

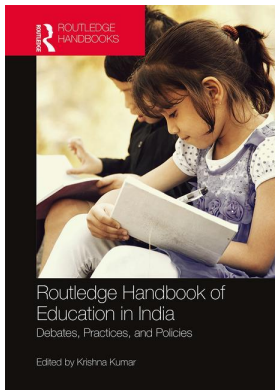
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Examination for elimination

Celebrating fear and penalising failure

*Disha Nawani*¹

Assessment of students forms an integral part of all educational processes. The form, nature, and timing of such assessments varies, depending perhaps on the structure and formality of the learning spaces they are situated in and the foci and explicitness of specified objectives, learning or otherwise. Therefore, what has been *taught*,² especially in the context of formal school education, needs to be not only *learned* but get manifested, reported, and assessed as well, in some form or other. The purpose of student assessment could be either to gauge the acquisition of desired learning over a specified period of time or to use the assessment results to assist students in their learning (Pellegrino *et al.* 2001). It could even be to examine the effectiveness of syllabus, teaching/learning resources and pedagogic experiences in achieving the desired learning objectives (Tyler 1949) or be something totally extraneous to learning, serving perhaps as a legitimate screening device for selecting and discriminating between candidates for distributing or withholding of certain rewards.

Curriculum, teaching/learning resources, and assessment share an intricately intertwined relationship with one another. The manner in which this relationship unfolds is contingent on several factors. For instance, in school systems, where textbooks are prescribed by the state, textbook content often determines the ‘what and how’ of assessment (Kumar 1991). On the other hand, there are instances where the ‘form and nature of assessment’ guides the selection of curricular resources and pedagogic processes adopted in the classrooms. This in turn influences the meaning assigned to ‘learning’ and the way students approach learning (Willis 1993). Assessment is also inextricably linked with the location and positioning of teachers and students vis-à-vis each other and important others (textbook designers, policy-makers, inspecting officials, etc.) in the educational hierarchy.

These and several related issues gain prominence in the context of the Indian education system, which was significantly influenced by the educational policies of the British colonial era. Evaluation of students’ learning acquired a definite meaning, shape, and aura, both distant from the traditional curricular, pedagogic, and assessment practices (Kumar 1991), as also deeply resilient and stubborn. The external nature of a written examination system, regulatory role and public use of its results, introduction of bureaucratic processes laced with formal rituals, uniformity in treatment of students, non-transparency in the process of evaluation, underlying pervasiveness and association of ‘fear’ with learning and a complete distrust of teachers in assessing students taught by

them are some of the features discussed in this chapter as it attempts to trace and examine the history, structure, and implications of the contemporary examination system in India.

This chapter reiterates that assessment of students' learning need not only be understood in a pedagogic context as an objective and benign evaluation of students' competence, but needs to be placed in a larger societal context in which it often plays an important role in maintaining societies and even establishing order in them. This chapter has been organised into three sections. The first traces the institutionalisation of examinations in the colonial period, consolidation in independent India, and its implications. The second section discusses examination-related concerns and recommendations of various committees set up to examine the prevailing education system both before and after Independence. The third section traces the debate around specific assessment-related reforms initiated by the Right of Children to Free and Compulsory Education Act, 2009 (RTE) and aims to understand its ramifications for the disadvantaged child in Indian society.

Institutionalisation of the examination system in India: history, structure, and implications

This section briefly explains the origin, institutionalisation, and consolidation of the examination system in India. Situating the Board Examinations in a structural context, it explains the regulatory role played by them, placed as they are at the transitional stage between school and higher education. Finally, it highlights the impact of their institutionalisation on the meaning and purpose of learning as well as educational lives of teachers and students.

Brief historical overview

The process of institutionalisation of examinations in India is closely linked to the setting up of three universities in Calcutta, Bombay, and Madras in 1857. Set up in accordance with the Woods Despatch, 1854, these universities were entrusted with the task of conducting examinations, ascertaining candidates' proficiency, and screening their eligibility for government service. The institutionalisation process was strengthened after the Indian Education Commission of 1882 linked the grants-in-aid to schools to their examination results. Under 'payment-by-results', the system adopted by the Hunter Commission, grants to schools were given in proportion to the success and failure of students in the matriculation examination (Arasarkadavil 1963: 32). Over time, a condition was imposed based on the recommendations of the Universities Commission, 1902, under which secondary schools came under the purview of universities. This meant that for these schools to be entitled to register their students for the Secondary School Leaving Certificate (SSLC) examination, they needed to be recognised by universities, wherein individual school examination results played a key role in securing such recognition. In addition, every student desirous of entering college was required to complete secondary school as well as pass the SSLC examination. By 1904, the character of examinations thus became highly centralised (*ibid.*).

The nature of these examinations was significantly affected by the framework of education governed by Macaulay's Minutes of 1835. One among the several aims of the British to educate Indians was to train them for clerical jobs with the government. Since recruitment to service was related to an exam result, the concept of a minimum standard of proficiency and, hence, the concept of *pass* and *fail*, automatically crept in. In all these examinations, the stress was on memory and this was accentuated by the general background of our own teachers, traceable to the old *pathshala*³ technique (NCERT 1971: 12) where teachers taught orally and students, in

the absence of much written text, rote-learned the knowledge thus communicated to them. Another reason for this mechanical selection was the sheer number of candidates, which made it difficult to give any importance to other aspects of students' personality and the percentage of marks scored in such exams became the sole criteria for their selection (ibid.: 13).

