PART I

THE BACKGROUND
INTRODUCTION

Schooling is not education. It is only one of its means, and certainly not the most important one. Education, whether it is viewed by John Dewey or Paulo Freire, whether it is conceived by Mahatma Gandhi or Ivan Illich, whether it is defined by Aristotle or modern educators stands for much wider things than mere acquisition of information and skills. One may take it to be a process of understanding the world, of acquiring the confidence to explore its working. Another may regard the supreme object of education as expert discernment in all things - the power to tell the good from the bad, the genuine from the counterfeit, and to prefer the good and the genuine to the bad and the counterfeit. Still another may imagine education as providing people a chance to develop and enlarge their interests and individualities so that they may play a more effective role in society. Schools may try to do all these. But they fail, as they are more concerned with custodial care than with real education. They are too much tied to curricula, examinations and certificates which become educationally
counter-productive. In this essay, we shall be concerned with the effect of the present system of public examinations on schooling, education and society at large. But let us first of all clarify the terms which we shall be frequently using.

1.1 Important Definitions

As in America, the word school is used to include any educational institution at any level, including universities. We define schools, after Everett Reimer as "institutions which require full-time attendance of specific age groups in teacher-supervised classrooms for the study of graded curricula".\(^1\) By specifying the age of required attendance, schools have institutionalized childhood. In schooled societies, childhood is now assumed to be a timeless and universal phenomenon. This is believed to be the time when schools must train the young members of the society for playing an effective role in later life. The schools also assume that learning is the product of teaching and therefore they need specifically trained functionaries called teachers to impart learning.

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Since knowledge is considered as a product, the graded curriculum becomes a pre-requisite as an ordered array of packets of knowledge each with its time and space assignment, in proper sequence and juxtaposed with related packages. By way of indicating that learning in the given curriculum has taken place successfully, schools also award certificates based on examinations of various sorts.

Like traditional testing theorists, we take examinations as 'samples of behaviour, parts that hope to stand for the whole, buckets let down into the great sea of human nature to drag up enough specimens so that life down there can be recorded systematically'. Therefore, examinations, for us, are an exercise in human judgement. The purpose of making this judgement may be diagnosis or prognosis. The procedure used may be formal or informal. The judgements made may vary in their social significance which may be greater in some cases and less in others. Such judgements may be made by schools or by some other organizations like employment agencies. But we are mainly

confining ourselves to the former. Even there, we distinguish between two types of examinations: internal and external or public.

In schools, some judgements are continuously being made by teachers informally as a part of instruction mainly with a view to improving both teaching and learning. They are referred to as internal examinations. They link together the parts of the educational process and have little social or economic consequences. They are formative in character and are completely integrated with the process of instruction. They also try to ensure almost complete identity between the teacher and the tester and do not emphasize too much the comparison among students at the inter-school level.

In contrast to the above, there are some judgements which are arrived at according to set procedures at specified stages in schooling. They appear to come like wayside stations along formal schooling. They have a finality and irreversibility about them, are acceptable to all and are often used for purposes other than educational. We call them public examinations. They are conducted by agencies which are only extrinsically
related to actual teaching and learning and which therefore create a hiatus between the teacher and the tester. An external control and anonymity of examiners are, no doubt, their striking features. But such examinations are public also because of the public nature of comparisons of students' achievement and because of the public use of such inter-institution comparisons. Of course, all these features may be present in different public examinations to varying degrees. We, therefore, take 'publicness' to be a continuum so that we have more public or less public examinations.

