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100% For Students, 0% For Boards

How Board exams have become a well-intended but unmitigated disaster

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An error occurred on the server while processing the URL. Please contact the system administrator.
"500 - internal server error. There is a problem with the resource you are looking for, and it cannot be displayed."
"This site cannot be reached. cbse-results.nic.in took too long to respond."



This is a sample of messages millions of Indians were forced to stare at multiple times on July 13 and 15. On these two days Central Board of Secondary Education announced the results of an estimated 2.6 million students who took its Class X and XII exams. The failure to communicate results for hours was only one of the several levels the Board examination system has been failing. From the way exams are conducted to secrecy over answer sheets to reluctance to correct errors, India's education boards are denying foundational requirements of a fair school education. Covering all that up with high marks is like putting an attractive mask on a failing body.

Denying students their basic right

One of the blessings - or banes, depending on what kind of parent you are - of modern day education is that after every school exam students are given answer sheets. Some schools even require parents to sign the answer sheets. Why is this done? Because answer sheets are the best way to gauge a student's progress. By sharing it, schools let parents participate in their child's progress. It also makes evaluation transparent by making teachers available for scrutiny by parents and students. This standard practice is abandoned when it comes to two most important exams of a student's life - finals of Class X and XII.

Students aren't allowed to know who has done their evaluation and how. Access to answer sheets is restricted to a small fraction who have to follow a complicated and expensive process to seek reevaluation. For years TOI has reported cases where reevaluation led to significant increase (in many cases doubling) of marks that altered the path of students' higher education.

WHICH ONE IS FAIRER?

	SCHOOL EXAMS*	BOARD EXAMS
QUESTIONS	Tougher	Easier
EVALUATION	Transparent	Secret
EVALUATORS	Known & answerable	Unknown & not accountable
MARKING	Rigorous	Lenient
NO. OF EXAMS (Two exams a year starting class 5; schools also take reviews)	14 	2 

NOT SO AATMA NIRBHAR

	STUDENTS IN 2013	STUDENTS IN 2017	GROWTH
India has over 30 boards, yet international boards are gaining ground			
CAIE	44,953	67,381	50%
IB	2,523	3,906	55%

CBSE, and maybe other boards too, do make digital copies of answer sheets. All they have to do is to make those copies available to students with a password and a deadline to review and respond. As for the likely deluge of requests for reevaluation, that's a perverse logic! It confirms the belief that the Board has something to hide. Besides, the mere announcement of making answer books accessible will lead to significant improvement in evaluation since examiners will know that their work will be scrutinised.

Leaving the fate of two critical exams in the hands of alien examiners with no apparent accountability is grievously unfair. If CBSE takes the lead, it will force state boards to do the same, granting a fundamental right to crores of students.

Flogging a dead horse

Try making sense of this. In just one year - 2020 - the number of students with more than 95% marks in CBSE Class XII more than doubled. And number of 90-percenters rose 67%. If this was because the Board was lenient due to Covid-19 disruptions, what explains 27% fall in number of Class X students

Recognising its futility CBSE had abolished Class X boards in 2011 ... It also introduced steps like 'continuous and comprehensive evaluation' that ensured students' future didn't depend so much on one exam ... but soon these measures were diluted

who got 95% or more marks and 18% fall in those with more than 90%?

In one year, performance of one set of students skyrocketed and of another set plummeted. This happens when the system of evaluation is secret. To make things worse all boards have been granting bonus marks in the name of moderation. The 'bonus' goes up to as high as 10 marks per subject in some cases. Race to the bottom is getting confused as race to the top.

Grade inflation is a reason why Board exams have ceased to matter for

entrance to engineering, medical, law and even many general colleges. Recognising its futility, CBSE had abolished Class X Boards in 2011, relieving more than a million students of the pointless drudgery. It also introduced progressive measures like continuous and comprehensive evaluation (CCE) and weightage to internal assessments. But soon after, progressive steps were diluted, and Class X Board was reintroduced.

Today, internal exams of many schools are tougher than Board exams and marking is more rigorous and transparent. So why are Board exams feared more? Because of fear of the unknown - unknown exam centre, unknown invigilators, and inability to see answer sheet. Education boards should decide what they want to be known for: Rigour or recklessness? Substance or shallowness? A well-wisher of students or their worst fear?

Fair, not fear

For all its shortcomings CBSE is India's only national, fastest growing and better-than-most board. It oversees some of India's best government schools. It can set trends in deep reforms, the first of which should be to abolish Class X Boards. For Class XII, it should either make evaluation transparent or make the Board optional. It should reintroduce CCE so that students' future doesn't depend as much on one exam as it does now. It can set question papers and can even introduce a mix of neutral invigilators - but exams must take place in students' schools. It could review answer sheets of randomly selected 10% of schools so that schools know they are under watch.

It's the lack of such student- and learning-friendly measures that's behind the explosive rise in the popularity of foreign education boards like International Baccalaureate and Cambridge International. That's tragic for a country that has the world's largest number of schoolchildren and maximum number of school boards. And a country where thousands of students start their day at school with a rendering of Tagore's 'Where the mind is without fear and the head is held high...'