

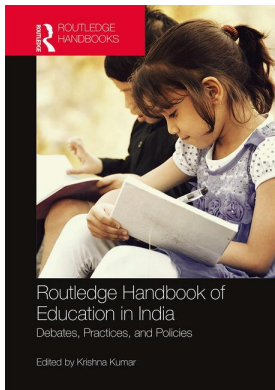
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On: 27 Sep 2023

Access details: *subscription number*

Publisher: *Routledge*

Informa Ltd Registered in England and Wales Registered Number: 1072954 Registered office: 5 Howick Place, London SW1P 1WG, UK



Routledge Handbook of Education in India Debates, Practices, and Policies

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Publication details

<https://www.routledgehandbooks.com/doi/10.4324/9781315107929.ch19>

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Published online on: 17 Oct 2017

How to cite :- Krishna Kumar. 17 Oct 2017, *Understanding Vyapam from: Routledge Handbook of Education in India, Debates, Practices, and Policies* Routledge

Accessed on: 27 Sep 2023

<https://www.routledgehandbooks.com/doi/10.4324/9781315107929.ch19>

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Understanding Vyapam

Krishna Kumar

If we had specialists in corruption studies, Vyapam would have given them a new realm to explore. This is not because of its scale, measured in terms of money or the number of people involved, or the length of time over which the scam was in the shade of urban gossip. The electronic media are treating Vyapam as a unique scam because of the serial deaths associated with it. This dimension should interest and worry the judiciary. However, blocking investigation by destroying evidence and killing witnesses is a familiar method in cases of corruption. This method has come into use in Vyapam on a scale that makes Madhya Pradesh (MP) look like Guatemala. But MP is not Guatemala, nor is Vyapam a story of drug mafia. It is a story of education, and that is what makes Vyapam so remarkable and worthy of deeper social – not merely police – inquiry. The public scandal surrounding Vyapam (an acronym for *Vyavasayik Pareeksha Mandal* or Board of Professional Examination) concerns the sale of seats in medical colleges and jobs in the lower order of government service. Though the idea of sale is not new, its strategy in the Vyapam case is new in the pervasive planning it involved. Instead of outright sale of seats in medical colleges, Vyapam enabled exam cheating to evolve into a service industry. Cheating became a facility to be purchased by youth; those who hesitate to buy the facility dread they may be taking a risk.

The logic of Vyapam alters the moral codes that govern competition for scarce opportunities. The investigation that is now underway will hopefully reveal the networks – of individuals and institutions – that enabled Vyapam's fraudulent operations to be sustained year after year. But how these networks became so robust and why the fraud did not cause public outrage or stir up politics are questions that demand a wider search for answers. Institutional decay in education and a political equilibrium that defies ideological categories are two important clues for understanding Vyapam. The last quarter-century has seen radical changes in state–market relations across the country. How these changes unfolded in the specific socio-political landscape of MP needs to be taken into account. Before we embark on drawing this larger picture, let us first recognise the change in the meaning of cheating implicit in Vyapam.

Mutation of cheating

The key word used in news about the Vyapam scam is 'cheating'. A simple summary of the scam might say that it enabled thousands of students to enrol in medical colleges by cheating in

the pre-medical or entrance exam. This summary is, of course, accurate. It induces us to use an old and familiar frame of cheating in exams to respond to the complex narrative of the scam. But this frame will not suffice to understand Vyapam. As a theme, cheating in exams is part of the annual coverage of exam-related news by the media between March and June. It follows a set pattern: in the first round, items about stress on students appear, and how parents are coping with it. A little later, when exams start, we get news about instances of cheating. And finally, when results are declared, news about suicides by students completes the annual round of exam coverage. This year, news about cheating came with visuals from Bihar in which high-school examinees were shown receiving help-material through the windows of a multi-storey exam centre. A short while later came the news about the Supreme Court's order to cancel the All India Pre-Medical Test (PMT) conducted by the Central Board of Secondary Education (CBSE) for 15 per cent of seats in all government medical colleges across the country. This news had some exotic items in it, such as the use of hi-tech means of cheating by the organisers to enable their clients to get high scores. When the national media started to report sudden, mysterious deaths in different parts of MP, readers and television viewers framed Vyapam as an exam-cheating story gone a bit too far. To see why such a frame is not appropriate for Vyapam, we need to take a brief look at the history of exam cheating.

