleges and universities, and the reform of the existing regulatory framework. The agenda has proposed a three-tiered system of universities, where the top tier will be given autonomy in matters of course, curriculum, teaching hours, etc, so that they can become globally competitive. The second-tier universities would provide employment-focused education, and the third-tier universities would be the universities whose primary purpose would be to provide higher education "for all." Moving from the first tier to the third will be accompanied by an increase in regulation, but reduction in government funding.

The fourth suggested reform is regarding project- and scholar-specific research grants. The grants will be provided to promote innovations in science and technology "to deliver solutions to clearly specified problems." To create future employment opportunities for the large workforce, the fifth strategy underlines the need for strengthening vocational and skill education.

The five recommendations and the rationale given for the suggested strategies clearly reflects the policymakers' perception that science, technology and engineering matter more academically and economically, than the humanities and social sciences.

While there is high demand for public higher educational institutions, the spending on higher education is at a historical low, pushing students towards private universities, which are not only expensive, but often their standards are low too. As per NSSO data, about 17% male and 10% female undergraduate students of the 18–24 age group cannot pursue higher education because of financial constraints (MoSPI 2015). Consequently, the roadmap for a three-tiered education system with a varying regulatory mechanism and skewed distribution of resources towards institutions in the top tiers, fuels the fear of withdrawal of the financial responsibility of the government towards universities in the lowest tiers, which serve the largest number of students. In an already unequal higher education system, this duality of funding within the government-supported colleges and

universities will sow the seeds of inequality within the system.

The NITI Aayog has acknowledged that the skill development initiative by the Government of India has failed to achieve the desired outcome. Thus, for continuity of education, the action agenda has also designed a series of strategies to strengthen skill education. The agenda includes proposals like setting up a Skill Assessment Board and a national-level Overseas Employment Promotion Agency under the Ministry of External Affairs for better management and regulation of initiatives for skill education. The report has also listed some specific action points for building up skill initiatives in sectors like creative and cultural sector, gems and jewellery sector, and automotive sector.

The reforms proposed in the document involve actions by the union as well as states. The big unanswered question is that of the resource requirement to realise the three-year strategy for the education sector. Interestingly, it has not been discussed anywhere in the vision document. Reforms through the introduction of a new measurement system for learning outcomes at the state level, launching of nationwide technology-aided education programmes, or improving existing governance are extremely resource-intensive. Currently, India spends around 2.7% of its gross domestic product (GDP) on school education and 3.9% of its GDP on overall education (CBGA–CRY 2016). This is much lower than the benchmark of at least 6% of GDP as recommended by the Kothari Commission in 1966 and subsequently reiterated by many other committees over time. As there is a consistent decline in the union government's share in the country's budgetary spending on education and a shift of responsibility progressively towards states, the onus of allocating more resources for the implementation of the action agenda will be more on states. It is hoped that the NITI Aayog has had a detailed discussion with states regarding resource arrangement before finalising the strategic plan.

In Conclusion

Good strategic planning needs a well-articulated vision. "An inappropriate process of formulating a strategic plan can have a number of undesirable effects which adversely affect the quality of the plan and even more so the quality of its implementation" (Sen 2017: 41). The NITI Aayog's "Three Year Action Agenda" appears to be a mere technical exercise towards developing a set of strategies. In the document, the learning outcome seems to be the central objective.

Though the emphasis on learning outcomes is not unwelcome, there are pressing issues—like the large number of out of school children, increasing number of educated unemployed youth, persistent socio-economic disparity, gender disparity, and regional disparity in schools, colleges, and universities—afflicting the whole education system. The vision document has largely ignored these issues. The overemphasis on the measurement of learning outcomes, obsession for technical education, and projecting skill over basic education have missed the broader and more meaningful vision of inclusive quality education.

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