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Spectre of Assessment and Examination: A Historical Retrospection

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Abstract

The Ministry of Education recently rolled out the national curriculum framework for secondary education to implement the imperative of the National Education Policy 2020 (henceforth Nep2020) across various stages of school education, including secondary education. This framework claims to make radical shifts in many aspects of school education, including assessment and examination. This paper reflects on the historical evaluation of the trajectory of assessment and examination, especially in the post-independence period. At the same time, there is a significant development milestone in this respect. The paper concludes that, despite the lofty claim of revitalising assessment and examination, NCFSE 2023 seems far short of providing a realistic Mechanism for this purpose. All claims related to establishing the regime of skill, competency, and creativity seem half-hearted, as they don't seem ready to invest time, energy, and money in the process. It is doomed to lower academic standards and critical skills among students, as it seems committed to reducing the academic weightage of board examinations to a considerable extent. It would be very interesting and critical to see how all these claims are integrated into the upcoming textbooks.

Keywords: *Assessment, Examination, Evaluation, Colonial system, Policy Document, Textbooks, Rote learning, Competency and Criticalities*

Introduction

The spectre of the exam has assumed the status of eternality. Every formal/informal relationship is in the grip of the dispector in general; it can support a wide-ranging interpretation, from an extremely philosophical one to a totally emotional one. It is an instrument which has a timeless, spaceless impact. Each one of us can try to test others in the requisite and desirable test. There are famous jatakas tales named “The Tale of the Courteous Mistress”. In this story, the servant Kali puts her owners to a test of patience with a critical question: Is she really benevolent, or is her benevolence contingent on my ability to do every task efficiently and on time? Ultimately, she could not pass her test. She scolded and beat Kali badly because she was getting up very late for the last three successive days. Kali concluded that her owners were only generous up to the time and day. When I was working properly, when I deliberately got up late, she lost all her generosity (tale of the courteous mistress, Cities of the Mahajanapadas. In Social Studies: Class 6. Pp 56). The conundrum of exams is most commonly discussed in the context of academic exams at various levels. There is hardly any ladder of educational up-scaling that can be climbed without going through exams. Even in the memorial, most of the educational phase of the discipline ended with one or another kind of exam. The nature and frequency of the exams, however, were quite different from those of recent times. In recent years, there has been a growing tendency towards irregularities across different kinds of exams. The spectrum of irregularities is quite comprehensive, ranging from mass copying to the leakage of question papers for various exams. The above-referred irregularities often lead to numerous controversies that are less academic than political.

These controversies raised questions primarily about the contradictions and practical aspects of assessment and evaluation methodologies. The central question is whether there is a distinction between education and exams, or if they are synonymous. In other words, does the exam ensure learning, or does it merely test it? How did education become so exam-centric that we

began to view it as synonymous with examinations? In this paper, we examine the inherent contradiction between assessment and examination from multiple perspectives. We will also briefly survey the available literature on this subject. Literature on assessment and exams began to emerge during the colonial era, following the introduction of a standardised, uniform system of education and examination. Numerous educational administrators have, over time, commented on the merits and flaws of these assessment and exam practices. Mahatma Jyotiba Phule was perhaps the first Indian educationist to emphasise the need for transparency in assessment and evaluation processes. The Sadler Commission (also known as the University Commission) expressed concern that assessment and evaluation were becoming increasingly focused on rote memorisation. Fictional literature addressing the examination system and its associated problems also began to appear in the early 20th century (and even a decade or two prior). Notable examples include the novel “Pariksha Guru” by Lala Srinivas Das and the short story “Bade Bhai Sahab” by Munshi Premchand.

Literature Review

Since independence, almost all the commissions, committees, and expert groups constituted to address educational issues in India have highlighted the problems and available alternatives regarding assessment and evaluation in their reports. These commissions and committees range from the University Education Commission to the National Curriculum Framework formulated in 2023.

Beyond these commissions and committees, assessment and evaluation have also remained the nucleus of the discussion in India's three National Education Policies (1968, 1986, and the New National Education Policy 2020, chapter four); these policies have analysed the flaws inherent in existing evaluation methods while emphasising the development of alternative suggestions and improved assessment processes. In addition to the alternatives proposed by these commissions and policies, various scholars have examined the issue of assessment and evaluation in great depth.

