

Moving from examinations to education

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This story is from almost 30 years ago. Unless you were a true bhakt, you won't even know that this magical prasad existed, let alone that it was distributed. The distribution of the prasad would happen a night or two before the examination. The bhakts would be waiting patiently. Whispers would be received, with the message that the prasad was out for distribution. They would take a copy and disappear into the quiet night. Many of my friends got to know of this invaluable benediction as a reward for being a true devotee only in the silver jubilee reunion of our batch.

The bhakts had the next step worked out as systematically. Most would have a friend who would have studied diligently through the semester and would "solve" the examination paper for them. The pujaris who ran this whole show were very wise. While they had a fail-proof system to get examination papers leaked, they would use it only for the "tough" papers. There were other tight security measures in place to ensure that word didn't leak that the exam paper had leaked. By the time we reached the final semester, some of this security had slackened. That is how I got to hear of this racket; then, as now, I had friends across the aisles—bhakts and non-bhakts.

Many of these bhakts and pujaris have been my friends for these 30 years. They are all successful, law-abiding citizens and most of them are very decent human beings. None of them condones their own behaviour of those days; most feel sheepish, while many find the elaborate ruse funny. Why did they do what they did?

Before answering that question, let me share that I had the privilege of studying in some of the best institutions of this country. So, this incident is not from the dust bowls of this country, where lawlessness is presumed to be the norm by most outsiders.

From a distance of three decades, without condoning their lack of application and breaking of the law (if you will), I can understand the reasons for their behaviour. First, these examinations were not designed to assess what we had learnt, but to defeat us. Second, most of the curriculum seemed to have no connection to real life. It all seemed like a charade. Especially in fields of application, which is what we were studying, this was a sure route to alienation and disinterest among students. Third, there were high stakes with each of these exams, with no second chances. The scores would have direct implications on our degree, our employment prospects, and also on our perceived social value.

While I have described one elaborate method of “cheating”, you would have heard of many more. From carrying “chits” into examination halls to the leaking of papers, no examination is immune to subversion. Which is why I found the brouhaha over the recent paper leak of the Central Board of Secondary Education examination over the top.

The leak should not have happened. The culprits must be brought to book and weaknesses in the system addressed to prevent future leaks. However, let’s acknowledge that it is likely that for every leak that comes to light, there must be many that do not. And we know that this is only one kind of subversion from within the vast of array of methods of “cheating” across all kinds of examinations.

We certainly must try to make all our examinations cheating-proof. But this effort is like paracetamol for the fever, not treatment for the disease. Every new measure of cheating-proofing will be eventually pierced by the ingenuity of some from amongst the millions of students (and an ecosystem of eager helpers), who see their entire lives hanging in the balance, on the outcome of what happens in a few hours of an examination.

High-stakes examinations that can make or break the lives of our young, in a few hours, are a disease. We have to cure India of it. If we do that, cheating, which is only a symptom, will reduce substantially. Far more importantly, this will fundamentally change the lives of students and their parents, improving psychological and social well-being. It will also enable our education system to focus on real education, rather than teaching to “crack” these high-stakes tests.

Cheating in exams is only one manifestation of our nation’s ethical climate. And our education system needs deep and sustained reform at all levels. So, efforts focused only on examinations will be insufficient, but they will help. Here is a list of some.

First, make all exams easier; these are assessments of learning, not some shoot-out. Second, examinations should be designed with principles that are very different from those in use currently: to assess what students have learnt and not what they don’t know, to assess conceptual understanding and fundamental capacities and not merely procedural skills, and to help in learning—not for judging. Third, reduce the stakes, by giving an unlimited number of chances to all students at all the examinations which are perceived to be crucial. Fourth, reduce the stakes further, by having multiple equivalent alternatives for these crucial examinations. For example, let students choose from amongst multiple school-leaving certificate examinations, rather than schools being tied to a “board”. Fifth, let employers announce and assess what matters to their work, and not use school (or college) exam scores as convenient proxies.

Many wags in Indian education are fond of saying—“we have an examination system, not an education system”—this is not untrue. If we move from examination to education, it will also stop the leaks.

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