

Thought-provoking Exam Results

THE results of Secondary School Certificate Examination, the biggest public examination conducted by five education boards in the country, have mirrored a systemic wastefulness we can no longer turn a blind eye to. Of the total 9,28,391 candidates taking the tests all over the country only 3,81,762 have come out successful making for a 40.36 per cent pass figure. In other words, almost 60 per cent failed to cross the hurdle. Our first question would be: where do these overwhelming number of frustrated adolescents go? A segment of them, along with those carried over from the failed batches of previous years, would reappear at the next year's tests but a large majority of them are likely to find themselves into the wilderness. This time the percentage of failure being the largest in last five years we have on our hands a stupendous problem to keep on course — for their own good and the good of the society.

The size of the debacle at the exams is essentially reflective of poor educational administration, flawed and sloppy class-room instructions, lack of special coaching to weaker students and encouragement of short-cut to success, like recourse to cheating. These are all a part and parcel of what we regard as an worn-out education system.

Nowhere in the world such a massive waste of youthful potential is allowed to recur year after year risking an avalanche of morbid generations. So, our basic accent would be on a policy position whereby most of the candidates who are sent up for public examinations will pass them.

We are for one major terminal phase after the SSC or HSC exams whence a vast majority should have the opportunity of opting for technical or vocational education dropping off from the so-called mainstream. If higher education were truly selective and knack or quality-oriented then a pressure would have been automatically exerted from the top on the conventional base-level cravings for climbing the ladder of white-collar academic degrees.

That said, we now congratulate those who have come out with flying colours, especially the high achievers whose list happily includes a large number of girl students. But a majority of the students who have passed are sure to find it difficult to get themselves admitted into institutions of higher learning, that being another kind of waste staring in our face. The education system as a whole needs to be recast.

Good Augury

In a somewhat gloomy picture of arsenic mitigation measures being on an uneven keel, the experimental use of water filters to remove high concentration of arsenic from tubewell water at a relatively cheaper cost certainly sounds like a good augury. We appreciate and welcome the initiative being jointly taken by the government and the World Bank to address the massive public health problem. The technology adopted to carry out the important task of ensuring supply of pure drinking water to six thanas at this experimental phase has proved to be environment-friendly and effective. Furthermore, it is also showing signs of acceptance among the villagers using tubewell as the only source of water. True, it would be a daunting task to have them switch over to alternative sources of water but we have to convince them anyway about those. We request the authorities to take steps to popularise the technology among the masses through an all-out national campaign.

Alongside, persuasion must go on at the grassroots about short-term options to ensure safe drinking water supply, including rainwater harvesting, boiling water from ponds and other simple arsenic-removal techniques. Alternative sources of drinking water are our priority now. While we continue to devote ourselves to patient management and sustainable options there is hardly any time to waste on short-term mitigation measures to be set on the roll. We must rise up to the occasion to save ourselves from this impending plague called "arsenicosis." We have to reverse the situation at any cost. We also request the political parties to help the cause by taking up arsenic mitigation on their agenda.

Justice Taking its Course

THIS is a strange country where the wanted criminals walk freely under the nose of the law enforcers while a child is tied up in handcuffs even on his sick bed in a hospital with as many as four constables standing guard over him as if he was the most dangerous criminal in the country. This is the story of a 10-year-old boy Jewel who was arrested from Gandaria last May by the police in an injured condition. On being produced before the court he was sent to jail and when his condition deteriorated he was eventually moved to DMCH for treatment. There he lay shackled before the court ordered removal of the cuffs around his feet.

The pathetic story was published in a largely circulated Bangla daily and it was immediately picked up by Ain-O-Salish Kendra, a legal aid body which filed a writ in the High Court. The learned judges issued rule on the officials concerned and ordered transfer of the child from DMCH to BSMMU Hospital for better treatment. Moreover, Jewel has been freed from the handcuffs as these violated Sections 31 and 35 of the Constitution. The respondents were also ordered to present Jewel in person before the Court on 26 June, 2000.

Jewel must consider himself lucky because his case was reported by a newspaper and taken up by a legal aid group. There are several others suffering behind the bars without trial. We feel relieved for Jewel but we feel concerned for others like him. When able-bodied adult killers and terrorists move freely around, a child like Jewel receives excessive police attention for something which at best could be addressed in a correction centre if he truly were a wayward boy.

I know that in future there will be many speeches stressing

NOTHING has recently given Indian leader-writers and cartoonists as much ammunition as Mr Ram Vilas Paswan's decision to provide free telephone connections to three lakh low-class employees of the department of telecommunications (DoT). Mr Paswan, the Dalit with "an unblemished history of populism", has been attacked for this "phoney capitalism".

Critics put the annual cost of this freebie at Rs. 400 crore, some even Rs. 1,200 crore. Their cry for DoT's privatisation has become shriller.

Mr Paswan is a populist. His performance as railway minister — with the creation of nine new zones, regularising of 50,000 casual workers, and issuing of countless free passes — proves this. (But then, so does most other rail ministers.)

Mr Paswan's latest move is especially pernicious because it's meant to scuttle DoT employees' agitation against its corporatisation.

However, the loss inflicted by the freebie is exaggerated. Waiving the registration fee for a phone connection (Rs. 3,000) for 3.2 lakh employees comes to Rs. 96 crore and the cost of 75 free calls to Rs. 40 crore. The rental forgone is Rs. 115 crore. This may be excessive in relation to the likely benefit, viz higher employee morale, and

Two Kinds of Populism Between Bihar and Mauritius

Praful Bidwai writes from New Delhi

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round-the-clock contactability. But those who argue thus ignore the free connections given to employees of MTNL — the very model of corporatisation that they want DoT to adopt. They also ignore that railway and airline employees get similar benefits the world over.

