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The Leak in Our Learning

BY INVITATION

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India conducts public examinations with admirable seriousness. Students are frisked, classrooms resemble surveillance centres, invigilators march about with the solemnity of intelligence officers, and question papers travel under security arrangements of a nuclear facility. Then, just when everyone begins congratulating themselves on this magnificent fortress, the question paper quietly appears on WhatsApp before the examination begins. It appears the only people who never see the question paper in advance are the students who studied for it.

The government's decision to constitute a task force to prevent examination leaks is welcome. Every system deserves a firewall. But every firewall eventually encounters a human being carrying the password. Technology can encrypt question papers. It cannot encrypt human greed.

Whenever an examination paper leaks, we instinctively blame the system. Systems certainly deserve scrutiny. Weak feedback loops, opaque accountability, fragmented processes, and excessive

human intervention create fertile ground for malpractice. Yet institutions do not become corrupt on their own. They require willing collaborators.

Every leak has an ecosystem. Somebody sells. Somebody buys. Somebody conveniently looks away. A parent persuades himself that honesty can wait until admission is secured. An official assures herself that this is only a small favour. A coaching operator calls it "resource management." Everyone invents respectable names for disreputable behaviour. Language is often the first casualty before morality becomes the

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second. Merit quietly exits through the back door.

The greatest victim is not the examination board. The real victim is the student who prepared honestly and suddenly discovers that honesty has become an optional extracurricular activity.

No progressive society can afford that lesson.

We have also developed a national habit of discussing education as though it were a shopping festival. Students are customers. Schools are brands. Coaching centres are investment opportunities. Marks are products. Rankings are advertisements.

Somewhere along the way, education quietly stopped being a public trust and became a private transaction.

Perhaps it is time to return education to educationists. Not because educationists are saints—they are utterly human too—but because the purpose of education cannot be reduced to managing examinations. Education is the cultivation of character before it becomes the certification of competence. When administrators begin thinking only like regulators and edupreneurs begin thinking only like investors, somebody must continue thinking like a patriotic teacher. ROI should be seen not as Return on Investment but as Return on India.

The future, fortunately, offers hope. Properly designed digital systems can dramatically reduce human discretion in the handling, transmission and evaluation of examinations. Secure encryption, distributed digital protocols, auditable workflows and artificial intelligence can make manipulation far more difficult than it is today.

But technology should not merely replace human hands. It should also expose human intentions.

Ultimately, every examination tests two things. It tests the student's preparation. It also tests society's values.

The first lasts three hours.

The second is conducted every single day.

If we continue to fail the second, no task force will ever pass the first.

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