Tomorrow's Affairs
Analysis of today
Assessment of tomorrow

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Rewarding compliance – What's wrong with India's education system?

A reckoning has just played out on the streets of New Delhi and other major Indian cities.

Tens of thousands of young Indians rose up against an education system that is failing them, ultimately securing the resignation of Education Minister Dharmendra Pradhan—a powerful symbolic victory.

But the message of the protests is more profound: the socioeconomic compact between India's youth and its political leadership has collapsed.

Each year, millions of Indian 17- and 18-year-olds spend months losing sleep over their 12th-grade board examinations, before regurgitating the same knowledge in a slew of college entrance exams.

For another huge segment of students, the board examinations are irrelevant; their lives revolve around engineering, medicine, and law entrance exams, for which they have spent the better part of five years preparing.

In the event of failure, economically privileged students might take a gap year and park themselves in coaching centers to prepare to try again.

Explosion of long-standing frustration

The process is brutal enough in normal times. This year, over two million students took the highly competitive National Eligibility cum Entrance Test, in order to qualify for medical college, only to find out nine days later that the results had been voided, owing to allegations of a leak, and they would need to re-take the test.

Another 1.8 million took the Central Board of Secondary Education's annual examination, only to notice grading discrepancies that apparently resulted from a new digital marking system.

> The fury on the streets was difficult to quell

The Indian government's response to the affected students' plight—which has included extreme stress, exhaustion, and even suicide—has run from indifference to disdain and hostility.

When young people marched to parliament to get their voices heard, they were met with violence.

But the fury on the streets was difficult to quell. This was not a response to a one-off event, but an explosion of long-standing frustration.

A sorting mechanism

For decades, successive cohorts of students—including mine about 20 years ago—have resigned themselves to the idea that the Indian education system is designed more as a sorting mechanism than as a means of building human capital.

But even this characterization now feels overly generous. Students are forced to run a gauntlet of high-stakes exams, only to find that the transition to employment has completely fractured.

Recent research indicates that between 2011 and 2023, the number of college graduates aged 20–29 in India almost doubled, from about 32 million to 63 million.

> Around 40% of graduates under 25 are unemployed

But around 40% of graduates under 25 are unemployed, and about 20% of those aged 25–29 remain out of work.

Among young men, only about 4% of 12th-grade graduates, and 6.7% of college graduates, manage to obtain a permanent

salaried job within a year of reporting themselves unemployed.

Other industry analyses suggest that only 8% of university graduates are in jobs that match their qualifications, while more than half work in low-skill roles that do not require a degree.

With advances in AI threatening to wipe out the bottom rung of the career ladder, the situation is set to worsen.

Mental-health crisis

This will only exacerbate India's burgeoning youth mental-health crisis, which policymakers have so far failed to address in any meaningful way.

In 2014–24, student suicides increased by nearly 80%, with nearly 124,000 students taking their lives over that decade.

> Suicide in India now accounts for nearly one in six deaths among individuals aged 15–29

More broadly, suicide in India now accounts for nearly one in six deaths among individuals aged 15–29, surpassing deaths from road accidents and infectious diseases.

In a large survey of university students across nine states, over 12% of respondents reported contemplating suicide over the past year.

Between one-quarter and one-third of respondents reported moderate-to-severe anxiety and depression.

These outcomes amount to an indictment of an education system that has prioritized a narrow idea of achievement over psychological safety.

'Exam Warriors'

Indian Prime Minister Narendra Modi himself effectively characterized the exam system in his book Exam Warriors.

His intention was apparently to motivate students to fight their way to "victory." But against what? A war, by definition, requires an enemy. In this paradigm, the student's own curiosity must be systematically defeated.

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More insidiously, this system functions as a training ground for a broader culture of compliance.

Risk aversion and fear of failure are so acute in India that they are hampering entrepreneurship.

Even as senior government ministers chide Indian startup founders for focusing on consumer services, rather than deeper innovations in areas like semiconductors, they preside over an education system that rewards rote learning, rather than critical thinking and experimentation.

Rewarding compliance

In The Disengaged Teen, Jenny Anderson and Rebecca Winthrop describe four distinct modes of student engagement: achiever, passenger, resister, and explorer.

For generations, the Indian system has produced mostly passengers, who went through the motions to ensure their survival, and high-performing achievers, whose pursuit of perfection was propelled by a debilitating fear of failure.

Today's young people fought anyway, making clear that the failure is the state's, not theirs, and demanding democratic accountability

Those who could not cut it became resisters, but because the paradigm was so rigid, they typically turned their resistance inward—a practice that left them deeply isolated and vulnerable to mental-health crises.

By enforcing and rewarding compliance, this system produces elites with little patience for questions about, let alone opposition to, the status quo.

When students take to the streets to demand change, educated Indians are likely to say that they should go home and study.

But today's young people fought anyway, making clear that the failure is the state's, not theirs, and demanding democratic accountability.

In doing so, they executed a profound psychological shift and displayed precisely the traits that make "explorers": purpose, critical thinking, and a refusal to accept a broken status quo.

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