

INDIA'S IDENTITY AND POLITICS

Lord Meghnad Desai

What does India think?

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There is no one “India” that thinks. There are several Indias, each of which has its own separate consciousness. Indeed, if there is any culture or civilisation that has rejected monism for pluralism, it is the ancient Hindu culture. Hinduism is not a religion in the Abrahamic sense. It has no creed, no single orthodoxy, nor a prescribed formula for affirming religious faith. There are many gods and there is no god – only a single disembodied essence, the *Brahman*, which permeates the universe.

But modern India is not just a Hindu civilisation. It has multiple religions – all the various sects of Islam and of Christianity, Judaism, Zoroastrianism, Buddhism, Jainism, and Sikhism – and its people often subscribe to more than one. There are also many languages – perhaps as many as 700, though only 22 are recognised officially, and a couple of thousand dialects. Geographically, India is comparable to Europe, minus European Russia, and many of its regions are larger than some European nations. Indeed, India is in a way a collection of nations.

Even so, there have been attempts through the last 200 years to fashion a single India, with a single identity. The struggle to throw off the British yoke led the elite to fashion stories of why India was a nation, in order to counter British jibes that India was no more a reality than the equator, as Winston Churchill once said. Thus Indians fashioned a story of nationhood.

Indeed, they fashioned more than one story. The idea of India as a single nation was countered by the idea of two nations: Hindu and Muslim. This led to India’s division into two nation states, India and Pakistan. One constant in Indian thinking since then is the notion of Pakistan as the Other, if not the Enemy. After Partition, a revised idea of India emerged, thanks to Jawaharlal Nehru, its first prime minister. India was to be a secular nation in which there was equal respect for all religions, but with special attention to the Muslims who had stayed behind rather than migrating to Pakistan.

The hegemony of the Nehruvian idea of India was bolstered by the near-monopoly of his Congress Party and the dynastic succession of Nehru's daughter and grandson as prime ministers. His grandson's widow will now be succeeded by his great-grandson. In the 68 years since independence, Congress has been in office for 55 and the dynasty in control for all but seven.

Rival ideas of India

The Nehruvian idea of India is facing a challenge not only because Congress lost power in 2014 but also because a rival party, the Indian People's Party (Bharatiya Janata Party, BJP) – commonly labelled as Hindu nationalist – has won a majority to form India's first non-coalition government in 30 years. Rival ideas of India are in the air. The hegemony of the Congress idea of secularism is being challenged and the idea of Indian nationhood is being debated anew. If Pakistan was born out of the idea of two nations and it is the Muslim nation, then why isn't India the Hindu nation?

The notion of two nations produced two nation states, but both nations were split between them, albeit unequally. There were Hindus and Muslims in both India and Pakistan. However, Muslims were divided much more evenly between the two than Hindus. Pakistan was itself divided between the territories of modern-day Pakistan to the west and Bangladesh to the east – not on grounds of religion but of language. Nations are not defined by religion alone – language counts, as does a common history.

The tension between this pluralist multi-faith society and the search for a single identity or idea of nationhood has moved to the forefront since the victory of the BJP. But the other, equally urgent desire is for economic growth, poverty eradication, and secure livelihoods for all. India had a moderate rate of GDP growth in the first 30 years after independence, which picked up somewhat in the next ten. But it was in the 1990s that India adopted a radical reform strategy, and since then growth has taken off. Even so, in terms of human development, India is a laggard. Poverty is still a serious problem, and the challenge of making India prosperous enough for a decent standard of living is the other issue occupying Indians, along with the question of identity. The new government was elected on the slogan of “inclusive growth”.

The previous Congress-led coalition government failed to achieve high growth or low inflation, and Indians lost their patience and took a bet on the BJP. The need for growth is urgent because India has a young and still-growing population,

three-quarters of which is aged under 30. Educating, skilling-up, and engaging millions of young people in viable employment is high on India's list of worries.

