

A MOMENT TO TRUST THE TEACHER

The novel coronavirus crisis is the right time to create the energy for examination reform

A public examination in the middle of the novel coronavirus pandemic is hard to imagine. That is what the government of Tamil Nadu has decided. It will conduct the Grade X board examination from June 15. The announcement carries the usual reassurance that all arrangements have been made. Indeed, special arrangements have been made. These include sparse seating to meet the medical requirement of physical distancing between candidates. No more than 10 will sit in a room. To enable this to happen, the number of exam centres has been radically increased from over 3,000 to 12,690.

A ritual

Nothing in the above paragraph can remind the reader that we are referring to 15-year-old children. In the discourse of public exams, children mutate into “candidates”; their names are replaced by roll numbers, schools become exam centres and teachers turn into invigilators. Every child knows how to behave in the examination hall. All examinations follow a strict ritual that has remained unchanged for over a century. A board exam has little to do with education or learning. The values it encourages children to imbibe are all negative. The prominent ones are fear of failing, sacrifice of joy and selfish competitiveness and submission to an opaque system. The urgency felt by the Tamil Nadu government to take the Class X examination in the middle of a health emergency can only be understood as the expression of a mindset rather than reasoning. The annual exam is seen as the culmination of the academic calendar. The set pattern it follows ensures that the exam questions will have no intellectual substance. They all require rote memory. If there is any real purpose these exams can serve, it is to select a few who can proceed further and eliminate the rest. This objective is attained by dividing students into “pass”–“fail” categories and into divisions based on marks.

A middle path to consider

This standard argument does not fit the State of Tamil Nadu. The Class X result last year placed more than 95% of the total number of students who took the exam in the “pass” category. In several districts, the pass percentage was close to 99%. So, the exam does not fulfil the structural purpose that other States, especially the northern States, might have, such as reducing the numbers so that the limited infrastructure for the higher secondary or +2 stage proves sufficient. In Tamil Nadu, most children are likely to move on to Grade XI in the same school. This is the main ground for the recommendation made in the National Curriculum Framework (2005) for making the Grade X exam voluntary. This is a middle path that the Tamil Nadu government can consider this summer. Whenever schools reopen, children who want to take the board exam can do so. Others can carry on in the next grade.

All that the matriculate exam might achieve in Tamil Nadu is to sort students, on the basis of their marks, into different subject streams. This is hardly a worthwhile reason to risk the spread of the virus or to harass the young.

It is a matter of belief that marks attained in the Grade X Board exam are a reasonable basis for judging who should study what. One might consider this as a valid argument if the exam papers and marking scheme of the Grade X exam had some substance. The questions are so uniformly inane, and quite a few so mechanistically silly, that a good or bad score shows little more than preparedness for facing the exam. That is all that the exam judges: Here is a question asked in an earlier exam: “Why is world peace an essential one?” There is a fixed answer to it and the teacher’s job is to ensure that the child gives just that answer rather than say that the question is poorly worded and is, in fact, a bit of nonsense.

The meaning of 'refresh'

It is the job of teachers to ensure that every child is all set for the kind of questions that are asked. Teachers are rightly complaining that the notice period given for the June exam is much too short to "refresh" the children. By "refresh" they mean activate children's rote memory into performance mode. Classes had to be suspended just when teachers had completed winding up the rote memory key. Three months later, the key has shed its tension. If you want the toy to dance out the programmed steps on the required date and time, give more time: that is what the teachers are saying. Considering their highly compromised professional and intellectual role, they are right. Had they enjoyed some real autonomy in teaching and assessment, they would have told the government not to worry about using exam scores to sort children into subject streams.

If you visit the website of Tamil Nadu's Directorate of Examinations and study last year's Class X results, you will come across this interesting statement. "The highest pass percentage was recorded in Tirupur district at 98.53 percent, followed by Ramanathapuram with 98.48 percent and Namakkal with 98.45 percent". When I read this statement, I wondered wherein lay its meaning or significance. The pass percentage of the three districts was almost identical. Moreover, it was so high that the small difference cannot be suspected to carry or convey a message that exam results often carry. No one can convincingly argue that the children and teachers of Namakkal are not as good as Ramanathapuram because the pass percentage of the latter is .03% more. The obvious fact is that all three districts have done well.