For instance, Suresh Chandra Shukla, in his seminal book “Education, economy and social structure in British India”, highlighted the evolution of the examination system in colonial India while tracing its implications. To him, colonial policy used written examinations to evolve a bureaucratic, centralised governance of education, implying that for all official purposes, such as promotion and employment, one needs to appear in a homogeneous, standardised examination system. Shukla further noted that this homogeneity of the examination system was meant to serve social purposes, namely to instil the sense and spirit of administrative fairness in the minds of the pupils of India. (S.shukla. pp 112-25).

While echoing the same sense provided by Shukla, Krishan Kumar, in his seminal article, " The Origin of Textbook Culture in India analysed the origin of the uniform examination system in India during the colonial period. He pointed out that examinations were impersonal in the sense that students were examined by someone other than the teacher. The establishment of norms for the public written examination, coupled with the notion of spot testing by inspectors, was an effort to impose the hegemonic elements of the colonial system on Indians, with a view to convincing them that the colonial system was fair and impartial. Krishan Kumar further noticed how the colonial examination systems virtually turned into a system of examining memorised content, along with speed and writing capacity, with some accuracy. This system led to the emergence of many malaises that are currently prevalent in the current education examination system. (Kumar, K., pp. 457, 458) The inherent traumatic fear of a strange atmosphere and of unknown entities who administer the examination systems as an external element plays havoc with the minds of the children, many of whom are seldom able to display their self-confidence in front of strangers.

Yashpal committees, which were constituted in 1993 as the National Advisory Committee to suggest ways to reduce the academic burden on school students. This committee made significant remarks regarding the entire assessment and examination system. They not only recommended minimising the intervention of external agencies, such as the board, but also sought to reaffirm faith in the teacher's agency. While commenting on the issue of reproducing memorised content, the committee specifically noted that a sense of understanding and analysis

of the phenomenon is sorely lacking in our textbooks and exam-centric education system, which is deeply entrenched in information and recall. The committee pointed out very, very specifically that "Recall-type questions outnumber the questions that test the child's capacity to speculate, evaluate or judge, and to apply all ideas in an unfamiliar context." The committee strongly recommended introducing the application-based question. (Learning without burden, 1993) This report seems to be a landmark document in that it identifies key attributes of assessment and examination that are neither mentioned in any official document nor significantly different in theory. It is altogether an issue that, in practice, most documents failed to strengthen these theoretical ideas with varying exceptions.

Tenner and Jones, in their book Assessment: A Practical Guide for Secondary Teachers,2006. He identified key assessment functions that serve three primordial functions: managerial, communicative, and pedagogical. The managerial function consists of a variety of policies, programmes, and schemes aimed at ensuring students' progression. The communicative purpose is closely aligned with the students' judgment/state of learning. It also includes considerations regarding the nature of the knowledge and skills imparted to students. The pedagogical purpose is to assess the basic processes of classroom teaching, including lesson planning, feedback, and other activities. They found that it is quite difficult to maintain the appropriate balance among the above purposes; often, one of them seems to dominate the others. (Tenner and Jones cited in Ritesh Khunyakari,144)

Ritesh Khunykari in his contributed chapter " Assessment and Learning in Indian Context: Compelling Association, Invariance or an Educational Folly?" in the edited volume on the occasion of the completion of 30th year of yashpal committee report under the title " Learning without Burden Where are We a Quarter Century after the Yash Pal Committee Report" edited by Mythili Ramchand, Ritesh Khunyakari and Arindam Bose" highlighted number of disjuncture features and multiple role of assessment and examination in the process of teaching learning. To him, assessment affects the learning process in a multidimensional manner, especially in curricular, effective, pedagogical, and psychological terms. He found that each of the above aspects is critically associated with assessment as it profoundly impacts all of them. He highlights that assessment is an unavoidable tool and medium; therefore, society tends to consider the systemic and institutional position on quality and learning, along with the prevailing environment and conditionalities of any institution. He tried to figure out some of the sociocultural shifts in approaches to assessment in the Indian education system that stem from an overemphasis on one purpose of assessment at the expense of the other. He concluded that in most cases, managerial and communicative purposes take precedence over the pedagogical purpose. (Khunykari, pp 144)