There are also other struggles that occupy Indians. Most recently, the safety of women from sexual harassment, and worse, has been a focus of debate. Young Indians, like others around the world, want equality for the LGBT population. Much more sensitive politically is the movement of the *Dalit* castes, which traditional Hindu society treats as “untouchables”, to achieve equality. There is some legislation, and progress has been made. Yet the hierarchical nature of the Hindu caste system itself has come under challenge by *Dalits* and “Other Backward Castes”. This is facilitated by India's democratic political system, whose electorate is alive to its responsibility to vote regularly, and insists that its demands be met by its representatives.

Indians are also becoming aware that they have a serious health issue, with a lack of sanitary facilities in rural as well as urban areas. The need to keep India clean and free of rubbish poses a huge problem, which has been highlighted by Prime Minister Narendra Modi. Rivers are dirty, cities are filthy, and many people, while keeping their private space clean, treat public space as a waste bin.

There is an elite awareness of the issues of the environment and climate change, but this has not caught the public imagination. Successive governments have taken a distributive rather than an ecological stance towards international agreement on climate change, with economic growth as their priority. India is a low polluter in per capita terms, and the West must clean up first and compensate the rest to catch up, is the argument. It is unlikely that India will take the lead in hammering out a global compact on carbon emissions at the November 2015 UN Climate Change Conference in Paris.

India and the world

While dealing with these internal challenges and struggles, India also aspires to be a substantial presence in the international arena, with the ambition of earning a permanent seat on the UN Security Council. It sees itself as a regional hegemon in South Asia – despite the challenge from Pakistan, a fellow nuclear power. The new government has turned India towards the east and begun to build strong relations with East Asia. China is much admired by Indians, but the two countries share a disputed border where there have been skirmishes. In the economic sphere, there is growing trade between India and China, and there is a genuine desire for China to be a friendly rival rather than an enemy.

India has always been a Western-oriented society, either due to the idea of a shared Indo-European heritage of related languages or the 500 years of Western presence after Vasco da Gama “discovered” India in 1498. Although India remained equidistant from the two blocs during the Cold War, its natural affinities are with the European civilisation. Most recently, Indo-US relations have flourished, with cooperation on the issue of nuclear fuel supply. The new government has deepened this cooperation by leveraging the successful diaspora community of Indians in the West. India and the US are joined in an implicit “just-in-case” alliance to hedge against the chance of either of them getting into a serious conflict with China.

Indians are many, as are their demands, aspirations, and ideas. But the fundamental achievement of Indians has been the construction of an open, liberal democracy that respects human rights, especially free speech. This guarantees that whatever challenges India may face, and however large the differences between Indians, they will solve them by leveraging the old traditions of debate and discussion rather than violence. Given the size of India, that alone should give the world reassurance that whatever India may be thinking, it will be all right.

Deep K. Datta-Ray

2

India's Gandhian Foreign Policy

If foreign policy is the truest expression of a nation state's identity, the fierce debate around Indian diplomacy precludes any possibility of gauging the character and aims of the Indian state. That this is the result of intellectual disarray, rather than any confusion about India's identity, is illustrated by a curious paradox.

There is a national consensus that Mahatma Gandhi, the strategist who dominated the Indian political scene until his assassination by a Hindu extremist in 1948, was the mentor of India's first prime minister, Jawaharlal Nehru, who held office from independence in 1947 until his death in 1964. Nehru forged a unique foreign policy that expressed Gandhi's ideas. As he put it at the very end of his life, "the policies and philosophy which we seek to implement are the policies and philosophy taught to us by Gandhiji". But, inexplicably, the framework that Nehru made the bedrock of Indian diplomacy is eschewed by academics who uncritically use European categories to explain Indian foreign policy.¹ To understand India's policy, it is necessary to use a category coined by Gandhi – *satyagraha* – instead of thinking in terms of realism and liberalism.² These European categories continue to be parroted by some Indian diplomats, though their policy proposals are rejected by India's leaders as anathema to the intellectual fabric of the nation state.

It is only by jettisoning such imported assumptions and the conceptual frameworks they rely upon that we can obtain a glimpse of India's true identity and diplomatic intentions. The rationale for Indian foreign policy can be brought

¹ See, for example, Srinath Raghavan, *War and Peace in Modern India* (London: Palgrave Macmillan, 2010) and Sumit Ganguly, *Conflict Unending: India–Pakistan Tensions Since 1947* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2001).

