

Evaluation in Indian schools, across assortments of examination boards and subjects, I contend, are basically meant to be a formality where the concerns of ensuring better pass percentages appear paramount. Second, the overriding evaluation criteria appears to be governed more by psychological concerns of minimizing stress and fear of exams than the need of testing understanding and skills. And by evaluation I refer both to the process of setting a test/examination paper and its assessment where, either marks or grades are awarded.

While the above may be the picture across disciplines, the scenario becomes even more depressing when it comes to social sciences comprising subjects of history, geography, political science (or just politics) and economics. These subjects, in particular, history and politics, beleaguered by the constant harangue of “irrelevance”, “memorization intensive”, “uni-linearity” seem to seek redemption by making it “easy”, and “scorable” in exams. The 90 pluses and A’s which so many students seem to be scoring, tell one story. A truer indicator of student understanding of history or politics is gauged by the kind of social and political practices of our youth - indifferent to society, politics and bereft of any citizenship attributes. Nothing more need be said as to this paradox, indeed a tragedy¹.

In this paper I seek to raise certain larger questions regarding the kind of evaluation practices used in public exams conducted by three educational boards viz, Tamil Nadu Matriculation Board (TNMB), Central Board of Secondary Examinations (CBSE) and Council for Indian School Certificate Examinations (CICSE or ICSE for short). Although many of the issues and questions that I raise may well be applicable to all the subjects of social sciences but given my experience in teaching of history and politics, my critique tends to be confined to the latter.

Evaluation, examinations, tests, assessments...etc in my view form part of what can be called the curriculum spectrum, where we need to look into aspects of textbooks and pedagogy, to review the kind of questions that are asked in tests and exams. With perhaps a marginal exception of CBSE, the exams conducted by TNMB and ICSE, reflect a rather pathetic and ludicrous state of social science practices in our schools. Both, the textbooks (with the sole exception of NCERT whose books are prescribed for CBSE affiliated schools

but which nevertheless does not exonerate CBSE as I point out later) and pedagogical practices in history and politics are, ironically caught in a time warp. This I contend is responsible for the banality and inanity of board exams (sic). For example, if we take the TNMB Class X exams in history and civics, there is hardly any question (objective, “caption questions”, short answers or essay type) that is not based on the three R model of exams – read, recall, write. Though the TNMB examination blue print claims that 41 questions that are asked are based on knowledge, application, skill and understanding only the naïve would take their word for it. Looking at the exam papers for the last 5 years, not a single question comes across as one where some thought, genuine analysis or originality from the students is sought.

Likewise, ICSE is no different. As one pours through its history and civics question papers for nearly a decade, one is amazed, if not shocked, that this board which claims to have a better brand equity and which therefore has some of the most elitist, exclusive, celebrated and well known schools across the country affiliated to it, a travesty similar to the TNMB is committed. For again the pattern of questions more or less remains the same, the questions too often remain the same and the thrust of the exam is basically to test the cramming capacity of the students².

Now coming to CBSE, the scenario is one of some change. We do see some effort to test students application and understanding sans mere memorization and writing in rote. Though from last academic year CBSE has brought in certain changes spurred by Kapil Sibal’s munificence of making Class X final exams optional, but observing the papers over the previous 4 years, CBSE is unable to get rid of the recapitulation mode of important dates, names and events. Secondly (and this is more revealing), the marking scheme of CBSE makes it explicit that some 80% of the questions should hover between the “easy” and “average”; “difficult” questions should be limited to not more than 20%!³ Thirdly, in the recent comprehensive and continuous evaluation (CCE) introduced by the CBSE, a maximum of 60% weightage is accorded to all social science subjects



put together in what they call as summative assessments. Summative assessments are akin to the final board exams (sic). The rest, called formative assessment comprises of tests, assortment of projects, assignments, homework, class work, etc to be carried out on a daily, weekly, fortnightly and monthly basis.⁴ On the face of it, these appear as very progressive and credible act(s). But as I argue these appear to emerge not in the context of enriching learning but guided largely in the name of de-stressing students and to take away the pressure and fear of exams.⁵ (Never mind in the process if teachers are stressed and much of their valuable time is taken by preparing, filling and compiling whole lot of data)⁶

Concerns of de-stressing students and removing fear of exams hardly do justice to learning. By compromising on the complexity and intensity of the discipline's epistemology, we not only make mockery of exams but mockery of the subject, learning and schooling itself. The shrill chorus raised by many in demonizing exams has damaged the inherent challenge, charms, beauty and reputation of history and politics if not other subjects.

