EXAMINATIONS AND THE EDUCATION CRISIS

The present educational scene can best be described by the generic term 'crisis'. We may say that accumulated problems and contradictions in the field of education, or the social problems relevant to education, have finally produced a definite education crisis or perhaps it would be more appropriate to say 'educational crisis of society'. It is affecting all countries, regardless of their socio-political systems and degree of socio-economic development, and is manifested differently at different places. For some, the essence of the present crisis is the riddle of mass education in a rapidly urbanizing society. Some are bogged down by the conflict between growing individual demand for education and the economic inability of society to satisfy this demand. For some others, the crisis is connected with the search for democracy - and especially for participatory democracy. Some are more worried about the freedom of the individual while others about the social irrelevance or obsolescence of the present system of education. Some take the crisis to be mainly due to the attrition through 'wastage and stagnation' in the system. It is obviously a complex phenomenon with various factors playing their role. Let us see how this crisis
has grown in recent years.

2.1 The Crisis

The two decades following the Second World War have been designated as 'the Golden Age of Education'.

During this period the public came to have boundless and unflinching faith in education. There was a virtual explosion of enrolment at all stages. National governments, as convinced of the value of education as the people themselves, invested large amounts in educational development on a priority basis. The teaching community - the priest class of this religion and its principal beneficiary - helped to maintain and continually deepen the public faith in education through research which sought conclusively to establish the beneficial results of the public education system and justified all the sacrifices made for it in the name of human resource development.

For could the underdeveloped countries escape the wave. Indeed, they accepted the view that the modernization, industrialization and wealth of the developed countries


2. Ibid.
were the direct consequence of their education systems and imported these models in the belief that they had only to westernize their education systems to modernize their society and to become industrialized and rich.

The situation, however, started changing in the sixties when there grew a lack of faith in the relationship between education and development. Those who were disenchanted began to demythologize education and to shatter the old illusions. During this period, the world education crisis was a subject of debate which stirred up discussions among circles interested in educational matters. Characteristically enough, it was the developed countries themselves that were the first to raise the alarm that all was not well with the expansion of public education and that its basic assumptions and structures needed a radical re-examination. The underdeveloped countries also began looking for new models because they had noted the lack of relevance of their imported education systems and realized that the high cost of these systems would not permit them to educate all their population within a reasonable period of time. The snowballing of this idea led to a situation which

1. Ibid.
has been described as a crisis in education.

The crisis has been felt in India too. It is recognized that the formal education system here is now a gigantic enterprise with about 700,000 institutions, 3.5 million teachers, 100 million students and an annual expenditure of Rs.25,000 million. And yet it hardly benefits the common people who are poor or very poor. Most of them are still illiterate; a large portion of their children do not go to school, and most of those who do, drop out sooner rather than later. A very small minority does climb up, through the limited vertical mobility that the system provides, and is coopted into the system which is thus legitimised. But the real beneficiaries of the system are the rich and the well-to-do classes who form the top 30 per cent of the income groups and who occupy about 70 per cent of the places at the secondary stage and about 80 per cent of the seats at the university stage. Besides, the system is not adequately related to national needs and aspirations, is highly inefficient and wasteful and has become greatly dysfunctional.

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2. Ibid.
especially in higher education. In fact the primary
objective of the system is not to spread education
among the people but to function as an efficient
and merciless mechanism to select individuals who
should continue to remain in the privileged sector
or enter it afresh.

The crisis is, indeed, the result of our
discontent with the existing traditional system
of schooling. This system limits educational space
to the school. It defines 'education' as something
that happens in school, and confines children in school,
claiming that schools are for children and that adults
are beyond education. The traditional system restricts
the role of teaching to licensed professionals. It also
places teachers and pupils in a vertical one-way
relationship, and endows the teacher with the authority of
office. Another stereotype of the existing system is
that it is a dual system with different schools for the
children of the privileged and the children of ordinary
people. Moreover it grades, degrades and fails majorities.
Those who fail to qualify in examinations at different
levels become frustrated because the expectations
which the system itself enkindles in them cannot be
fulfilled. Social seniority is bestowed according to the level of schooling achieved. The reckless competition among the schooled persons is the result of such a system which acts as a patronage of an elite. This fails to justify the extremely rising costs being spent on each student because this means, in effect, that we offer more privilege to a few at the cost of many. The number of satisfied clients who graduate from schools every year is smaller than the number of frustrated drop-outs who are conveniently graded by their failure for use in a marginal labour pool. The resulting steep educational pyramid defines a rationale for the corresponding levels of social status. We shall discuss these issues in greater detail in the following sections. Suffice it to say at this stage that there is a crisis of the school as a political educator which is paralleled by the crisis in its relationship with economy. The professionalization and the institutionalization of educational services have further compounded this crisis. It is in this context that we would like to highlight the social, economic, political and pedagogical malfunctioning of the present education system particularly with reference to public examinations in India.
2.2 The School of Deschoolers