So, what exactly is the board asking us to notice by highlighting the micro difference in their pass percentages? A similar point can be made about the tag line claiming that "girls outshine boys" just because the girls' pass percentage is slightly higher.

Crisis and change

Some disasters teach lessons; the experience of going through a crisis can create the desire for reform. But it is hard to imagine that the novel coronavirus crisis will create energy for examination reform. A system so well-established as the board exam does not easily yield to pressure for improvement. The board system has successfully resisted the criticism and recommendations articulated by countless committees and individuals. Even a minor improvement in the exam system will demand an effort sustained over several years during which a regime may change and the officer-in-charge may get shifted or retire. If we do not wish to feel cynical, a good starting point for change is to think of an alternative name for the certificate a child gets after passing the Class X Board exam: "school leaving certificate". Once upon a time, the matriculate examination carried a lot of weight and only a handful proceeded towards further education. Today, the overwhelming majority of children do not want to leave the school after Class X. Tamil Nadu is among very few States left where the term 'school leaving certificate' is used. Ironically, these are the States with the highest rate of transition from Class X to XI. Let us hope a virulent virus will impel these States to drop an obsolete title. The next step will be to start trusting the teacher and nurture the growth of a school-based system of evaluation.

Meanings of Difficult Words :

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| ❖ reassurance (noun) – comforting statement, encouragement. | ❖ discourse (noun) – a formal discussion, conversation, expression. |
| ❖ indeed (adverb) – in fact, actually, undeniably. | ❖ mutate (verb) – change, evolve, convert. |
| ❖ sparse (adjective) – limited, minimal, least, distributed thinly. | ❖ imbibe (verb) – assimilate, absorb, take in/acquire, learn, grasp (knowledge). |
| ❖ radically (adverb) – completely, thoroughly, totally, entirely. | ❖ submission (noun) – yielding, capitulation, agreement, acceptance, compliance. |
| ❖ ritual (noun) – formality, procedure/practice, observance. | |

- ❖ **opaque** (adjective) – unclear, uncertain, unexplained, confusing, unfathomable, incomprehensible.
- ❖ **expression** (noun) – indication, intimation, demonstration exhibition.
- ❖ **reasoning** (noun) – thinking, line of thought, logic, interpretation.
- ❖ **culmination** (noun) – finale, end/climax, conclusion, termination.
- ❖ **intellectual** (adjective) – rational, logical, cognitive, psychological.
- ❖ **substance** (noun) – significant subject, important matter/content, valid message.
- ❖ **rote learning** (noun) – a memorization technique based on repetition.
- ❖ **objective** (noun) – aim, intention, purpose.
- ❖ **attain** (verb) – achieve, accomplish, reach, arrive at.
- ❖ **move on** (phrasal verb) – progress, make headway, advance.
- ❖ **ground** (noun) – reason, factor, basis.
- ❖ **sort** (verb) – classify, categorize, grade, rank.
- ❖ **stream** (noun) – group, track (based on ability of school children of the same age).
- ❖ **worthwhile** (adjective) – valuable, helpful, useful.
- ❖ **inane** (adjective) – silly, foolish, stupid, absurd.
- ❖ **mechanistically** (adverb) – routinely, mechanically, monotonously, automatically, unthinkingly.
- ❖ **preparedness** (noun) – readiness.
- ❖ **a bit** (phrase) – somewhat; to some extent.
- ❖ **wind up** (phrasal verb) – increase the tension (tightness) of something.
- ❖ **shed** (verb) – lose, drop.
- ❖ **tension** (noun) – tightness, tautness, tenseness, rigidity.
- ❖ **come across** (phrasal verb) – find by chance, meet by chance.
- ❖ **wherein** (adverb) – in which.
- ❖ **lay** past of **lie** (verb) – be, remain, kept in a particular state.
- ❖ **moreover** (adverb) – besides, furthermore, in addition.
- ❖ **identical** (adjective) – the same, uniform, equal.
- ❖ **suspect** (verb) – consider, presume, suppose, conclude.
- ❖ **convincingly** (adverb) – strongly, conclusively, forcefully.
- ❖ **highlight** (verb) – underline, underscore, emphasize, call attention to.
- ❖ **tag line** (noun) – saying, formula, catchphrase.
- ❖ **outshine** (verb) – outclass, surpass, upstage, be better than, be superior to.
- ❖ **go through** (phrasal verb) – undergo, experience, face/suffer/endure, be subjected to (a difficulty).
- ❖ **well-established** (adjective) – time-tested.
- ❖ **yield** (verb) – agree to, submit to, comply with, pay attention to
- ❖ **articulate** (adjective) – express, point out, mention.
- ❖ **sustain** (verb) – continue, carry on, maintain, bolster up.
- ❖ **cynical** (adjective) – sceptical, doubtful, distrustful.
- ❖ **weight** (noun) – importance, significance, value/power.
- ❖ **handful** (adjective) – few, one or two, a small number.
- ❖ **overwhelming** (adjective) – very great/large, huge, enormous.
- ❖ **ironically** (adverb) – paradoxically, unexpectedly, strangely.
- ❖ **transition** (noun) – change, move.
- ❖ **virulent** (adjective) – deadly, lethal, fatal; highly infectious, highly contagious, rapidly spreading.
- ❖ **impel** (verb) – propel, drive, move.
- ❖ **obsolete** (adjective) – outdated, outmoded, old-fashioned.
- ❖ **nurture** (verb) – encourage, promote, foster.
- ❖ **school-based** (adjective) – relating to a strategy/system to improve education by transferring significant decision-making authority from state and district offices to individual schools.
- ❖ **evaluation** (noun) – assessment, analysis, consideration, opinion.

