CHAPTER FIVE

THE DISILLUSIONMENT

The British had created a monster of public examinations in India - rather a Frankenstein's monster which they soon started dreading. As examinations became institutionalized, they also generated considerable degree of disillusionment about them. But they had been so well entrenched in various educational, social and economic aspects of our lives that any attempt to dislodge them was considered futile. Here we would like to examine the nature of dissatisfaction and discontent with public examinations.

5.1 Pre-Independence Dissent

By the beginning of the 20th Century, the British had themselves become disillusioned with the institution of public examinations they had created in India. This might not have happened out of any good-will or compassion for the Indian society or education. On the contrary, this was the result of their sensitivity to developments in England, and the international trends. So even disenchantment with examinations in India had its inspiration from England.

Towards the end of the 19th Century, England was experiencing an increased awareness of the dangers of
public examinations and competition. It had been realized that it was no use doing everything by way of racing. Several hundred professors, teachers and others signed a protest in 1888, claiming that education was being sacrificed to examination. It was claimed that dangerous mental pressures and misdirection of energies and aims were to be found in nearly all parts of the educational system. Little children were being treated as instruments for earning government grants; young boys of the middle classes were trained for scholarships just as horses were trained for races, with little thought for their future; under-graduates were being led to believe that the winning of money prizes and high honours was the main aim of education. It was stated that examinations destroyed good teaching, and the existence of prizes confused the public as to its proper aims. It was generally accepted at that time that the whole of English education was controlled by the examination system. Thinkers like Earl of Cromer were asking questions like: Have not examinations become, as it were, an artificial nervous system of our education, of which every movement is controlled either by their stimulus or by their power of inhibition, so that extirpation is an impossible task?

1. R.J. Montgomery, op. cit., 256.
If we cannot remove this tyrant that governs education from within, cannot we either reduce its powers or force it into beneficence?¹

At about the same time, there was the international movement for progressive education with its emphasis on learning rather than teaching and on the pupil and his activities rather than the teacher. Initially it was confined to the elementary level but soon its influence spread to all stages and to all educational activities. One basic assumption underlying the trend was the charge against traditional examinations that they were the cause of artificial barriers between ends and means, between goals and practices. As a result, a new reaction set in which advocated a more organic view of examinations. In theory, at least, in a progressive school which used student-centred activity methods, there would be no need for formal examinations. Evaluation of failure of success was an integral part of the learning process, and reinforcement - being the operational equivalent of external evaluation - was an integral part of the teaching process.²

The Government of India, even in pre-Independence days, could not remain unmoved by these developments.

¹ Earl of Cromer, "A lecture delivered at the Royal Society of Arts in January 1911".
Their Resolution of February 1913, became in part a critique of the system of external examinations. They were recognized as laying a narrow standard confining as they did to the appraisal of achievement without regarding to mental development or general growth of character. According to the Resolution:

they eliminate the inspecting and teaching staff as factors in the system, they impose all responsibility upon a body acquainted little (if at all) with the schools examined; they rely upon written papers, which afford no searching test of intellect, no test at all of c-character, or original ability; and, they encourage cram.

It also referred to the drawbacks of external examinations, attention to which was prominently drawn in the report of the Consultative Committee in England.

The baneful effects of external examinations were also sought to be removed through the programme of educational reconstruction planned as a part of the national independence movement. Although the focus of Zakir Husain Committee was on elementary education, their indictment that a "bad system of education has been made worse by awarding to examinations a place out of all proportion to their utility" was true in general. They laid stress on the

2. Ibid.
evaluation by the teaching faculty on the basis of school records. A similar sentiment was echoed in the famous report of the Central Advisory Board of Education dealing with post-War reconstruction in India. They recommend that for post-primary selection, the methods used should aim at discovering promise rather than actual attainment and should be based on a careful scrutiny of a candidate's previous school record and of his or her performance at an examination designed and conducted by experts.\(^1\) External examinations at the end of the secondary stage were not intended to be abolished. They endorsed the recommendation of the Joint Committee of the Central Advisory Board of Education and the Inter-University Board of India and Ceylon (at present known as the Association of Indian Universities) that there should be one examination designed with a two-fold purpose of (i) testing the satisfactory completion of a course suited to the requirements of those who will go directly from the high schools to occupations of various kinds, and (ii) testing the suitability of those who desire admission to the University.\(^2\) This is just the opposite of what it should be. In place of

2. Ibid.
de-emphasizing examinations, it only adds to their significance; importance.

Thus, the first half of the 20th Century may be characterized as a period of discontentment with external examinations. But the dissent was not strong enough to de-emphasize them, much less de-institutionalize them. As a result, a combination of external and internal examinations based on continuous assessment came to be advocated as the strongest dynamics of their reform in this period.