Terms like 'cheating' and 'unfair means' invoke a record that began with the advent of the modern exam system in India in the late nineteenth century. 'Unfair means' covered a practice more directly denoted by the Hindi/Urdu term '*nakal*', which literally means copying. It conveys the basic idea that an examinee who copies from material brought into the exam hall illegally is cheating. The distinction between an honest examinee and the one who cheats in this conventional usage is that the former has access to no external help. The term '*nakal*' tells us what the most familiar form of help was. It meant concealing in one's dress a book or paper in order to copy from it. How widely prevalent the practice was can be guessed from a comment made on it by Rabindranath Tagore in 1919. Tagore saw no distinction between those who cheat and the rest who do not. 'If it be cheating to take a book into the examination hall hidden in one's clothes, why not when the whole of its contents is smuggled in within the head?' (Tagore 1919). The culture of cramming that Tagore decried remains the core of education and the examination system, but competitive entrance exams of the kind that Vyapam conducts present a new dimension.

Cheating under Vyapam is not an act we can attribute to individual candidates who appear in a mass test. Both the nature of the test they take and the enabling role played by the test-conducting authorities need to be comprehended. Organised cheating of the kind we see in Vyapam (and also in the PMT taken by the CBSE in which the Supreme Court asked for a re-test) involves the services of question-solvers who have access to the exam questions in advance and who are financially compensated for the risky service they provide. Their services are used by examinees in two ways. First, the solvers can act as proxy candidates by actually taking the exam in the place of a candidate. For this, they require a fake identity card which must be arranged by those who pay them, and this arrangement needs the tacit approval of designated authorities of the government who will also get a fee or cut for this risk-taking behaviour. The second or alternative method by which solvers' services can be availed is to equip the genuine candidates with electronic devices that permit the transmission of correct answers without drawing the attention of invigilators. This second method may require financial compensation for people performing functions like invigilation, guarding of entry doors, and checking identity cards, etc. An inclusive plan that ensures all such people do the needful and keep their mouths shut is necessary.

Another dimension of the difference between conventional exam cheating and present-day, organised cheating is the design of test items. Appreciating this dimension helps us to bring into

the orbit of analysis a set of players that the official probe into Vyapam may not cover. Conventional cheating worked for essay-type questions; the new mode is meant for tests consisting of multiple choice questions (MCQs). In MCQ-style testing, cheating involves ticking off the correct choice in hundreds of items at considerable speed. Indeed, speed is a critical factor of success. Examinees keen on success cannot afford to leave any items unattempted due to lack of time or choose wrong answers due to hurrying: both incur negative marking. Unlike the conventional exam which asked a few questions covering a limited number of patches of the syllabus, an MCQ-based examination calls for mastery of the entire corpus of knowledge included in a syllabus, for mastery alone can give the honest examinee sufficient speed to cover the vast number of items that such exams carry. This academic attraction of an MCQ-based test is precisely what makes it vulnerable to organised cheating. We can appreciate this vulnerability by revisiting our earlier discussion of the roles involved in organised cheating.

Link industries

The key role played by ‘solvers’ is crucial for organised cheating. This role, in turn, depends on their access to the question paper in advance. Thus, if we wish to understand how cheating has mutated into a service industry, we must focus on these two factors: one, availability of solvers in sufficient numbers; two, solvers’ access to the question paper in advance, i.e. its leakage. The Vyapam scam has brought out into the public domain, so to say, the full landscape of organised cheating. The attention this industry is currently receiving is somewhat new; otherwise, its operative presence in professional, especially medical and engineering, exams has been a part of post-secondary education in many states. The role of linking organised cheating with the system of education has been performed for decades by the coaching industry. How this industry operates, along with certain ancillary industries, is just beginning to be researched, but its emergence as a challenge to the state’s system of education has been noted in many countries. In India, coaching and private tuition are closely associated with the mainstream system. Both prepare the young to improve their performance in competitive settings. Consumers of the coaching industry pay in order to buy an advantageous position in open contests organised by the public education system.

The stake that coaching institutions and their cartels have in competitive exams such as entrance tests for medical and engineering courses is high. The volume of money that coaching institutions generate from among their clients is vast enough for investment in building strong bridges between their personnel and state functionaries involved in entrance tests. One of the crucial merchandise passing through these bridges is the content of the question paper designed for school-leaving examinations and entrance tests for further education. Ancillary industries that facilitate this trafficking include publishing of exam guides, simplified textbooks, compendia of past exam questions along with answers, and provision of online exam-related services. The coaching industry and these ancillaries operate under the shelter of the public education system and assist it, often by sharing roles or even spaces. The two systems collaborate in maintaining the popular belief that children need the services of both – attendance at school for legitimacy and enrolment in a coaching institution for preparation for entrance exams. Along with coaching, the ancillary industry of exam-focused guidebooks acquires its credibility because they closely anticipate the actual exam papers at frequent intervals, thereby conveying their resourcefulness. The market value of individual companies involved in the ancillary industries keeps changing, but the industry as a whole retains its value for its young clients, who notice sufficient evidence to believe that the industry is linked to the exam process.