² *Satyagraha*, or "truth force", is the idea of converting the violent to non-violence (this is a facet of the "truth", in "truth force") without replicating the behaviour of the violent, i.e. violence.

into focus only by viewing it in terms of the most significant relationship in the state's history: that between Jawaharlal Nehru and Mahatma Gandhi.

That relationship has been invested with a new impetus by Prime Minister Narendra Modi of the Indian People's Party (Bharatiya Janata Party, BJP), who took office in 2014.

Non-violence in international politics

Though it may seem paradoxical, the most prominent leader of the rival Congress Party, Gandhi is palpable in all that Modi does. He has unveiled statues of the Mahatma around the globe, paid rich tributes to him, and put into practice many Gandhian ideas such as the campaign to "Clean India". Regardless of the political party in power, Gandhi is inescapable. However, the true import of his ideas lies not in the realm of the explicit but at the level of the intellect, and is most obvious in the thinking behind India's foreign policy. In short, Nehru's "authentic Gandhian era" continues, but what exactly does it denote?

The answer lies in the lesson Nehru learnt from Gandhi – that the principle of non-violence is irrefutable, and that it demands an altogether new type of state.³ For Gandhi, we live in an inextricably interlinked cosmos in which any form of violence is ultimately self-destructive. For the cosmologically minded, then, politics serves just one purpose: to erase violence. Gandhi pursued this precept within the confines of the British Empire, but his disciple's ambitions were greater. Nehru sought to apply his guru's practices not only within India but also in the realm of international politics.

In seeking to purge violence from the political entity he had inherited, Nehru extended the idea of sovereignty far beyond the old idea of survival for survival's sake. The Nehruvian state sought to eliminate violence, placing the calculus for action beyond history understood either as a Golden Age to be recovered, or as a series of humiliations to be avenged. Instead, action was to be calculated on the basis of present conditions, to eliminate violence now.

However, this ideal posed a significant challenge: how could India non-violently confront violence? The solution lay in Gandhi's concept of *satyagraha*. This might itself seem violent because it challenged authority. Crucially, however, the practitioner of satyagraha was less violent than their opponent, and

³ This claim is based on original research carried out by the author for India's Ministry of External Affairs, in *The Making of Indian Diplomacy: A Critique of Eurocentrism* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2015).

directed most of their violence inwards. Nehru made this his approach to foreign policy, and, though his country was impoverished, he did not hesitate to put it into practice. Most sensationally, in India's border regions he sought to free Indians from the everyday violence of poverty while simultaneously challenging Chinese aggression. This earliest application of *satyagraha* to international politics continues to shape India's military border policy.

Modi: In Nehru's mould?

Though the Gandhi–Nehru rationale remains, 15 years of economic liberalisation have given New Delhi's foreign policy a new impetus. Modi's renewal of non-violence as a guiding principle in foreign policy is deeply significant. Its effects will cascade across the world, remaking the global system just as India's last prime minister, Manmohan Singh (2004–2014), rewrote the West's international nuclear architecture by negotiating the unique India–US deal. Although many accuse Modi of breaking with the past, he is resolutely faithful to his predecessors. The best example of this continuity is that Modi personally selected as foreign secretary the man whom Singh used to negotiate the India-US deal. The policies of engagement charted in the early years of India's independence continue, with the added vigour that prosperity – if only relative to Nehru's day – and parliamentary majority afford.

In practice, this means widening the definition of violence and seeking it out for eradication with greater confidence, both domestically and externally. Modi did precisely this when he spoke of India's shortage of toilets. In other words, the belief is that India's focus on the quotidian, if successful, will transform the country. Indian diplomacy is firmly geared towards relieving Indians of such unspectacular, everyday suffering by attracting investment for basic infrastructure – hence New Delhi's concerted efforts at harvesting unconventional investors, including its supposed arch-rival China. By seeking a pragmatic alliance with Beijing, New Delhi demonstrates that not only has it overcome fears of Chinese subversion but that it is remaking the world order. An early fruit of New Delhi's labours is membership, with the second largest stake, in China's proposed Asian Infrastructure Investment Bank (AIIB). New Delhi supports this project because it hopes that Beijing will invest in projects that the Japanese and US-led Asian Development Bank and Bretton Woods institutions will not. These include coal power plants, which India sees as essential to its development, but that run counter to environmental objectives.