EXPORT BLOCKS: ON INDIA'S TRADE AMID THE PANDEMIC

India mustn't miss out on the rise in world trade on the back of stimulus packages

Official trade data for April, released at the mid-point of the Finance Ministry's five-tranche package to salvage the economy in the throes of a pandemic-induced lockdown, was the grimest in over two decades. Merchandise exports had collapsed by over 60% and imports contracted only slightly less. Only two of India's 30 biggest export products clocked positive growth — iron ore and pharmaceuticals, the latter by just a quarter of a percent. Thanks to the sharp dip in global oil prices, higher volumes of petroleum exports didn't help much in value terms. The trade collapse was not surprising as the spate of national lockdowns around the world have not only dented demand and investment, but also severely disrupted global supply chains and shipping routes. India's exports, however, were already in a free fall. The government's economic stimulus package in totality offered several reform commitments, improvements in the ease of doing business along with some forbearance and a few sops for micro, small and medium enterprises (many of which are also export-oriented units). However, there was no explicit respite offered for exporters. The Reserve Bank of India, on May 22, did unveil a few measures, including a special ₹15,000 crore liquidity facility for the Exim Bank of India and a six-month extension for importers to complete outward remittances. For exporters, the maximum permissible credit period from banks was extended from 12 months to 15 months, for disbursements made up to July 31, 2020.

The three-month credit extension for exporters was, in fact, not a new measure and had already been announced by the central bank on March 23. So its repackaging two months later as a fresh move suggests policy makers are running short of ideas to prop up a key employment-generating bulwark of the country's economy post-liberalisation. In an employment-intensive sector such as textiles, garment exports, which fell 16% between January and March, fell 91% in April. The outcome for May is unlikely to be any better and the World Trade Organization expects trade flows to slip by between 13% and 32% over 2020. The prognosis gets even murkier when one adds to this the new barriers on trade in medical and food supplies imposed by over 90 countries, and an increasing tendency to look inward for essential supplies (as India is doing too with its emphasis on self-reliance). The country is again pitching to become an alternative investment destination for big global businesses in the hope that the COVID-19 pandemic would prompt them to hedge their China-dependent supply chains. But investment moves are a longer-term play. Meanwhile, Indian exporters shouldn't be caught on the back foot as bigger stimulus packages, announced by other countries, kick in to revive demand and give a minor fillip to international trade.

