

Do exams throttle India's education system?

PARLEY

The stress on rote learning instead of critical thinking continues, unlike in European systems

The importance accorded to school-leaving examinations in India puts enormous pressure on students to score the highest possible marks. Bagging a rank among lakhs of students is accepted widely as a mark of excellence. But how scientific is the examination system at determining the progress of students? In a conversation moderated by G. Ananthakrishnan, Krishna Kumar and Rohit Dhankar talk about the education system and possible reforms. Edited excerpts:

The school-leaving exam is a defining one in the life of a student. What outcomes do these exams actually achieve?

Krishna Kumar: This examination system is something that reminds us of the beginnings of the modern education system in India. The school-leaving examination was designed in the latter half of the 19th century as a way to determine who can be selected for further education, which was very scarce at that time, and also for lower-level jobs in offices. It was basically a means of elimination. And it has remained that all the way up to now. The Grade 10 exam, for instance, fails a large number of children and stops them from going any further. This is a kind of structural arrangement in a system in which secondary education is not very widespread and higher secondary education is even less so. Opportunities for further education at the undergraduate level or various kinds of technical education are also relatively scarce. So, the exam system acts as a custodian which doesn't permit a vast number of children to go forward. It has acquired its legitimacy over the century, and therefore it is not questioned, but it has very little scientific basis, and it is not a system of any kind of valid assessment of the potential of a young person. Rather, it is a means of keeping out [children]. In what manner can you be stopped from going further? Grade 10 is the most draconian barrier, Grade 12 also fails a large number of children. That is one function of the examination system. The other big function is to create an illusion of equal opportunity in an otherwise highly unequal society. It is in the exam

that all children – no matter what their background is, or whether they study in a posh school or a poor school – face the same test of three hours. Their names are turned into roll numbers. The identity of paper-setters and evaluators is not revealed. Thus, confidentiality enhances the legitimacy of a situation where children from contrasting circumstances are given an equal-looking opportunity.

Rohit Dhankar: I agree. The problem is well-known for quite some time. The first mention of the educational system being throttled by exams was in 1904 in the Indian Educational Policy, at the time formulated by the Governor General in Council. After that this was mentioned in every commission and report. They always try to say exams should be reformed and something should be done about it. As far as reliability of children's understanding, acquiring knowledge and ways of formulating knowledge are concerned, I don't think the examination system leaves much scope. Children do acquire snippets of information, but whether they construct that into knowledge remains seriously doubtful. I feel that this is also an outcome of intense competition in society. As long as the school structure and the structure of the curriculum remain as it is today, where every child has to finish certain kinds of learning in a given time, and at the same time the possibility of children exploring on their own is limited, it seems that the exam system cannot be changed.

If one changes these two things – the structure of the school and the curriculum – and somehow an alternative way is found which ameliorates the high competition in the parents' mind, there is a possibility of reforming the system in such a manner that it is more insightful and less stressful.

How does India's exam system compare with the systems of other countries?

KK: Our system compares very poorly with the evaluation and assessment systems which are in place in other societies, including



S. SUBRAMANIAM

European and North American societies as well as China. These societies have reformed their evaluation systems from within by improving teachers' understanding of what they are looking for in a child right from the start. In our case, we don't equip our teachers with a deep understanding of how children learn and how to assess a child's growth. Our system right from the beginning becomes intensely competitive and stressful and starts promoting cramming as a way to move forward with high marks.

A recent attempt made in the Right to Education (RTE) Act to introduce Continuous and Comprehensive Evaluation (CCE) was an important step but this was not welcomed by a large number of schools and State authorities. And the idea that the RTE introduced – that we will not have a Board examination up to Grade 8 – has now been amended by Parliament. States are now once again free to introduce a Board exam. Some have already moved towards that by reintroducing at Grade 5 and Grade 8 levels an exam that can classify children into pass and fail categories. This was the old system. This reversal of a progressive step that the RTE had taken also shows how accustomed our system is to this old and rigid practice of examining children one against the other. And how dependent it is on certain time-honoured skills like cramming and preparing for an exam through coaching.

In comparison, European systems, including the British system on which we were modelled originally, have moved on to far more holistic and humanistic ways of as-

Unfortunately, the National Education Policy draft doesn't look at the phenomenon of improving the institutional functioning of the Boards.

sessing each child's own growth trajectory right from the beginning. Even where there are public exams, they are taken with much greater care for objectivity and justice for every child. The GCSE [General Certificate of Secondary Education] in Britain, for example, makes sure that each child's work and performance gets a fair chance to be assessed properly by more than one evaluator. Internal reforms in the system in these directions have taken place in all those societies and they have been ignored in India.

