



Elections 2019: What Is Promised to Our Children? A quick look at Election Manifestoes

Over 37 per cent of the population of India is below the age of 18 years. India boasts of demographic dividend. True, they will not vote in these elections - but many will in the next and the others in the years to come. They are the citizens today and voters of tomorrow!

The falling interest has been evident over the last five years with share of the budget for children falling (4.76 % of the Budget in 2012-13 to 3.25 % in 2019-20 (Interim Budget) as well as the share of questions asked in parliament (3.9 % in 2014-15 of total questions in both houses to 3.3% in 2018-19). We have also seen regressive changes in the law such as introduction of waiver for 16-18 year old in the Juvenile Justice Act; elimination of the no detention policy. Given that in over 70% of the child sexual abuse cases, the accused is either a known person or a family member, the introduction of death penalty for child rape (below 12 years) and increase of minimum punishments has already led to judges becoming more circumspect in their orders and children turning hostile.

It is in this context that the political manifestoes and what they promise, become important. Even as the manifesto of Bahujan Samaj Party (BSP) is awaited, the following is a quick scan of the election manifestoes of 6 national parties – Indian National congress (INC), the Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP), the Communist Party of India (Marxist) (CPI (M)); Communist Party of India (CPI); Nationalist Congress Party (NCP) and All India Trinamool Congress (TMC).

The INC recognises, “the 2019 elections are crucial for India’s future and our children’s future”. Indeed, this is an important election.

However, given that the government of India since 1992, when it ratified the UN Convention on the Rights of the Child, has used the term ‘child rights’, no manifesto except CPI uses this term. What is also surprising is the absence of the mention of the Sustainable Development Goals that government of India has adopted at the centre and the states. Most manifestoes continue to talk of women and children together- despite the country having adopted separate policies and plans for these two categories over the years. None of the manifestoes find it important to even refer to the National Policy for Children, 2013 or the National Plan of Action, 2016.

While every party mentions the need for special attention to the girl child, none of them mention falling sex ratio.

Given the current attention on children in institutions it is not surprising that the only substantive mention in the context of child protection in the BJP manifesto relates to child care institutions – *“We will formulate a comprehensive Child Protection Framework to facilitate the setting up of standards and robust inspection and monitoring of child care*

institutions across India.” Other parties too have taken cognizance of increasing violence against children.

Congress promises improvement in Child Protection Services with a focus on vulnerable groups of children, increase in the number of Protection of Children from Sexual Offences (POCSO) courts and fast track trials, and better after-care and rehabilitation services towards child victims. CPI (M) also promise effective steps to trace missing children ensuring public reporting of the status of search, strict implementation of the POCSO Act, provision of shelter and social services to street children, and reform of the juvenile justice system and institutions towards helping minors to reintegrate into society as responsible citizens. CPI promises about ensuring that all schools remain free from violence and abuse, stringent provisions to stop trafficking of children and strict monitoring and implementation of all laws related to children.

The amendment to the child labour law was a matter of great debate and discussion. However, only CPI-M and NCP have specifically addressed this issue. CPI (M) promises to ban all forms of child labour through amendment in the Child Labour Prohibition and Regulation Act to remove the distinction between hazardous and non-hazardous work. NCP promises eradication of child labour with a proper rehabilitation policy and strengthening of the POCSO Act. It has recognised the vulnerability of children in the entertainment industry.

Given the controversy around the juvenile justice law, and every party having an opinion on it, it is interesting to find only CPI (M) mentioning it in their manifesto.

The share of children in the Union Budget has been falling over the years. In this context is it not surprising that only NCP mentions budget- *“Adequate budgetary allocation will be done for child welfare and for children with special needs and children in need of care and protection”*. The only mention of budgets has come from the CPI promising to increase government expenditure on education to 10% of the GDP and Trinamool, promising to increase the education budget from the current 3% (3.24%) to 6% of GDP and the health budget to 4.5% of GDP. Child Protection being under-resourced finds no mention in any of the manifestoes despite promises for some action.

Right to education was adopted as a law in 2009, promising free and compulsory education up to the age of 14 years. The hope was that over the years this right will be extended to all children. After a decade of adoption of the law, only three parties –the INC, CPI and NCP are promising children education up to the age of 18 years. The BJP does not mention right to education for all children. It merely promises to improve the quality of children’s learning through training and capacity building of the teachers and to initiate yet another one of those ‘Prime Minister XXX’ schemes - the ‘Prime Minister Innovative Learning Program(me)’. This one however, is only for the *“talented”* children who will be brought together from all over the country in one place for a certain period each year to provide them facilities and resources to excel. The not so talented will continue to fall by the way side. BJP also promises to expand the use of technology in classrooms, as well as to initiate smart classes in the secondary level. Finally, BJP promises to open 200 more Kendriya Vidyalayas and Navodaya Vidyalayas by 2014.

Over the last few years, there has been a decrease in the allocations in schemes for SC, ST and OBC children (e.g. Post Matric Scholarship Scheme for SCs reduced by 60%; Girls Hostel for SCs reduced by 40.32 %; Post Matric Scholarship for OBCs reduced by 17.35% and Boys and Girls Hostel for OBCs reduced by 40 %). In this context, it is only the CPI (M) that has promised specific measures including setting up of residential schools and hostels with modern facilities for scheduled tribe and scheduled caste children. NCP has drawn attention to pre-primary and primary education as well as education of girl child, especially from minority sections.

Right to health remains a distant dream. Access to health care is becoming more and more difficult. In this scenario, it is heartening to see right to health being recognised by INC, CPI (M) and INC. BJP promises to continue with Ayushman Bharat and TMC with Health for All.

BJP also promises full immunization coverage for all the children by 2022, forgetting that it had set a deadline of 2021 in the National Plan of Action for Children, 2016. CPI-M promises complete coverage of immunization, regular health check-ups and quick referral services.

INC, BJP and CPI (M) have recognised the importance of childcare. INC promises to expand the ICDS programme, increase in the number of Anganwadis and inclusion of crèche in Anganwadis to provide day care to small children. Similarly, CPI-M promises to expand ICDS programme and to provide crèche facilities in Anganwadi centres. BJP also promises to strengthen the crèche programme with special focus on the needs of parents employed in the unorganized sector. Furthermore, they promise to increase the childcare facilities three fold by 2022. NCP promises better services in the field of maternal and child health.

38% of children under age five years are stunted; 21 % of children under age five years are wasted, and 36% of children under age five years are underweight - these are all signs of malnutrition and hunger! INC promises expansion of Integrated Child Development Services (ICDS) and Mid-Day Meal Scheme, and increased funding for both. CPI-M promises complete coverage of supplementary nutrition services and universalisation of ICDS programme for children in the age group 0-6 years to ensure nutritious meals for them. CPI promises to end all forms of malnutrition and to achieve the internationally agreed nutrition targets for children and adolescent girls. BJP promises to reduce malnutrition through its existing *poshan abhiyaan*.

Children's Manifesto by Inclusive National Children's Parliament OUR INDIA OUR VOICE has been put out by Nine is Mine coalition. It has identified among others, non-discrimination, the need to be inclusive and the right to play and playgrounds as important demands.

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