Disha Navani has comprehensively covered the various dimensions of assessment and examination through her papers and articles over the last 20 years. She has written extensively on issues such as the no-detention policy, continuous comprehensive evaluation, and legal changes in the domain of assessment and examination. She has widely argued that, to develop a proper assessment matrix, the teacher's agency needs to be restored. No system of assessment can work efficiently unless teachers are accorded legitimate autonomy. A brief survey of the field reveals two key facts: first, the majority of work on assessment and evaluation has focused on school education.

In contrast, higher education largely faces the same challenges as the school sector. Second, studies have predominantly focused on strictly academic aspects of assessment and evaluation, with insufficient attention to methods involving co-educational and co-curricular activities, except in a few exceptions. Consequently, the role and contribution of these latter areas within the processes of learning, assessment, and evaluation remain limited. Key Functions of Assessment and Evaluation: Assessment and evaluation are integral components of the education system. Throughout an individual's educational journey, assessment and evaluation begin early and span both brief and comprehensive stages, often forming what is referred to as the "labyrinth" or "maze" of assessment and examination (the "gatekeeping" perspective). Beyond its operational function, assessment and evaluation hold significance due to their multifaceted roles. It profoundly influences the curriculum, educational

institutions, and the creative, psychological, and social dimensions of learning; how it interrelates with these aspects is crucial and highly sensitive from a learning perspective. Assessment and evaluation are the processes through which society reviews itself and provides feedback on implemented procedures, methods, and environments. In other words, assessment and evaluation determine the quality and accountability of the education system in relation to society. Currently, evaluation has come to dominate learning to the point that, if not approached carefully, it could fundamentally alter the nature of learning itself. It is hardly surprising, then, that assessment and evaluation have become a major concern for both the academic community and the general public.

Following the announcement of results for any public examination, the importance of evaluation and its democratic appeal reach their zenith. The media plays a particularly notable role in this regard. By glorifying the marks or ranks of top-performing students, the media shapes a specific image and perspective in society. While this fills high achievers and their families with immense pride, it subjects students who lag even slightly or fail to secure a top spot to harsh treatment. Parents and teachers often treat them as if they have committed a heinous crime. Such societal behaviour not only alienates students from education but also breeds feelings of despair, depression, and isolation. Consequently, many students are driven to suicide.

Many scholars believe that an examination of the processes involved in educational assessment and evaluation reveals a context deeply connected to understanding both the students and oneself. According to Tanner and Jones (2006), assessment is a continuous process that broadly serves three objectives: administrative, communicative, and pedagogical. In its administrative capacity, assessment focuses on the system’s policy aspects, establishing accountability based on student progress and evaluating institutional performance. Its communicative objective is to exchange information about knowledge and skills.

Within this scope, it establishes accountability for student progress, diversifies the curriculum to include valuable components, and reviews the growth in student learning. The pedagogical function of assessment and evaluation involves planning the entire learning and assessment process, analysing the activities of both teachers and learners, correcting students' misconceptions, providing appropriate feedback, and encouraging and reinforcing students by acknowledging their successes from time to time. It often happens that a proper balance is not maintained among the three aforementioned tasks; consequently, greater emphasis is placed on one while another is neglected. Thus, we see that assessment and evaluation constitute a multifaceted process; it encompasses not only the structuring of a vision for achieving learning outcomes but also the scope for analysing pedagogical plans, curricular perspectives, and the expectations placed upon the education system by society at large, spanning both local and global contexts.