You have written about the role played by model answers coming in the way of students creatively answering an exam question. Could you tell us how it affects the process?

KK: These model answers are prepared to provide the evaluator with a yardstick to see how many marks will be given to a child's answer. So, since the whole process is so hurried, the evaluator looks at the model answer, and looks for an exact replication of that in the child's answer sheet. If a child has written something sensible in slightly different words – for instance, instead of the word 'architecture', if a child has used the word 'structure' – the evaluator will strike off a mark simply because the model answer says the correct answer should use the

word 'architecture'. The model answer is rigidly applied and thereby the chances of any justice being done to a child's original answer which carries the child's own creative use of language or her own way of expressing something is likely to be ignored – not just ignored but punished and evaluated poorly. Sometimes so poorly that gross injustice is done to the child's answer.

RD: I have some information about the assessment systems in Finland, the U.K., and some States in the U.S. When we compare some of these systems, one or two things stand out clearly. A kind of continuous assessment which feeds back into the teaching-learning process and a kind of taking care of the child's continuous progress is in place.

The second and more important thing, perhaps, is that in the public exam, the questions are on concepts, critical thinking and various ways of looking at the avenues of knowledge, and [there are] criteria for judging the veracity of that knowledge. Our emphasis is on speedy reproduction of information. It seems that the approach of looking at the conceptual side and critical analysis and justification is a much more constructive and better way for the child's learning.

Our system is rigid. We never give adequate time for these ideas to take root in an institution. We think that a document when prepared and given to the Board, it [the Board] has the capability to translate that document into action, which is not the case. Similarly, we never pay attention to helping the teacher understand the new system. Giving certain words and ideas to people is one thing, and exploring with teachers what their views, assumptions are, and what the problems are with that understanding and how to move to a better understanding has never happened.

In the draft National Education Policy 2019, there is an idea that we can shift to modular exams rather than one single exam. Is this actual reform?

KK: This idea has been given many times earlier. And the National Institute of Open Schooling does provide the facility for taking one subject at a time, when completing your examination process over three-four

years if necessary. I don't think this idea is going to make any impact on this very highly competitive system.

In fact, the draft policy has ignored a number of very good reforms within the various Boards that have been recommended over the last 20-25 years. Many of the Boards don't have adequate staff, enough academic faculty to monitor their own procedures. Many of the State Boards are actually in very poor shape as far as their academic infrastructure is concerned. Even the CBSE and ICSE operate as bureaucratic, mechanical set-ups. Unfortunately, the policy draft doesn't even look at this phenomenon of improving the institutional functioning of the Boards.

RD: Exam reform doesn't come alone in the draft education policy; it comes along with the changes recommended in structure, curriculum, choice of subjects. A lot is written about curriculum reform. At this moment, in the first reading, it was somewhat confused, and talks of too many things simultaneously and repetitively. For example, if we give more flexibility to children at the secondary level [it proposes to do away with secondary-senior secondary distinction] with eight semesters and around 40 courses, for 24 courses students should take Board exams. With how much understanding I don't know, but they also say the exam will shift from testing rote memory to basic concepts and their relevance to life, situations and problem-solving. If the bulk of the recommendations are implemented, then there seems to be a possibility that we will get a kinder and better assessment system.

But I must point out that on the curricular reforms to the subjects, for example, there are 14 or 15 different kinds of courses and subjects for 6th to 8th standard students, but there doesn't seem to be that much room in the time table. So, at this moment it seems the situation is not very clear. However, as far as examinations are concerned, if the policy understands what they are writing, the emphasis is more on the fundamental concepts in subjects and more on understanding. Through a modular kind of Board exam, it might help. But then this comes along with a whole bunch of recommendations, and piecemeal implementation is not going to help.



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SINGLE FILE

Competing icons

The controversy over a statue in Bangalore University exposes fault lines in an old assumption

TANU KULKARNI



K. MURALI KUMAR

The run-up to the Lok Sabha election saw a furore over a bunch of miscreants vandalising the bust of Ishwar Chandra Vidyasagar on a Kolkata college campus. Meanwhile, what has gone mostly unnoticed by the national media is a controversy over the installation of a statue in the State-run Bangalore University campus.