5.2 Post-Independence Reform

In the post-Independence period, the disillusionment with external examinations grew into a veritable movement no doubt but its direction was open to question. Examination reform was in the spotlight in all plans of educational transformation initiated in this era. The University Education Commission, which was set up immediately after Independence made their classic observation: "We are convinced that if we are to suggest one single reform in University Education, it should be that of examinations." They advisedly used the word reform, although they knew that, in India as

elsewhere in the world, dissatisfaction with examinations had been so keen that eminent educationists and important educational organizations had even advocated their abolition. They did not share this extreme view and felt that "examinations rightly designed and intelligently used can be a useful factor in the educational process. And if examinations are necessary, a thorough reform of these is still more necessary."³

For good or evil, this suggestion of 'one single reform' became an article of faith in the field of educational reconstruction in the country after independence. It is undoubtedly, the most quoted sentence in the literature on examinations. It has not, however, gone unquestioned. There are those who doubt its wisdom. The stronger critics feel that by making this statement, the Commission did a signal disservice to higher education. It led to a fallacious approach. Whether it was intended or not, the recommendation was taken to mean that if something could be done to improve examinations, the academic process would thereby automatically improve.² But more than that, the Commission erred in accepting the institution of public examinations. Even though abolition appeared too radical to them, they

1. Ibid.
could have advocated a policy of de-emphasizing them. On the contrary, they were rather keenly concerned with the improvement of the process of testing by increasing its reliability, validity and objectivity. They had been too obviously inspired by American ideas in testing and overly enamoured of the efficiency of the objective type test. Indeed, this defeatist approach of taking external examinations for granted, improving their technical efficiency and tempering them with internal assessment became a national policy on examinations in the fifties.

This is clearly reflected in the Report of the Secondary Education Commission who were convinced that external examinations could not be altogether done away with. They suggested certain steps to minimize their undesirable effects.

Firstly, there should not be too many examinations. Secondly, subjective element which is unavoidable in the present purely essay type examination should be reduced as far as possible...Lastly, the final assessment of the pupil should not be based entirely on the results of the external examination; other things such as internal tests and the school records maintained by the teachers should be taken into consideration and due credit should be given to them.1

This broader policy of examination reform was successfully converted into a movement by the Central Examination Unit.

set up as part of the All India Council for Secondary Education which later on got incorporated into the National Council of Educational Research and Training (NCERT). Atiyah confirmed it in his assessment when he observed that:

In India where an examination reform project is actively underway, there is no thought of undermining the traditional system. Their policy is, rather, to correct an over-emphasis on external examinations. This they intend to do not by weakening external control, but by strengthening internal assessment.

The movement aimed at the improvement of external examination and an increasing use of internal assessment. It also tried to incorporate the ideas of progressive education. Its most important feature was the conception of evaluation as an integral part of instruction which, to be effective, it was realized should be continuous and objective-based.

The Education Commission (1964-6) admitted that the Central Examination Unit was able to galvanize an examination reform movement in the country on the basis of the recommendations of the Secondary Education Commission. It had worked with thousands of secondary school teachers

in seminars and workshops, introduced hundreds of training college lecturers to the new techniques, established a very large pool of test items, trained papersetters attached to different Boards of Secondary Education, published a good deal of literature on evaluation and carried out or sponsored several studies and investigations on various practical problems in examinations. The Commission, however, never thought beyond the measurement aspect of public examinations. They were of the opinion that no major break-through towards the improvement of external examinations is possible unless (a) the technical competence of papersetters is raised through an intensive training programmes sponsored by the State Boards; (b) the question papers are oriented to testing not merely the acquisition of knowledge but the ability to apply knowledge and the development of problem-solving abilities; and (c) the nature of the questions asked is improved. 1

