LOOKING BEYOND THE CRISIS

The essay has covered the particular aspect of the education crisis concerning public examinations which prevails in India as much as in other countries. In the international context, there is a school of deschoolers, consisting of the proponents of de-institutionalization and deschooling. The society may not be deschooled in the near future, but we must take a comprehensive view of the role of public examinations in it. Although much is known about their psychometric intricacies, not much work has been done in India about their externalities or functional aspects. They have, indeed, remained a second generation problem.

Our schooled society, unfortunately, is also an examining society in which examinations play a very significant part in determining its structure and functioning without being in any manner consistent with its needs. This has led to its own contradictions which we have highlighted here. We have, however, attempted only to dispel some of the misconceptions about public examinations. Now we would like to present a summary of our arguments. An attempt will also be made to look beyond the crisis.
10.1 Development of Examining in India

We have shown that examining as such has been in existence in India since very ancient times. There are references to it both in Rig Veda and Atharva Veda. The Sutras of Panini also indicate the presence of some sort of ranking done through examinations. With the rise of Buddhism the centres of higher learning had shifted to the monasteries. By 7th century A.D. when Huan Chwang visited India, Nalanda and Vikramasila had acquired the status of universities. There is documentary evidence to prove that they had developed their own matriculation procedures. But the 'publicness' of these examinations remained considerably limited till the middle of the 19th century. They were not institutionalized till that time. Their use was also mainly confined to education. They were informal procedures designed for specific purposes.

The present public examinations in India have, however, acquired all the characteristics of a social institution. They have standardized procedures, physical property, recognized functionaries and various symbols. They were institutionalized during the British raj particularly with the setting up, in 1857, of the first three universities of modern India at Bombay, Calcutta and Madras. This transformation took place under two mutually consistent factors: the contemporary examination practices in England
of those days and the desire of the British to control masses through education and education through examinations. 'Payment by results' was introduced in India on the same lines as in U.K. The inspection of schools came to be based on examinations. They also got linked in this period with employment which laid the foundations for qualificationism.

As a consequence of these developments the system came to rely exclusively on external examinations. The only judgement that was accepted was primarily based on external examinations. Their obvious paramountcy led to a multiplication of examining agencies. There was also a gradual increase in the frequency of examinations from biennial to annual and now to half-yearly as in many universities. Indeed, the stranglehold of external examinations over Indian society in general and Indian education in particular became ever more vicious.

But this is not to say that there was never any dissatisfaction with public examinations. The British had themselves started dreading the Frankenstein's monster that they had created. There was disillusionment with examinations before Independence. It, however, remained mild and never threatened their existence. It could
not go beyond advocating a combination of external and internal examinations. In the post-Independence period, this policy continued to be accepted. The examination reform programmes were intensified into a movement by the National Council of Educational Research and Training. But it did not go beyond the training of paper setters and examiners or other similar programmes for improving the technical side of public examinations. Their continued role in society further deepened their irrelevance. The latest draft National Policy on Education 1979 also takes them for granted. It only pays a lip service to their deinstitutionalization by recommending a decrease in the number of external examinations.

10.2 Dysfunctionalities of Public Examinations

The basic issue in examinations, therefore, is their irrelevance in modern society. It would, obviously, mean their failure to meet the social needs. Our main thesis is that the system of public examinations in India is dysfunctional as it did not grow directly out of the needs of the society. As such, in all socio-academic areas, it is doing more harm than good.

Pedagogically, the present system is based on misconceived assumptions which have led students and teachers to have an inverted perspective about academic
work. In this perspective examination results and grades have become the chief form of institutionalized value. The result is that learning has become misdirected. Examinations have become counter-productive in the field of learning as they provide disincentives rather than incentives for it, particularly for life-long learning. The teacher's attention is being diverted away from the real objectives which are important for an all-round development of children. It even curbs teacher's initiative and originality. As far as the curriculum is concerned, the present system becomes self-eroding. The instructional objectives that are initially laid down cannot be pursued because of the system. Indeed, it leads to a total inversion of pedagogy.

