

# Why our education reform keeps missing the mark



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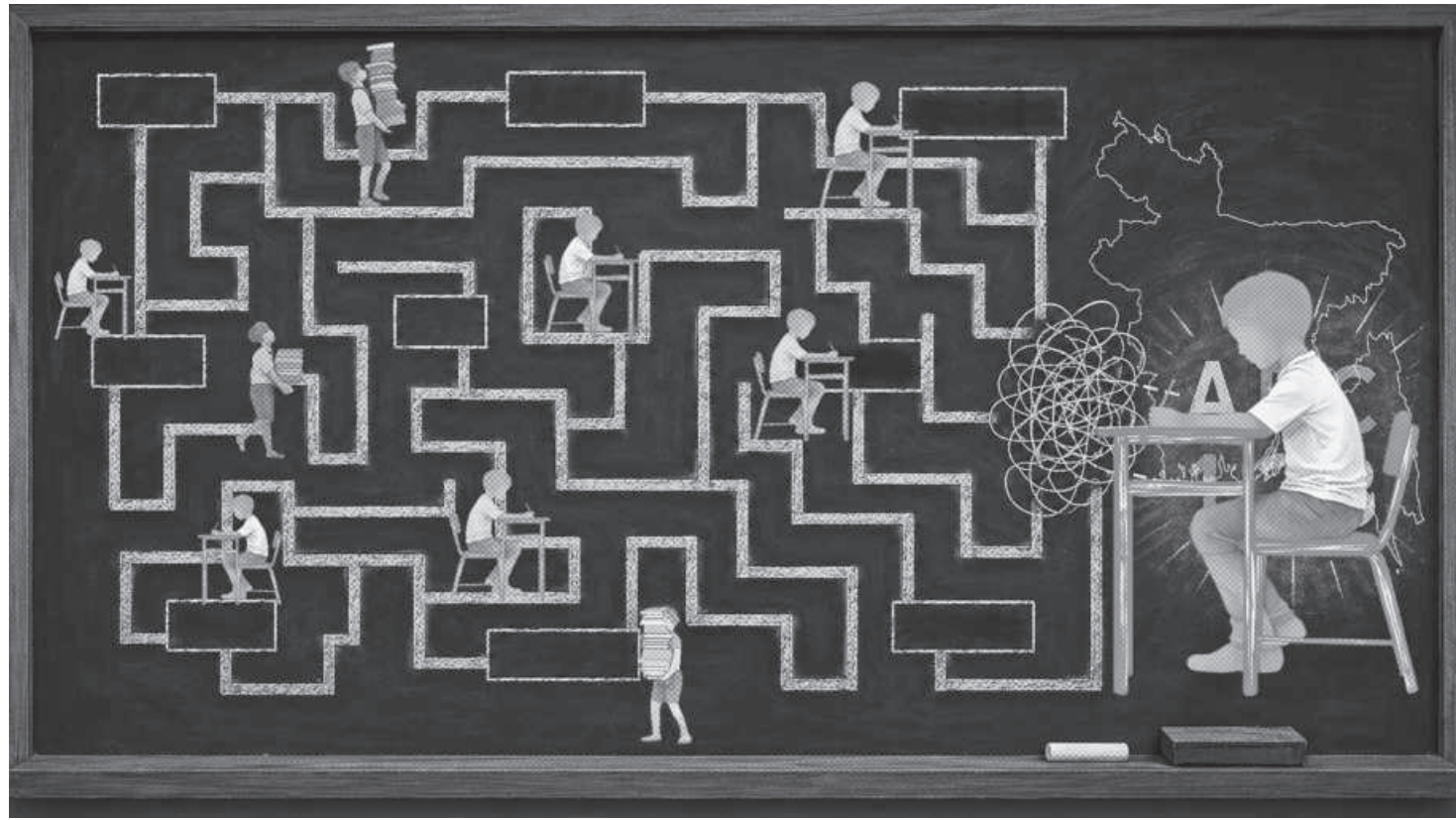
MANZOOR AHMED

That school education does not work for most of our children cannot be passed off as a hyperbole anymore. When most children cannot read, write, or count at a functional level after completing five years of primary education, how can it be called an effective system?

The situation has not arisen suddenly, and the complaints are not new. Various development projects in the education sector have been carried out with national funds and external assistance. The failures and absence of results have accumulated over decades. Can the upcoming budget for FY2026-27 portend a reversal of the trend?

With the benefit of hindsight, it can be said that the development projects labelled as sector-wide approaches (SWAs) for the comprehensive development of primary and secondary education for all children have failed to live up to their promises. The Primary Education Development Programmes (PEDPs 1 to 4) were designed to cover schools under the Directorate of Primary Education, leaving out almost half of the children, including some of the most disadvantaged groups, who do not or cannot attend government schools. Similarly, at the secondary level, at least one-third of the children attending non-government institutions and madrasas have been outside the scope of the development projects. Moreover, as it turns out, highly centralised, top-down management of project activities often did not mesh with the specific conditions and needs of schools across the country. The activities were disconnected from each other and had specific quality and equity barriers.

