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EXAM-NATION: Regulating Opportunity in an Unequal Society

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As the only gateway to un-inherited opportunity for most Indians, the public entrance exam is a critical institution. But we have worshipped its form and ignored its social roles. The GenZ protests have opened the door to a deeper understanding. Can we follow through?

If we did not know it already, we know it now: The holiest institution in Bharat that is India is not the cow or even the newly built temple in Ayodhya - it is the examination.

Veneration for our *gau-mata* does not prevent us from ill-treating, starving or abandoning her with impunity. And it seems that we can bear with relative equanimity the embezzlement of devotees' offerings at the Ayodhya temple. But the repeated desecration of our public examinations cannot be tolerated. The intense, nation-wide youth protests centred on entrance examinations have achieved what even the farmers' long agitation could not: they have extracted a token of accountability from the least accountable government of independent India.

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The sacredness of the examination protects its foundations from scrutiny even as it invites worship of the outer structure. The recent protests have focussed attention on the surface workings of the institution - its integrity, logistical management, and overall system of accountability. This was long overdue and is very welcome, particularly the hard-won acknowledgement of accountability. But though the protests essentially expressed the anguish of devotees denied the means of dignified worship, their unprecedented courage, resilience and irreverent style have unintentionally unlocked new possibilities. Rather than just "cracking" this or that examination, the protesters have broken open the institution itself, offering the opportunity to examine examinations from an agnostic standpoint.

An atheistic perspective on the examination is not available today, especially in countries like ours. History proves that the exam format is impossible to avoid because it is by far the most cost-efficient, time-saving, logistically viable, and socially acceptable method for the evaluation of large numbers. But the indispensability of the examination need not enforce blind worship. A "secular" vantage point helps us to see the invisible ideological work that examinations do, thus enabling us to become more conscious and careful users. One way to go about this is to begin with what exams look like in everyday life, before probing deeper to get at their unacknowledged functions and effects.

Exams in Everyday Life

We are a nation of examinations. CAT, CBSE, CUET, GATE, JEE, NEET, NET/JRF, UPSC ... these are only the best-known acronym-avatars; there are many more regional ones, and countless nameless versions that regulate lives. From the age of three (when entering nursery school) into their thirties (when competing for a job or for entering a profession), the material and moral careers of millions of Indians are shaped by examinations. Doing well in even the lowliest examination elicits a gentle glow of social approval, while "topping" the most venerated ones like JEE or UPSC can confer a status that is part deity and part celebrity. Conversely, the fear of doing badly in an exam is a known source of extreme anxiety and stress. The connection between exams and stress works in the opposite direction as well. Repressed anxieties about something in our lives may get expressed through the "examination dream", as Sigmund Freud discovered more than a century ago.

In recent decades, the examination has also become a major industry with "coaching" as its most lucrative segment. Not only in India but across East Asia competitive examinations for college entry place a huge burden on families and kin networks ranging from crippling financial outlays on coaching to the countless hours spent in "helicopter parenting". At the centre of all this are adolescent examinees subjected to immense pressure, being continually reminded that their exam-performance will make or break their lives. Because of their exalted status, examinations are the ultimate exception, the unquestionable excuse for all kinds of departures from the normal. An impending or ongoing examination may bring exemption from normal duties and chores, justify the withholding of news of

a death in the family, or prompt major sacrifices from friends and relatives. Success in examinations is celebrated like a festival, but, sadly, failure can trigger suicides.

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This, in brief, is what exams look like in everyday life. To see beyond this, we must uncover the work that they do, most of which is to underwrite the ideology of meritocracy. This is the belief that rewards and privileges in society (jobs, income, status, wealth) should be earned through achieved capabilities rather than inherited by being born in a particular social group. Unlike an aristocracy which is a birth-based elite, a meritocracy is an achievement-based elite, an "aristocracy of talent". This ideology occupies a key place in modern societies because it connects the culture of modernity with the economic logic of capitalism.

Modernity invests the idea of equality with an unprecedented moral hegemony, but capitalism is an economic system that thrives on inequality. The confluence of these contradictory forces is made possible, first, by restricting equality to the formal legal-political sphere, and second, by promoting the ideology of meritocracy. As the inventor of the term, Michael Young, pointed out nearly seventy years ago, meritocracy provides a modern justification for (capitalist) inequality as being "earned" (or deserved) instead of "inherited" (or unearned). Capitalism also triggers a vast expansion of the technological fields, with new forms of technical knowledge and competences which must be certified to be marketable. This prompts the rebirth of the old institution of the examination in its varied modern avatars as the key element in meritocracy. Examinations concretise the abstract ideology of meritocracy - exams and aptitude tests enable the certification of competence, or merit. Public entrance examinations are the ideological cornerstones of meritocracy because they seem to (and sometimes actually do) promise "careers open to talent". The cult of merit, in turn, is a key element in the ideological infrastructure of modern societies that are (more or less) democratic, capitalistic, and unequal.

