

Spend whatever required to ensure quality education: Azim Premji

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My views on allocation of funds for the education sector in the Budget are in two parts. Firstly, India should spend whatever is required to ensure quality education for every child without getting trapped in percentages. Second, but equally important, that spending the money effectively and with accountability, is absolutely critical at this stage of our nation's growth.

Our education budget has averaged 3.22% of GDP between 2003-04 and 2006-07. For a long time, economists and experts in education demanded that this budget should be at least 6% of GDP. To me, what is more relevant and important is whether we are fully funding our overall ambition of being a developed nation. Therefore, if pursuing certain critical actions to achieve quality with equity means allocating 10% of GDP as education budget, so be it. I am convinced that, as a nation, we have the ability to find funds.

The central funding for education over the past about 10 years through Sarva Shiksha Abhiyan (SSA) has shown that providing significant budgets does help create the required positive environment. That two successive governments pursued a consistent agenda in elementary education also makes an important point about the need to depoliticise education. Today, we have a situation where over 95% habitations have a school within a kilometre. Probably, the most significant effort towards equitable access was the institutionalisation of the mid-day meal. It is no secret that for a very large proportion of children, the mid-day meal is the only decent one of the day.

Providing access to a school is just one aspect. The fact is that quality of education and equity have remained elusive. This Budget and several successive Budgets must address the issues of quality of education and equity.

I strongly urge the government to consider the following issues while presenting the Budget:

- Financing the Right to Education Bill

This is a clear priority before the government and has several important features like improved teacher-pupil ratio, equitable infrastructure for all schools, continuous comprehensive evaluation of children etc. This bill cannot be implemented unless necessary financial budgets are provided for both by the Centre and states.

Special Budgetary allocation is required for the one year pre-school programme that is in-principle agreed by everyone as the vital contributor to better learning at lower primary school level.

- Financing the Rashtriya Madhyamik Shiksha Abhiyan

This 'abhiyan' has the potential to build upon what SSA has achieved so far. A token Budget of a few hundred crores was provided in the interim budget. Now, we need to provide the full necessary Budget for this programme but build in certain mechanisms to ensure that SSA's weaknesses are not repeated.

- Quality mid-day meal

The programme needs to realise its full potential by implementing the intended nutritional objectives. The current budget of about Rs 2 per meal is inadequate to provide the nutrition that is

envisaged by the government definition of intended calories, protein, fat and carbohydrate content. There is also a provision for supplying micro-nutrients -iron, folic acid and Vitamin A - which is currently not implemented. The Budget must provide for implementation of defined nutrition levels. India's citizens, who contribute a cess that is now around Rs 14,000 crore, would be happy if their money is used wisely.

- Teacher development

Currently, the Budget provides about Rs 70 per day for 20 days per teacher. Any person familiar with human development efforts would agree that such budget for residential programmes is grossly inadequate. Most organisations earmark about 6% of their salary budget for employee development. With that logic, the budget that needs to be provided for is about Rs 2,000 crore as against the current amount of about Rs 700 crore.

I now address the pressing subject of how there need to be mechanisms to ensure transparency and fiduciary control.

- Radical Improvement in Budget Utilisation

There is an urgent need to critically analyse the Budget spend in the past years. There are instances either of unspent money or of blatantly inappropriate spend patterns. For example, even in the mid-day meal scheme, where expenditure ought to be evenly distributed through the year, reports show that 62% of the funds are spent in the last quarter. Not surprisingly, 66% of SSA funds are also spent in the last quarter. This fourth quarter syndrome implies that the emphasis is on spending and not judicious utilisation. The Budget needs to provide a framework of monitoring the judiciousness of spending.

Similarly, it is not enough to increase the budget for teacher training to Rs 2,000 crore from Rs 700 crore. What is needed is to create a cadre of high- calibre academic resource persons so that the quality and content of training is significantly improved. Only then will the increased allocation have any impact. When the National Rural Employment Guarantee Scheme was launched, many feared - the scheme, was no doubt, laudable - the money would not reach the last person in rural India. But apparently it has. And we have sufficient evidence coming in from many states. So NREGs offers the education department valuable lessons on this score.

The importance of this budget is that the intentions of the ministry of human resource development are right and one is noticing an unprecedented urgency in doing things. I think this budget can make a singular contribution by articulating a national (and unambiguous) commitment to equitable education for every child on the basis of per child expenditure. Making the right provisions in the budget will establish credibility of the government in being serious about action beyond doubt.

Wipro chairman Azim Premji writes exclusively for Times of India on his wishlist for the Union Budget.