99% Unlucky Young Indians

Our competitive exams are gamed to make the vast majority lose, and then be pronounced as lacking merit. So unfair is this filtering, that it may as well be replaced by a lottery system

D Shyam Babu

Youth protests have prompted GOI to address, anew, the problem of competitive examinations' question papers being leaked. It has taken two key steps. Firstly, it has amended the Public Examinations (Prevention of Unfair Means) Act, to "bring greater transparency, fairness, and credibility", and to inspire confidence in the system. The amendment introduces time-bound resolution of exam fraud cases.

Secondly, it has appointed a high-powered task-force headed by Nandan Nilekani, to make the country's examination system "leak-proof and technology-driven". One is inclined to hope, given the reputation of the task-force members, that it would succeed in its mission. But both these moves are, in a fundamental way, beside the point.

What is this point? That the increasing number of candidates and shrinking job opportunities have created an unprecedented crisis, in how we sort out who-is-in and who-is-out, and its societal ramifications. On top of this, we have become a low-trust society, where every failure seems an outcome of unfairness.

Consider that in 2023-24, for 7,999 jobs in 22 central civil and defence services, a total of 1,508,430 candidates attended the examinations. That amounts to a mere 0.5% success rate, which effectively renders the rest of the candidates, the overwhelming 99.5%, meritless. Bottom line is that most of our educated youth will not get jobs that satisfy their aspirations.

In 1854, it was Macaulay who introduced merit-based recruitment by competitive examinations, after doing away with the patronage-based appointment of East India Company's officers. That same year the Civil Services Commission (precursor to UPSC) was set up, and the following year its first examination was conducted.

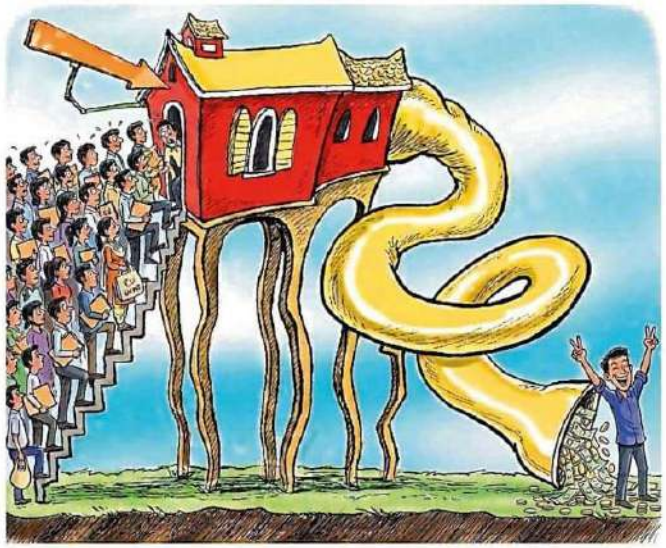
In 1864, Satyendranath Tagore became the first Indian to pass the exam. However, even as Macaulay ended one kind of patronage, other forms survived, and decidedly persist even today.

Indians were 'free' to travel to London (the only test centre till 1922) and master the European classics to succeed in the examination. After Independence and till the early 1980s, Indians were 'free' to take the examination in English medium only. A mini scandal erupted around this time, because one of the exam questions concerned the definition of equestrian sports!

No filtering system is value-neutral. The current efforts to make our competitive examinations fair and transparent will also merely fix the mechanical problem, not the structural one.

After all, millions of aspirants vying for thousands of jobs will amount to the rejection of more than 90% of contenders. And the difference between one's success and millions of others' failure could be just one mark for equestrian sports.

Isn't the process of selection, then, a filtering process merely to perpetuate patronage? Note, too, how it places an additional burden on low-income rural candidates, who have to 'prepare' for it by moving to a city for coaching, and bear the expenses involved.



We also make too much of academic credentials and rankings in competitive examinations. Neither really matters in one's preparedness to be a competent officer. A rocket scientist and a graduate in arts are, upon qualifying the examination, equally unprepared for the job. Hence the extensive pre-job training and subsequent bouts of on-the-job training throughout one's career.

What is it that we accomplish through our complex selection process, except vindicating GK Chesterton's point that 'evil thrives in ambiguity"? Above all, isn't it unconscionable that we not only fail to provide decent jobs to our youth, but also brand most of them as meritless?

Is the selection process about merit? No. It is about the need to filter, chopping away millions as unsuccessful. And, then, why not dip the blade in honey? This is what our two-step selection system is, whereby a preliminary filtering removes the bottom 10% or so, and then step two separates the rest from the lucky ones.

Harvard philosopher Michael J Sandel endorsed, in *The Tyranny of Merit*, this suggestion by Ernest F Thompson, a member of Yale University's admissions committee: "You sometimes have the nasty feeling that you could take all the thousands of [applications]...and you could throw them down the stairs, pick up any thousand, and produce as good a class as the one that will come out of the committee meeting."

The same could be said not only about those 22 central services mentioned above, but also for many other competitive examinations. And this means that almost all seats in schools, colleges, and universities might as well be filled through a lottery system.

Should technical and highly specialised jobs and courses be outside the lottery system? To select the really meritorious? Nope, not at all. Instead of a competitive examination that involves an interview process, which is problematic in its huge subjectivity, selection through lottery would be more efficient, fast, and seen as fair.

What comes in the way is our tendency to scoff at straight lines and simple solutions. Power and privilege operate through complex and complicated processes, which only a few can manipulate.

In conclusion, two points deserve our attention.

One, the paper-leak phenomenon is the function of commercialisation of the education process. So long as coaching centres keep competing with each other with claims of 100% success of their respective candidates, incentives to cheat will remain. Whenever a technical fix is overcome, we will be back in the same place, having to tighten the law, and to set up a committee. A lottery will reduce, if not end, commercialisation.

Two, a solution like a lottery for selecting candidates doesn't have to be implemented all-India from tomorrow. A pilot involving school admissions somewhere could be the first step. But let's not mindlessly prostrate at the altar of merit. After all, what is merit? It's a weed on Mars.

The writer is Senior Fellow at Centre for Policy Research. Views are personal