

The Exam has a Cottage Industry

Indian Express, 1 January, 2026

The young girl stopped me during my morning walk asking me if there was a cyber café nearby. She was carrying an infant and her husband was walking behind her with a huge backpack. She had come from Prayagraj and had lost her wallet with her Adhaar card in the train. She needed to download and print out a copy so that she could appear for the exam. I told her the way to the shop but added that it would possibly be closed so early on a cold and foggy morning.

The exam was a computer based test conducted by the Staff Selection Commission (SSC) for recruitment of 7500 Delhi Police constables. The center was a school in our colony whose owners have figured out that hosting entrance and recruitment exams is big business. The exams were held for 15 days in multiple shifts which meant all through the day, the whole neighbourhood was taken over by thousands of candidates and their relatives who had come with them. Scores of people would be hanging around the road leading to the school, warming themselves with a makeshift fire made with dried twigs or languidly watching Instagram reels while waiting for their exam to begin.

The collateral effect of this jamboree was a huge uptick in the local business. Makeshift tea-stalls, *chaat* and *bhelpuri* carts, shared autos and cabs as well as bike taxis thronged the place through the day. And since the testing agencies have decided that the candidate needs to go through as much inconvenience as possible, the assigned exam center is never in or even near one's hometown. This of course meant that candidates had to usually come a day in advance and spend the night in a Dharamshala or a cheap Oyo hotel.

The train/bus fare, the local transport by cabs/autos, the cost of boarding and lodging must all be adding up. And this was just one exam at one center. If one takes the number of examinations conducted by the various agencies (UPSC, SSC, NTA, Railways, Defense services, Public Service Commissions of various states, UGC, CSIR etc.) and multiply that with the number of centers for each examination, the economic benefits of having our youth go through multiple exams to be able to be a government

servant are immense. And this is without taking into account the coaching industry which has been and remains a sunshine industry- the coaching industry is estimated to add 30,000 crores to Kota's economy alone, with places like Sikar fast catching up. Little wonder that the government make sure that tens of millions of our youth spend their most productive years either preparing for or appearing for multiple examinations. One frequently reads about a few million appearing for the lowest level government jobs. What is more, jobs for which the qualification is class XII has people with PhD and Masters degree holders appearing for them .

The silver lining in this unending circle of examinations is that some entrepreneurs have discovered an opportunity. A student of mine frustrated after several years of appearing unsuccessfully for various exams, realized that there is money to be made from them. His house is close to one of the exam centers. Apart from using his laptop and printer to download and print the various documents needed by the candidates, he has spied another niche. Candidates are not allowed to carry their phones or any other belongings to the exam. And the center has no provision for safekeeping them. So he allows them to keep their phones etc. with him for a small sum. It is people like him who no doubt have contributed to the astonishing 8.2% GDP growth recently.

Shobhit.mahajan@gmail.com

9811222582