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Public Examinations: When the Solution is the Problem

By: Furqan Qamar

Entrance and recruitment tests emerged to overcome the limitations of selecting candidates based on school board and university examinations. The solution has now become a much bigger problem. A remedial solution needs to be and can be devised.

Nothing comes into existence without a reason. But once introduced, it can continue long after its utility ends. Further, the solution perpetuates itself and becomes a bigger problem in itself. More often than not, it becomes so entrenched as a shibboleth that nobody dares to do away with it for fear of a revolt or the wrath of vested interests. This can be said of public examinations for admission to higher professional and technical education, as well as for job recruitment. These were introduced to overcome the insufficiencies of relying on the results of school board and university examinations to assess the suitability of candidate for admission to higher education institutions or for recruitment to government jobs. University exams were found deficient due to the variations in curricula, academic rigour, and evaluation.

Proliferation

Over time, the public examinations for admissions and recruitments have multiplied.

JEE (Joint Entrance Examination), NEET (National Eligibility cum Entrance Test), CLAT (Common Law Admission Test), CUET (Common University Entrance Test), CAT (Common Admission Test), XAT (Xavier Aptitude Test), CMAT (Common Management Admission Test), MAT (Management Aptitude Test), the UGC/CSIR NET (University Grants Commission-Council of Scientific and Industrial Research National Eligibility Test) and GATE (Graduate Aptitude Test in Engineering) are only a few of the more familiar ones. The list looks manageable but only if you do not unpack it. JEE isn't one exam but two, conducted one after another: the JEE has the Main and Advanced. CUET comprises 37 subject combinations, and a student must write many of them.

Add the entrance tests run separately by states, universities and professional associations, and the count runs into the hundreds. For students, taking one exam is never sufficient. They routinely apply for and appear in dozens of them to hedge their chances. Since a single attempt rarely secures a seat in their preferred institutions, most keep reappearing in these examinations year after year.

The pattern recurs in recruitment. India runs hundreds of government-job examinations each year through state public service commissions, staff selection boards, and teacher-recruitment agencies - [as many as 100 in Rajasthan in 2022-23](#). Only the Union Public Service Commission and the Staff Selection Commission have restricted their numbers to 15-20 by recruiting for multiple services through shared examinations.

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Over time, the number and type of such examinations and tests have multiplied, giving the impression that they serve a useful purpose for identifying the most suitable candidates for university admissions and for jobs. The reality may be just the opposite. We have no evidence that the merit lists they prepare are consistent, reliable, or valid.

On the contrary, evidence abounds to show that the examinations suffer from defective question papers, biases in the appointment of paper setters and evaluators, paper leaks, evaluation flaws, mark manipulations, mix-ups in centre allotment, frequent changes in the time and place of examinations, recurrent cancellations of examinations, and even the results, all jeopardizing the prospects of the youth taking these exams,

The National Testing Agency (NTA) may have dominated the headlines for failing to conduct the NEET examination this year and for not organising several of its examinations glitch-free. It is, however, not the only agency to suffer from such deficiencies. Except for one or two notable exceptions, there is hardly a public examination that has not been marred by snags, malpractices, and a multitude of other problems, much to the chagrin of the youth and their families.

What do you do when the much-touted solution to a problem becomes a much bigger problem itself? Why do these entrance and job examinations continue not only to exist but to grow exponentially? Simply because this system has created a chain of agencies with vested interests.

Many kinds of costs

Those who conduct these examinations charge hefty fees, creating a huge surplus that accumulates year after year. The practice has also given rise to a flourishing coaching industry. It [generates revenue](#) of Rs. 58,000 crore annually, poised to rise to Rs. 1,30,000 crore in a few years.

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Each additional examination carries direct costs comprising hefty application fees and the hassle and cost of travel and accommodation to reach and stay at the test centres, not to mention the considerable cost of the near-mandatory coaching that has grown up around every major test. Parents, at times the entire household, has to relocate to coaching hubs, spending years and lakhs of rupees for a single shot at admission. India's test-preparation industry is now fuelled by the anxiety that high-stakes, low-transparency exams generate.

This cost falls unevenly. For the rich and affluent, these expenses don't matter much, but what about low-income families? They cannot afford such costs and must instead choose which exams to skip, which coaching to forgo, and which subjects to under-prepare. They are deprived of even the opportunity to test their potential, not for want of ability, but because the system has made trying expensive. Far from levelling the field, exam proliferation has become a mechanism of exclusion that rewards financial endurance as much as academic merit.

Burden on society

Administering these public examinations is becoming a huge challenge despite technological advancements. A frequent failure to conduct them smoothly and transparently repeatedly delays admissions, leaving precious seats vacant or allotting them to the less meritorious in the spot round of admission.