Examining the manner in which this kind of examination system gained wider social acceptance can help us understand the validation and contestation around the social functions that examinations performed, placing them within the complex matrix of state and society. Most of the pupils studying in the secondary schools of the colonial period belonged to the educationally advanced classes of society, whose main objective was to obtain employment under the government. Gradually most of the secondary schools also came to be managed by the educationally advanced classes themselves (Naik and Nurullah 1974). As the examination system served the interests of this group, it gained social acceptance and became entrenched. However, there was another dynamic at work as well. Being part of the colonial education system, the examination system also represented the colonial state. It became a vehicle for the colonial state to express the principles that it claimed to represent. In the colonial imagery, Indian society was divided along caste and religious lines. The colonial state claimed that by virtue of its foreignness, it stood above these different groups, mediated between them, and was neutral in its approach towards them. Setting up of question papers and evaluation of students by people other than teachers who taught them was one such measure of expressing its neutrality. Phule's submission to the Hunter Commission helps one notice how he viewed colonial education, of which examinations were an important part, as promoting equity and fairness in a sharply stratified society:

The withdrawal of Government from schools or colleges would not only tend to check the spread of education, but would seriously endanger that spirit of neutrality which has all along been the aim of the Government to foster, owing to the different nationalities and religious creeds prevalent in India.

(Phule 1882: 9)

This perhaps also explains why the public exam system got so entrenched and acquired lasting social sanction in India.

Structure and role of Boards of Secondary Education in independent India

The first University Education Commission appointed after 1947 under the Chairmanship of S. Radhakrishnan gave priority to higher education. The Secondary Education Commission, headed by A.L. Mudaliar in 1952, specifically examined problems of secondary education. It gave a good deal of attention to matters concerning examinations. The Kothari Commission (1964–66; Ministry of Education 1966) recommended that each state should have a Board of Secondary Education (BSE). Till then, while some of the states did have such Boards, others did not. Owing to the pressure of increasing student population, universities withdrew from the job of the management and control of matriculation examinations. Thus, separate and autonomous BSEs came up in most states. The few that existed before 1947 (the precise number being two) took over the job of conducting matriculation examinations. Beginning with the 1920s, when Intermediate Boards were set up in several provinces, intermediate (and also matriculation) examinations came to be handled by them. Most of these Boards were examining Boards and did not perform any academic function, which meant that universities continued to dominate secondary school education until the 1960s, after which it began to get diluted. As the number of students increased at a phenomenal rate, the School Boards became more important and

continue to be so, especially in the conduct of examinations and declaration of results on time. The practice of screening large numbers of students and selecting only a few, to match the number of seats available, is followed in most states (Singh 1997a).

Secondary education, as compared with higher, professional, and elementary education, received far less attention, even after Independence. While the states' priorities kept fluctuating between these sectors, secondary education was never looked upon as an independent sector of education (Singh 1997b). Interestingly, secondary education in India enjoys a peculiar relationship with college education, where the former, instead of being seen as a terminal stage of school education, is seen as a precursor to college education. The Board Examinations organised at the Secondary (Class X) and Higher Secondary (Class XII) levels therefore acquire special significance in such an educational context. Given the absence of alternative avenues of employment, when students choose to enter a college, generally speaking, it is mainly to defer unemployment; postponing the evil day, as it is called (Singh 1997b: 882). One can see a continuity in examination results serving as a criteria for limited opportunities (both admission to institutions of higher learning or employment) in colonial as well as independent India. The data in the following section show how aspirations of millions of students are thus scuttled and controlled by examination results (read: failure).

However, before presenting the statistics pertaining to performance of students across states in Class X and XII examinations, it may be pertinent to briefly examine the BSE operating in India at present. There are several educational Boards at present in the country – Central Board of Secondary Education (CBSE), Council for the Indian School Certificate Examinations (CISCE), which is an umbrella term for ICSE (Indian Certificate of Secondary Education for Class X) and Indian School Certificate (ISC for Class XII), National Open School (NOS), and numerous State Boards.

The CBSE is the oldest and most prestigious Board in India and comes under the central government. Schools recognised by CBSE fall into three categories – schools established by the central government under its various schemes, schools run by the Delhi government, other state governments, or by private agencies in those states, and private schools located in Delhi and various Union Territories.

While CBSE and NOS are government-sponsored and government-run, CISCE is a non-government body. Whereas CBSE and all other Boards generally follow the curriculum laid down by NCERT, the Council follows a different pattern of academic organisation.

While most private and prestigious public schools are affiliated to CBSE and CISCE and enjoy a superior status, State Boards are placed low in the hierarchy. They are set up by individual state governments in different states and follow their own syllabi and grading patterns. They are aimed at promoting regional language and culture and regarded as being relatively easier than other Boards.

Presenting board examination results (2009–2011)

This section presents data pertaining to results of Board examinations for Classes X and XII across three variables – states (State Boards versus CBSE, ICSE/ISC), gender (girls versus boys), and enrolment type/category of students (regular versus private) for 2009, 2010, and 2011.

A very preliminary examination of the data reveals how every year a large number of students are unable to pass these terminal examinations (Tables 4.1 and 4.2). It is not surprising that the failure rate is much higher among private students (more than 50 per cent) as compared with regular⁴ students (varying between 20 and 30 per cent). Thus, students who for various social, cultural, and economic reasons are already outside the formal school system get eliminated completely by failure in Board Exams.

Table 4.1 Result of BSEs (2009–11): Class X

Year	Students appeared		Students passed	
	Regular	Private	Regular	Private
2009	13,257,089	1,845,177	94,66,126 (71.40%)	769,649 (41.71%)
2010	14,529,898	1,618,217	10,647,530 (73.28%)	772,904 (47.76%)
2011	14,556,735	1,320,628	10,178,487 (69.92%)	553,934 (41.94%)

Source: this is a consolidated summary of all students appearing in different state and central Board examinations held for that year. These data have been provided by Council of Boards on Secondary Education (COBSE).