It would be an abdication of the principle of non-violence if India tolerated violence from abroad to reduce it at home. Hence, there has been no let-up in Singh's Nehruvian policy of building infrastructure, including roads, along the border with China, the purpose being to counter China's perceived international aggression. Moreover, Modi has injected new momentum into the "Look East" policy of former Prime Minister P.V. Narasimha Rao (1991–1996), converting engagement into action. Modi's "Act East" policy represents more than a mere change in nomenclature; it expresses a new resolve to engage the Association of Southeast Asian Nations (ASEAN) both economically and militarily. Negotiations are underway to deepen economic and strategic links across various spheres, and to project Indian influence into East Asia and beyond.

What makes all of this *satyagraha* is that, compared to China, India is a non-violent state. This is best explained in terms of India's nuclear policy, which approaches the possibility of total annihilation from a pacific stance. Instead of replicating the logic of Mutually Assured Destruction (MAD) and outdoing challengers by building arsenals, India became the first country whose "no-first-use" pledge was taken seriously by the comity of nations. In 2010, India moved towards the concept of Credible Minimum Deterrence, limiting the "no-first-use" pledge to non-nuclear states.⁴ This ability to defend oneself without replicating violence inspires other foreign policy initiatives that merit the Western world's attention, both for the possibilities they offer and the challenges they pose.

As Sino-Indian relations develop new facets, it is paramount that Europe and North America reconsider their policies, which have amounted to a withdrawal from India. Western investments have been shrinking, and though the responsibility undoubtedly lies primarily with New Delhi, where Modi must find the political will to create a business-friendly climate, the West cannot withdraw in the face of a rising China. By welcoming China as a major trading partner, India is playing a dangerous game – one that needs balancing by Europe. The West needs to show some sign of faith. This could take the form of concessions to make the India-EU Bilateral Trade and Investment Agreement a reality. The costs would be minor in comparison to the heavy global price of China becoming the primary means of meeting India's desperate developmental needs, leading to Indian economic dependence on China. Modi campaigned on the issue of growth, and this is demanded by more than a billion Indians. If the West doesn't respond, it will be providing succour to authoritarian tendencies

⁴ Meanwhile, minimal deterrence was espoused but not followed by Beijing. See Alastair Iain Johnston, "China's New 'Old Thinking': The Concept of Limited Deterrence," *International Security*, Volume 20, Number 3, 1995.

among Indians, who marvel at non-democratic China forging ahead while the world's largest democracy falters.

At stake is the nature of India's development, as well as global security and the norms the West holds dear – which matter because they shape the course of development. The West remains the bedrock of innovation and technology. Working in unison, it can ensure that India effectively meets its primary goal of poverty eradication in a “clean” manner that does not risk planetary survival. This is especially important because of the threat from self-styled Maoist rebels who have already seized control of vast swathes of territory in India's geographical heartland. Their terrorism threatens the very existence of the Indian state and, in turn, regional and global stability.

India's foreign policy is constructed around the principle of non-violence. If this has not always been apparent, it isn't because of any dissimulation on the part of India's politicians and diplomats. The greatest stumbling block is that India's actions are so often misread. India's identity was never concealed, even if observers were incapable of understanding what they saw. It is necessary, therefore, to reach a new understanding of India. But this will not happen through the assiduous collection of new facts and figures alone if they continue to be misinterpreted. The West must adopt an entirely new analytical framework that can encompass Gandhi's mission and his abiding influence. That alone can reveal India's foreign policy for what it is.

In September 2014, three months after being elected India's prime minister, Narendra Modi travelled to Japan. He was familiar with the country, having visited it more than once as head of the provincial government in the Indian state of Gujarat. Nevertheless, arriving in Japan, which is in many ways the model for Asian societies embarking on rapid modernisation and industrialisation, was special for him in his new role as prime minister.

By conventional parameters, the visit was successful. There was much reportage on the "personal chemistry" between Modi and Prime Minister Shinzo Abe. The two count each other as personal friends, with Modi, at the time at least, being one of only three people the Japanese leader followed on Twitter. Agreements were announced on economic cooperation and Japanese investment in India, modernising India's railways, and exporting Japanese military equipment and civil nuclear technology. Yet what stood out was the choreography of their meeting and the delicate and deliberate choice of symbols drawn from both Hindu and Buddhist tradition.

