Meritocracy in Higher Education: A View from Afar

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One of the remarkable traditions that elite Indian institutions have developed in their post-Independence history is a robust meritocracy, whose existence in a society still rife with corruption and graft is surprising and improbable. At the core of this tradition is an elaborate system of entrance examinations, a high score on which is a necessary condition for admission to these institutions.

These entrance exams draw very large numbers of aspiring students: over 5 lakh each year to the Joint Entrance Exam for the IITs, over 2 lakh to the Common Admission Test (CAT) for the IIMs, and about 2.5 lakh to the UPSC exam for civil services. The acceptance rates are consequently among the lowest in the world: 1% for the top five IITs put together, 0.5% for IIM-A, IIM-B, and IIM-C combined, and 0.4% for civil services. And these institutes seem generous compared to AIIMS, at which the acceptance rate of 0.06% is even more rarified.

This examination-based system of admission appears quaint and narrowly one-dimensional from an American perspective, where most universities apply a more holistic set of criteria to admission decisions. Indeed, it seems implausible that the ability to solve contrived mathematical or logical puzzles rapidly, for instance on the IIMs' CAT, predicts the candidate's future ability to manage large corporations, create new enterprises, or be an effective leader. But, despite its reliance on a narrow assessment of skills, the system has at least two compelling virtues, both unintended, and not fully appreciated.

The first is that the system's reliance on numerical and objective measurement makes it impervious to any influence of money or political power. Opening the door in India even slightly to American-style subjective assessments runs the risk of caving in to undue influences. Yes, elite Indian universities and civil services do use interviews and other subjective assessments in the final stages of selection. But the first screen is essentially completely quantitative.

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visionary leadership, there is a common underlying personality trait that helps one succeed both in narrowly technical entrance examinations and in the wider domains of leadership. That trait is a combination of hard work, determination, and the will to overcome difficult odds or competition.

Moreover, being admitted to these institutions becomes a powerful affirmation of the student's talent, and society at large begins to offer opportunity in expectation of that talent. If the above holds true, then examination-based selection should produce results about as good as those produced by elaborate multi-attribute assessments.

There seems to be more agreement about the immeasurably powerful democratising influence of these institutions in a society still riddled with inequities. India's elite educational institutions have created considerable social mobility and opportunity for underprivileged students. Though parental wealth determines the student's access to good schooling and test preparation, raw talent can, and often does, prevail despite poor schooling.

There are drawbacks to the system as well, especially in the emotional toll it takes on kids who try hard but don't succeed. Test preparation can also become so ritualised that it supplants real education. These problems are caused by a shortage of high quality institutions rather than *the processes they deploy for admission. The solution, therefore, requires the creation of more high quality institutions, not the re-engineering of admissions processes.*

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The selection processes and their outcomes are also remarkably transparent. The numerical cut-offs are made public, as are the lists of those who make the cut. Faculty and administrators guard the tests like state secrets.

The second virtue is this: though the entrance exams patently don't measure leadership, entrepreneurial ability, or creative talent, many graduates of technical and professional institutes such as the IITs, IIMs and AIIMS, have nevertheless excelled in endeavours that lie beyond the institutes' respective professional realms.

A plausible explanation of this success is that while the ability to solve maths puzzles does not constitute quality institutions, not the re-engineering of admissions processes.

There is another implication. For perfectly understandable reasons, Indians nurture a healthy desire to make universities and public institutions more inclusive and accessible to underprivileged and under-represented peoples. The challenge is to ensure that the well-intentioned efforts to engineer the admission processes do not erode the very foundations of meritocracy. In my exposure to universities around the world, I have found this kind of meritocracy to be rare, and very much worth preserving.

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