Economically, the imperatives of imitative industrialization have created a need to have a particular selection strategy to pick and choose those for whom alone the modern job-destroying technology can provide places. This is also directly related to our strategy for national development and the relationship we visualize between development and education. In spite of the labour of love put in by human capital theorists, we can recognize only a pseudo-relationship between education and development. Our contention here has been that education is a process of screening which is carried out through the instrument of public examinations.
It does not help in production but only redistributes wealth. It seems to be related to productivity only because of social norms. The result of this process of choosing and chopping has been an economy of qualificationism in which qualifications, as certified by degrees and diplomas, act as the currency subject to constant inflationary trends. In under-developed countries like India, the mechanism of qualificationism is governed by the laws enunciated by Ronald Dore. Educational certificates are very widely used in our country for occupational selection. A very fast rate of qualification inflation has also been observed. And, of course, schooling is examination-oriented at the expense of genuine education. The qualificationist society has also created the myth of the pool of ability which is generated and sustained by examinations.

Politically, examinations thrive because of the current bureaucratization of democratic culture with its supporting ideology of scientific liberalism and democratic idealism. Nevertheless, they have created a totalitarianism of the elite. This has led to a political paradox. Superficially, examinations appear to be compatible with the requirements of democracy, but in reality they undermine it. There is a clash between equality and excellence, between contest and monopoly and between the individual motivation and curbs put on it by selective
allocation. The concept of equality of opportunity is our response to this paradoxical situation. But this is not a solution. Examinations only appear to be giving equal opportunity to all. They are always loaded in favour of the elitist or privileged groups. They help in the legitimation of exclusion. Further to soften the contradictions involved there is the concomitant warming up and cooling out dilemma. They warm up the upper classes and cool out the lower classes. But more than the political paradox created by examinations, they are downright anti-democratic and anti-man. They infringe upon inalienable human rights particularly the right to privacy. They also become tools for trivializing, de-individualizing, de-personalizing and even de-humanizing man. Their real bane, therefore, is the enslavement of man.

Sociologically, the public examinations in India have created conditions of disequilibrium. A society known for its traditional and unrelieved stratification has started using testocratic and democratic principles - both of exotic nature - for regulating its affairs. The rise of testocracy and the introduction of democracy in India have created a triangular contest. On one side we find a clash between testocracy and egalitarianism, the former entailing that the best man win and the latter refusing
outwardly to recognize any differences between individuals. On the second side there is a conflict between hereditary stratification defining status on the basis of birth and parentage and testocracy allowing full vertical mobility on the basis of merit as determined by test results. This tension reveals itself in malpractices which have been recently very common in public examinations. On the third side we have a conflict between hereditary stratification and democratic egalitarianism. All this creates a situation of disequilibrium. We must give credit to the Indian polity which has met it by demarcating the areas of operation for the three different principles. We still operate on the basis of the caste system on the purely social front. In the matter of admissions and employment, testocracy seems to reign supreme. Egalitarianism has been given a constitutional status and is apparently respected in all legal and civil matters. An incorrigible optimist may even see a brighter side to this triangular contest. Each principal keeps a check on the other and prevents it from either operating in its extreme form or from complete collapse.

This irrelevance of public examinations has created pathological conditions for the society. The question arises as to how long can the society continue with this situation. We do not plan to suggest remedies but would like to see the trends.
10.3 The Future Shape of Society

In order to look beyond the crisis we have to visualize the shape of the society in the near future. Adiseshiah has given us a demographic scenario for 2001. If we assume, after the Registrar General of India, the medium birth rate hypothesis, the 2001 census will establish a population of 945 million. By 2009 AD our 1971 population will double itself. Such an enormous mass of population with a less developed economy to contend with will need more, rather/less, efficient sorting out mechanism than at present.