It all began in early May after the Postgraduate and PhD Students' Association, aided by some of the faculty members, decided to install a statue of the Buddha on the campus. What made this move particularly controversial was the fact that they wanted it installed in the place where there was a Saraswati idol. The Buddha statue was allegedly brought in when the old Saraswati statue, which was damaged by accident, was removed to be replaced with a new one. They argued that the Buddha deserves a place on the campus as a "secular symbol". Students from Scheduled Caste, Schedule Tribe and Other Backward Classes communities said that this was the only way they could show dissent against the university officials they alleged were propagating one religious ideology on the campus. They claimed that the Vice Chancellor of the university was taking keen interest in this and was even personally bearing the cost of installing the new Saraswati statue.

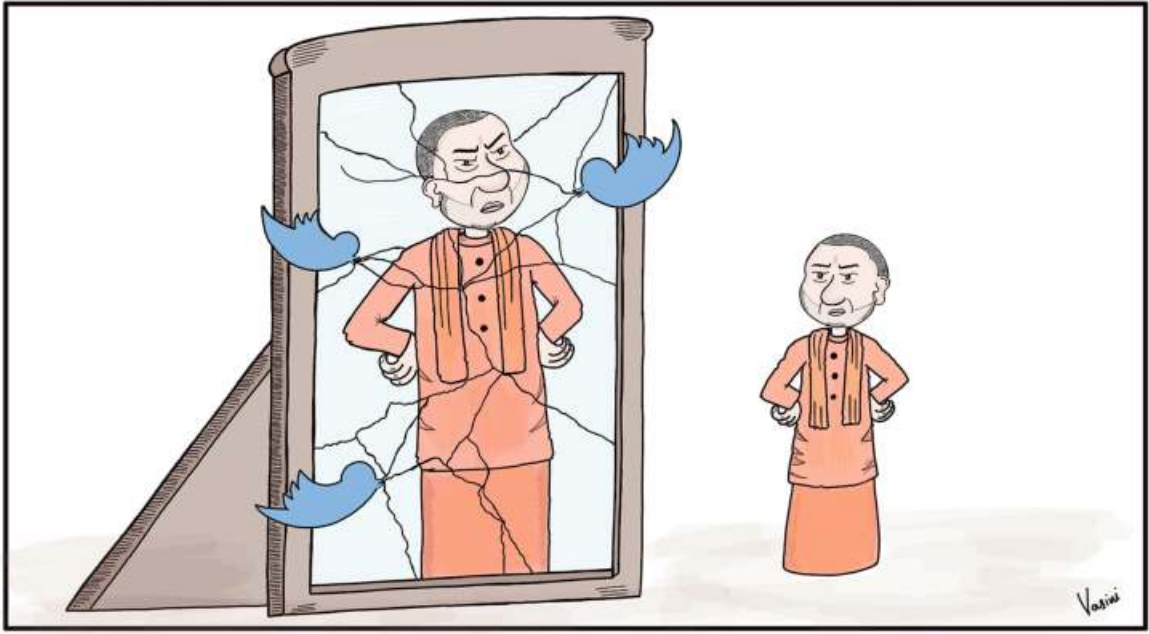
After some tense moments, authorities approached the police who cordoned off the place and deployed personnel to keep watch. The university also formed a sub-committee to examine where the Buddha statue should find a place on the campus. Given the sensitivity of the issue and its potential to blow up, the university authorities eventually arrived at a compromise and said that both statues would find a place next to each other.

However, this was not the end of the story. Several groups started demanding that statues of several other icons, including Mahatma Gandhi, Kanaka Dasa, Basaveshwara, Shishunala Sharif, Kempe Gowda and M.D. Nanjundaswamy, also be given a place on the campus. The authorities decided to deliberate upon the matter in the syndicate, the university's highest decision-making body.

Now, in a new twist, Karnataka's Higher Education Minister G.T. Deve Gowda has decided to say no to any new statue installation across campuses in the State, while adding that old statues will remain. This means that the statue of Saraswati will stay on the Bangalore University campus while the Buddha's statue will not find a place.

This episode has yet again raised the larger issue of idols and pictures of Hindu gods and goddesses routinely finding a place in several 'secular' government or government-aided institutions. While their presence is assumed to be 'normal', the statue controversy in Bangalore University has exposed the fault lines underlying this assumption.

Tanu Kulkarni is with The Hindu in Bengaluru



NOTEBOOK

Tracking caste in reporting

Caste is a reality that provides context to political stories

B. KOLAPPAN

When I applied for a job as a reporter at a Tamil publication many years ago, the editor who hired me asked about my caste. I was not shocked by the question as I was brought up in a rural area where caste was an everyday reality, but I was embarrassed. He said, "As a journalist you must know every possible detail of a person, including his caste. Caste is a reality and knowing about it will add to your perspective as a journalist."