The historical perspective on assessment and examination: The form of evaluation we see today in India originated in the colonial era, coinciding with the state's takeover of education. The Department of Education, then known as the Department of Public Instruction, was established in India in 1854, based on recommendations that incorporated principles associated with administrative bureaucracy. With the establishment of this department, a hierarchical bureaucratic structure for schooling was created, and schools gradually came under government control. Following this state takeover, teachers and education officials were recruited as government employees; the focus shifted to providing funding and maintaining official records of school activities, prioritising government accountability over the actual teaching-learning process. Policies were introduced to establish a homogeneous and standardised curriculum, textbooks, and assessment systems across the board. (Kumar, pp 75-79)

This marked the beginning of the "textbook-centric culture" that persists in India today, in which examinations were based on reproducing textbook content. Specific chapters and excerpts from particular textbooks were prescribed in the curriculum; effectively, this meant that if a student failed to reproduce the prescribed excerpts verbatim, the student’s marks were deducted accordingly. In other words, under this system, textbooks became de facto with the curriculum, syllabus, teaching methods, and even the guiding principle for assessment and evaluation processes themselves. Consequently,

the broader aims and objectives of education were sidelined, and education became synonymous merely with examinations. (Kumar,82-87)

The resentment against this rigid framework is powerfully depicted in Munshi Premchand's story "Bade Bhai Sahab," which captures the voice of a rebel challenging this system. The famous observations regarding education and assessment found in this story remain strikingly relevant—so much so that the narrative feels as though it could have been written around 2023. In o the story, Bade Bhaisaab, the protagonist's elder brother, explains the importance of studying to his younger sibling, saying: "When you reach my grade, you'll find it an uphill struggle—a truly gruelling task. You'll have to grapple with the 'iron nuts' of Algebra and Geometry, and study the history of England. Memorising the names of kings isn't easy; there were eight Henrys alone, the number of Jameses goes into dozens, and there are too many Williams and Charleses. Trying to memorise them makes your head spin; it takes a lifetime. These stupid people did not find an exclusive name to give their children. They just kept appending 'the Second,' 'the Third,' 'the Fourth,' and 'the Fifth' to the same name. God alone knows the fate of these countless names. Just imagine—write 'A-J' instead of 'J-A,' and you lose all your marks. No one asks these heartless examiners what the actual difference is between 'A-J' and 'J-A,' or why they crucify students over such trifles—what is the practical difference if one ate *dal-bhat-roti* or *bhat-dal-roti*." "What does it matter? But the examiners don't care. They only look for what is written in the book. They want boys to memorise every single letter by rote, and they have labelled this very act of rote learning as an 'education'."

As early as the colonial era, specifically during the Hunter Commission (1882–1886), flaws in the assessment system began to be highlighted. Yet, no significant changes were observed in the system until 1947. The government relied on a core curriculum, essentially the literary education the colonial administration provided to the Indian people, which left no room for practical, technical, or physical activities, and failed to bring about any comprehensive changes in creative or progressive assessment methods. An analysis of the historical perspective on assessment and evaluation reveals a clear fact. There was insufficient consideration of the need to transform the very nature of these processes up to 1970. While there was some deliberation on "what" specific points, competencies, and skills should be evaluated, the prevailing practice has largely been based on rote memorisation and the verbatim reproduction of facts found in textbooks. When designing question papers, the specific standards or criteria intended for assessment are often not clearly identified. Consequently, there is an undue emphasis on questions that merely test the memorisation of textbook facts. The year 1972 is a watershed in the concept of significant consideration in assessment and examination. The establishment of the Kishor Bharti Organisation in Hoshangabad district proved to be a milestone in this respect.

Kishore Bharti, coupled with its sister organisation Eklavya (1971–1982) and (1982–2000), respectively. In their all-innovative and experimental educational program, mainly the Hoshangabad Science Teaching Program (HSTP), the Social Science Teaching Program (SSTP), and the Primary Education Teaching Program, popularly known as Prashika. The above educational program and the above-mentioned organisations consciously endeavoured to incorporate criteria to assess students' holistic learning. The parent of all these criteria seems to be the Hoshangabad Science Teaching Program (HSTP), implemented between 1972 and 2000 across various schools in the district of Hoshangabad and thirteen other large school complexes in Madhya Pradesh, spread across the fourteen districts of the state. (Never a dull movement, pp 33-36, pp 37-61) The HSTP assessment model was grounded in multiple parameters, including measuring experimental capabilities, conducting tests, formulating new questions, summarising information, interpreting and creating tables, and exercising reasoning, comparison, and analysis. (Never a dull movement, pp. 410- 422)