Apart from these improvements, the Commission wanted many other procedures of public examinations to be made more systematic and scientific, as for example determination of cut-off points, grace marks, reliability of scoring procedures, standardization of marks etc. The Commission also made very significant recommendations in that a few

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selected schools should be given the right of assessing their students themselves and hold their own final examination at the end of Class X which would be regarded as equivalent to the external examination of the State Board of School Education and that some colleges should be granted autonomous status with powers to frame their own rules of admission, to prescribe courses of study, to conduct examinations and so on. If implemented, these recommendations could have put examinations in proper perspective. But they have remained only in the realm of alternative strategies or futuristic possibilities. To date, there are not more than 13 autonomous colleges and 2 autonomous schools in the entire country.

It goes without saying that the examination reform movement in the post-independence era was not properly conceived. It could not achieve much as it failed to touch the basic question of the irrelevance of examinations. With the change in the political situation, time had come to remove the anachronism by rectifying the imbalance. In the name of modernity, plans were drawn to improve the efficiency of examining through better

1. Ibid, p.247.
2. Ibid, p.286.
paper setting and introduction of sophisticated statistical procedures or objective testing. The explanation for this is that India has become so addicted to the use of external examinations, that she can think only of improving them.

5.3 The Present Thinking

The disillusionment with public examinations has continued till today. While designing the curriculum for the new "10+2" pattern of education now in vogue in most of the states in the country, the National Council of Educational Research and Training did keep it in mind. They recommended semesterization of courses at the school level with the hope that it "would improve the teaching-learning situation and also reduce the burden of the end-of-course evaluation". They also felt that whereas in the present system either there is promotion for all students without examination, or there is an annual examination covering all the courses inducing the child to cram a large mass of half-digested information in a short time and thereafter to forget it conveniently. They wished continuous assessment through unit-testing to be introduced as a viable alternative.

to public examinations. The objective was very clearly stated:

Gradually as the system of internal assessment takes root, and personal biases leading to the lowering of standards are brought under check, the external public examination even at the end of Class X will become redundant and should be abolished. It would be necessary for each Board/State to evolve a phased programme of accomplishing this.¹

Although the new curriculum has been largely implemented,¹ the recommendations regarding semester system and abolition of external public examination have remained only pious hopes.

The Government of India while drafting the National Policy on Education in 1979 remained convinced of the irrelevance of public examinations but could be bold enough just to suggest a restriction on their number. They stated that

Generally there should be no more than three public examinations during the entire course of education till the end of under-graduate education. These may be at the end of elementary, secondary and the under-graduate stages. All other examinations should be internal. A regular system of sessional evaluation should be followed so as to identify the pupils lagging behind and needing special attention.²

The National Policy also expects examinations, especially

¹. Ibid,p.7.
public examinations to be made more objective and reliable. Evaluation should enable the teacher to see the effectiveness of his instruction and enable the pupils to judge the results of their learning efforts. It should thus act as an instrument of improving both the teaching and learning processes including the content of courses and methods of teaching. The mode of evaluation should discourage memorization and should be comprehensive enough to cover the total learning experience in the curriculum and co-curricular programmes.

5.4 Conclusion

In conclusion, we can say that there has been a widespread disenchantedment with the type of public examinations that we have. It had started during the British regime under the inspiration of a similar disaffection in England itself. But before Independence, the dissent remained in a low key and was enough only to advocate a combination of external and internal examinations. In the post-Independence era, this continued to be acceptable but there was a greater stress on improving the psychometric aspects of public examinations. Examination reform, no doubt, grew into a movement but it did not go beyond training paper setters and examiners or taking up similar other programmes for the improvement of testing. It never
questioned the relevance of the traditional public examinations. It took them for granted; that is what we are doing even now. The draft National Policy on Education 1979 only recommends a decrease in the number of external examinations.

We would like to reiterate our submission that the basic issue is the relevance of public examinations in modern society. We saw recently a startling example of the failure of a great traditional system of examinations to meet the needs of a society drastically changed by recent events - the examination system of the Chinese. In India, our examination system was not evolved out of our social needs. Therefore, there is a need to study its malfunctioning. It is also the time to demolish various myths with a hope of opening the way for alternative strategies.