

Burden of Exams

Recent debates on examination reform will achieve little in the coming years unless sustained by political will and assistance from civil society. The latter is at best minimal because civil society's grievances against the exam system are 'seasonal' and minor in nature; it is still to perceive that the present system of education and examination itself is a major hindrance for child development.

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The history of exam-time stress is probably as old as the system of public examination, but the spilling of competitive culture into every aspect of childhood has made things worse over the years. The faces of children on the firing line in TV programmes like *India's Child Genius* display reckless and forced enthusiasm backed by visible stress and the fear of failing at the moment of judgment. School life in metropolitan India begins with an interview for which four year-olds are coached. At the other end, the coaching industry has cracked the code of the country's most prestigious institutes of technology and management. The best coached, and not necessarily the most creative, teenagers end up getting into the merit list which also serves as the social roster for top-end dowry and other fruits. No wonder parents invest, to the best of their capacity, and often beyond it, in

admission to coaching institutes which promote themselves by flaunting the names of institutes they usher their clients into. Children realise how much their parents' happiness depends on the results of entrance tests in which lakhs appear and only a few hundreds are taken. But the conventional class XII examination is no less emotionally charged and stressful. The three hours in which one has to show the proof of one's hard work present a now-or-never kind of challenge; institutional arrangements ensure that no one appears for the exam in his or her own school; paper setters, evaluators are all masked. The child is reduced to a roll number, even her library card and other links with the school she studied in for years are withdrawn. The whole operation has the spirit of a district magistrate managing a curfew, with policemen substituted by invigilators.

The recent meeting called by the HRD minister to discuss exam reforms brought out quite a few questions but also revealed

why the prospect of reform arouses instant doubts and resistance. Procedural matters like giving children more than one chance or more time to complete an exam paper elicit the fear that quality would decline. Changing the typology of questions inspires immediate warnings that rigour must not be sacrificed. For just about every reform idea mentioned at the meeting there were plenty of reminders that the system was doing well if we notice how many of our young engineers and managers gain success and fame abroad. It was left to Yashpal to remind the gathering that the handful of Indians who do well abroad can hardly serve as the yardstick for judging the system in a country so large and vast as ours. He also discussed the effort currently underway to make the curriculum more flexible, with the boundaries between subjects and between the child's life at school and outside the school (the 'framing' of knowledge as the late Basil Bernstein called it) softened. This ambitious project can hardly succeed unless the exam system is radically reformed, starting with small steps like increasing the frequency of public

examinations so that children can stagger their encounter with different papers, offering longer time limit for completing a paper, changing the pattern of questions so they cannot be answered from any specific textbook, discouraging schools from oppressing children with pre-boards and so on. The presentation made by Cyrus Vakil, who has led the NCERT's focus group on examination reforms, highlighted some subtler recommendations which, if implemented, would make 'success' in an exam more specific and thereby reduce the percentage of those who would qualify to be called 'fail'. What happens to these recommendations would now depend on the degree to which boards of education come together to implement reform ideas, some of which have been waiting for half a century.

Structural limits to which the examination system can be reformed have significance for the choice of strategies, their depth and the fixing of time horizons. The issue of stress has an immediate and familiar ring, so it is a useful choice as an entry point, but it cannot serve for long

without major academic support for the reform effort and sustained political will to break the vast rocks of systemic inertia and professional cynicism. The feeling that nothing much will happen is rampant within the very organisations which are expected to initiate and pursue reforms. Equally strong is the feeling that nothing much can be done, and this feeling has the support of professionals who give primacy to structural factors in their analysis. Such analysts have a valid point when they say that an eliminative exam system enables the social order to control the tensions arising from the scarcity of opportunities. However, this argument does not explain why question quality is poor even at higher levels of education where the examinations can be truly evaluative because competition among candidates is relatively irrelevant. Indeed, compared to school boards as a whole, university exams have remained intrinsically more backward.

Between systemic inertia and structuralist logic, there is the fear of rocking the boat and managing the process of change

in so vast a system. For introducing internal assessment in higher secondary schools, monitorial detail to ensure fairness will present a formidable challenge, not to speak of inbuilt corruption and interests vested in the present system. These factors may have their best chances for putting up a strong resistance to reforms in the context of entrance tests for prestigious technological and medical institutes and the coaching outfits which regulate admission through unregulated market mechanisms. The coaching industry has taken over not just the entrance rites of professional institutions but the entire school system, from kindergarten upwards. This is the real face of the political economy of education in a highly stratified society with a democratic system of governance. Political awakening raises popular aspirations, formal education keeps them down with the

remarkably resilient mechanism of the examination system. It does need reform, at least as a step to strengthen democracy. How much energy goes into the reform process and what results are achieved over the coming years will depend on the sustenance of political will and assistance from civil society. It would be fair to say that for the time being, the first seems evident, but the second factor continues to be scarce, perhaps because civil society overlaps with the dominant strata whose grievance against the examination system is mainly seasonal and of a minor nature, comparable to the numerous other irritants in family life. India's civil society is a considerable distance away from seeing the present system of education and examination as a major hindrance for development. [47]

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