He was perhaps training me to ask that very uncomfortable question to all my interviewees over the span of my career. As he said, caste informs everyday living: work, culture and eating choices, as seen in the recent report that an anganwadi worker in Tamil Nadu was transferred because caste Hindus refused to eat food prepared by a Scheduled Caste woman.

The cultural aspect has always interested me. Though Tamil Nadu is the land of Dravidian ideals, and its leaders boast of arresting the entry of Hindutva forces, casteism is as entrenched as the Dravidian movement itself. While there is an ugly side to this which most are forced to face, I have discovered as a journalist many forms of music in Tamil Nadu, each associated with a specific community, which shows what a variety of musical forms we have in a State where one 'season' of culture is only associated with the Brahmins and Isai Vellalas.

I didn't know, for instance, that A.N. Sattanathan, the first chairman of the Tamil Nadu Backward Classes Commission, belonged to the Padayachi community. It was only when I read his book, *Plain Speaking a Sudra's Story*, that I realised that his father

was a nagaswaram player. He details in the book the struggles that his father underwent in his career. I enjoy listening to Amabasamudram M.A. Durairaj, who is also from the same community.

The community of Dalits and barbers also have produced excellent musicians. Kambhar is one community that performs poojas at the Kali temple and plays the nagaswaram and the tavil. Kaniyaan koothu is performed by Kaniyaans, a community that is now included in the list of Scheduled Tribes. While this art form has helped them enter government service, the art is not able to get adequate performing artistes from the community. Today many of those who dance for the koothu are from other communities.

Once I asked a group of youth who were performing thappu at a temple festival their caste. "We are

Dalits. But we will play only at temples, not at funeral processions," they said, clearly telling me where the lines are drawn.

The role of caste is so paramount in politics, too, that a journalist cannot do justice to his reporting unless he is aware of the caste structure, especially since caste organisations often masquerade as political organisations.

Caste also determines appointments. Once, when a Vice Chancellor was appointed to the Tamil University in Thanjavur, the same Tamil editor asked me whether I knew the background of the person. When I mentioned his caste along with other details, he told me, "His caste also played an important role in getting him the post." As a journalist, one realises that it is not the use of the caste that is important, but the context within which it is used in the story.

FROM The Hindu. ARCHIVES

FIFTY YEARS AGO JUNE 14, 1969

Russia has missiles aimed at China

The Soviet Union has positioned 300 nuclear missiles in Mongolia aimed at China's Sinkiang province which holds the nation's key nuclear installations, defence sources here [London] said to-day [June 13]. The sources said the Russians also were extending considerably their air base system in the Far East, notably in Siberia. The moves were seen as part of Moscow's latest determined anti-Chinese build-up, designed, according to Communist sources, primarily as a deterrent against any possible anti-Soviet venture of Communist China. The Soviet rocket emplacements in Mongolia have been organised under the Soviet-Mongolian Defence Treaty, signed by Soviet Party Chief Leonid Brezhnev in Ulan Bator in January, 1966, the sources said. They are located in completely isolated areas, totally manned by Russian crews and supplied by specially built roads, the sources said.

A HUNDRED YEARS AGO JUNE 14, 1919.

Saved from the Gallows.

Their Lordships disposed of this morning [June 13 in the Madras High Court] a referred trial and Criminal appeal against the conviction and sentence of death passed on five accused persons on a charge of murder by the Sessions Judge of Kistna. The Prosecution case was that all the accused bore grudge against the deceased, Kotayya. They were waiting for an opportunity to do away with the deceased and the plot to murder him reached the tragic end on the 12th December last... Their Lordships after hearing the Public Prosecutor held that the prosecution evidence was unsatisfactory and that the prosecution had failed to establish a case against the accused beyond the shadow of doubt. Accordingly they set aside the conviction and sentence and directed the release of the prisoners.

CONCEPTUAL Harvard MBA indicator

FINANCE

This refers to a stock market indicator that gauges the future performance of the stock market based on the employment choices of Harvard MBAs. When more than 30% of MBAs graduating from Harvard Business School choose to work in jobs in the financial sector, such as in investment banking and private equity, it is a strong signal to sell stocks. On the other hand, if less than 10% of Harvard MBAs pick jobs in the financial sector, it is a strong signal to buy stocks. The indicator thus uses the number of Harvard Business School graduates choosing to work in the financial sector after graduation as an indicator of the popularity of stocks among investors.

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