



#### 4. **Who Turns the Mind to Stone?** **Credentialism, Political Cognition & the Crisis of Critical Thinking in Contemporary Democracy**

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*The controversy surrounding the educational degree of Prime Minister Narendra Modi periodically returns to public discussion. It began with Arvind Kejriwal and the Aam Aadmi Party (AAP), earned little political mileage, gradually weakened, and has now been revived by CJP, reportedly founded by a former associate of Kejriwal, echoing many of his earlier arguments. The controversy is not only back, but growing stronger through amplification by Cockroach Janata Party (CJP) among Gen-Z audiences.*

#### **Does a Degree Qualify a Leader?**

Why does Arvind Kejriwal repeatedly raise the issue of Narendra Modi's degree? I do not know his mind, nor am I interested in judging his motives. However, some facts are worth noting. Kejriwal is an IIT graduate, a former IRS officer, and a person whose educational credentials are frequently highlighted. Narendra Modi, on the other hand, rose through a very different route, one in which documentary proof of educational qualifications is not a mandate. Despite the difference in educational backgrounds, Modi succeeded in becoming Prime Minister and has been elected to that office three times. Kejriwal's direct challenge to Modi in Varanasi ended in a decisive defeat. Thereafter, the question of Modi's degree became a recurring political issue. Whether the allegation is true or false is not my concern. My interest lies elsewhere: what makes a person attach such importance to another's degree?

We see political opponents revive the issue, supporters dismiss it, and social media amplifies it. Yet one question remains: Is this issue truly important for the future of the country?

For me, the question is largely irrelevant. Whether Narendra Modi possesses a particular degree or not does not change the fact that he has been elected Prime Minister three times by the people of India. Elections are not university examinations. Citizens do not vote for a certificate; they vote for [www.theresearchers.asia](http://www.theresearchers.asia)

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leadership, judgment, vision, and performance. A degree may be useful, but it is neither the only measure of knowledge nor a guarantee of wisdom.

### **Hubris Behind the Debate**

The answer may lie in a common feature of human nature. People often evaluate others through the standards they value most in themselves. A scholar respects scholarship, a wealthy person respects wealth, a warrior respects courage, and a highly educated person may naturally place great value on educational qualifications. When a person who possesses such qualifications encounters someone who achieves greater success without what he regards an essential credential, a psychological tension may arise. The focus then shifts from explaining the other's success to questioning his qualifications. In this sense, Kejriwal's emphasis on Modi's degree can be viewed not merely as a political strategy but also as an illustration of a broader human tendency. The issue ceases to be about a certificate and becomes a window into how pride, rivalry, disappointment, and deeply held beliefs influence human judgment.

This is why I find the debate over degrees less interesting than the debate over minds. A degree may impart specialised knowledge, but leadership, public trust, practical wisdom, communication skills, and the ability to inspire millions are qualities that cannot be measured by certificates alone. History is full of examples of extraordinary individuals whose influence far exceeded their formal educational attainments. The real question, therefore, is not whether a leader possesses a particular degree, but why societies sometimes become so obsessed with credentials that they overlook performance, experience, and public acceptance.

When that happens, the debate ceases to be about education and becomes a question of whether minds have turned to stone.

### **Degree, Knowledge and Understanding Are Not the Same**

Modern society often treats degrees as the highest proof of intelligence. This assumption is mistaken. A degree certifies that a person has completed a course of study in a particular discipline. It does not certify complete knowledge, sound judgment, creativity, leadership, patriotism, or practical wisdom; even knowledgeable in all branches of knowledge in the discipline.

The ability to govern a nation requires understanding history, economics, society, diplomacy, administration, technology, culture, and human behaviour. No single university degree can provide mastery over all these fields. Much of this knowledge comes from experience, self-learning, observation, reading, and interaction with society.

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History provides many examples of influential thinkers and leaders whose greatness did not depend upon formal degrees. Spiritual teachers, reformers, writers, and statesmen have often acquired knowledge through lifelong learning rather than through formal certification. The value of a person should therefore be judged by character, understanding, and contribution rather than by a certificate alone.

### **A Disturbing Trend Among the Youth**

What concerns me is not the debate about a politician's degree but the quality of public understanding among some young people.

In recent years, television interviews and social media clips have revealed an alarming tendency. Many young people repeat political slogans without understanding the facts behind them. Some confidently express opinions on complex economic, educational, or political matters while possessing very little knowledge about the subjects they discuss.

One hears statements such as: “The GDP has fallen because the Prime Minister has no degree.” Yet when asked what GDP means or where exactly it has fallen, the speaker often cannot explain. Others participate in protests without clearly understanding the issue, in fact beating about the bushes, being protested. Their opinions are frequently borrowed rather than formed through independent thought.

The problem is not ignorance alone. Ignorance can be corrected through learning. The real problem is creation of the illusion of knowledge, the belief that repeating a slogan is equivalent to understanding an issue.