Table 4.2 Result of senior secondary boards of examination (2009–11): Class XII

Year	Students appeared		Students passed	
	Regular	Private	Regular	Private
2009	7,011,131	1,026,703	5,568,157 (79.42%)	453,233 (44.14%)
2010	8,434,002	1,043,680	6,578,797 (78%)	493,725 (47.30%)
2011	10,173,781	1,180,096	7,616,545 (74.86%)	530,780 (44.98%)

Source: this is a consolidated summary of all students appearing in different state and central Board examinations held for that year. These data have been provided by the COBSE.

Tables 4.3 (Class X) and 4.4 (Class XII) show pass percentages of students across different Boards, including gender and enrolment category/type of students. There are significant variations in the pass percentages of students across State Boards. In Table 4.3, one can see states like Chhattisgarh and Madhya Pradesh consistently lagging far behind other states. Southern states like Tamil Nadu, Karnataka, Kerala, and Andhra Pradesh perform better, with ICSE and CBSE being among the top scorers. Children studying in schools affiliated to CBSE and ICSE belong to relatively privileged social backgrounds as compared to children studying in schools affiliated to State Boards. There are significant differences in the pass percentages of private and regular students, even in CBSE and ICSE. Results of private students are abysmally low across states. On average, girls perform better than boys. One can notice no significant changes in trends in data across three years. Similar trends can be seen in data for Class XII as well (Table 4.4). While failure in Class X ensures the exit of students midway through, failure in Class XII exams prevents those who manage to clear the first hurdle from joining colleges (professional and general) for higher learning. While for the majority of school students it is a two-hurdle race, some states previously had Board examinations even as early as class V.

A more sophisticated analysis of the data is required to arrive at a nuanced understanding of the implications of these scores, which is not within the scope of this chapter. However, the data point out: (1) the performance of the students in schools generally and exams specifically may depend on several variables external to the individual and cannot therefore always be seen as a direct outcome of one's competence and effort; and (2) the significant social function that such exams perform every year, of discriminating between students into pass and fail categories. While the pass category students continue to chug along in the system, without any guarantee of success, for the failed students the doors of formal education and associated rewards are forever closed – and that for seemingly *legitimate* reasons.

Name of board	2009						2010						2011					
	Regular			Private			Regular			Private			Regular			Private		
	Boys	Girls	Total	Boys	Girls	Total	Boys	Girls	Total	Boys	Girls	Total	Boys	Girls	Total	Boys	Girls	Total
1 Board of Secondary Education, Andhra Pradesh	78.58	79.10	78.83	41.42	49.83	44.29	81.27	82.01	81.63	39.59	48.46	42.54	82.71	83.52	83.10	12.34	17.70	14.10
2 Board of Secondary Education, Assam	65.81	59.03	62.39	62.79	52.48	58.00	66.70	59.72	63.21	48.25	51.74	50.05	73.42	67.39	70.38	44.22	47.49	45.92
3 Bihar School Examination Board	65.84	60.65	63.76	72.24	68.11	70.55	71.97	67.37	70.06	78.63	73.86	76.70	71.33	59.94	66.39	77.89	62.84	71.83
4 Bihar State Madrasa Education Board	86.75	86.55	87.59	N.R.	N.R.	N.R.	N.R.	N.R.	N.R.	N.R.	N.R.	N.R.	N.R.	N.R.	N.R.	N.R.	N.R.	N.R.
5 Central Board of Secondary Education	89.26	91.23	90.07	44.61	36.19	40.97	89.57	92.19	90.65	38.68	32.29	36.00	98.33	98.98	98.59	23.26	19.99	22.04