Merit, Mobility and Exams in a Caste Society: A Telegraphic History

As a society long structured by caste, the Indian experience with exams is distinctive because modernity and capitalism arrive under the umbrella of colonialism. Cutting short a long story, the expected friction between a caste society and meritocracy is muted by colonialism, as Indians are denied opportunities open to the British. But this very friction between the upper caste elites and the British gives birth to Indian nationalism and the increasingly insistent demand for independence. More opportunities are opened in the decades leading to independence, but mobility is contained within caste silos, given the very low rates of literacy, particularly in the English language.

To transform an elite campaign into a national cause, and to be consistent with its own claims of modernity, Indian nationalism is forced to take a position on caste. An unequal, two-pronged compromise is worked out in the new Constitution: caste-marked reservations for the victims of the most flagrant exclusions, the Scheduled Castes and Tribes; and the offer of caste-less citizenship for everyone else, within which the "upper" castes, particularly the Hindu upper castes, may continue to enjoy almost all of their prior privileges.

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As in other contexts where a stratified society is making the transition into one claiming to be modern and meritocratic, the public examination-as-measure-of-merit had to play a double role in independent India. On the one hand, it had to appear to promote, and to some extent actually promote, mobility based on merit. On the other hand, at a subsurface level it had to also ensure that older ascriptive privileges were converted into merit-based privileges without seeming to do so. In the initial decades after Independence, there was hardly any tension between these two objectives because the set of persons eligible to take public exams (for recruitment to the upper bureaucracy or the modern professions) coincided almost entirely with the set of the older elites. According to the Indian Education Commission of 1964-66 (better known as the Kothari Commission), the gross enrolment ratio (GER) for the 18-23 age group for post-high-school education (at all levels and for all disciplines and genders) rose from 0.7% in 1950-51 to 2.1% in 1965-66.¹ By 1970-71, it was 2-3%, and rose only by one percentage point during the decade to reach 4-5% in 1980-81. As late as the turn of the century, the GER was still in single digits, ranging from 8-9.5%.²

It is not difficult to guess the caste and class composition of such a small educational elite. Moreover, during this period, an expanding developmental state provided enough employment opportunities to keep anxieties at bay, despite a brief scare about the "educated unemployed" in the late 1960s and early 1970s, also a period of student unrest. This also implies that there was not much social pressure on public exams, as the effective candidate pool was mostly restricted to the older elite, and those clearing exams could have a reasonable chance of finding decent work. But towards the end of this period, beginning with the 1970s and extending into the 1980s, competition within the elites had been rising. This had the effect of cementing the ideological positioning of the exam as a meritocratic device, with candidates gaining lived experience of the hard work and disciplined study required. But the fact that the exams were essentially enabling mobility within a particular social group was not apparent.

The 1990s - the Mandal years - marked a turning point. As the GER started to climb faster in the 2000s and especially the 2010s, new tensions emerged. This was the time when the Indian state had entered its contractionary neoliberal phase, a time of declining public investment in education and shrinking of government employment. In the 21st century, the sharp increases in the GER were driven by private education, at a time when the private sector job creation (barring a brief IT-boom in the 1990s) had begun to slow down. By the time we reach the 2020s, the gig economy is in full swing and precarity is no longer limited to the lower segments but pervades the entire labour market from top to bottom. The pressure on public entrance examinations increases exponentially, with a mushrooming coaching industry fuelling the boom. By this time, the pool of effective contenders has stretched well beyond the older elites to include proportionately small but numerically significant numbers from castes and class-segments that hitherto served only as cannon fodder for mass exams.

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But the overarching horizon that frames our present is the fact that a financialized hyper-capitalist economy able to generate profits without creating employment has broken the longstanding link between professional/higher education and good jobs. This brings exams under tremendous pressure, and the repeated leaks and other malpractices are the inevitable consequence. While only those with influence and resources can buy question papers, we can only speculate about the social identity of the buyers. It is likely that the established elite, who (after the arrival of coaching) can no longer rely solely on their superior social capital to make the grade, are now resorting to buying question papers. It is also possible, though perhaps less likely, that those aspiring to join this elite are doing so. The point here is that question paper leaks are a pathology within the deceptively named "general category"; they do not offer the easy option of blaming reservations. Corruption and mismanagement of exams have a devastating effect on the ideology of merit. It is this shared devastation that has produced the so-called Gen-Z protests.

One cannot get away from the fact that the publicity given to the protests and their overwhelmingly positive resonance in society were driven by the fact that they were about the elite examinations that the middle and affluent classes are invested in. The latest report of the All-India Survey of Higher Education (AISHE 2023-24) shows the overall GER for the 18-23 age group at 30%. This means that 70% of the youth in this age group are not enrolled in higher education. At an earlier stage of education, UDISE+ 2024 data shows the retention rate for classes XI and XII (those who continue their school education until this level) was 47%, which means that more than half of India's school-going age children do not reach high school.