The economic scenario is equally dismal. Assuming that the growth rate until 1992 will be nearer 5.5 per cent as we had targeted in our last two Five Year Plans and thereafter 7 per cent in the last decade before 2001, our agricultural sector will contribute 27.2 per cent to our national income, manufactures 24.8 per cent and infrastructures and services 48 per cent. In other words, we shall continue to be an agricultural society with manufactures becoming more of a key variable in people's life than it is today. Regarding


2. Ibid., pp.6-7.
employment, our labour force will increase from 170 million in 1971 to 366 million in 2001. This more than doubling (121 per cent) of the workforce in 30 years means that gainful and productive employment will have to be found for some 200 million new labour force entrants plus what is called the unemployed and the severely underemployed backlog which is estimated at a conservative 20 million. In terms of sectoral employment, the agricultural employment will increase from 130 million (72.2 per cent of the labour force) in 1971 to 214 million (58.7 per cent) in 2001; manufacturing employment will increase from 17 million (9.6 per cent) in 1971 to 60 million (16.6 per cent) in 2001; and employment in tertiary sector will increase from 33 million (18.4 per cent) in 1971 to 90 million in 2001. 1 Thus at the end of the century we would have doubled the labour force but we shall continue to be heavily agriculture-based rural economy.

The political infrastructure has been fairly stabilized on democratic lines. An important feature of the political life in India is that most of the political parties are wedded to democracy. The fairness with which general elections have been held since Independence goes to prove that democracy has taken deep roots in India. Indeed, we

1. Ibid., p.9.
can expect a greater participation of the people in the government and its agencies. The elitism in Indian politics with U.K. trained politicians dominating the scene is expected to vanish. But bureautechnocracy will continue to be a force to reckon with and it will continue to need the support of public examinations.

The quantitative aspects of the educational scenario are relatively easy to describe. Pandit and Raj \(^1\) will have us believe that the school going population in India at the elementary level (Age 6-13) will increase from 113 million in 1971 to 135 million in 1991 and then decline to 109 million in 2001. Similarly, the school going population at the secondary stage (Age:14-15) will increase from 23.6 million in 1971 to 33.4 million in 1991 and will decline to 23.8 million in 2001. At the senior secondary stage (Age:16-17) the enrolment is expected to increase from 21.8 million in 1971 to 33.2 million in 1991 and then decline to 30.7 million in 2001. For the higher education (Age:18-24) the student population is likely to increase from 66.4 million in 1971 to 112.9 million in 1991 and then marginally decline to 112.8 million in 2001. The net result is that the total student population (Age:6-24) will increase from 225.4 million in 1971 to 314.5 million in 1991 and then decline to 280.5 in 2001. This decline, though it

spreads optimism, is somewhat incredible. It is perhaps the result of our assumption that the birth rate would decline during these years from 35.5 in 1971-6 to 19.4 in 1996-2001. In addition to this explosion of numbers, the education system will also have to cope with the explosion of knowledge. This might necessitate new methods of teaching and learning, new methods of examining and, more than that, supplementation of the formal system of education by an efficient non-formal system. To follow Beeby's hypothesis of educational stages in developing countries, the 'stage of transition' has already begun in India. By the turn of the century this stage would be fairly advanced and some of the school systems may even enter the 'Stage of Meaning'.