6 Chhattisgarh Board of Secondary Education	54.34	55.41	54.84	38.06	40.79	39.21	54.61	55.57	55.07	38.17	40.90	39.29	52.38	51.40	51.90	33.88	34.13	33.99
7 Council for Indian School Certificate Exam, Delhi	97.82	98.69	98.20	60.96	54.05	59.06	98.11	98.87	98.44	67.91	72.47	69.54	98.31	99.22	98.71	65.82	72.79	68.36
8 Goa Board of Secondary & HS Education	77.40	76.84	77.11	32.00	33.79	32.88	79.54	78.61	79.08	100.00	0.00	100.00	81.31	80.26	80.80	33.33	0.00	20.00
9 Gujarat Secondary and HS Education Board	84.00	85.00	84.00	45.00	40.00	44.00	79.23	80.94	79.98	67.45	75.00	70.16	64.16	69.54	66.57	60.69	65.00	62.36
10 Board of Secondary Education, Haryana	55.44	58.11	55.75	54.82	45.48	50.18	62.3	64.18	63.19	65.29	65.79	65.53	62.01	62.42	66.20	64.09	63.75	63.92
11 Himachal Pradesh Board of School Education	81.57	76.72	79.47	75.94	72.19	74.48	79.48	76.32	78.07	70.72	67.31	69.34	74.71	69.47	72.25	58.12	55.31	56.87
12 Jharkhand Academic Council	59.50	58.11	58.22	20.75	0.00	20.75	66.71	71.00	68.81	5.45	14.16	7.32	78.86	82.90	80.85	8.97	21.27	11.69
13 Board of School Education, J&K	74.45	77.30	75.83	12.19	23.57	14.80	66.71	71.00	68.81	5.45	14.16	7.32	78.86	82.90	80.85	8.97	21.27	11.69
14 Karnataka Secondary Education Exam Board	89.74	93.99	91.92	N.R.	N.R.	N.R.	88.99	92.42	90.12	0.00	0.00	54.20	89.71	93.01	91.36	45.32	52.72	47.54
15 Kerala State Board of Public Examination	34.09	37.19	35.33	8.38	9.96	8.90	46.65	50.31	48.15	19.85	19.82	19.84	53.85	55.79	54.68	24.01	23.82	23.94
16 Board of Secondary Education, Madhya Pradesh	80.39	82.98	81.55	38.49	43.78	40.09	78.25	82.50	80.17	36.00	43.83	38.34	70.34	74.93	72.42	31.58	41.03	34.42
17 Maharashtra State Board of S&HS Education	85.80	54.10	60.14	35.50	28.40	31.46	67.00	55.30	61.33	0.00	0.00	0.00	0.00	0.00	0.00	0.00	0.00	0.00
18 Board of Secondary Education, Manipur	78.62	74.16	76.29	26.53	27.06	26.80	76.53	70.83	73.53	25.07	24.90	24.99	0.00	0.00	0.00	0.00	0.00	0.00
19 Meghalaya Board of Secondary Education	76.12	71.01	73.50	28.88	25.30	27.10	83.54	78.23	80.84	39.48	30.71	35.11	81.65	78.05	79.83	36.84	28.51	32.55
20 Mizoram Board of School Education	72.45	67.47	69.98	71.58	68.45	69.77	68.13	64.15	66.17	26.80	25.33	26.01	72.87	70.39	71.64	32.26	26.76	29.34
21 Nagaland Board of School Education	0.00	0.00	0.00	33.40	37.84	34.75	72.38	69.35	70.86	53.48	56.66	54.84	66.59	63.78	65.21	33.71	36.52	34.91
22 National Institute of Open School	51.73	49.42	50.38	40.14	43.78	41.60	75.59	82.67	78.80	61.76	72.06	66.04	67.84	73.66	70.57	41.28	54.27	46.73
23 Board of Secondary Education, Orissa	77.40	79.29	78.07	9.35	10.67	9.92	77.05	77.41	77.18	9.38	10.56	9.92	75.54	76.12	75.76	8.58	9.85	9.19
24 Punjab School Education Board	78.67	84.29	81.53	N.R.	N.R.	N.R.	79.33	85.45	82.45	8.60	11.38	9.43	82.28	88.15	85.28	0.00	0.00	0.00
25 Board of Secondary Education, Rajasthan	62.11	54.57	58.65	37.04	35.43	36.36	63.71	55.82	60.05	34.77	34.78	34.77	65.03	58.64	62.07	24.61	26.22	25.38
26 Tamil Nadu State Board of Secondary Education	49.00	68.10	57.29	43.60	62.96	50.59	64.52	77.76	71.35	64.21	77.29	70.79	66.83	77.55	71.66	57.56	63.05	59.11
27 Tripura Board of Secondary Education	63.17	68.67	65.73	37.34	40.68	38.34	63.74	74.85	69.04	36.56	46.59	39.82	65.84	63.51	64.75	36.93	45.40	39.76
28 UP Board of Intermediate and High School Education	86.82	76.32	81.74	55.55	52.50	53.85	86.05	77.43	81.78	38.59	32.25	35.34						
29 Board of School Education, Uttaranchal	71.91	61.14	65.30	N.R.	N.R.	N.R.												
30 West Bengal Board of Secondary Education	69.27	74.06	71.40	38.58	47.53	41.71	71.08	76.02	73.28	45.76	51.07	47.76	73.89	77.10	69.92	40.81	43.83	41.94
31 West Bengal Board of Madrasah Education																		