In each five-or-more-year project, detailed lists of activities were compiled for each area, following the 178-page manual for preparing the Development Project Proforma (DPP). A DPP is not supposed to change once approved. Funds were spent. Tick marks in monitoring reports against each activity indicated that the tasks were accomplished. The time period for every development programme was extended multiple times,



VISUAL: ANWAR SOHEL

and even then, funds remained unused. Most critically, even though claims were made of completion or major progress, the results have not been visible in student learning outcomes in schools. It is a case, as it were, of a successful surgery, but the patient died.

The education minister, state minister for primary and mass education, adviser to the prime minister on education, and the prime minister himself have spoken about the importance of education and how it is the government's priority. These are commendable expressions of intent on the new government's part. Concerned citizens and many educationists ask whether the targets and actions, and the decision-making

approach followed, will ensure that the key problems in education will receive attention and a real change in the system will happen. Some of the early decisions with an eye to symbolic actions that may catch public attention give rise to such questions.

The prime minister told a recent parliament session that education development work had been initiated in 43 areas. The number itself is not the problem. But could too many

in the classroom, seem to be the preferred strategy for improving quality. High-stakes scholarship exams in the early years are being brought back, which takes teachers' time and attention away from the majority of students. Admission tests have been proposed to replace the lottery system for school admission. Admission by test in early grades is discriminatory and promotes commercial coaching and illegal admission business.

have also been announced: school uniforms, schoolbags, and shoes for students; school meals; waiver of tuition fee for girls up to tertiary education; and "one teacher, one tab," among others. Each has a justification in its own right and can be helpful when implemented as elements of a holistic plan to achieve key objectives of quality, equity, and inclusion. The comprehensive plan and strategy, however, are still missing.

Several of the actions are intended to attract students to school, whereas the main problem is to make teaching and learning in school meaningful and attractive to students and thus keep them engaged in learning. School meals have proven to be beneficial for learning and nutrition. These have to be scaled up and managed to avert health and safety risks for children. Involvement of the local community and education NGOs can help. There is much to be done to improve teachers' skills and performance through immediate and longer-term measures. Devices and digital portals could be part of these. However, various technology initiatives, when done in isolation, have been mostly a waste of resources.

A comprehensive reform perspective focusing on selected strategic objectives is needed to bring together various initiatives within a coherent plan. The objectives that deserve particular attention should comprise:

- In every school, teachers as a team, led by the headteacher, need to develop a short-term (one-year) and a medium-term (three-year) plan for improving teaching and learning in every classroom. The team will be accountable for the visible and measurable learning outcomes of students.

- In each class, lagging students should be given remedial lessons beyond regular class hours in the school.

- It must be ensured with a time bound plan that the poverty of a family will not be an obstacle to children's participation in school.

- To achieve these objectives, upazila-based and school-based decentralised plans and programmes should be developed under national guidelines and implemented as a pilot project.

Experience suggests that a creative and innovative approach is required to move forward. Remaining bound to the present structure will not take us there. To kick-start the process, a high-level expert task force should be appointed to guide the effort. Its work will face resistance from various vested interests, which can be overcome with high-level government and political resolve.

## How did the BJP gain a stronghold in West Bengal?



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The result of the just concluded West Bengal legislative assembly election is significant not only because of the change of power but also because it marks the emergence of a new structural phenomenon in eastern India and, in addition, a new variable for Bangladesh-India relations. Winning by gaining 206 seats and nearly 46 percent of votes (an increase of almost eight percentage points from last year) was the result of not only the Bharatiya Janata Party's (BJP) electoral campaign but also its ability to consolidate its political base in one of the most problematic states for the right-wing party.

Among the reasons behind BJP's victory are obviously the powerful anti-incumbent sentiments among West Bengal's citizens. Growing concerns about lack of employment opportunities, the non-expansion of industrial enterprises, cases of corruption associated with the recruitment practices of Trinamool Congress (TMC), and the functioning of local political patronage networks contributed significantly to it. Welfare programmes,

mainly aimed at benefiting women, created a social buffer against discontent but failed to cover demands related to economic development and administration.

Moreover, the BJP succeeded in changing some elements of its previous campaign strategy. Having learned from its failures in 2021, the party made efforts to diminish its "outsider" perception by leveraging local leadership, language, and culture, while developing its organisational capabilities in North Bengal and in border areas.

