

Marks Mask Incompetence

Our High School Students Have Low Levels of Learning

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In the recent past, there has been a dramatic nationwide increase in the marks obtained by students in the secondary board examinations. In Maharashtra, during the last decade, the proportion of candidates passing the Class 10 examinations has jumped from around 50 per cent to about 80 per cent. Whether it is the state board examinations, or those conducted by the CBSE and ICSE authorities, more students are scoring above 90 per cent than ever before, though not always getting into the college of their choice.

This inflation in marks is due to a variety of reasons. High schools and the coaching class industry are doing a better job of preparing students to crack the examinations. Competition between the state boards, CBSE and the ICSE authorities in terms of ensuring their students' entry into college, especially prestigious courses and institutions, has also fuelled this quantum jump in marks. In this insanely competitive environment where every single mark counts, most schools have deliberately inflated the internal assessment marks of their own students.

In many urban schools, an overwhelming majority of candidates are now getting distinctions and first classes in the board examinations. This inflation of marks does not tell us, as many believe, that these students are better in mathematics or science than those students who passed out of school a decade ago. Qualitative judgments of this kind require a different type of periodic testing than those conducted by our current board examinations. However, it is possible to assess whether current levels of learning are adequate, or not.

The recent large-scale World Bank study of mathematics achievement of 6,000 Class 9 students studying in government and private schools in Rajasthan and Orissa highlights serious deficiencies in what many students are learning. Between 30 per cent and 40 per cent of these students could not pass a low international benchmark described as "some basic mathematical knowledge". More than 80 per cent of them could not choose correctly, for example, the smallest number from the following set: 0.625, 0.25, 0.375, 0.5 and 0.125. The two states fell below 43 of the 51 countries for which comparable data exists. According to the authors, Jishnu Das and Tristan Zajonc, "The average child falls far below any reasonable standard and a large minority fails completely."

We do not have similar large-scale studies of actual achievement in other areas of the secondary curriculum. The following results of a study of the English skills of 100 students in eight rural and two urban government regional medium schools should, therefore, be treated as indicative. These Class 10 students — most of them selected by their teachers as among the best in English — were asked to write as much as possible about their favourite film star. About half of these "best" students were unable to write a single correct sentence, or at best could manage only one correct sentence. While less than 10 per cent were able to write more than five correct sentences, the subsequent board examination results declared a few months later indicated that more than 80 per cent of all candidates passed in English in the state.

The limited evidence that has been presented indicates that inflated examination marks are not an indicator of the health of our secondary school system. The authors of the mathematics study estimate that about 18 million - or 70 per cent of all 14-year-olds - are either not enrolled or have not acquired some basic mathematical knowledge. There is extensive research indicating that many students are completing elementary education acquiring very limited foundational skills. For those who continue to the high school stage, the evidence suggests that the additional years of schooling do not significantly improve their learning.

Only a very small percentage of the Class 9 students in Orissa (9 per cent and 1 per cent), and in Rajasthan (4 per cent and 1 per cent), were able to pass the 'high' and 'advanced' international benchmarks in mathematics respectively. These figures were better than countries like Chile, Iran, Philippines, South Africa and Ghana. However, the Indian results were less than the corresponding figures for the Netherlands (44 per cent and 10 per cent) and the USA (29 per cent and 7 per cent), and far less than the comparable figures for South East Asian mathematics powerhouses like South Korea (70 per cent and 35 per cent), Taiwan (66 per cent and 38 per cent) and Japan (62 per cent and 38 per cent).

While less than 5% of the 14 year olds in India could be viewed as top mathematics achievers, the sheer size of the youth population in India makes a big numerical difference. Das and Zajonc estimate that India would have more top achievers in mathematics than South Korea or any European country, and have about 60% of the top achievers in the United States. According to them, it is this enormous size of our youth population, which translates into large numbers of high performers that accounts for “India’s global presence, the large number of Indian professionals in high paying jobs, and the dramatic growth of its service industry, particularly in information technology”.

But this understanding should not obscure the reality that India does not have employable young people in the large numbers that our country requires. Manpower studies, and spokesmen of various industries, indicate that a large proportion of our engineering and business management graduates, and a far greater percentage of general graduates, are unemployable. And this huge quality gap will only begin to be substantially addressed if our authorities are aware of the abysmally low levels of learning of high school leavers. Being clueless about this, they are unaware of the nature and magnitude of the task that needs to be undertaken.

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