Source: these data have been provided by the COBSE.

Table 4.4 Result of senior secondary examination of different boards (2009–11): pass percentage – Class XII

Name of board	2009						2010						2011						
	Regular			Private			Regular			Private			Regular			Private			
	Boys	Girls	Total	Boys	Girls	Total	Boys	Girls	Total	Boys	Girls	Total	Boys	Girls	Total	Boys	Girls	Total	
1 Board of Intermediate Education, Andhra Pradesh	74.15	74.06	74.87	48.57	53.58	50.98	62.49	67.28	65.68	31.49	38.23	33.82	48.04	66.43	55.49	25.92	31.52	27.87	
2 Assam Higher Secondary Education Council	89.52	89.08	89.43	79.38	78.14	79.14	89.80	89.51	89.69	85.15	84.23	84.59	89.44	91.01	90.06	83.24	82.13	82.17	
3 Bihar School Examination Board	79.14	87.51	82.69	46.37	52.19	49.76	78.16	87.09	81.97	39.37	47.26	42.25	79.10	88.43	83.04	42.17	49.32	44.68	
4 Central Board of Secondary Education	74.54	80.02	76.79	51.86	57.76	53.86	76.35	81.09	78.37	45.17	52.16	47.63	70.98	77.40	73.81	40.32	45.96	42.15	
5 Chhattisgarh Board of Secondary Education	98.99	98.48	97.67	74.43	69.42	73.46	96.98	98.54	97.69	77.56	80.88	78.34	96.94	98.71	97.74	83.57	82.19	83.23	
6 Council for Indian School Certificate Exam, Delhi	77.09	85.94	81.39	19.05	10.00	16.13	74.63	81.43	78.11	0.00	0.00	0.00	76.15	80.34	78.34	11.12	0.00	9.38	
7 Goa Board of Secondary & HS Education	84.38	91.54	87.20	50.04	57.70	52.20	88.60	94.10	89.30	62.30	74.60	65.10	79.03	88.17	83.21	47.28	60.42	50.33	
8 Gujarat Sec. & Hr Sec Education Board	90.00	96.00	93.00	51.00	56.00	52.00	89.00	95.00	92.00	0.00	0.00	0.00	63.00	80.93	70.85	54.03	66.82	56.65	
9 Board of School Education, Haryana	68.37	72.25	70.25	44.88	48.94	45.53	64.91	68.00	65.63	36.65	53.45	50.16	59.33	62.58	60.92	44.04	48.63	45.98	
10 Himachal Pradesh Board of School Education	81.57	76.72	79.47	75.94	72.19	74.46	48.54	60.48	53.52	32.64	40.90	35.05	45.80	58.99	51.48	34.42	42.15	36.96	
11 Jharkhand Education Council	48.25	48.84	47.63	24.90	25.98	25.33	54.61	65.39	60.14	20.79	30.06	23.76	53.64	64.32	59.07	20.56	30.66	23.69	
12 Board of School Education, J&K	44.40	55.07	49.75	23.35	28.68	25.12	54.61	65.39	60.14	20.79	30.06	23.76	53.64	64.32	59.07	20.56	30.66	23.69	
13 Dept. of Pre-University Education, Karnataka																			
14 Kerala State Board of Public Examination	62.87	74.01	67.13	28.01	34.73	30.20	66.01	76.11	69.87	33.91	39.72	35.78	61.79	70.07	65.02	28.34	33.71	30.09	
15 Board of Secondary Education, Madhya Pradesh	76.89	83.93	79.89	47.97	55.31	50.02	69.92	78.35	73.54	43.55	51.73	45.72	62.05	73.32	66.85	39.15	49.20	41.86	
16 Maharashtra State Board of S&HS Education	71.70	69.67	70.75	30.43	31.47	30.86	80.32	78.35	79.39	21.74	50.00	30.30							
17 Council of Higher Secondary Education, Manipur																			
18 Meghalaya Board of Secondary Education	69.88	68.94	69.39	26.35	22.71	24.88	76.87	70.91	73.82	32.28	23.76	28.55	75.18	74.20	74.65	32.37	29.86	31.29	
19 Mizoram Board of School Education	77.15	78.18	77.66	47.83	51.92	49.59	72.04	72.31	72.19	34.87	34.95	34.91	69.57	73.39	71.51	54.16	55.43	54.77	
20 Nagaland Board of School Education	0.00	0.00	0.00	0.00	35.13	36.22							37.63	42.20	39.02	0.00	0.00	0.00	
21 National Institute of Open School Education																			
22 Orissa Council of Higher Secondary Education	95.15	97.83	96.02	30.95	36.33	32.89	65.77	78.72	71.94	42.95	60.25	50.47	68.74	83.33	75.64	41.63	67.64	53.44	
23 Punjab School Education Board							93.07	97.35	94.56	24.29	32.06	27.28	90.29	95.69	92.21	26.52	34.14	29.66	
24 Board of Secondary Education, Rajasthan	75.41	80.25	82.83	NA	NA	NA	81.93	87.98	85.15	27.74	40.63	33.16	82.33	89.04	85.92	0.00	0.00	0.00	
25 Tamil Nadu State Board of Secondary Education	68.42	64.09	66.45	26.16	22.94	24.88	72.18	68.88	70.77	36.38	36.52	36.44	72.27	71.94	72.13	33.3	28.85	31.39	
26 Tripura Board of Secondary Education	73.92	89.19	80.36	64.85	77.41	68.23	74.35	90.23	81.52	67.89	80.94	71.75	71.25	91.19	80.99	63.89	82.37	69.64	
27 UP Board of Intermediate and High School Education	70.85	81.65	76.19	38.92	50.45	42.84	69.36	84.05	76.59	46.96	63.25	53.60	74.32	83.21	78.42	49.70	57.08	52.56	
28 Board of School Education, Uttarakhnad	79.25	64.48	77.79	N.R.	N.R.	N.R.	81.42	77.95	79.88	62.04	59.53	60.93	75.97	74.54	75.33	65.62	67.48	66.49	
29 West Bengal Council of Hr Secondary Education	76.72	83.06	79.42	42.14	46.63	44.14	74.81	82.00	78.00	44.11	52.91	47.30	70.18	81.43	74.87	43.55	54.56	44.98	

Source: these data have been provided by the COBSE.

The introduction of such an examination system in the Indian school education system brought about some significant long-lasting changes, a few of which are highlighted here.

Pedagogic and sociological implications

The institutionalisation of exams not only led to the setting up of infrastructural prerequisites for conducting examinations (setting question papers, supervising examination halls, correcting answer scripts, etc.), but most importantly led to a complete distrust and disempowerment of teachers (Kumar 1991). The alienation, distancing, and disregard of the teacher formed part of the larger rejection/distrust of all that was indigenous/native (Elphinstone 1824).

Since textbooks were prescribed by the Director of Public Instruction (the highest official in the administrative hierarchy) and examinations were almost entirely based on them, textbooks emerged as the de facto curriculum (Kumar 1991) and the educational lives of students and teachers began to revolve around them. Learning began to be equated and restricted to memorisation of textbook content. Further, since these examinations were centralised, the questions on which all students were tested could only be very general in nature. This also meant that examinations provided no scope for testing knowledge specific to individual children's milieu and experiences (Kumar 1992).

External examinations increased the distance between teachers and students. The idea of impartial assessment, where the 'assessed' was not known to the 'assessor', besides leading to public and written examination at the end of the course, also led to on-the-spot testing of students by inspecting officials. With its aura of secrecy, strictness, and uniform treatment of all examinees, the examination system played an important role in the development of a bureaucratic system of education. To the English administrator, examinations like textbooks were a means of norm-maintenance. As Shukla has pointed out, colonial policy used written examinations to evolve a bureaucratic, centralised governance of education (Shukla 1978, cited in Kumar 1991). The official function of the examination system was to evolve uniform standards for promotion, scholarship, and employment. This function had a social significance in as much as it enhanced the public image of colonial rule as being based on just principles and impartial procedures. The secrecy maintained over every step, from the setting of papers to the final announcement of the result, gave a dramatic expression to the image of the colonial government as a structure that could be trusted.