At one level let me also say that CBSE examination pattern hardly does credit to the most imaginative, thoughtful of the textbooks we have on history and politics. The history and politics textbooks of NCERT are meant to help students to appreciate history as lot more than mere dates, events and names. The books are multilayered and more thematic in their approach. All topics are exploratory in nature and are deliberately open ended to ensure that both teachers and students debate on them⁷. In such a case the exams therefore demand more imagination and depth, goading students to give answers of insight, profundity, reflecting deeper understanding. Alas! When one contrasts the CBSE papers with NCERT texts, the CBSE pattern of exams appear so tame and insipid⁸. On the other hand, if we see any of the textbooks prescribed by ICSE or the TNMB⁹, one will be forgiven if these texts are mistaken to be guidebooks!! All chapters are categorized in neatly divided causes, courses and consequences paradigm. There is little of the how's and why-forth's and even where they are presented, the arguments put across are neatly packed, self contained and sealed. These, like I stated earlier, are meant more to facilitate easy memorizing and consequently scoring.

Ultimately any examination/evaluation makeover is congruent

upon two things – one, changes in textbooks and second, and more importantly, pedagogy. NCERT has done its bit to expose children to a qualitatively richer understanding of history and politics. However, in the final analysis the onus to help a child rests with teachers and the kind of class interaction s/he initiates. Teachers with a sound and firmer grasp of history and politics who see society both in its past(s) and present not in absolutes but more as processes where they help students with appropriate activities, classroom discussions etc to explore the interface between economy, culture, politics and how it determines and shapes our identities and outlooks. Sadly this is where reforms and policy changes are not coming. Given the context in which teaching finds itself as the least sought after profession in urban India, being the worst paid, ridiculed and maligned, it is no surprise that the best teaching talents are not to be found here. Consequently, learning suffers. However, the situation in the rural parts is different. There the issue has more to do with lack of teacher preparation and motivation.

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Meanwhile, we do have few teachers and schools, who try to make exams more challenging and meaningful. However, owing to the nature of the public exams that are highly centralized affairs and its grades or marks given so much of credence by all, such innovation and experiments get sidelined and focus is once again on 'examination' preparation and ensuring high pass percentages. One may view attempts by CBSE through their CCE as an effort not only to minimize the importance of final exams¹⁰ and also as an attempt to decentralize. The many rubrics that fill the data sheet/report cards suggest that non logico-mathematical intelligence and emotive constituents in a child's growth have been factored

in. However in the process cognitive benchmarks have also been so tweaked, informed by 'clearing exams should be a breeze' mindset. Moreover, in stipulating every benchmark, including the weightage to be given for these benchmarks - instead of giving teachers the freedom to evolve their own benchmarks - the board has once again derided the concept of decentralization. The teachers' manual for CCE, so full of instructions, appears to be written in 'a- teachers-needs-to-be-spoon-fed' and 'teachers-know-nothing' tone. The anxiety in making evaluation very scientific and objective through check lists, hundreds of rubrics, anecdotal notes and what not, undermines the element of fuzziness, which in contemporary management discourse, is perhaps an abomination¹¹. But I contend that learning at many levels is fuzzy and the apprehension to generate 'scientific' data removes the element of intuitiveness which to me plays a key role in teaching-learning. Though at some levels their intent has been to make classroom transactions richer and deeper, these measures appear to bludgeon a teacher with so much of data generating paper work leaving them gasping for time. Such a move on the one hand gives no room for teacher's discretion who may have otherwise evolved an

appropriate evaluating mechanism keeping in mind the nature of learning styles of each student with whom the teacher formally and informally interacts¹². But on the other hand, the fear of reducing it into some caricature or travesty is genuine given the realities of teaching in classrooms in India with limitations of resources, teacher availability, teacher competence and compulsions of ensuring high pass percentages.