### **Lesson from the Panchatantra**

This reminds one of a famous tale. The unquestioning acceptance of claims on social media resembles the Panchatantra tale of "Budhia Died". A washerman's donkey named Budhia (literarily meaning wise) died. The washerman cried because the animal had helped him earn his livelihood. People who saw him crying asked what had happened. They heard only that “Budhia has died” and began crying themselves. Soon the news spread from street to street to the palace. Eventually even important people, like the King and the Queen, mourned without knowing who Budhia was. Only later did the Minister ask a simple question: Who was Budhia, then all discover that Budhia was merely a donkey. The story illustrates a timeless truth. People often repeat information without examining it. They react emotionally before they understand the facts. In the age of social media, this tendency has become even stronger. *Rumours, half-truths, and slogans travel faster than careful reasoning.*

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### **Who Turned This Man into Stone?**

At this point I am reminded of Godabarish Mohapatra's famous Odia story *E Manishaku Pathar Kala Kie?* (“Who Turned This Man into Stone?”).

The story narrates the life of Bhima Das, a stone-cutter who spends his life breaking stones for the construction of palaces, temples, and monuments. Years of harsh and repetitive labour gradually rob him of sensitivity, joy, and emotional richness. In a symbolic sense, he himself becomes like stone.

The original story criticises social and economic conditions that dehumanise workers. Yet its central metaphor can also be applied to another phenomenon: the hardening of the human mind.

Just as endless stone-cutting can turn a man into stone, endless exposure to misinformation, propaganda, prejudice, and slogans can turn the mind into stone. A person repeatedly fed distorted information may gradually lose the habit of questioning. He may stop examining evidence, stop listening to alternative views, and stop thinking independently.

The story therefore inspires a broader question: Who turns the mind into stone?

### **Conditioned Mind and the Loss of Critical Thinking**

Every political group attempts to influence public opinion. This is not unique to any one party or ideology. The danger arises when persuasion is replaced by conditioning.

A conditioned mind does not ask questions. It merely repeats answers supplied by others. It becomes emotionally attached to slogans and hostile to facts that challenge its beliefs.

When this happens, young people cease to be learners and become carriers of borrowed and vested opinions. Their education may continue, degrees may accumulate, but genuine understanding remains absent.

The purpose of education is not to produce ideological followers. It is to cultivate critical thinking, intellectual honesty, curiosity, and the ability to distinguish truth from falsehood.

### **The Obsession with Degrees**

Those who continuously attack political opponents over educational qualifications often assume that a degree is the ultimate measure of competence. Reality suggests otherwise.

If degrees alone guaranteed success, every highly educated person would become an outstanding leader. History does not support such a conclusion. Some highly qualified individuals have failed in



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public life, while others with modest educational backgrounds have demonstrated remarkable leadership.

Similarly, degrees do not automatically create honesty, integrity, patriotism, courage, or dedication to public service. Nor do they prevent corruption, arrogance, extremism, or poor judgment.

A university can teach a subject. It cannot guarantee character.

Therefore, the central question should not be whether a leader possesses a particular degree certificate. The more important questions are: What policies does the leader pursue? What results are achieved? How effectively are national challenges addressed? How does the leader respond to crises? What vision is offered for the future?

### **Knowledge in the Age of Self-Learning**

The modern world has transformed the nature of learning. Knowledge is no longer confined to classrooms and universities. Books, digital resources, lectures, archives, and research materials are available to anyone willing to learn.

Today, self-learning is recognised as an essential skill. Individuals routinely acquire expertise beyond their formal academic backgrounds. Engineers study history. Historians learn economics. Administrators read psychology. Scientists explore philosophy.

Therefore, it is entirely possible for a person to develop broad knowledge through continuous learning even outside formal academic structures.

The true divide is not between degree holders and non-degree holders. It is between those who continue learning and those who stop learning.

### **What Should the Youth Learn?**

The energy of the youth is one of the greatest assets of a nation. Unfortunately, much of that energy is increasingly consumed by political gossip, social media outrage, and endless controversies.

Young people deserve better.

They should be encouraged to understand economics rather than merely repeat economic slogans. They should learn constitutional principles rather than blindly support the slogan of political camps: *the Constitution is in danger*, *Democracy is in danger*, etc. They should study history critically rather than accept simplified narratives. They should analyse data, verify claims, and distinguish facts from opinions.

Most importantly, they should cultivate the courage to think independently.

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A nation advances not because its citizens repeat of political slogans, but because they acquire knowledge, develop skills, innovate, and contribute to society.

### **Conclusion**

The debate about Narendra Modi's degree ultimately distracts from a far more important issue. The real challenge before India is not the educational qualification of one individual but the intellectual condition of its citizens.

When young minds become dependent on slogans rather than reasoning, on propaganda rather than evidence, and on emotional reactions rather than informed judgment, society suffers. Such minds become like the stone in Godabarish Mohapatra's story: hard, unreflective, and resistant to truth.

The question before us is therefore not whether a political leader possesses a degree. The more urgent question is: Who is shaping the minds of our youth, and what kind of citizens are they becoming?

A healthy democracy requires informed citizens, not merely opinionated ones. Nation-building demands knowledge, critical thinking, responsibility, and intellectual independence. These qualities matter far more than any certificate hanging on a wall.