The awareness that cheating prevails has a very different psychological meaning for examinees appearing in today's mass entrance tests. Conventional cheating offers a very limited advantage to its beneficiary. In the conventional exam in which such cheating works, the scope for marks is, in any case, limited. Someone who cheats by copying faces a serious disadvantage arising out of the time it takes to give an essay-type answer by copying. Cheating by copying can seldom result in more than a pass score for the examinee. Therefore, the honest examinee does not feel threatened by those who cheat. This is not so in the case of organised cheating. Success in a competitive MCQ-based exam demands high scores. Someone who has used the aforementioned services of the organised cheating industry can obtain the highest scores. Genuine examinees may be weeded out entirely if the number of beneficiaries of organised cheating is substantial. For this reason, the genuine examinees feel the threat of being at a disadvantage. Some of them may well feel sufficiently stressed by their fear of failure and yield to the offers made by the service providers representing the organised cheating industry.

Their incursion into the routine of exam preparation has to be viewed as a significant cultural inversion. The idea that one must pay to ensure selection replaces the belief that tests for professional courses and state employment require hard work. This seems to have happened in MP. Conditions congenial to this change in popular perception have been coming together for a long time. There are districts where certain exam centres were given out to contractors to arrange uninterrupted cheating for candidates, many of whom were drawn from other states. The new set-up of organised exam fraud involves more meticulous arrangements and planning networks. In the networks so far revealed in the Vyapam case, ground-level help by proxy candidates and solvers was supplemented and scaffolded by computer experts who had access to score sheets and lists of selected examinees yet to be finalised. These high-layer functionaries had bureaucratic and political patrons. Private medical colleges also had a role in this multi-layered arrangement.

Systemic context

Growth of organised cheating as a service industry in MP has a larger, systemic context. The public system of education has been hollowed out over the last 25 years. This process covered all stages of education. From the early 1990s, MP's system of education followed the path recommended under the structural adjustment programme. The doctrine of neoliberal governance on which the structural adjustment policies were based demanded the substitution of welfarism with a thin social safety net to cover the risk of social unrest. This was a general prescription for all states, but while other states compromised on many aspects and negotiated the broad doctrine with partial compliance, MP adopted the vision with rigour and went further than any other state in implementing it. MP carried out a thorough dismantling of its welfare apparatus in education and health. Powers to appoint and monitor teachers were transferred to village *panchayats*, using the rhetoric of grassroot democracy to provide political underlining for the social safety net regime. Legal and administrative scaffolding enabled MP to drastically streamline its budget on teachers and schools while negotiating the goal of systemic expansion. Decentralisation, community participation, and other such discourses facilitated the dismantling of the old public system at all levels of school education. MP became the darling of global donors by launching populist programmes such as the Education Guarantee Scheme. They served to conceal the impoverishment of schools and teachers, and the promotion of low-cost private schooling.

The voice of civil society in MP was limited and the state had no difficulty in co-opting it. Appointments of permanent teaching staff at all levels of education froze and mutated. In colleges

it happened in the late 1980s; in schools it happened through stages over the next decade. The old pool of school teachers – from primary to senior secondary – was declared a ‘dying cadre’, which meant that when teachers of the existing pool retire, their posts will be abolished and fresh, downgraded posts will be created in their place. Thus, the entire system got transformed and hollowed out. At the college level, guest and ad hoc appointments became the norm. Even as teachers were de-professionalised, infrastructure like libraries and laboratories was starved of funds. Demand for privately owned institutions of higher – especially professional – education grew, resulting in the establishment of links between edu-business and politicians. New networks were forming even as products of impoverished schools were struggling with entrance tests to claim eligibility for further education in a scarcity market. Ill-prepared for MCQ-based competitive tests, they turned to service providers promising a seat. The situation was becoming ripe for a scam.

Political consensus

Over the long period of this overhaul of education, political power oscillated smoothly between MP’s two main parties. Consensus on the structural adjustment-related policies across party lines was not unique to MP. However, the vivacity and determination with which MP proceeded to embrace these policies call attention to MP’s specific social and political history. The Vyapam scam is not incidental to this heartland region of India. The same can be said about the scam’s aftermath in which the state has attempted to label a long series of unnatural deaths as incidental. Familiar terms such as ‘backward’ and ‘underdeveloped’ that are used to describe the social landscape of the Hindi Belt blind us to the specific histories of the regions this area comprises. These histories are important in as much as they remind us of the functions of the modern state that the new economic policies seek to redefine. The discourse of these policies also tends to establish the correctness of general prescriptions. How they will unfold in different regions invites little interest or attention.