It is easy to interpret such semiotics as a concession to the traditionalist constituency that forms an important element of Modi's Indian People's Party (Bharatiya Janata Party, BJP). However, that would be a limiting assessment, perhaps even unduly cynical. The tug of tradition is not merely an act. As one Japanese diplomat put it, "Mr Modi is an economic moderniser who sees heritage, tradition and faith as important aspects of his political persona and his conception of India. In this he is remarkably similar to Prime Minister Abe."

The twin – if paradoxical – attributes of an economic moderniser and a social conservative make Modi a captivating politician. But it is facile to categorise him, as some have, as one among a new generation of nationalist leaders in Asia

who are almost democratically elected “strongmen”. Like Abe, Modi embodies a wider concern in his society that China’s economic gallop may be reducing Asia to a one-horse race. However, in 2014, India responded to Modi’s appeal and voted him into power in an equally important context of long-term social currents. Modi represents those currents today, but they exist independently of him and will survive him. As such, to understand Modi and his multiple identities, it is crucial to understand the context that he thrives in.

Youth, urbanisation, and technology

Modi arrived as India’s leader at the junction of three important currents.

First, India is the beneficiary of (or burdened by, depending on how one sees it) an unprecedented youth bulge. It will have the largest working-age population of any society in the first half of the twenty-first century, with a million people added to the job market every month for the coming two decades. This population of job seekers – and impatient young voters – is set to peak in 2030 with 485 million Indians aged between 15 and 34 (of a total population of 1.5 billion). Many of the members of this cohort have not yet been born, but its oldest members began to vote in 2014. The 2014 election was also the first in which those born after 1991 – when India began its process of economic reform – came of voting age.

This “youth vote” proved to be a game changer for Modi as he won over young voters, even in families and communities that had hitherto been hostile to his party. This was the product of an extraordinary revolution in expectations triggered by a decade of very high GDP growth: between 2003 and 2011, the Indian economy grew at an average of 8.3 percent a year. The dynamism and pent-up aspirations from this youth dividend will define Indian elections until at least the late 2020s, probably longer. In that sense, the Modi mandate is not *sui generis* but may signal a new politics in India.

Second, there is India’s urbanisation. Officially, 32 percent of India’s population are full-time residents and voters in urban areas (by 2011 census figures). However, some 60 percent of the GDP is linked to cities, constituting the urban economy. By 2030, this figure will rise to 70 percent.¹ The discrepancy between the GDP and population numbers is glaring. It masks the fact that

¹ “India’s urban awakening: Building inclusive cities, sustaining economic growth”, McKinsey Global Institute, April 2010, available at https://www.mckinsey.com/-/media/McKinsey/dotcom/Insights%20and%20pubs/MGI/Research/Urbanization/Indias%20urban%20awakening%20Building%20inclusive%20cities/MGI_Indias_urban_awakening_full_report.ashx.

a larger section of people – more than 32 percent – are associated with or dependent on the urban economy. It fails to factor in migrant workers or recipients of remittances, for instance, whose household income and family prosperity is tied to the city, even if they vote in the village. This means, and there is empirical evidence to support it, that voters are learning to distinguish between provincial and national elections, and realising that jobs in the big city cannot be fixed by a local politician. India is therefore seeing the beginnings of a broader middle class with a heightened sense of macroeconomic issues.

The third current is technology. India is in the midst of a massive communication boom encompassing television and the internet, including social media tools such as Facebook and Twitter. In business, these are disrupting local markets and allowing regional brands to go national, using mechanisms such as e-commerce. In popular culture, soap operas and reality shows are carrying customs and lifestyles from one part of the country to another, influencing consumer habits.

The Modi campaign was the political analogue of these trends. Modi deftly used television and social media to go national,² effacing the gap between local and pan-Indian recognition to transform himself from a leader of Gujarat state to the prime minister India was waiting for.