Another important implication of the pervasiveness and centrality of Board examinations in students' lives was the grounding of fear as being integral to school learning. The fear associated with non-learning was unique to colonial times as it began to be associated with denial of several rewards that Western education brought along with it. There was only one road block in the way to people's aspirations being fulfilled and that was failure in those examinations.⁵ Entrance to school meant being gradually initiated into a world of fear, where all that mattered was success in examinations, especially terminal ones. The fear of failure and associated shame and humiliation became part of the lore of childhood and adolescence (Kumar 1991). Munshi Premchand's *Bade Bhai Saheb (My Elder Brother)*, written in 1910, is a classic story that conveys the anguish of a student who repeatedly fails in exams (Premacanda 1986). However, this story is not just about his frustration at failing, but makes a sharp comment on the irrelevance and futility of the education and examination system prevalent in those times.

The feeling of fear associated with school learning did not dissipate with the attainment of Independence, but was further strengthened. That is the reason why students are often found flocking to temples especially during exam time, seeking divine interventions, wearing religious markers, and making religious symbols on their answer scripts. Popular literature and culture

continue to echo similar sentiments where the relevance of learning an alien curriculum is also questioned. An old song from a Hindi film, *Anpadh* (1962), conveys the feeling quite well, *Sikander ne Porus se kee thee ladhai toh main kya karoun ...* (If Alexander fought with Porus, why do I care?). One has also grown up hearing phrases like *padogey likhoge toh banoge nawaab, kheloge kudoge to banoge kharaab* (If you study, you will do well and if you play, you will get spoilt). Social sciences typically were loaded with lots of information for students to memorise, hence became the butt of jokes, *History Geography badi bewafa, raat ko rato, subah safaa* (History Geography are not to be trusted, you learn them at night, by morning they disappear).

Reminiscing about his childhood days, the famous sociologist T.N. Madan, born in 1933, writes about the fear he experienced when, after five years of home-based education, he was to join a school in Class VIII. As he was presented before the Inspector of Schools in his big office, he sweated and trembled with fear: 'I was however, oppressed by the fear of the upcoming examinations ... the entry into school ended my childhood, bringing with it many anticipated joys, but also unknown fears, including the examination blues' (Madan 2010: 192–193).

To conclude, the public, external exams that were introduced by the colonial system of education presented themselves as providing a 'neutral and fair' criteria for awarding limited employment opportunities to those aspiring for it. The same practice continued in independent India, where secondary education, instead of being perceived and developed as a terminal stage of education, was seen as a transitional stage where Board Exams performed the important role of filters. A system that was marked by uniformity, secrecy, and impartiality could hardly be faulted and students' success and failure in examinations was justified as the presence or absence of individual effort and talent. Thus the structural inadequacies of the system in being unable to either provide seats in institutions of higher learning or employment in the market was masked behind the superbly efficient system of examination in successfully eliminating a large number of job seekers/aspirants. Teachers and students both became pegs in such a system, which was dictated by fear and desperation to do well, while the bitter pill of failure was swallowed unquestioningly as being caused due to one's own inability and incompetence.

Prevailing examination system: concerns and recommendations

It is interesting to note that no sooner was the system of external examinations introduced in India, than educationists and policy-makers began to recognise its limitations. Commission after commission pointed out the malaise afflicting the Indian education system, particularly examinations and the deleterious impact that they were having on the meaning of education at large and school education in particular.

Pre-Independence period

Criticisms levelled against external examinations in the pre-Independence period essentially focused on excessive importance being given to examinations causing enormous stress to both teachers and students, forcing them to channel all their energies into clearing exams, killing any kind of meaning making and creativity in the process. Other criticisms were imposition of the uniform textbook/curriculum across diverse school contexts, confinement of instruction to the rigid curricular framework, neglect of all education/training which could not be tested, the literary character of courses of study to the exclusion of practical skills, prioritising rote memorisation over other higher-order skills, and mechanical repetition and memorisation of textbook content (or even guides) (*Interim report of the Indian Statutory Commission 1929; Post-war Educational Development in India 1944; Report of Calcutta University Commission, 1917–19; Report of*

Indian Education Commission, 1882–83; Report of Indian Universities Commission, 1902; Report of the Zakhir Husain Committee and the Detailed Syllabus, 1938; Resolution of Government on Educational Policy 1904).

Independent India

Interestingly, almost every commission/committee (Mudaliar in 1953; Radhakrishnan in 1948) bemoaned problems raised earlier and suggested more comprehensive ways of assessing students' learning. The Radhakrishnan Commission reiterated the pernicious manner in which the exams had become the aim and end of education, to the detriment of all initiative among teachers and students. Similarly, the Mudaliar Commission commented on the overwhelming influence of external exams, restricting and nullifying the real purpose of education. The Kothari Commission in 1964–66 upheld the importance of a written exam as a reliable and valid measure for judging educational attainment but also proposed inclusion of other techniques to measure those aspects for which the written test was not appropriate.

Similarly, the National Policy on Education, Programme of Action (NPE POA) of 1991 proposed the value of continuous institutional evaluation of scholastic and non-scholastic achievements of students but upheld the continuation of public examination for classes X and XII. However, it suggested measures that could make the examination process less taxing and more meaningful, such as provisions for clearing examinations in parts and innovative ideas like open-book examinations. It strongly articulated the need for assessing students by teachers who taught them (Government of India 1991: 150–151).