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But though the protests focussed on the high-level exams like NEET, glimpses were available of the presence of those who belonged to an entirely different segment of the population. This was a reminder of two facts easily forgotten when dealing with prospective doctors or engineers, basically people like us. First, entrance examinations of some sort regulate entry into government jobs right down to the bottom levels of peons in offices, constables in the police or entry level jobs in the railways. Second, working conditions have been steadily eroding in the ironically named "informal" sector where around 90% of the workforce is employed with little or no job security and extremely exploitative pay. The intensification of precarity has accompanied its normalisation with the arrival of the gig economy, which makes even the lowliest government job seem so attractive that the media regularly reports the mad rush for them. In 2015, when the UP government advertised 368 posts of peon or office attendant, as many as twenty-three lakh people applied for them, making for an average of 6,250 applicants for each post. The applicants included two lakh engineering graduates and 255 PhDs. In 2019, the Gujarat High Court advertisement for 1,149 Class IV jobs (bailiffs, attendants) elicited nearly 1.6 lakh applicants, and those

eventually appointed on clearing the entrance test included 7 doctors, 450 engineers and 547 post-graduates. More recently, the largest employer in the government, Indian Railways advertised 32,438 Class IV posts in 2025, for which 1.08 crore applicants turned up.

These events and the "riots" that often happen at poorly managed, overcrowded subaltern mass exams are usually reported in the English media in a tone of ironic amusement. What they represent is the tragic reality of a labour market so degraded that government jobs offer the only security, regardless of how low down the hierarchy they may be. Above all, they point to the centrality of the examination in contemporary India for everyone except tiny minorities at either end of the class spectrum. For the vast majority of Indian families that own little or no property, they are the primary institutional gateway to un-inherited economic and social security, and even for the preservation of status. What have state and society done to, and for, such a critical institution?

Distorted Forms and Unexamined Implications

The astonishing mismatch between the importance of examinations and the quantity and quality of the attention paid to them is one of the scandals of our recent history. Both the pedagogical aspects (internal to the teaching-learning process) and the social aspects (ideological effects and differential impact on social groups) of examinations need to be researched with care. The design of exit examinations - those that certify successful completion of a course of study, from the school boards to university degrees - receives little systematic attention. This kind of examination is being undermined by the ubiquity of entrance exams for most of the in-demand options after schooling. But it remains a vitally important issue and has direct links to the quality of schooling. However, judging by reports on "examination reform" produced by the National Council for Educational Research and Training (NCERT) such as the 1971 Report of the Committee on Examinations or the 2006 Position Paper of the National Focus Group on Examination Reforms, the same problems and challenges persist, with little progress in tackling them.

The exams in the public limelight today are entrance exams such as the NEET. Currently, it is the unregulated coaching industry that studies these entrance examinations, but from a commercial point of view, in the effort to monetise the training drills it has devised to score high ranks. The sheer scale of the returns on investment in this industry naturally produces incentives for corrupt practices, and many question paper leaks have been linked to coaching centres. To counter this phenomenon, we need publicly funded research on techniques of testing in specific fields and disciplines. A rare recent example of such a study is the 2024 Report of the High-Level Committee of Experts (Radhakrishnan Committee) on Reformation of National Common Entrance Testing in India. Appointed in response to earlier leaks and other problems with the NEET exam, the committee appears to have done a very detailed study of the National Testing Agency (NTA) and testing techniques more generally. However, the report submitted to the Ministry of Education in October 2024 remains unavailable to the public - only the "Recommendations" are available. And it appears that the government is unhappy with these recommendations, for no action has been initiated on them. On the other hand, it has responded by appointing yet another high level committee (the Nilekani Committee) whose remit is limited to shoring up the security of public exams.

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If examinations are to be considered holistically (incidentally the word 'holistic' appears 41 times in the 59-page text of the National Education Policy 2020 document), public enquiry must go well beyond just plugging leaks. For starters, the crucial diagnostic part of the Radhakrishnan Report must be made public so that there can be discussion and debate around it. The no-questions-permitted top-down approach of this government has produced the NTA and its blunders. The government must take advantage of the unprecedented opportunity afforded by the favourable climate of popular opinion created by the youth protests to correct the mismatch between the public importance of examinations and the attention and care they receive.

But beyond its scholastic or subject-specific aspects, there is also a vital social side to examinations that needs attention and airing. This dimension goes well beyond the technicalities of test design and concerns a question on which our collective future depends: How will access to un-inherited opportunity be regulated? If the current concern with examinations is limited to plugging leaks, the inspirational Gen-Z protesters will have won the battle but lost the war.

A Bengaluru-based scholar, Satish Deshpande is the author of a long essay on examinations, "Pass, Fail, Distinction: The Examination as a Social Institution", published as the Third Marjorie Sykes Memorial Lecture by the NCERT in 2009 which is available [here](#).

Footnotes:

1 Education and National Development, Report of the Education Commission 1964-66, p.300, Table 12.1.

2 GERs for these years were not systematically or routinely calculated; they had to be pieced together from estimates by different agencies, such as the Planning Commission or the UGC. The figures mentioned here are more like guesstimates.