Curriculum-related documents published before the 2005 National Curriculum Framework (NCF) proposed only partial changes. For instance, instead of continuous assessment, specific lessons were designated for unit-based or term-based evaluations. The 2005 NCF offered progressive suggestions regarding assessment and evaluation, pointing towards positive changes. This document primarily

emphasised understanding and application over rote learning. It advocated for Continuous and Comprehensive Evaluation (CCE), which entails assessing co-scholastic and co-curricular dimensions alongside academic activities. The document also emphasised the need to ensure the autonomy of both teachers and learners by making the evaluation process constructivist and progressive. It also suggested making board examinations optional, allowing students to choose school-based exams instead. While a National Assessment Council was formally established, the initiative remained largely superficial, existing only as a suggestion or a token gesture. (NCF 2005, PP 4-5 and PP 114-116)

The comprehensive evaluation model required a constructive, creative environment in India; however, due to neglect and a lack of such an environment, it failed to progress. Implementing this requires time and energy from the education system, yet systemic issues prevent teachers from dedicating the necessary time and effort.

Free and Compulsory Right to Education in 2009

The Right to Education Act, 2009 (enacted to guarantee education as a fundamental right for students aged 6–14) included a provision for a 'no-detention policy' up to Class 8; however, this provision has since been significantly modified to account for various social and political considerations. Under a 2019 amendment to the Act, state governments now have the autonomy to decide the grade level up to which they wish to implement the no-detention policy. (RTE Act 2009, pp 9, RTE Amendment Act 2019, pp 1-2)

The National Education Policy (NEP) 2020, introduced primarily to overhaul the curriculum and assessment, advocates making assessment and evaluation competency-based and formative. The policy proposes the establishment of a national assessment centre named 'PARAKH (Performance Assessment, Review, and Analysis of Knowledge for Holistic Development)', which is also expected to guide the school boards of examination in revitalising their assessment patterns. (NEP 2020, PP19) . The policy does not merely emphasise board examinations but advocates for competency-based assessment. Configuring the idea of holistic assessment is not a new contribution of NEP 2020. National Advisory Committee to Advise on Improving the Quality of Learning While Reducing the Burden on School Students, under the chairpersonship of Prof. Yashpal. As usual, the drafters of NEP 2020 did not acknowledge this borrowing at all.

It is important to note here that the Professor Yash Pal Committee emphasised the need to restructure learning and assessment in education as a holistic process. The Committee held the clear view that assessment should not merely be a means to determine a final result but should be an integral part of the entire learning process. The Professor Yash Pal Committee believed that such an approach would improve the educational environment.(Yashpal committee report1 ,pp 13-14,pp-22) And some efforts have been made to implement holistic assessment in the National Curriculum Framework 2005 and subsequently through the Right to Education Act 2009, especially by ensuring a continuous, comprehensive, and no-detention policy to make assessment a holistic and multidimensional process.

To meet the imperative of the NEP 2020 national curriculum framework, both foundational and secondary stages have been prepared. We will focus briefly on the secondary framework because the issue of assessment for secondary classes has been addressed in this document. Unlike its parent document (that is, NEP 2020), the National Curriculum Framework for Secondary Education 2023, henceforth NCFSE 2023, is an unwieldy document of 650-plus pages with a lot of repetition across various subparts and subsections. It is identical to its predecessor in its use of flowery and dubious language, which sounds very progressive. So the sub-part related to assessment in 3.4 is concerned; it has been beautifully curtained with forward-looking phrases and very sophisticated terminology. For instance, it envisions the assessment as a competency-based, holistic process that should cover the entire gamut of student learning. "The connection between the Competency or Learning Outcome and the assessment should be clear and precise. Appropriate forms of assessments may be chosen in alignment with the Competencies and Learning Outcomes to be assessed". It further advocates timely, credible, and constructive feedback to students. They should be given useful, constructive, and realistic feedback, with ideas to help them understand how they can

further improve their learning. DOCUMENT reiterated the principle position of the Yashpal Committee report and NCF2005. (NCF2023,PP117-118)