The crisis burst on the international scene with the provocative debates initiated in recent years by Ivan Illich and his followers and associates - the proponents of 'de-institutionalization' and 'deschooling' which are neologisms no more. Almost constituting a school by now, the deschoolers contend that the school's position in society and the play of forces to which it is subjected make it incapable of promoting 'conviviality' or true education. On the contrary, it only serves the purposes of alienating and dehumanizing societies. UNESCO might assume that 'deschooling which as yet has no experimental basis remains an intellectual speculation'.¹ But 'Illichists' have generated sufficient radical thinking on various aspects of education, which has to be taken seriously. Indeed, deschooling has the potential of becoming a part of the rhetoric of educational reform.

Educational circles these days are not much surprised to hear that in all societies, both primitive and highly civilized, until quite recently most education of most children has occurred incidentally, not in schools set aside for the

purpose. The school only leads to the institutionalization of certain values. The pupil is schooled to confuse teaching with learning, grade advancement with education, a diploma with competence, and fluency with the ability to say something new. The inevitable result of such miseducation is physical pollution, social polarization and psychological impotence; three dimensions in a process of global degradation and modernized misery.

Illich claims that All over the world the school has an anti-educational effect on society; school is recognized as the institution which specializes in education. The failures of school are taken by most people as a proof that education is very costly, very complex, always arcane, and frequently almost an impossible task. School appropriates the money, men and goodwill available for education and in addition discourages other institutions from assuming educational tasks.

But what is more important for us here is that the institutionalized values that the school instils are quantified ones. It initiates young people into a world where everything can be or has to be measured, including their imagination, and, indeed, man himself. Quantity as such has become a fetish in a GNP oriented world and measurement is its necessary concomitant.

3. Ibid.
4. Ibid., p.8.
Examinations - a subsystem of education - basically intended to evaluate quality have become a means of quantification of human beings and a tool for dehumanization. This is the essential paradox, and also the tragedy of examinations.

While Illich feels that the school has become the world religion of a modernized proletariat which makes futile promises of salvation to the poor of the technological age, his co-thinker Reimer asserts that it has become the universal church of a technological society, incorporating and transmitting its ideology, shaping man's minds to accept this ideology, and conferring social status in proportion to its acceptance. According to Reimer, the school has transgressed its avowed function of education and has, therefore, outlived its utility.

Different schools do different things, of course, but increasingly, schools in all nations, of all kinds, combine distinct social functions: custodial care, social role selection, indoctrination and education as usually defined in terms of the development of skills and knowledge. It is the combination of these functions which makes schooling so expensive. It is the conflict among these functions which makes schools educationally inefficient. It is also the combination of these functions which tends to make school a total institution, which has made it an international institution, and which makes it such an effective instrument of social control.

1. Ibid., p.10.
3. Ibid., p.23.
Special attention must, however, be drawn to the place of the school in role selection which has implicit in it a 'betrayal of the hopes of schooling'. One could join Reimer in making a bold prophecy that if schools continue for a few more generations to be the major means of social-role selection, the result will be a meritocracy, in which merit is defined by the selection process that occurs in schools. There may be little reason to decry meritocracy per se but what complicates the situation are the criteria of merit. The school defines merit in accordance with the structure of the society served by it. This results in the maintenance of a hierarchy of privilege and, only the privileged are shown to have merit. Merit is, indeed, a smoke-screen for the perpetuation of privilege.

It is a serious point which cannot be brushed aside. The criticism cuts at the very roots of the present system of examinations, a vehicle, above all, of assessing merit which is itself rather narrowly conceived. Paul Goodman talks of the 'mass superstition'

1. Ibid., p.28.
2. Ibid., p.29.
3. Ibid., p.30.
about diplomas as a part of 'mis-education'. He believes that in the tender grades, the schools are a baby-sitting service during the time of extreme urbanization and urban mobility. In both the junior and senior classes, they are an arm of the police, providing cops and concentration camps.  

1. He also sees our educational reality in operation in the present kind of scheduling, testing and grading. He finds that colleges and universities go along with the spiritual destruction and indeed devise the tests and the curricula to pass the tests.  

2. He makes a bold proposal to abolish grading, and to use testing only and entirely for pedagogic purposes as teachers see fit.  

