

Is Elon Musk Testing His POTUS Quotient?

The world's richest man may have bigger plans

If Elon Musk did not exist, post-Donald Trump America would have made it necessary to invent him. The SpaceX-Tesla CEO, of course, has been existing, and existing well, much before the advent of the US' last Republican president. But with Wednesday's announcement — on Twitter, of course — that he 'can no longer support [Democrats] and will vote Republican', the Musk is off. What looks like the first step of a reinvention comes in the form of disillusionment with the Democrat establishment, a party that he once supported for being '(mostly) the kindness party', and less in rousing support of the Trump School of Yahoos that put 'Make America Great Again' as its sole fulcrum.

When the richest extrovert in the world announces not just his political ideology but the political party he will vote for, he is either a Bruce Wayne, or prepping to run for presidency. For Musk, both are simultaneously possible

with his Potus as a caped crusader. For all his future-readiness, Musk is an old-style libertarian. For many, his Ayn Rand-meets-Thomas Edison approach is jarring. But for much of America tired of Democrat doublespeak, Musk represents an older, American value that has weakened under liberal



fundamentalism — capitalist anti-establishmentism. It is in a polarised US that Musk's contradictory stances stand out, ironically, as those of an arch anti-polariser.

Similarities with Trump may be cherry-picked. But where the two businessmen fundamentally differ is Musk's success as a strategic, not hell-raising, disruptor. Trump may have dialled the notch up against Democratic groupthink, but, clearly, he dialled up too much. In contrast, Musk's ongoing tryst with Twitter and the conditions he's set for the deal to go through, or his statements against war-mongering Russia (where Tesla does the business) and silence against no-free speech absolutist China (with its vast electric vehicle market) is a telling — even reassuring — sign. Musk may be testing the ground yet. But President Musk is something that America could well find itself inventing in the winter of 2024.

There is a misbalance, not an acute shortage as projected, of teachers in public schools across India

More Missed Than Missing



Sandip Datta & Geeta Gandhi Kingdon

Now that children are being vaccinated and schools are learning to live with Covid, the pressure for hiring more teachers in public schools will grow. This is likely in view of strong teacher unions and the recommendation by the New Education Policy (NEP) to appoint 1 million new teachers at the whopping cost of ₹54,000 crore a year. Before the state governments, blessed by the central education ministry proceed for such a hiring spree and bust already fragile state budgets, it is prudent to ask whether the NEP has rightly assessed the shortage.

The education ministry gives a figure of 1.035 million teacher vacancies without explaining how it got that number. Going by the 2019-20 District Information System of Education (DISE) data, the pupil-teacher ratio (PTR) in public elementary schools across India was only 25.1. Given that the Right to Education (RTE) Act mandates a maximum PTR of 30, nationally there is no teacher shortage in the sense that if students and teachers could be properly rearranged or deployed, the mandated average could be achieved without hiring any new teachers.

Applying the RTE norms — e.g., at the primary level, two teachers for all schools with '60 or fewer' pupils, and one additional teacher for every additional 30 students or a fraction of that — even to existing students and teacher allocations to schools, some schools suffer from teacher shortages, some have just the right number and some have surplus teachers.

When we relocate the surplus teachers from the last category of schools to those suffering from shortage, the net shortage is only 2.5 lakh rather than 10 lakh. In other words, three-fourths of the shortage identified by NEP is not a shortage at all.

Indeed, even the 2.5 lakh shortage figure turns out to be an overstatement once we correct for the padding up of student enrolments in the official data. As per reports by the Comptroller and Auditor General (CAG) and the Midday Meal Authority (MMA), public schools seriously overstate enrolments to get more state benefits (sweaters, bags and food grain for midday meals). As our April 2021 research (bit.ly/3woltZT) using school-wise data on students and teachers shows, a correction for this overstatement converts the net shortage of 2.5 lakh teachers into a surplus of nearly 1 lakh teachers.

Our research shows that maintaining a surplus of teachers and a PTR of 25.1, rather than the permitted maximum of 30, already costs the Indian exchequer nearly ₹29,000 crore a year in excess teacher salaries alone. If new teachers are recruited to fill the claimed 1 million teacher vacancies as per NEP recommendation, the nationwide PTR would fall further to 19.9, and would incur an additional cost of nearly ₹54,000 crore each year (in 2019 nominal terms) in teacher salaries for the following 30 years or more, since policy in India does not allow teachers to be laid off once hired.

(Only) Three Bags Full...

Over the years, a staggering number of parents have moved their children into low-fee private schools. Between 2010 and 2019, 2.7 crore pupils left public schools for private ones. This mass migration has created an extremely large number of 'mini' schools with very low PTR. By 2019, 48% of India's about 10 lakh public elementary schools were left with only '60 or fewer' pupils each. The average number of pupils in these approximately 5 lakh schools was only 31, and they had only 13.3 pupils per teacher.

The RTE Act requires that even tiny schools with '20 or fewer' pupils employ two teachers. It also prescribes no minimum size for schools, thus maintaining tiny unviable schools that provide scant socialisation opportunity to children.

Instead of appointing yet more teachers in emptying mini-fied schools, let us have fewer higher-quality schools pedagogically and economically viable



Do the math

Adding this extra cost of fresh recruitment to the existing cost of currently surplus teachers, the total extra cost of the lower PTR of 19.9 turns out to be a gargantuan ₹3,000 crore a year in 2019-20 prices. As many as 70 countries enjoy a lower GDP than this figure. Just as there is need for the consolidation of tiny agricultural holdings in India (48% of the holdings are smaller than half a hectare with the average size at just 0.23 hectare), there is a need to consolidate tiny public schools. Due to the emptying of public elementary schools, by 2019-20, there were 1.3 lakh 'tiny' public schools with only '20 or fewer' pupils. These schools had, on average, 12.7 pupils and two teachers per school, and a very low PTR of 6.7. Teacher salary expense per pupil in these schools averages ₹7,312 a month, or ₹87,852 a year, at 2019-20 prices.

Writing on the Blackboard

This nationwide problem requires GoI's intervention to incentivise the states to undertake necessary school consolidation (merging nearby public schools). For instance, no central resources should be provided for hiring new teachers in at least the 13 major states in which there is a net surplus of teachers, till they consolidate pupils into larger schools and transfer surplus teachers to nearby public schools that may have a teacher deficit.

Instead of appointing yet more teachers in emptying mini-fied schools, let us have fewer higher-quality schools that are pedagogically and economically viable, with direct benefit transfer (DBT) funding for transport to ensure that access is not jeopardised in the pursuit of quality.

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THE SPEAKING TREE

What's Your Intention?

NAJIB SHAH

Intention that one has in mind, is the first step to translating a thought into deed. The concept of intention is integral and common across religions. They all emphasise that it is the thought behind the deed which is relevant.

The Bhagwad Gita describes this as sankalpa, your resolve. Krishna states that it is not the action but the intent behind the action that matters. The concept of sankalpa also runs across Buddhism and Jainism. Right intention is considered the key towards the eightfold path.

The Semitic religions, Christianity, Islam and Judaism, emphasise the importance of pious intention as the first step towards good action and deed. In fact, they say that your deed will be weighed according to what you intended, since actions are the result of intentions. They go so far as to suggest God will pardon a mistake if intention was not bad.

'Mens Rea' meaning 'guilty mind' is statutorily required to convict a person. And it is your intention is bad that is punished. Conversely, good intentions are the first step towards good deeds. But merely having good intentions is of little use unless they are transformed by actions. As the saying goes, the road to hell is paved with intentions. A lack of determination, resolve, perseverance and persistence to transform good intentions into deeds will result in intentions remaining.