10.4 To Examine or Not to Examine

Will the new society and its education system go on tolerating the irrelevance of public examinations? Authorities in many Western countries are taking, or are about to take, steps to reduce their dependence on public examinations as basis for issuing school leaving certificates. In Canada, Ontario abolished its examinations in 1967; Manitoba did so in 1970. Queensland has announced plans to terminate all its secondary school examinations, and other Australian States have given notice of

similar moves. Sweden has abolished all external examinations and Norway is reported to be moving in the same direction. Great Britain is experimenting with school-based examinations and reference tests, while the United States has for many years operated an elaborate system of aptitude and achievement testing, not tied to any particular school prescription. But all these countries are at higher stages of developments. They have already entered the 'Stage of Meaning'. They are not threatened by the explosion of population. Their economies are sound enough to absorb largely the entire out-turn of educational institutions. This will, obviously, be well-nigh impossible in India - at least in the near future. But, at the same time, the deep-rooted democratic values - similar to those of the Western World - will demand, in the interest of equality of opportunity, the application of universalistic principles of selection for admissions or recruitment. As special tests for each recruitment or admission may not be possible, public examinations will continue to play their role with importance being attached to their certificates. All that can possibly happen is that, along with other under-developed countries, there will be a greater tendency at the elementary level to drop examination altogether.

and to substitute for them automatic promotions. But at the higher stages of education, although people will continue to be dissatisfied with external examinations, they will not be able to do away with them completely. The abolition of examinations, although it may free schools and colleges from unnecessary pressures and would enable them to aim at the right things, will not be acceptable to the society. What can perhaps be attempted is to make them direct measures of all the educational objectives.

To analyze the situation more precisely we have to look to the demographic scenario in conjunction with the economic scenario. Examinations provide us a screening device for sorting out the population into desired categories in accordance with the network of political and economic roles. In 2001 the sorting out would be much more difficult as it will have to contend with a population as big as 945 million and a labour force as big as 364 million - that too in the face of a less developed economy. Accordingly, with tough competition for economic and other positions, only the selections done through examinations which are free from particularistic principles would work. But paradoxically, the centralized public examinations will become more difficult to conduct because of the large number of candidates that will be required to be handled. The external examinations, as presently conducted,

require such a cumbersome system that sufficient control cannot be exercised when the numbers go up. Moreover, as a consequence of the political and educational scenarios, teachers would be more educated, well-trained and more aware of their rights and as such will demand a greater participation in the process of passing judgement on the performance of students. This does not in any way justify abolition of examinations but, of course, it does justify their reform. Thus the odds seem to be against abolition; the trend is rather towards greater emphasis on examinations. However, in response to the recommendations of educational psychology and to the pressures created by heavy school enrolments, examinations everywhere seem to be undergoing a basic metamorphosis which mostly touches the question of their control and of their nature. It is thus expected that in the next decades, we shall witness added activity towards the improvements of examinations and the training of qualified examiners.1

The abolition of external examinations has been very extensively debated in India. The Education Commission (1964-6)

went on record to say:

One line of attack would be to abolish set syllabuses and the external examinations based on them altogether and to replace them by a system of internal and continuous evaluation by the teachers themselves. This is already being done in some institutions like the IITs or the Agriculture Universities and it could be increasingly extended to others as soon as the necessary facilities and conditions can be provided. We hope that, at no distant date, it will be adopted by all teaching universities and that the major universities, would give a lead in this matter. We realize, however, that external examinations will remain with us for a long time, especially in universities which have large numbers of affiliated colleges of very unequal standards. The main strategy here would be to attack the problem on two fronts: introduction of more frequent, periodical assessment so that the undue emphasis on the final examination as the sole determinant of success is reduced, and reform of evaluation techniques. ¹

A committee of the members of the Parliament which considered the recommendations of the Education Commission (1964-6) recommended that in the matter of examination reform attention should be concentrated on three major areas: reduction of the dominance of external examinations; the introduction of reforms which would make them more valid and realistic measures of educational achievement; and, the adoption of a good system of internal evaluation. ² The National Policy on Education 1968 laid down that a major goal of examination reform should

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be to improve the reliability and validity of examinations and to make evaluation a continuous process aimed at helping the student to improve his level of achievement rather than at certifying the quality of his performance at a given moment of time. The National Policy on Education 1979 also visualizes only de-emphasizing of public examinations and not their abolition.