Perhaps one of the most comprehensive and simple yet enlightening reports on the malaise affecting Indian school education is the Yashpal Committee Report (YCR), also called *Learning Without Burden* (MHRD 1993). According to this report,

the biggest defect of the examination system in its present form is that it focuses on children's ability to reproduce information to the exclusion of the ability to apply concepts and information to unfamiliar, new problems, or simply to think.

(MHRD 1993: 6)

The National Curricular Framework (NCF) of 2005, drawing from the insights of YCR, re-oriented the educational discourse towards focusing on problems of curricular failure and inability of schools to provide relevant and meaningful educational experiences to children, which led to their failure and subsequent dropout from schools. It was the first time a curricular or policy document challenged the objective and validity of conducting public examinations such as the Boards. It stated that there was an urgent need to revise the public examinations at the end of Class X and XII, whose quiz-based and text-based question-answer format caused inordinate anxiety to students. It also regarded the uniformity in such examinations as being unfair and discriminatory to a majority of students who were not placed in conducive teaching/learning environments. In fact, it reconceptualised the role played by Boards to change from direct testing at present to careful and rigorous validation of school-based, teacher-conducted assessments. It also suggested that Class X Board Examination should be made optional and tenth-graders who wished to continue into the eleventh grade at the same school, and did not need the Board certificate for any immediate purpose, should be free to take a school-conducted exam instead of the Board exam (NCERT 2005, 2006).

However, it must be noted that apart from suggesting curricular and specific examination-related reforms, it also urged for reforms in other related areas like improvement of teacher-training,

teacher quality, and teacher–student ratios, and making textbooks more relevant, interesting, and challenging, among others.

The next section focuses on measures initiated under the RTE Act and the discomfort expressed around them.

Contextualising contemporary examination reforms

Despite meaningful suggestions made repeatedly by various commissions set up for the purpose of reviewing the examination system in India, precious little has been done to ameliorate the ills plaguing it.

Right to Education Act, 2009

The RTE gave teeth to the reforms proposed in earlier review documents/policy formulations, the most recent being NCF 2005. The specific measures mandated in this regard are–

- 1 No child admitted in a school shall be held back in any class or expelled from school till the completion of elementary education (non-detention policy (NDP)).
- 2 Continuous and comprehensive evaluation (CCE) of a child’s understanding of knowledge and his or her ability to apply the same.
- 3 No child shall be required to pass any Board Examination till completion of elementary education.

These measures pose a fundamental challenge to the existing examination practices, sharpening the dichotomy between a one-off examination and detaining children on the basis of its results, *and* regular assessment of students and not penalising them even upon failure. The subsections below present an elaboration of the first two provisions (since they are the ones being contested) including challenges associated with their use.

The NDP is not new, and existed at various levels (I–II, I–V, I–VII) in 28 states of India even before the passing of the RTE Act. Some states had a few conditions attached to it, like minimum attendance. The rationale behind mandating this provision in the RTE is that by creating a non-threatening teaching/learning/assessment environment in school, it essentially responds to the challenges confronted by the disadvantaged child, who struggles to come to school and strives even harder to stay on in school. On failing and being detained in the same class, such a child faces humiliation, gets demotivated, and often drops out of the school system. The Act recognises the importance of addressing the conceptual lags of children promoted under this policy and the need for giving them additional support beyond classroom hours. However, it is not difficult to imagine the inability of the already burdened school teacher teaching children who have little or no support at home to find additional time to achieve this.

The idea of CCE, similarly, is not new, but found mention in several commission reports and policies much before it took a formal shape in this Act. ‘Continuity’ in examination was supposed to ward off the evils associated with a singular exam on which hinged a child’s future. ‘Comprehensiveness’ sought to give legitimacy to developing and assessing the overall personality of a student. The idea was to take away the fear associated with performance in a one-off terminal examination, and reinstate faith in the agency of the teacher to assess her students on a regular basis using multiple modes of assessment.

CCE is an umbrella term and there is no uniform model of CCE in the country. NCERT, CBSE, and different states, some with the help of non-government organisations (NGOs) and

others with the help of private organisations and individuals, have evolved their own models of CCE. Besides several problems with these varied conceptualisations (Nawani 2013), CCE is grappling with multiple challenges at the level of implementation (Srinivasan 2015). While teachers are being given some basic training in most states, fuzziness abounds on what and how children are to be assessed and the way in which these results are to be used for their further growth. Teachers⁶ have also complained of CCE adding to their woes of maintaining registers, filling up assessment formats, tracking students' growth, collecting evidence, and writing detailed descriptive portfolios, etc. The teachers perceived that as a result of CCE, the focus has shifted from teaching to maintaining assessment-related records. They also felt pressurised to project an inflated progress of the students over the course of the year to ensure that their own performance appraisal was not adversely affected.

With several states voicing their discontent with assessment-related reforms introduced under the RTE and the challenges faced by their schools, the Ministry of Human Resource and Development (MHRD) in 2012 set up the Central Advisory Board of Education (CABE) Sub-Committee to examine 'Assessment and implementation of CCE in the context of the No-Detention Provision of the RtE 2009' (MHRD 2014). This Committee was set up under the Chairmanship of Geeta Bhukkal, former Education Minister of Haryana.⁷

Two central concerns that informed this Committee's analysis of the provisions under study were: (1) declining learning level outcomes (LLOs)⁸ of government-school children; and (2) migration of children from government schools to private schools, as reported by the Annual Status of Education Reports (ASER 2012).

The root cause identified by the Committee for declining LLOs of children is the NDP, which in most cases is misunderstood as no assessments. It further asserts that non-detention de-motivates both students and teachers; reduces teacher accountability; increases multi-level classrooms; and eventually increases teachers' burden. Moreover, it felt that this policy is implementable only in an ideal system – where there are optimal resources at every level (sufficient number of teachers), seamless processes (CCE), and a supportive ecosystem (engaged parents/community who ensure full attendance of children, driving and supporting students towards academic excellence).