A bottom-up phenomenon

India has seen widely popular national leaders before, but they spoke to their people from a certain elevation. In contrast, Modi's rise is a bottom-up phenomenon – the attainment of an outsider, from the periphery of national politics and a humble family background. Communication technology was the force multiplier here, not the privilege of a famous surname. It made and continues to make Modi the classic twenty-first century underdog. It would follow that the principal appeal of Modi in contemporary India is not religion or caste or even hyper-nationalism. It is class. The narrative of a self-made man – whose father sold tea at a railway station and whose mother went house-to-house washing dishes to pay the school fees – is an arresting and powerful one. Being a *chaiwalla* (Hindi for tea seller) is a badge of honour for Modi.

² In March 2013, the Indian Information and Broadcasting Ministry announced that there were 410 television news channels in a variety of Indian languages. Today, the number is estimated to be some 500. According to PTI, the number was still around 400 in December 2014. See "Number of TV channels rises by 37 in one year", *Zee News*, 7 December 2014, available at http://zeenews.india.com/news/india/number-of-tv-channels-rises-by-37-in-one-year_1510793.html.

If Modi's electoral successes have capitalised on a class revolt, this expression has to be understood correctly. The reference here is not to class in a Marxist sense. It is simply to primarily young, small town, semi-urban people – or even rural folk, exposed to or associated with city life and the city economy – usually from non-English-speaking backgrounds. They are hungry to learn the language, though – not to read Shakespeare and join the Anglosphere but simply to get a job. They are too well-off to be satisfied by an anti-poverty dole programme (favoured by the previous Congress government) but too poor to be genuinely middle class. They see themselves as socially underprivileged and their progress as thwarted by invisible social hierarchies that set up complicated, if not impossible, rules for entry – for professional advancement as much as political office – that usher in only the initiated.

Modi's voters are motivated by a complex mix of emotions. There is undeniable ambition here, from talented people who have simply not been given the opportunities they deserve. There is also a degree of resentment and anger, sometimes excessive. Inevitably this segment, this middle India, represents a far greater section of the population than the narrow apex of the pyramid that dominates the older Congress Party, constitutes its reference points, and writes its policies in the salons of New Delhi.

Similar binary splits have caused upheaval in other societies as well. In several countries of Africa and Asia, the first generation of genteel post-colonial leaders and *noblesse oblige* elites usually gave way to more angular native (or nativist) politicians who grasped popular hopes and fears more easily simply because they had lived them. India has been lucky. It has accomplished a similar change through the ballot box. Modi is a political product of these forces.

It needs to be reiterated that Modi packaged himself for a market that was ready for him. He didn't invent the market: India's society and polity were primed for such a transition. As a corollary, irrespective of whether Modi himself succeeds or fails as prime minister, India's essential quest will not change. It will continue to determine politics and affect electoral outcomes in the near future, and will set the template for those who want to follow or replace him. Modi the idea has far outstripped Modi the individual.

Rukmini Banerji

The challenges of basic education in India

4

I am in rural Uttar Pradesh – India’s largest state. It is morning. The road from one village to another winds its way through farms and fields. Looking back at the village we have left behind, I can see the low roof of the school in the distance. Schools here have a green stripe running around the building. Looking ahead towards the next village, the local primary school is clearly visible through a group of dwellings. The road we are on is crowded with children going to school. Some are on bicycles and some are walking – all streaming either towards the school we have left behind or the one ahead.

It is hard to find a village in India – even in the remotest parts of the country – where there is no school. Over the last two decades, the provision of schools by the government, especially primary schools, has become almost universal. These schools have basic infrastructure; however small or rudimentary, there will usually be a few classrooms and an open space for a playground. Private schools have mushroomed, too. In rural areas they operate under trees or in simple sheds, and in urban areas in residential buildings. Schools are everywhere, and almost all children are enrolled in a school of some sort.

This is an impressive achievement in a country as vast and diverse as India. Access to school is now recognised as a non-negotiable part of a child’s right to education. It is enshrined in law and is widely accepted in practice. The Right to Education Act that was passed by the Indian parliament in 2009 lays down norms that each school should aim for, the processes to put in place, and the qualifications that teachers should have. Parents, politicians, planners, and policymakers are united in their conviction that all children should be in school. But India’s success in expanding access and extending the reach of education is creating new challenges, as standards struggle to keep up with rising expectations.