In the final analysis then, the variables involved in evaluation are many and complex, each having its pitfalls. I, however would bet on the teaching community to restore the credibility, not just of evaluation but the entire teaching-learning process. This of course is dependent on a contingent of teachers who love teaching and interacting with students, are passionate about the subjects they teach and importantly schools wherein these teachers trusted for what they do and how they go about their job. But if teachers are just not trusted, we are not going to get the best lot ever and learning with all its constituents will continue to suffer and continue (with apologies to Marx) as a farce and as a tragedy.

Footnotes

1. See Kanti Bajpai, 'The middle and other classes,' in The Times of India, May 29, 2010 for further examples of 'failed citizenship'
2. Even one look at the syllabus and guidelines itself will be enough to indicate the kind of limitations both TNMB and ICSE impose on setting an examination paper. See <http://www.cisce.org/data/Syllabus%20for%20ICSE%202011/history.pdf> and http://www.tn.gov.in/matricsyllabus/blueprint/matric_QandB.pdf p 49
3. See the section on 'Sample question paper and marking scheme' for social sciences at <http://cbse.nic.in/> (the pattern has now changed to some extent for academic year 2010-2011)
4. In effect everything that a child does both inside and outside the classroom comes under scrutiny. From what one understands of the guideline given, even homework and class-work have to be graded. At one level I suspect it becomes inevitable for how else is one going to quantify continuously a student's homework and classwork performance as the new system demands? In that sense it does appear contradictory to the underlying intent of CBSE of pushing up pass percentages. In this context see news report: <http://timesofindia.indiatimes.com/city/delhi/CBSE-sounds-warning-on-arbitrary-use-of-CCE/articleshow/5587256.cms> (The Times Of India, February 18/19, 2010, New Delhi edition)
5. In the circular sent by CBSE on September 20, 2009 by its chairman to all CBSE schools, the first two reasons given for introducing CCE stated were "to reduce stress and anxiety" and "to reduce drop out rates". See Circular 39 at <http://cbse.nic.in/circulars/cir39-2009.pdf>. Secondly as far as history and politics are concerned, the NCERT books calls upon a robust understanding of history and contemporary politics. Given the limitations of many teachers dealing with history, themselves schooled in simplistic, political narrative approach, one wonders how many can deal with these chapters in the rigorous, multi-layered fashion it so demands. . One is welcome to read more on this on my site: <http://www.historicalmind.com/2007/07/new-ncert-history-text-books-critique.html> for further critique and some problems of dealing with NCERT books in our classrooms
6. For further reference on our obsession with numbers and the high percentages where '90 percent has been reduced from the status of outstanding to a minimum qualification', see Robindra Saha's Merit in a time of extravagant marking, Education World, March 2008. Given the 'I top, I first' mindset, the grades, despite being indicative, are certainly going to take the place of marks and percentages. Nothing short of A+ may secure one a seat in senior secondary, making A+ a minimum
7. Sumit Sarkar, A new kind of history textbooks, The Hindu, April 17, 2006
8. If the sample papers are anything to go by under the new CCE parameters for the academic year 2010-11, with multiple choice questions being a first, the tone and tenor of the questions do not appear to be as demanding of a student's analytical, reasoning skills as claimed. The recapitulation mode of exams similar to TNMB and ICSE seems to be intact at most levels. See in <http://www.cbse.nic.in/cce/index.html>

9. Uma Maheswari & Sally Varghese, history and civics, Matriculation, Tamil nadu textbook corporation, Chennai, 2006; Xavier Pinto, E G Myall; New ICSE history and civics , part II, NOIDA, 2010
10. Some may contend that instead of one major exam now there are far too many of them albeit in different guises
11. I also contend that there is an effort to 'managerialize' education with all such data work on spreadsheets and make it market oriented. For a similar view see Stephen Alter, 'Classroom shopping –All the management mumbo-jumbo cannot make education a retail product' ,Outlook, November 27, 2006
12. It can be argued that teaching and learning cannot be seen merely as a craft to be measured and quantified through lesson plans, flow charts and check lists. Teaching and learning are more of an subjective experience. While one is not denying the need to measure and assess learning but the criteria involved and its best judge would be the teacher himself/herself. See <http://www.historicalmind.com/2009/06/indian-exams-patently-fraudulent-and.html> and www.historicalmind.com/2010/05/cbses-continuous-and-comprehensive.html

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