Whatever may be the trend in developed countries, in India, the interaction of various scenarios and the direction of change already initiated leads one to think that in 2001 public examinations will be de-emphasized. They will possibly be metamorphosed and will be supplemented by alternative strategies which are already underway.

10.3 Metamorphosis of Examinations

The metamorphosis of examinations has to be seen in the light of our socio-economic and academic limitations. The most obvious limitation is that it is not possible to change the system. It is possible, however, to reform it. This reform is, of course, a euphemism for metamorphosis, the most important feature of which would be that there should not be too many

external examinations. This is something about which there has been near unanimity so much so that National Policy on Education 1979 lays down that there should not be more than three examinations up to the end of the under-graduate stage. This can be hoped to stabilize in the coming decades.

Along with this development, the educators in India, as everywhere else, will also be deeply concerned with the diploma disease, the scourge of the certificate, the dependence of individual life-chances on certificates of school achievement. We can expect the social importance of diplomas and certificates to be reduced before drastic measures are thought of. It would be increasingly recognized that the system of selection through the education system has disastrous consequences. The certificate selection alternative developed in the industrial countries will be taken to be largely adhoc and unplanned. In so far as the system does work roughly in a socially rational way, it will be taken to do so chiefly by identifying the able rather than by creating ability and that we are fooling ourselves if we think that it is necessary to keep a man at Euclidian Geometry until the age of 21 just to test his capacity to learn to write pithy position papers or plan a sales campaign. So, at a later stage, we may expect

recruitment for jobs to be gradually de-linked from educational examinations. The rumblings have already been heard. A Committee on Examinations set up by the Central Advisory Board of Education in 1970 suggested that all State Governments and the Government of India should agree that all recruitment to the services will be made in future on the basis of results of competitive examinations held purpose-wise by the appropriate authorities. The passing of a public examination or the securing of appropriate grades in that examination may be utilized as a criterion for permitting candidates to appear at such competitive examinations and no more. They also recommended that the maximum age limit for recruitment to lower clerical and other similar cadres should be reduced to 19 years. The latest National Policy on Education also gives the same direction. This could be a possible strategy for the future. The society may resort to an early entry into careers for its youth, doing as much of the selection as possible within work organisations, and transforming most of the training into in-career learning, either part-time or full-time, in special educational institutions.  

This metamorphosis of examinations will, however, aid and support the bureaucratization of society. The above change assumes that all middle-level and professional careers are made within large organizations. This would lead to the grip of the Big Organization on the social structure.¹ This is a possible contradiction with which the society must reconcile which it is already doing. In India, as in most underdeveloped countries, the modern sector which employs the product of secondary schools and universities is already highly bureaucratized - a good deal more so than in the industrial countries. Typically, in Africa and Asia at least 80 to 90 per cent of university graduates who do get employment get it in the public sector, and most of the rest in large corporations. Moreover, in situations of acute unemployment for graduates, genuine freedom of choice does not exist; most people are happy to take what job they can get, and are likely to cling to the organization which offers security; job mobility is low, except for those with special skills in scarce supply².

Along with the partial snapping of this link between jobs and educational examinations and general decline in

². ¹. Ibid., p. 149.
². Ibid.
their role, there will be attempts to improve their measurement value. This is the area which has been receiving maximum attention in India. The National Council of Educational Research and Training has already expanded most of their efforts on this task. Apart from the improvements in questions and question papers, many other procedures of external examinations will be made more systematic and scientific. The results, for example, may be declared increasingly in grades rather than in terms of numerical scores. Over-all aggregation of marks and classifying students into various divisions or classes may be abolished in favour of the certification of performance in individual subjects. Some progressive boards like the Central Board of Secondary Education have already started doing so. Statistical scaling of marks with a view to controlling inter-examiner and inter-subject variability may find favour with the examining agencies. The adhesion in the determination of cut-off points and the award of grace marks may be replaced by some sound rationale.