Freire's condemnation of the school is at a more philosophical plane. He thinks that the whole educational system is one of the major instruments for the maintenance of a 'culture of silence'.  

4. The school has evolved the 'banking concept of education' according to which education becomes an act of depositing, in which the students are the depositaries and the teacher is the depositor. The teacher is

1. Ibid., p.21.  
2. Ibid., p.104.  
3. Ibid., p.106.  
considered knowledgeable and students ignorant - a characteristic of the ideology of oppression. The teacher presents himself to his students as their necessary opposite; by considering their ignorance absolute, he justifies his own existence.\(^1\) According to this concept, students are merely reduced to objects. Examination becomes instrumental in contradicting 'scientific revolutionary humanism'. It supports the myth of the oppressor ideology: 'the absolutizing of ignorance', which implies the existence of someone who decrees the ignorance of someone else.

Postman and Weingartner, while seized of the 'burgeoning bureaucracy' as a resistance to change are not unnecessarily scared of it. They are not against bureaucracies any more than they are for them. Rather they take them to be like electric plugs. Bureaucracies will not probably go away, but they need to be controlled if the prerogatives of a democratic society are to remain visible and usable. That is why they ask the schools to be subversive so that they serve as a kind of anti-bureaucracy bureaucracy, providing the young with a 'what is good for' perspective on its own society.\(^2\) Their aim is to help all students

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1. Ibid., pp 45-6.

develop built-in, shock-proof crap detectors as basic equipment in their survival kits. The teacher - an agent of subversion - is seen as a catalyst for a new creativity, a new questioning to face the challenges of accelerating change within society. They do not suggest deschooling but would like education to become more relevant. What is at stake is our survival. It is not possible to overstate the fact that technologically wrought changes in the environment render virtually all of our traditional concepts - and the institutions developed to conserve and transmit them - irrelevant, but not merely irrelevant. If we fail to detect the fact that they are irrelevant, these concepts themselves become threats to our survival.

To sum up, we may say that at the centre of the case for deschooling arguments is the assertion that formal institutional education has outgrown its usefulness and has become an obstacle to social change. This is a time of crisis in the very existence of the school and a time also for innovations in the field of education; formal and radical changes in man's image of himself especially

1. Ibid., p.204.
2. Ibid., p.196.
as a school needing animal. The deschoolers' thesis is well epitomized by Illich himself, when he says that:

The logic would seem to require that we do not stop with an effort to improve schools; rather that we question the assumption on which the school system itself is based. We must not exclude the possibility that schooling is not a viable answer to our need for universal education. Perhaps this type of insight is needed to clear the way for a futuristic scenario in which schools, as we know them today, would disappear. 1

There have, however, been opponents to the above way of thinking. Wardle 2 has tried to demolish partly the thesis of the deschoolers through an historical analysis of the situation in England. He feels that too much of the argument in favour of deschooling has been at the level of polemical assertion, deriving from preconceived political dogma rather than from examination of evidence. 3 He thinks that the controversy is seriously in need of deflation by an injection of verifiable material, so that it may proceed at the level of rational argument and counter-argument, rather than by the confrontation of rival confessions of faith. 4 But by his own confession,

3. Ibid., p. 170.
4. Ibid., p. 171.
the deschoolers have made out a *prima facie* case. Indeed they have drawn attention to certain features of the educational picture which deserve a more critical appraisal than they have so far received.¹ So does Ronald Dore who recognizes elements of truth in the indictment of deschoolers, even when he does not necessarily share their fervour. He believes that to deschool is to throw the baby out with the bath water, for there genuinely is an educational baby worth preserving and nurturing in the institution called school. The cure for the problems which beset school systems in underdeveloped countries must be sought in less drastic measures - but measures perhaps only a little less drastic than are made out by the school of deschoolers.²

Some may even argue that deschooling presumes schooling. In underdeveloped countries like India which are still struggling to make schooling universal, it is rather out of place to talk of deschooling. It is not for

¹. Ibid., p.157.

the abolition of schools in underdeveloped countries that one has to consider the issues raised by deschoolers. They are relevant for planning improvements in their existing education systems. Ian Lister feels that instead of regarding deschoolers as devils to be exercised by conventional rituals or incorporating deschooling in a new liturgy, we need to analyse the challenges in order to meet them, and get beyond them.¹ This thinking has a universal appeal. It is applicable to India as much as to Mexico, Brazil or Germany.