These commentators did not feel outraged when MTNL announced free phones for anyone who subscribes to its Internet service. Nor were they shocked at the Rs. 8,000 crore private operator telecom scam. Even less did they protest against the government's plan to unduly favour Internet users: they can now access the Net from anywhere at the cost of a local call.

This is in a country where less than 0.5 per cent have computers! Making the 21st century cheaply accessible for the elite is not "populism": it is post-modernist prudence! Is it possible to detect a touch of class or an anti-Dalit bias here, perhaps?

Mr Paswan's populism is

Bihar-style, patronage-driven, directed at large numbers. But we have another kind of populism, far nastier, which caters to the topmost layer of the elite.

This is Mauritius-style populism, with a conduit to foreign institutional investors (FIs). Mauritius, less than one-hundredth the size of India, is the source of 60 per cent of our FI investment — much larger than the US. Mauritius is crucial to the post-1992 \$11.8 billion portfolio investment.

The reason for this oddity is simple. Like Fiji, Mauritius is a tax haven, with which India has a double-taxation avoidance treaty. Fund managers can use a Mauritius address and pay no tax on huge capital gains. The bonanza runs into \$3 billion. This tax-dodge has driven our artificial stockmarket boom. The loss to the exchequer is estimated at Rs. 3,000 crore-plus?

This past March, income-tax officials in Mumbai noticed the

oddity and issued notices to 24 of the 136 Mauritius-based FIs, demanding proof that they were Mauritius "residents." The institutions panicked. The Sensex tumbled.

That's when finance minister Yashwant Sinha stepped in. Mr. Sinha, like Mr. Paswan, is a Bihar. But he is an ex-IAS officer with Big Business contacts who teamed up with variety of politicians, before settling on the BJP with RSS help.

So keen was Mr. Sinha to pump sunshine into the markets that he got the Central Board of Direct Taxes to "clarify" in April that a mere certificate from Mauritius that a company is resident there is sufficient proof that it should not be taxed.

Mauritius-style populism has since hit the headlines and featured in a public-interest litigation filed by the Azad Bachao Andolan, a semi-Gandhian organisation. In response, Mr. Sinha first charged there was a "systematic campaign" of

defamation against him, and threatened to sue the newspaper which alleged that his daughter-in-law (Ms. Punitha Kumar Sinha) benefited as an investment manager with the Oppenheimer Group.

Mr. Sinha has done little to refute the tax-dodge allegations. His media supporters, however, have launched a disinformation campaign. Why "crib" about the tax loss (only Rs. 3,000 crore)? Why forget that the "basic purpose" of double-tax avoidance agreements is "investment promotion" (read, give rich FIs huge tax breaks)?

One commentator, a market speculator, even accused the petitioners of having "Stalinistic objectives". It is hard to miss the irony of Gandhians being termed Stalinist, and even harder to accept that abuse can substitute for reasoning.

The relevant issue here is simple. The public exchequer has lost thousands of crore in Banana-Republic style tax eva-

uation. Thus, the Sensex has doubled over the past two years. But capital gains tax receipts have stagnated. (In the US, by contrast, such receipts have kept pace with the market.)

Most FIs use Mauritius only as a post box. Thus, a \$750 million company with an expenditure of tens of millions in the US spends just \$25,000 on its Mauritius "operation."

True, such fly-by-night operations preceded Mr. Sinha's tenure and were condoned by governments eager to attract foreign capital. But Mr. Sinha was the first minister to actively order the CBDT to withdraw tax notices after they were issued in good faith.

This makes him *prima facie* culpable of misleading the public and causing a huge loss to the exchequer. It won't do to pretend that double-taxation treaties take precedence over sovereign tax laws. No international treaty can. Even if the Mauritius treaty is abrogated, the issue of recovering lost revenues will persist.

Mr. Sinha must face this issue squarely without personalising it. If Mr. Vajpayee does not force him to do so, he will only have proved that in the race between Patna and Port Louis, between public and private sector scams, it is Mauritius-style

City, on a silver platter will not help us achieve that goal. If Mr. Barak really intends to reach a final agreement resolving the thorniest issues, then why is he willing to transfer Abu Dis without demanding a concession in return? If, as he has stated, he is giving it as a down payment, one wonders how the full bill can be paid while preserving the undivided capital of which he has so repeatedly spoken."

One can gauge the difficulty of peacemaking in the Middle East from the fact that Mr. Sharansky, a former peace activist in his native Russia, is considered a moderate, a dove in Israel. Mr. Sharansky has no qualms about demanding reparations from the Palestinians to them that were forcibly taken away from them in 1967.

In reality, both people aspire so much the same things. Yes, there are Muslims in south Lebanon dedicated to destroying Israel. But they are in the minority, and they can be effective only when the majority is ready to tolerate them and pay the price of their hatred. But the vast majority of the southern Lebanese wanted the Israelis out of their lives so they could make their own better. And now that the Israelis are gone, few Lebanese are prepared to sacrifice their future to a self-defeating fantasy of marching on Jerusalem.

By defining its border with Lebanon, Israel can defend it with all its considerable might. It can use the Israeli air force, unrestrained; it can hold the Lebanese and the Syrian governments responsible for the actions of those within their borders — south Lebanon, the Palestinian intifada in the West Bank — it has always lost because it always found it difficult to win support, either at home or abroad, for force that is required to win a war without borders. Israelis will only sanction such force and sacrifice for a war of clear-cut self-defense over a defined border."

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