

Repairing The Damage Done To Secondary Education

SSC examination results just announced show an unprecedentedly high percentage of success. In about 9 cases out of ten, even the examinees themselves would not quite believe they had done so well. Neither was it luck. And of course luck is out of place for so many and at the same time. A reform in the examination system itself explains it; fifty per cent of marks on a given question paper were obtainable on answers on what may be described as set and known questions, thanks to the Questions Bank introduced in 1992. Five hundred questions with answers set down in quiz form would fetch an examinee fifty marks out of a hundred. One simply could get them by rote and leave the books to dust on the shelf, feeling confident of a magnificent score on the 50-mark part of his question paper.

The published results bear him out. They are studded with 'stars', to put it a little colourfully. But even for most of the starred students the euphoria takes little time to run out. And that happens when they would sit for tests for admission to college about a month or so after the SSC results published.

To put it plainly: the problem, in fact, is not merely one of getting admitted to the college course. Being rejected in a college admission test or in any one taken to qualify for a job apart, the matter has to be considered from more than one very serious point: The thoughtlessly simplified method of letting a student pass the SSC examination strikes at the very root of education itself in this country.

Both from the admission debacles suffered by overwhelming numbers of students despite 'very good' results in their SSC examination, among other problems faced by them, the huge damage done by this so-called reform in the examination system has been more than clear. It has drastically lowered standards, which is the last thing that can be academically- and nationally- accepted. If the purpose in introducing this reform was to raise the percentage rate of success for the examinees, it has dismally failed at great cost to the nation.

One thing to be specifically noted in this context is: education obtained by a student at the secondary stage forms the very foundation of his academic and post-academic career. Nothing can justify tampering with it from motives other than making the student fully equipped to launch either into higher education or to qualify for a job or a course of (higher) training to build a career. Statistically so impressive, the success rate has actually spelt doom for tens of thousands of students. And the authors of this ill-conceived reform has to answer for this.

Instead, the imperative need is to see to the awfully deteriorating standard of teaching at the SSC level. Recent reports have it that, reputed as among the best schools in the country, some are no longer so. More than 50% of schools outside the cities are running without the required strength of staff, apart from other lacks ranging from that of library or laboratory facilities, chronic irregularities in holding classes or tutorial arrangements entailing special pains taken by individual teachers to help improve their students.

Questions of frustration for guardians and students apart, as has been seen in matters of admission to higher education or in qualifying for a job etc, these unfortunates have become an avoidable addition to the educated unemployed in society. Which has only created new problems for the administration which has no precise policy or programme to deal with the situation so created, either by arrangements for their retraining for jobs or careers, or to reeducate them along proper lines.

Here is therefore a new problem created, or an old one that has assumed new, enormous dimensions for the central education authority to thoroughly examine and overcome. The problem in the main is repairing the damage already done to schools and students, and to take up the question of overall improvement of teaching, teacher attendance, teacher appointment, and other shortages suffered by the schools. Adhoc or piecemeal or unsound measures (such as the one introduced to artificially boost examination results) must give place to worthwhile measures that will remove the causes of the sharp decline in the standard of education at the secondary level.

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