

Confusion Worse Confounded

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The time honoured practice of admission to the Indian Institutes of Technology (IIT) has been through a common entrance test called the Joint Entrance Examination. This test is conducted jointly by the Indian Institutes of Technology and selected candidates are, as far as possible, accommodated in the institute and the subject of their choice. Of course the availability of seats in a particular IIT or subject would determine the number of students admitted to it.

In addition to the Indian Institutes of Technology, whose JEE is accepted by the Indian Institutes of Science and Education and Research (IISER) for the purpose of admission, there are other Institutes which are of national importance. These include the Indian Institutes of Information Technology (IIIT), NITIE, Indian School of Mines and the National Institutes of Technology (NIT). Admission to these institutions is through the All India Engineering Entrance Examination (AIEEE). The system is tried and tested and has worked without hitch so far and there are no complaints about it. Suddenly the Ministry of Human Resource Development and, in particular, its Minister, Kapil Sibal decided that change was needed. For this purpose the Ramasami Committee was set up. On the basis of the Ramasami Committee report the Ministry decided that there were too much examinations and that it was necessary to reduce them. It also decided that in the entrance examinations weightage was not given to the performance of students in the XIIth standard examination conducted by various Boards of Higher Secondary Education, Central and State. Therefore, a new dispensation was made whereby there would be a single examination covering both JEE and AIEEE. On protest by faculty of various IIT this was modified to the effect that the top twenty-five percent of students who appeared in the joint entrance examination would have to take a second examination for qualifying for admission to an IIT. To these marks would be added the Board Examination marks of the top thirty percentile group of each Board and on this basis the total marks of the students would be compiled. The IIT Council accepted this recommendation, but this led to such an uproar that eventually a compromise formula has been worked out whereby there would be a common examination, but for admission to IIT there would be a second advanced test in which the top twenty-five percent of the students of the combined examination would be allowed to participate. The Board Examination marks of students would be taken into consideration in the grand total, but only of those students who are within the top twenty percentile group of the Board Examinations. This is a complicated system of two examinations masquerading as one which IIT Council has been bulldozed into accepting.

The expressed opinion of Kapil Sibal is that the present system is encouraging coaching classes in order to prepare students for JEE and AIEEE. If Board Examination marks are taken into account then coaching centres will lose their glamour and the standard of schools will improve. What absolute balderdash! It is not an entrance examination to engineering colleges which is lowering school standards. The standard is low because government refuses to invest financial and manpower resources at the appropriate scale to improve school education. The fact that the Prime Minister's order to set up six thousand new model schools in rural areas on the pattern of Navodaya schools has been torpedoed by the Planning Commission and MHRD through adoption of the Public-Private Participation mode (PPP mode) is indicative of the mindset of the Ministry, which sees glamour in setting up new Indian Institutes of Technology and Indian Institutes of Management but is quite happy at letting our school system rot. Rather than looking into the fundamentals of schooling the Ministry is trying to use an entrance examination as a means of improving the standard of schools. As it is, our Boards of Higher Secondary Education, ranging from ICSE and CBSE to the State Boards of different States have a

widely varying standard of education, examination and marking of answer books so that the results of different Boards are not really comparable. This is proved by the fact that as soon as a school achieves a certain standard it tries to migrate from the State Board to either CBSE or ICSE. Now all of them will be weighed in the same scale. This will not improve the standard of the Boards but rather lead them on to the path of fraudulently fudging marks so that their students are seen to perform well. Politicians have to nurse rural constituencies, where the standard of schools is abominable. Therefore, they pressurise the Higher Secondary Boards to mark answer papers in such a way that the failure rate is low and the largest number of students possible are given high marks. The IIT will now have to take these marks into consideration.

Kapil Sibal also feels that the new system will eliminate coaching. The coaching classes are a direct slap in the face of our formal school structure. Schools impart very little education and student go there to mark attendance in order to qualify for the Board Examination. A major part of teaching and learning is done through tuition and coaching and this has caused this parallel education industry to flourish. With a two-part admission examination and with Board marks being taken into consideration the coaching classes will further prosper because now there are three stages for which the students need to acquire a competitive edge. Far from eliminating the coaching classes one wonders whether the Ministry is in conspiracy with coaching centres in order to further increase their reach and, therefore, to prosper. If the JEE and AIEEE examination system is carefully examined it would probably be found that these entrance tests have become almost mechanical, in which multiple choice questions with only one correct answer now predominate. The coaching classes drill students in answering such papers by repetition, till it is almost second nature for a student to tackle a multiple choice question and enter the answer. So the institutions of higher technical learning are getting a bunch of drilled robots or automatons. I am almost positive that if these students are subjected to testing with questions which force them to exercise their analytical skills their performance would fall drastically and students who have seriously studied their subjects but not through a drill would probably perform better. What needs to be done by the IIT Council, IIIT Council and NIT Council is to take a good, hard look at the examination and what it covers and redesign it so that learning by rote will no longer be at a premium.

A question which might be asked is whether education might not be better off if the Ministry of Human Resource Development is abolished. This would automatically give autonomy to institutions and universities and then, perhaps, we could proceed with the serious business of educating our children.