‘Self-financing’ is one such prescription. It has been offered as the right approach to making education cost-effective as opposed to being a big burden on the exchequer. The self-financing model has been offered not merely for schools and colleges, but also for regulatory bodies such as the ones that control professional education in medicine, engineering, teacher training, and so on. Indeed, the self-financing model now covers examining bodies like the CBSE and Vyapam as well. Vyapam generates its resources from the vast number of aspirants who compete for a small number of seats. Technically, no test can distinguish between those who have potential and others who lack it when the contest is so keen – involving more than 1,000 for each single seat. But public testing does generate impressive revenue under the self-financing model. As a public utility, therefore, Vyapam is trusted to work with competence and technologically monitored transparency, irrespective of the socio-political terrain it serves. Mass poverty, illiteracy, sharp income disparities, and caste hierarchies are characteristic of this terrain. Too little time has passed since modern statehood and citizenship started to replace loyalty to princely structures. In such a terrain, a self-financing institution charged with selection of a few hundred out of millions can easily become a conduit for the distribution of patronage by networks of power and new businesses.

As an administrative territory, MP was sculpted nine years after Independence by merging some of the older units and jettisoning some others. Much of the area consisted of princely states of different sizes. They catapulted into democracy straight from princely rule. The area that came under Central Provinces in the colonial period consisted of culturally distinct populations. Princely loyalties prevailed in this area as well. Administrative unification could hardly

mean that social cohesion and civic identities would soon follow. A social ethos marked by entrenched poverty and extremely limited opportunities for education enabled local orbits of feudal-style patronage to survive. Diaspora of the educated unemployed from neighbouring states also got assimilated into the dominant cultural system. Political expression of social and economic aspirations remained confused and weak, as the ideological alternatives represented by the two main political parties – the Congress and the Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP; formerly Jan Sangh) – stayed deceptive. As a renowned MP journalist, the late Rahul Barpute, once told me, it is unnecessary to look for stable ideological distinctions behind party loyalties in MP.

Political occult

Vyapam presents a modern political occult that failed to contain its secrecy. The moment of failure came after success sustained over many years, along with the growth of confidence among collaborators. The fraud pervaded the entire system of selection for distribution of opportunities for professional education and lower-level state employment. Its immanence and continued growth is currently passing through the phase in which the participants are doing whatever is possible to destroy the evidence that might reveal the fraud – its dimensions and the diverse identities of players. A series of unnatural deaths of young people and several others is part of this phase of the scam (*The Hindustan Times* 2015). The social world of MP has taken these deaths laconically, as yet another episode in the familiar story of power plays. On the specific identity and life stories of those who were found dead at some point, brevity has guided the regional Hindi media.

Although this melodrama had set in a while ago, the specific death that made Vyapam a national media story this summer was that of a TV journalist who had travelled from Delhi to interview the father of a medical student whose body was reportedly found on a railway track three years previously. The young journalist died soon after completing the interview. Despite the high number of unexplained deaths – figures reported exceed 40 – the state government's investigating team initially saw no point in treating this phenomenon as a relevant matter. The political brass of MP repeatedly asserted that the deaths should not be viewed as being necessarily related to the scam. The news of deaths, as indeed all Vyapam-related news, had become normalised by the time the national media suddenly smelled something unusually meaty in the scam. In MP itself, neither the fraudulent enrolments and appointments in jobs, nor the series of mysterious deaths aroused public outcry or political stirrings. The only voice of anxiety was that of four individuals who were identified in the media as whistle-blowers. They had used their limited means to collect certain details to bring the fraud to public attention. They have faced threats and harassment since.

In the context of Vyapam, an apparent tussle has broken out between the two main parties. The focus of this tussle is corruption, an omnibus term that covers a wide range of behaviours, from abuse of power to incompetence. As a corruption story, Vyapam also includes a cover-up attempt. There is plenty of material here for allegations to be exchanged. Only if we see the scam as a systemic failure can we notice the longer story of state-sponsored institutional decay and the rise of cheating as a service industry. In that longer story, neither of the two political parties can hope to remain clean. Indeed, the entire political apparatus – including the office of the governor – has to be held responsible for the abuse of education, both as a system and as a social resource. The project of education, both as a means of human resource development – its official aim since the mid-1980s – and as a means of nurturing civil society, has miserably failed in MP. Failure of this kind is hardly ever dramatic, so it cannot be dated, but the Vyapam scam

has revealed it in a dramatic manner. Whether such a revelation will create the desire and energy needed for embarking on the road to reform is a different matter.

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