

## BOARD EXAMS

It is that time of the year. The board examinations are around the corner. Every year during the board exams for Class X and XII, there is a news item about a particular question paper being very difficult or in some cases misleading. At least one year, there was actually a question in the Parliament about the Mathematics paper being too difficult or tricky! This must be the only Parliament in the world that seems to have time for discussing the level of difficulty of a Class X Mathematics paper!

The problem is actually much deeper. And it involves several actors; the parents, the school system, the board and the academic bureaucrats. Let us try and look at the problem from the viewpoint of all these players.

The students and their parents are under a lot of real or imagined stress because of these examinations. The student is repeatedly told that this one exam can make or mar his/her career or indeed life! Every year, in the run up to the board examinations and after it, there are news reports of children breaking down from stress or even attempting suicide. Helplines are set up by concerned citizens and NGOs. The hype is most evident if one goes to the examination center. Most students arrive with their parents and siblings in tow. It is a sight to see parents waiting outside the centers, literally chewing their nails in anxiety. This adds to the stress of the already pressured student.

This anxiety for performance leads to some absurd demands. The year that the question was raised in the Parliament, it turned out that the Mathematics paper (or the Science Paper) actually was testing comprehension rather than memory. The result was that the day after the paper, parents were complaining to newspapers how their wards' life had been ruined and demanding a more lenient marking scheme! Unbelievable, yet true that citizens think that it is their fundamental right to score well in examinations!

So what does the board conducting the examination do? It buckles under public pressure and issues statements about students not being penalized! One look at the question papers of the board is enough to convince oneself that they are meant to be high scoring.

The academic bureaucrats who decide policy are the ones who are responsible for this ultimately. The Class X and XII science syllabus is actually a joke. It has been so watered down as to make it almost irrelevant. In Class X physics, there is just one "real" physics chapter while the others are on Space Exploration, Universe and so on. Knowing about the Indian Space Program is laudable but certainly not at the expense of some real science. The situation in biology is similar with chapters Food Preservation instead of biology. It turns out that this is a well thought out strategy on the part of the educational planners. Move the hard-core science chapters to Class IX and XI leave the soft chapters for Class X

and XII so that students can score well. The result: several schools just rush through their Class IX and XI syllabus and instead concentrate on the X and XII syllabi which are going to be tested!

But this has deeper ramifications. The combination of softer science chapters and the examination scheme leads to even bright students being fairly ignorant about real science. An examination system which places a premium on knowing the names of the first Indian satellite or the high yielding wheat variety leads to students not really comprehending what science is all about. Problem solving, analytical and comprehension skills are not required to score well.

The net result of this ironically, is actually quite contrary to what the parents and the bureaucrats in their zeal for better performance want. The “market” realizes the hollowness of the board examination results and barring Delhi University colleges (which for their own reasons would not like to change), almost nowhere is admission on the basis of the board results. Depending on their place in the hierarchy, each institution conducts their own entrance examinations to determine the competence of the students! And this is where the huge commercial interests of coaching classes come in with their own logic.

The whole thing reminds me of an apocryphal story about the Indian railways. When there was a lot of hue and cry about trains not running on time, the minister came up with a brilliant idea. The official running times of the trains was increased and thus the trains would always be on time at the stations! This way the charade continues. The pass percentage in the board examinations is high and this pleases the parents, students, and the bureaucrats. Never mind that we are producing students with no real skills in science or Mathematics. But then does anyone care?

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