Of course, without acknowledging them, the Examinations should move away from testing rote memorisation and instead focus on conceptual understanding, application of concepts, problem-solving abilities, critical thinking, and other such capacities. The document also appears fairly progressive when it considers the form of assessment, which includes, among others, written, oral, practical, experimental, demonstration, artefacts, projects, portfolio and open-book tests."(NCf SE2023,pp119-121). NCFSE 2023 emphasises the need for holistic assessment and argues against comparing students with one another.

Up to this point, it seems well advanced and extremely progressive; however, if we lift the curtain in the remaining part of this subpart, it easily exposes the retrogressive elements hidden in the above-mentioned paragraphs. For instance, theoretically, it advocates a no-detention policy up to 8th grade; however, in practice, it does ensure a mechanism for retention while making it optional for parents to keep their ward in the same class if they do not acquire the recognition competency/skill determinant for a particular class. It is important to take into account that the unconditional reference of the no detention policy is in apparent contradiction with the latest amendment of the Right to Education 2009 through the Right of Children to Free and Compulsory Education (Amendment)Act,2019, which does make it optional for the state government to decide about it. (NCFSE2023 PP 124-126)

NCFSE 2023 makes wholesale arrangements to unleash the psychological trauma upon young minds while making provision of examination by external agencies at the third, fifth and eighth grades respectively. In this venture, it even surpasses the colonial bureaucratic apparatus, which provided the external exam at least from the fifth standard. (ncfse2023,pp124) Probably the most detrimental proposal in this document is the recommendation for a written board examination based on only 25% of the total marks. It suggests that the board-written examination must consist of only 25% marks, and the remaining 75% should be divided among various practical aspects, which may include experiments, demonstrations, and creative work, to mention a few. We can visualise how these marks can be awarded very subjectively to various students, depending on the school's and the teacher's likes and dislikes. Certainly, this proposal will contribute to the already deteriorating intellectual capacities of the student. This doesn't seem to provide them with an adequate opportunity to think and reason independently. (NCFSE2023,PP127-128) Last but not least, this document does not inspire confidence in the teacher's ability to undertake serious academic work. It advocates for a pool of test developers, evaluators, and reviewers to develop high-quality question papers and test materials, without providing any space for teachers in this venture. (NCFSE 2023, pp 128)

Conclusion

In light of the conclusion, it can be inferred that assessment is a tool designed to support both teachers and students within the teaching-learning process by ensuring that learning occurs. It enables the realisation of educational objectives, makes the learning experience as meaningful and effective as possible, and ensures that both teaching and learning goals and objectives are clearly defined. Assessment cannot be solely result-oriented; the process of assessment is just as important as the outcome. Assessment must be timely and encompass all aspects of the teaching-learning process. The historical survey of the government's initiative related to assessment and examination reveals that before the report of the National Advisory Committee to Advise on Improving the Quality of Learning While Reducing the Burden on School Students (1993). The government establishment made no serious efforts to improve the assessment and examination process. The experiences of innovative assessment programs were evident in the field, even with the collaboration of government institutions such as the State Council of Educational Research and Training, Bhopal, and Madhya Pradesh; however, these learnings were not taken into consideration before the National Curriculum Framework 2005. It's a complete document to some extent. With the amendment to the Right to Education Act 2009 in 2019, and subsequently with the introduction of the National Education Policy 2020, these innovative efforts were pushed back in many respects. The National

Curriculum Framework 2023 for secondary education promises, at least in theory, to give appropriate weightage to competencies, critical thinking, and related areas. However, its scheme for upgrading students across different classes doesn't suggest this and seems to be completely at odds with its theoretical precepts. It would be interesting to see how the design of skills and competencies is integrated into upcoming textbooks across subjects and classes. It would be necessary to investigate very meticulously whether the tools of skill, competency, and creativity should not be weaponised to reduce / diminish the content of a specific kind. Teachers seem to be, once again, on the losing end, with almost no voice in the most serious processes.

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