



This year's Goa Board examinations witnessed many HSSC and SSC students complain that the physics and science question papers respectively were too tough. Many parents and students wrote letters in the press, pleading with the Goa Board officials to be lenient during evaluation. The anxiety that students and parents shared alike was so much that it also resulted in an online petition.

Such complaints about exams being too tough or questions being framed "out of the syllabus" are not at all new. In fact repeated pleas for leniency come from students who mostly attend private and expensive schools (in Goa it is generally aided private schools), and who are provided with the best of facilities. Contrast this with the public schooling system which is in doldrums; the largely poor students who attend such schools don't make such demands. Across India, good schools are generally private ones whether they are aided or not by the government. These demands for leniency - largely for science and professional subjects - expose the serious problems with the educational system in the country and the state's failure to provide equal and fair education. In the end, it also exposes the hollowness of the idea of 'merit' as a yardstick to measure academic excellence.

Through the whole period of schooling one finds very few parents demanding better quality of education. Rather than demanding proper changes, one finds that students and parents in fact suffer through bad schooling systems. Some prefer private (and expensive) schools as alternatives, which are often considered better for non-academic reasons. Despite there never being a sustained demand for better public schools, parents still expect their kids to excel academically and will go to any lengths to achieve this. To give the best to one's children is not wrong; the problem emerges when only those with means can afford decent schooling facilities. The consequences will be serious as good educational facilities are intimately linked to a better society.

The pleas for leniency rest on deep fears that a difficult question paper will affect a candidate's chances of qualifying for reputed professional and technical colleges. The petition circulated by students in Goa was similarly concerned with "percentages and careers". We | 1

know that there are thousands of 'middle class' parents across India who spend lakhs on coaching classes so that their children will have access to these professional colleges and the job market. Indeed, the proliferation of expensive private schools and coaching centers not only bestow prestige on the students and parents who are able to afford it, but also ensures that high paying jobs only go to the privileged folk.

This is precisely what the periodic hue and cry regarding tough question papers confirm: the complaints are not about the miserable system of education, but are about the anxious feelings amongst parents and students for losing out on individual success and personal gain. The logic seems to be frustratingly simple: nothing matters except that the student cracks the exam. And why not, since the whole education system is oriented towards cracking an exam – it is worse for technical courses whereby colleges and coaching centers train one to answer one typical question paper that guarantees results. A slightly unusual question paper – fairly or not – causes panic as children are not encouraged to think independently, critically, and to have sound awareness of the world around them.

Which brings us to the question of merit. The access to expensive and exclusive technical/professional colleges is intimately connected to the idea of merit, as it recognizes only individual success in professional/science courses which are valued over the rest. This is the obsession of the elites who identify as 'middle class Indians' and those that aspire to this class mobility through their children's success. Hence this merit can generally be achieved by only those with the financial means and caste/class networks.

The inadequate availability of publicly-funded, fair, and equal education and the simultaneous promotion of merit and cutthroat competition is one of the causes for the rising inequalities in India. The intense competition that private schools, teachers, coaching centers, and parents promote not only lead to narrow career choices being valued, but it also makes education extremely expensive for a large chunk of the population. This would eventually lead to inequalities in accessing the job market as well. Which is why, any idea of merit and academic excellence celebrated and promoted during the time of board exams, and after results are declared, ring hollow.

I do not want to deny that Goa hasn't witnessed any demands for a better schooling system. Movements like that of FORCE – Forum for Rights of Children to Education – that demanded better facilities for all gives us hope for a better future. The movement championed by parents who could not afford expensive private education, demanded that the government support English as a medium of instruction as this would help their children to access better jobs. The movement also rested on the fact that government or public schools – where most of the poor people were forced to send their children – were ill-equipped to impart any decent skills that would be useful in later life. But the full potential of the movement has not yet been realized.

In many ways it appears that Indian society, riddled with considerable inequalities, hasn't learned to exist in communion with the less fortunate other. This is why, time and again, one hears calls for leniency in evaluation during examinations, when in fact one should have demanded a better education system and facilities.

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