The assertions made by the Committee and their implications need to be understood since they echo the popular perceptions about these provisions. The objective behind NDP is to remove the fear of failure from those students' minds that are most likely to fail and leave the system. This is achieved by de-linking 'promotion to next grade' from students' results. If it is being felt that this de-linking has led to a lackadaisical attitude towards learning on part of both teachers and students, then there is a clear problem with the kind of learning one is trying to promote and the reasons for which one is in school. Moreover, this provision neither de-emphasises learning nor assessments; it simply allows the potential dropout to stay a little longer in school than she otherwise would.

On the one hand is the claim that government schools largely cater to children whose parents are unable to support their children, while on the other hand lies the claim that NDP negatively impacts their motivation to attend school and do well. It is difficult to imagine how a detention policy will motivate these children to strive to perform well if they are both irregular in attending school and constrained in getting parental support. The NDP, on the contrary, tries to make the school less threatening for these very children, who are likely to fail and leave, never to return.

Multi-grade environments exist not only because of NDP, as is being asserted, but because of shortage of teachers, varying numbers of students in schools, and differential needs and support available to children either at home or in school. NDP does not by itself promote under-learning. It hinders the failing and incessant detention of children. In any case, even if 'failing'

children were detained and held back, besides being demotivated, they would still continue to struggle in the same class unless substantial need-based support was provided to them. Children's failure also becomes compounded by poor quality of pre-service and in-service training and on-site support to teachers.

The last point is a classic case of the chicken-and-egg problem. There is no denying the fact that meaningful reforms cannot be seen in isolation and need several other processes to be in place, but then does it also mean that all such measures should be thwarted/postponed till every single variable in the education system is in order? The RTE Act in fact reiterates the need for several other rights-based provisions – adequate school infrastructure, minimum qualifications for teachers, pupil–teacher ratio, no non-academic activity for teachers, child-friendly curriculum, CCE and teacher-training education, etc., which need to be initiated simultaneously.

Both CCE and NDP, despite facing severe and real challenges, are based on sound principles that need to be recognised and supported rather than being dismissed in haste. To hold the child responsible for not attending school regularly when the school in question does not inspire the child in any manner and detains him for 'not knowing adequately enough', when the system is probably at fault in delivering, may not be an appropriate solution for the malaise. By blaming the child or the teacher alone, one personalises a structural malaise and shifts the onus entirely on them to perform. It is more important to create a system which supports teachers to teach and students to learn rather than creating a system based on fear of chastisement and failure leading to detention.

Concluding insights

Examinations serve a highly important function of controlling social conflict in situations where there is a mismatch between number of candidates appearing for exams and number of rewards contingent on their results. In a stratified society like India, social goods such as even education are not equitably distributed. While the right of citizens to elementary education was finally recognised in 2009, secondary education still remains outside its orbit.

Since their introduction, the purpose of Board examinations in India has not changed. It continues to filter a large number of aspirants, and thereby control aspirations for upward social mobility and curbs social dissent in circumstances where they remain unfulfilled. It is in this larger context that provisions such as school-based reform and non-detention of students should be seen. Related to this is also the increasing disempowerment of teachers where lowly paid, under-qualified, contractual teachers are being considered not just cost-effective but efficient. This is a reflection of the deeper educational malaise that our society is grappling with. An environment where accountability of both the teacher and the student is singularly linked with failure/non-performance (purely in terms of students' exam results), bereft from an understanding of the actual situations which they work in, can only promote detention of students and celebrate en masse failure in examinations.

Most importantly, the Boards of school education also need to broaden their vision and enlarge their role and not merely serve as examining bodies responsible for conducting examinations. Better linkages also need to be established between different agencies responsible for school education – organisations responsible for framing curricula, designing syllabi and developing textbooks, training and supporting teachers, and even inspecting schools. Until such a time that exams stop being viewed as tools by Boards of education to merely test students linked to some extraneous presentation/denial of reward and all economic benefits are restricted to a privileged few in the name of 'efficiency and meritocracy', all attempts at initiating reforms in this space will meet with resistance.

Notes

- 1 I would like to acknowledge the support of Manish Jain, Anisha George, and Suresh Reddy in developing this chapter.
- 2 The terms taught and learned (teaching and learning) may acquire different meanings depending on the underlying theory of learning, which defines learning and associated pedagogic processes in a particular educational context.
- 3 School in Hindi.
- 4 Regular candidate means a student enrolled in a school who has pursued a regular course of study and is entitled to appear for the Board exam that his school is affiliated to. A private candidate is one who is not a regular candidate but, under the provisions of bylaws, is allowed to undertake and/or appear in a given Board examination. Such students come from relatively disadvantaged backgrounds and find it difficult to study/continue in formal schools.
- 5 It is not uncommon to hear middle-class parents tell their children that if you do not study you will have to wash utensils and sweep floors in other people's houses.
- 6 This was revealed in interviews with several teachers, both government and private, as part of a study on CCE.
- 7 The Committee examined the existing literature on implications of non-detention and detention of students for their learning and also collected first-hand information from important stakeholders. It administered questionnaires to several states, incorporating questions for parents, teachers, and administrative staff. Thirteen states filled in those questionnaires, while 12 other states submitted separate reports sharing their experiences and voicing their concerns with regard to these provisions. In addition, the Committee also visited schools in several states and had conversations with teachers, students, parents, and other community members.
- 8 Several national, private, and international organisations have of late been assessing learning levels of children in schools. ASER is a survey conducted since 2005 by Pratham, an NGO working in the education space.

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