Meanings of Difficult Words :

- ❖ **block** (noun/verb) – obstruct, bar, barrier, check, hurdle.
- ❖ **amid** (preposition) – in the middle of, surrounded by; during.
- ❖ **miss out on** (phrase) – omit, lose, neglect, leave out (an opportunity to take advantage of something).
- ❖ **on the back of** (phrase) – as a result of, after/subsequent; in support of.
- ❖ **tranche** (noun) – part, section, portion (of something, particularly money).
- ❖ **salvage** (verb) – save, recover, regain, restore.
- ❖ **in the throes of** (phrase) – struggling with, grappling with, in the middle of.
- ❖ **grimest** superlative adjective of **grim** (adjective) – severe, serious, distressing, upsetting, worrying.
- ❖ **merchandise** (mass noun) – goods, commodities, produce.
- ❖ **contract** (verb) – decrease, decline, reduce.
- ❖ **clock** (verb) – register, record; achieve.
- ❖ **thanks to** (phrase) – because of, as a result of, due to.
- ❖ **dip** (noun) – decrease, fall, drop, reduction.
- ❖ **spate** (noun) – series, flurry; a large number of something (taking place at the same period).

- ❖ **dent** (verb) – diminish, reduce, undermine.
- ❖ **global supply chain** (noun) – a dynamic worldwide network when a company purchases or uses goods or services from overseas. It involves people, information, processes and resources involved in the production, handling and distribution of materials and finished products or providing a service to the customer.
- ❖ **free fall** (noun) – sudden decline of something; relating to something declining rapidly.
- ❖ **in** (its) **totality** (phrase) – as a whole, in its entirety.
- ❖ **forbearance** (noun) – temporary postponement of (tax/debt) payments granted by the government/bank. It is to give taxpayers/customers extra time to make their tax/debt payments.
- ❖ **sop** (noun) – a thing of little or no value (usually given to stop protests/complaints).
- ❖ **explicit** (adjective) – clear, detailed, definite, categorical.
- ❖ **respite** (noun) – breathing space; moratorium, postponement, suspension (of something (debt repayment) temporarily to give relief).
- ❖ **unveil** (verb) – present, announce, disclose/make public.
- ❖ **measure** (noun) – step, course of action, plan, procedure.
- ❖ **liquidity** (noun) – the availability of liquid assets; liquidity means liquid assets; cash; (liquid asset is an asset which can be easily sold/converted into cash without losing its value); a measure of activity (i.e. the ability to buy or sell easily) in a market.
- ❖ **Exim Bank** (noun) – Export-Import Bank of India (EXIM Bank) is a specialized financial institution, wholly owned by Government of India, set up in 1982, for financing, facilitating and promoting foreign trade of India.
- ❖ **inward remittance** (noun) – money (payment) received into your bank account (either from another account within home country or from an account in another country typically).
- ❖ **disbursement** (noun) – the act of paying out or disbursing money for a purpose, particularly to run a business.
- ❖ **repackage** (verb) – give/provide something again in a new method.
- ❖ **run short of** (phrase) – use up, run out; become depleted/exhausted.
- ❖ **prop up** (phrasal verb) – support, assist, fund/finance.
- ❖ **bulwark** (noun) – protector, guard, supporter.
- ❖ **liberalisation** (noun) – removal or loosening of restrictions on something, typically an economic or political system.
- ❖ **intensive** (adjective/usually in combination) – (in business) concentrating on a particular thing.
- ❖ **slip** (verb) – decline, drop, worsen, fall.
- ❖ **prognosis** (noun) – forecast, prediction, projection.
- ❖ murkier comparative adjective of **murky** (adjective) – questionable, suspicious, dubious,/ mysterious.
- ❖ **add to** (verb) – increase, magnify, intensify, amplify.
- ❖ **inward** (adverb) – inside, towards the inside, within.
- ❖ **pitch** (verb) – to attempt/try to persuade (people to do something); make a bid/try/attempt.
- ❖ **alternative investment** (noun) – the purchase of tangible assets (e.g. commodities, real estate, infrastructure, etc). It does not fall into the traditional investment asset classes of cash, bonds or stocks (shares).
- ❖ **prompt** (verb) – give rise to, bring about, cause, trigger.
- ❖ **hedge** (verb) – safeguard, protect, shield, cover.
- ❖ **on the back foot** (phrase) – in a defensive position, off balance, at a disadvantage.
- ❖ **kick in** (phrasal verb) – come into effect.
- ❖ **revive** (verb) – revitalize, regenerate, restore, bring back.
- ❖ **fillip** (noun) – stimulus, boost, incentive.