India's schools fall short

As enrolment rises and more students complete more years of schooling, aspirations have risen across the board. Running through the many layers of Indian society is the deep faith that education will lead this generation out of poverty, providing better livelihoods and opportunities. But this faith is prompting new questions about the education system. Now that schooling targets have been achieved, and most children are enrolled in school, the question arises: are children learning? What “value is added” with each year that each child spends in school? Does an extra year in school give students more knowledge, skills, and – crucially – opportunities? What needs to be changed to bring outcomes into line with expectations?

Schools are not producing the expected results. New data shows that even after five years of school, only about half of India's children have attained the level in reading or arithmetic expected after two or three years.¹ (There are similar situations in countries such as Pakistan, and parts of East and West Africa.²)

The root causes of this shortfall in learning are embedded in families as well as schools. About 50 percent of rural school-going children in India have mothers with no or very little education, who can provide little active support for learning at home. Further, parents with a low educational level may not be able to see when a child is not progressing, and may lack confidence to communicate with teachers about this. They often assume that schooling will automatically lead to learning, without realising that extra effort may be needed. The rigid structure of India's schools allows children to fall behind – teachers are expected to stick to the curricula and textbooks for each grade, and cannot spare much time to help children who are below that level.

Until recently there was little assessment of students in early grades to identify those who had fallen behind. Nor were there organised or systematic remedial efforts within the school system (government or private) to help them. As a result, basic learning (reading and arithmetic) is generally low even after the completion of the primary school cycle. And, more worryingly, learning trajectories are flat – implying that if a child does not learn basic skills early, they are unlikely to acquire them in later school years. India's Right to Education

1 See Annual Status of Education Reports (ASER) from 2005 to 2014, available at www.asercentre.org. These reports are generated for every rural district in India and capture a snapshot of a representative sample of children (aged three to 16) across the country. On average, the annual ASER survey reaches over 560 districts each year, surveying an average of 650,000 children in more than 16,000 villages in India.

2 See palnetwork.org for details of the Uwezo reports from East Africa and similar citizen-led assessments from other parts of the world. ASER Pakistan provides similar information as the ASER reports from India.

Act guarantees eight years of schooling to each child. But, at the end of these eight years, the foundation on which future skills, further education, or indeed lives are built is still very weak.

India now faces the immense challenge of moving its education policy beyond infrastructure and inputs, enrolments and expenditures to address fundamental questions of vision and implementation. There are many choices to be made and alternatives to be weighed; for example, should India pursue excellence for some at the cost of equal opportunities for all? Should the education system be academically directed, and geared towards the few who will make it to college, or towards preparing the vast majority for their livelihoods? Where do technical and vocational skills fit in? How much space is there for innovation and enterprise in the delivery of this basic service? Should it be centralised or decentralised? How can relevant and affordable education be delivered today while laying the foundations for the education of tomorrow?

Educating the youth boom

What does India want? What does India need? First, without building a strong foundation in the early years of school, students can make little progress later on. India has to ensure that by the time a child finishes five years of schooling they can read and understand basic texts, discuss what they have read, and express their views. They should be able to do basic calculations and tackle basic logic problems. Most importantly, children should be able to ask questions and have confidence in their ability to learn.

Second, if these are to be the top priorities of the education system, then there must be substantial reorganisation of the structure and functioning of schools.

Third, action must be fast and sustained. There is a lot of discussion in India about the potential of the “youth bulge” – the rapidly growing young population – and the opportunity to reap a “demographic dividend”. According to the last census, in 2011, there is a population of roughly 25 million in each single-year age group between five and 16. Today, there are almost 100 million children in grades between three and six. If India does not move fast to ensure that this group gains fundamental skills, they will not be able to contribute much to the economy or to society when they are young people entering the workforce, building families and taking part in their communities.

What India wants is for every child to have a better future and more opportunities than his or her parents. What India needs is the ability to build children's capabilities so that this dream becomes reality in the years ahead.

The school bell can be heard throughout the village. The few stragglers who were still on the way to school begin to run. As children settle into their classrooms and get ready for the school day, we hope that each new lesson will lead them closer to a better life.