Furthermore, there are two aspects of public examinations: the process of examining per se and its effect on the outside world. The former covers all stages like planning, administration and execution of examinations. It is concerned with issues such as reliability, validity and usability of the tools and techniques of examining. We call this aspect of public examinations their internalities. They encompass problems like those of interpretation of scores, scaling of marks, cut-off points, grace marks etc. They, indeed, govern the mechanics of testing and equip the specialist in educational
measurement for working out the theory of an efficient test. However, this does not take into account the interactions of the process of examining with external institutions or agencies which may be social, political or economic. We call them externalities. These obviously cannot be ignored if we want to have a complete programme of examining students. Attempting to predict future performance on the basis of test scores is much like trying to guess the ultimate size and shape of an oak tree by measuring a sapling in pitch darkness with a rubber band as a ruler, and without taking into account the condition of the soil, the amount of rainfall or the woodman's axe. 1

1.2 The Scope and the Methodology

Our contention in this essay is that we have not only started glorifying schooled society but we have also created a veritable examining society, in which the structure of human relationship is being considerably influenced by various forms of examinations. It has led to a phenomenal growth of examining agencies and

their expensive and bizarre procedures and other 'software' and has created a number of social contradictions. A survey of practices and procedures of under-graduate examinations in India that I undertook for the Association of Indian Universities shows that the average number of question papers set annually by an Indian University for under-graduate examinations, excluding practicals, is 909. Simple arithmetic will reveal the colossal waste involved in terms of the financial costs. But more serious are the social effects of examination certificates. That is what we intend to examine here.

The situation may be similar in other countries and sometimes more awful. In USA, between 1945 and 1961 alone, the total net sale of standardized tests and answer sheets to schools increased roughly 16 times as fast as the entire student population. And to date there is no indication that there is any change in this trend. Nevertheless, we have chosen to focus our attention on the situation as it has developed in India. Although similar to some other


countries, there is some 'Indianness' about it.

One aspect of the Indian situation as it stands today is that internalities of public examinations have come inevitably to overwhelm the externalities. Educators have been more interested in improving the efficiency of tests than their beneficence. This obviously is of no help to one who is taking a broader perspective and as such would be interested in the way examinations establish or destroy the balance of various institutions than in the improvement of procedural technicalities. It is no use having a psychometrically efficient test that gives results which are socially insignificant, if not outright harmful.

With public examinations becoming an important parameter in social organization, it seems all the more necessary that their beneficence be studied carefully than that the time be devoted to improving the technique of testing, important though this is. The present essay, therefore, highlights the dysfunctionalities of public examinations of which we remain blissfully unaware. The focus is essentially on their pathology or deviations from pedagogical, economic, political or social propriety rather than just on their ecology or the pattern of their relationships with other institutions. Not many people have thought of the diseased conditions so far and those who have done so, have only ended in
making suggestions for improving the technical efficiency
of examinations. We, however, propose to question the very
relevance of public examinations with special reference to
India. We shall bring out the contradictions, paradoxes and
dilemmas produced by them.

Although it may appear repugnant to an empiricist,
the study avoids quantitative approach. It assumes that a
social scientist must develop a perspective of 'macro-
sociological and historical processes.' But this is
seldom possible through quantitative methods. Quantification
is in fashion no doubt but the results of data analysis
are more frequently the product of technique than of comprehension
of the under-lying social reality. Masses of data, though they
tend to give an impression of objectivity, conceal rather than
reveal the true situation. As the present inquiry is planned
at the macro-level and is intended to be done in qualitative
as against the quantitative idiom, we perforce adopt the
historico-philosophical approach. We, therefore, rely heavily
on the logic of the extreme case, on the citing of key
examples and on the opinions of outstanding authorities.

We may submit at the outset that the present
investigation does not go beyond a diagnosis of the
situation. We believe that no construction is possible without destruction. So, as a first step, we propose to demolish some of the myths and misunderstandings leaving remedial action to future thinkers and researchers. No attempt has either been made to test any specific hypothesis. Indeed, we only hope to generate hypotheses for other research workers to test.

1.3 The Structure

The essay is divided into four parts. The first part provides the backdrop to the study and delineates the education crisis and the part played by examinations in it. It also includes a survey of literature on the externalities or functional aspects of examinations. The second part describes how examinations came to be institutionalized in India and the nature of discontentment and disenchantment with them in recent years. The third, and that is the major part, looks into the dysfunctionalities of public examinations. It reveals the socio-political contradictions produced by them. The fourth part sums up the argument and makes an attempt to look beyond the present crisis.