According to Ruhela's ² analysis of deschooling in India, there are innumerable books, articles and research studies by scholars and public men which testify to the naked fact that her present-day education system has belied all hopes and is in need of immediate attention. The crisis in India is the result of the static system of education which has essentially remained unchanged and unresponsive to our social needs for over a century. Parikh³ believes that the concept of deschooling of society or deinstitutionalizing of education introduced by Ellichists is applicable to toto

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to the present traditional educational structures and programmes in India. He feels that India cannot wait any longer with her compromising attitude as revealed through the reports of all the three major Education Commissions appointed by India after Independence. Indeed, the emphasis being laid by the Government of India on the programmes of non-formal education is itself an admission of the need for deschooling in India. We do not, however, propose to examine here the applicability of deschooling to India. Our contention is that some of the thinking of deschoolers is certainly worth consideration. We would, therefore, like to draw from their thinking about examinations and testing and elaborate it with reference to the present educational and social scene in India.

2.3. Examinations in a Schooled Society

Postman and Weingartner¹ have recognized that it is not too uncommon in the history of the human group for a simple idea to change the entire direction of life in a society. Consider, for example, the idea that earth revolves around the sun rather than vice-versa. Or the idea of evolution or that a man may govern only by the consent of the governed. Most often, ideas of this type do not change everything immediately. It takes a long time.

Sometimes a war or two. But in the end the idea prevails and nothing is the same as before. The use of public examinations has been such an idea and no wars have been necessary to make it prevalent. The idea has been found so acceptable that it has permeated almost every sphere of our lives often with disastrous results. It is difficult to anticipate a schooled society without examinations. Aided by the economic rat race of consumption-oriented society, they have vitiated the objectives and methods of education and have even affected our social life.

But what is atrocious is that schooling has been converted into qualification-earning through the use of public examinations. According to the analysis of Ronald Dore, more and more of it becomes so. Everywhere, in Britain as in India, in Russia as in Venezuela, schooling is more often qualification earning schooling than it was in 1920, or even in 1950, and more qualification earning is more qualification earning—ritualistic, tedious, suffused with anxiety and boredom, destructive of curiosity and imagination; in short, anti-educational. The question arises, are we prepared to live with this problem for a while longer before it becomes desperate. Is there still a certain amount of

1. Ronald Dore, op. cit., p. ix
educational vitality in our school system capable of resisting the ritualizing disease of what Dore calls 'qualificationism'? We firmly believe that it is time to question the legitimacy of the prevailing order and the reigning orthodoxy in this field of education and to see what can be done by way of improvement.

Although the viciousness of public examinations has been recurrent in their theses, the deschoolers did not take a comprehensive view of them as affecting economic, political or social institutions. As pointed out earlier, they have thought of it as a tool for dehumanization through quantification of values which are otherwise immeasurable. A part of the deschoolers' critique has also been that schools fail to give people the right kind of training for their later occupations so that the selection processes mixed up with training inculcate the wrong kinds of attitudes to work and society and get in the way of healthy intellectual and spiritual developments of the individual.¹ Much has been written about the inefficiency of the selection process with its consequent wastage of talent, and the deschoolers are not alone in drawing attention to the cost of the system in terms of children's experience of failure, its self-confirming character, and

¹. Ronald Dore, op. cit., p.132.
its tendency to imbue even the successful competitors
with a worship of success rather than of excellence.¹

We would, therefore, reiterate here that we are living
not only in a schooled society but also in an examining
society. Not only has the individual to undergo a large
number of tests at various stages of his life but, in general,
the society seeks to regulate its affairs through them. This
is in response to the needs of societies to solve their
various functional problems. One of them is the conduct
and management of the total selection process. All societies,
and especially those which are highly stratified, must strive
to cope with the problem of total selection. Of course, they
do not meet this problem with the same degree of effectiveness
and efficiency. Some are more successful with one component
or a combination than they are with another. But all of them
meet it through their systems of examinations entailing several
contradictions.

That the examination system dominates society today
is not, however, a new phenomenon. What has changed
is the functional nature of its character. It has
become an end in itself rather than a means to an end.
The reasons for this are to be found in social change,
not in the examination per se. Preparation by society
for function in society is no longer an isomorphic
process, even though the examination remains the link
between the early stage of skill acquisition and the
later stage of vocational effectiveness.²

1. Ibid., p.163

2. Ruth H.K. Wong, "Educational Effects of Examinations of
Pupils, Teachers and Society", in Joseph A. Lauwerys and
David G. Scanlon (eds), Examinations: The World Year Book
We may blame the inventiveness of society which discovered new uses for examinations. But what is to be seen is how they play their part. As we shall see later, although much is known about their technical intricacies, not much is known about their socio-economic interactions. Therefore, schools may stay but the schooled society must have a fresh look at its examination system to find out how it impinges on a variety of its institutions and whether it is relevant in its present form. This is what we intend doing here.