A third element of the BJP's success can be attributed to changes in social coalitions on which the TMC relied before. The fact that Hindus consolidated their political preferences and there emerged some division among minorities has become a critical point. Certainly, it cannot be said that the BJP achieved its goal largely through social polarisation; however, the transformation of social coalitions became a crucial factor in this victory.

One of the most controversial features of

this election is its pre-campaign phase called Special Intensive Revision (SIR). As a result of the process, about nine million names were removed from voter rolls. It decreased the number of registered voters from around 76 million to about 68 million, with about 2.7 million people not reinstated after SIR. Though it may seem quite normal, its criteria raised significant concerns, specifically regarding "logical discrepancy."

**It would be incorrect to claim that the BJP gained victory exclusively thanks to SIR. Various factors influenced the process, including anti-incumbent sentiment, the BJP's strengthening of its organisational power, the reconfiguration of social coalitions, and the messages the party delivered to voters.**

SIR has caused a paradoxical situation. First, despite the deletion of voters' names, turnout reached nearly 93 percent. Nevertheless, in 48 constituencies, the number of registered voters decreased, representing a disproportionately large proportion of those deleted. In this case, even though the overall voter turnout increased, the competitive equilibrium shifted in certain areas where

this factor was especially important.

Having mentioned all of this, it would be incorrect to claim that the BJP gained victory exclusively thanks to SIR. Various factors influenced the process, including anti-incumbent sentiment, the BJP's strengthening of its organisational power, the reconfiguration of social coalitions, and the messages the party delivered to voters.

However, one of the main themes of the election was precisely the message dominating it. The slogan "detect, delete, deport" reflected a specific attitude towards Bangladesh and its alleged infiltration of West Bengal. These issues were directly associated with the region and its borders and thus constituted an extremely important element of BJP's strategy.

Border constituencies played a decisive role in determining the election outcome. As calculations show, 44 seats bordering Bangladesh, along with adjacent regions, proved crucial to the BJP's victory.

From the perspective of Bangladesh, the outcome of the election has significant implications as well. The Petrapole-Benapole corridor is responsible for more than 70 percent of land-based trade between Bangladesh and India. Besides, about 2.8 million people use the border region for transit each year. Therefore, political changes there affect not only the issues of border crossings, visa access, and trade facilitation, but also Bangladesh's economic interests. Although Dhaka responded

pragmatically, focusing on bilateral issues, new opportunities emerged to resolve some of them in Bangladesh's favour.

For example, the issue of the Teesta water-sharing agreement, long blocked by West Bengal's state government, may face fewer obstacles now that interests align between the state and the centre. However, further events remain unpredictable. Consequently, the post-election political situation is characterised by two contradictory features: coordination with West Bengal on specific problems and politicisation of Bangladesh-India relations, which might lead to further mutual mistrust.

Against the backdrop of unstable, somewhat fragile relations that have existed since August 2024, such a political strategy can entail adverse consequences beyond diplomatic channels. Cross-border movement and people-to-people contacts may become complicated. Since August 2024, the number of visas and medical travel permits has decreased; in addition, the use of transshipment sites has increased trade costs. The current situation may deteriorate due to a harsher line on border issues.

The West Bengal election should be seen not as an isolated phenomenon but as part of the process of political realignment in India. From the perspective of Bangladesh, its implications will be seen through a gradual change in relations depending on the extent to which electoral rhetoric turns into practical actions.

CROSSWORD  
BY THOMAS JOSEPH

- ACROSS**  
1 TV, radio, etc.  
6 Get smart  
11 Glorify  
12 Dome-shaped home  
13 Leaving in large numbers  
15 Sinking signal  
16 Museum focus  
17 Summer, in Paris  
18 Crooked  
20 Grownup  
23 Takes it easy  
27 Prudent  
28 Database option  
29 Apply, as force  
31 Account  
32 Follow the outline of  
34 Boar's mate

- 37 Flamenco cheer  
38 Greek X  
41 Kicking back  
44 Brat's opposite  
45 Cash drawers  
46 Face features  
47 Like conga lines
- DOWN**  
1 Base meal  
2 Trade fair  
3 Speaker's platform  
4 Suffering  
5 Finally  
6 Beam above a door  
7 Nest item  
8 Lotion additive  
9 Decisive defeat

10 Jot down  
14 Tick off  
18 Wide awake  
19 Squander  
20 Really impress  
21 Twice cinq  
22 Take advantage of  
24 Menagerie  
25 Drop the ball  
26 Messy room  
30 Fantasy characters  
31 Perfumes  
33 Boxing great  
34 Checkout act  
35 "Dear me!"  
36 Costume parts  
38 Soda choice  
39 Unwieldy ship  
40 Tiny  
42 Writer Harper  
43 Collins base

### YESTERDAY'S ANSWERS

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T	E	N	E	T	T	E	N	T	S
S	E	X	Y	O	R	E	S		

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