This year, the state machinery had to be mobilised just to conduct one NEET examination again. So much so that the process required assurance that the Prime Minister was personally monitoring the examination. The nation cannot afford to devote all its resources year after year to holding hundreds of examinations run by a multitude of agencies.

Also read: [EXAM-NATION: Regulating Opportunity in an Unequal Society](#) by Satish Deshpande

In recruitment examinations, advertised positions remain unfilled for years, if not decades, due to repeated cancellations or the withholding of results, and the organisations that need new employees suffer. Candidates, institutions, and test administrators become embroiled in litigation, which further delays decision-making. In many cases, those given jobs based on their exam scores remain in a limbo because the selection process is often challenged in the courts.

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The practice has grievously eroded people's confidence and trust in the system. They perceive it as designed to deprive them of opportunities. The government and the system are perceived as corrupt, even when the examinations might suffer from accidental errors or oversight.

Most critically, the psychological cost cannot be ignored. Preparing seriously for one competitive examination itself consumes months or years of a young life. The burden multiplies when they have to take multiple exams, each with different syllabi, question styles, and marking schemes. Students describe their final two years of school not as years of learning but as forming an unbroken cycle of mock tests amidst a fear of failure. That pressure has been linked, repeatedly and painfully, to student suicides in coaching hubs.

The damage is not only personal but structural. Senior secondary education has taken a backseat. The time, resources and energy that should have been devoted to strengthening the foundation and building broad-based learning are spent only on mastering the art of cracking the tests that have little to do with the school curriculum. As a result, higher education institutions and employers get candidates with weak foundations who are severely stressed when they enter universities and later on the job.

Original problem

But what are the options available? But to answer these questions, we must first understand why we stopped relying on them in the first place.

The foremost reason was to take away the power of higher education institutions and employers to select their candidates. It was claimed that institutions were misusing their autonomy and resorting to favouritism. These allegations may not have been unfounded, but such incidents were individual-centric, occasional, and sporadic. The canard was that the malpractices were rampant and that therefore the admission and selection process must be centralised for control.

We were also made to believe that all the school boards and university examinations suffered from cheating, mass copying, and rampant use of unfair means. Sporadic incidents of mass copying in a few states, boards and universities were projected as plaguing the system across the board.

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Additionally, it was argued that India had too many boards and universities, each with its own system of developing content and pedagogy, and that their evaluation systems and processes varied widely. That they failed to provide a uniform standard and common denominator to determine inter-board merit. All this justified the need to invent a system in which candidates would be selected based on the score of a common entrance or recruitment examination.

It was a mathematical problem that was treated as a structural problem. In fact, a few premier institutions of the country had developed a working solution, but rather than learning from them, they were forced to give up their practice of preparing a merit list based on normalised scores.

What do we do now? Can we return to the old system of selecting candidates for admission and jobs based on school board or university examinations? They are held in a decentralised manner and reflect students' assessment over a sustained period. This would probably be the most appropriate way out. But the idea is least likely to be accepted for the reasons stated earlier.

A Possible Solution

The next best solution appears to be to drastically reduce the number of entrance-level tests and job-related examinations to at least meaningfully lighten the cumulative burden they impose on the candidates. It should be put into practice such that one score could open multiple doors and thereby break the monopoly of each gatekeeper, be it a university, a professional council, or a state agency.

Entrance and recruitment examinations must help institutions identify capable, motivated students rather than spawning a shadow industry of coaching centres. They must prioritise the mental wellbeing of candidates pursuing their chosen vocation rather than hindering their ambitions.

This means building a common admissions architecture. A student should register once, submit academic records once, and take the appropriate national test or modules. The verified score should then be available to every institution the student applies to, with each university publishing its admission criteria in advance.

This is not to argue for flattening institutional diversity. An IIT, a central university, a public-funded state university, or a self-financed private university need not select students identically. We must distinguish between testing and selection. The national system should provide one reliable common measure, leaving individual universities and recruiters to decide how much weight to give it.

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One university might treat the national score as its sole criterion. Another might combine it with school performance. A specialised institution might add an interview, portfolio or audition. The idea is to discontinue the multitude of overlapping tests and examinations. A simple regulatory principle would anchor this. No government body, regulator, university, consortium, or professional body should be permitted to run a public examination when an existing national- or state-level test can validly assess the same competencies.

Fewer, more predictable examinations would also weaken the coaching industry's grip, since preparation could then return closer to the school curriculum rather than to exam-specific tutoring. This is more than an administrative fix. We must aim for a system where students no longer worry about how many examinations they must take and how many times they must sit for, to able to get in. Instead, they must be able to discover which programme they can pursue based on their competencies and academic performance. That is the shift from an examination-centric admissions regime to a student-centric one.

The goal is not to eliminate competition or institutional choice, but to eliminate needless duplication. A country of India's scale cannot afford to make millions of young people prove the same thing, again and again, to different institutions through different tests. India needs more choice in higher education and far fewer gates to open them.

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