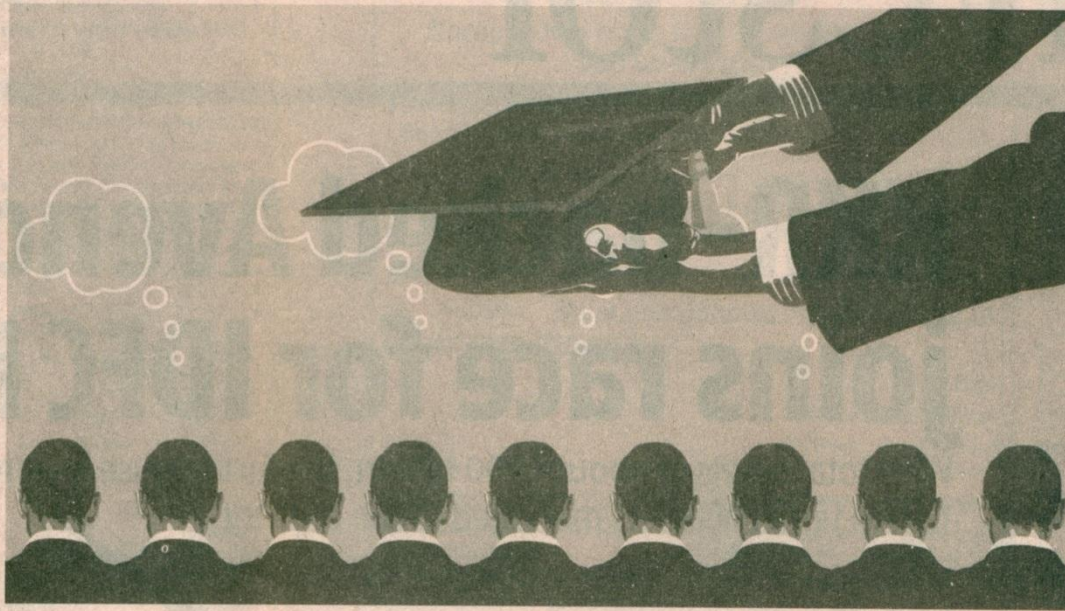


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Education is strategic

Future generations will not forgive us if we fail to give them a competitive advantage

Having studiously avoided all entrance examinations for the past 25 years, I was struck last week when my colleagues showed me a few questions from the Gaokao, China's annual national college entrance exam. Now, I'm familiar with the debate over the Gaokao and its flaws, especially over whether it selects for merit as is claimed, but I was not prepared for what I saw in the question paper.

A report in this newspaper by Anish Kumar "Is Gaokao world's toughest exam? 10 questions from China's school test" (July 10) has many examples, but here's one to give you a sense of what the equivalent of Indian 12th grade students must answer: "Between June and August, a cruise ship travels from Fujian province to Venice, via Mumbai, as part of Xi's 21st century maritime silk road strategy. Which of the following would it experience on the way?" Here's another "Write an essay on how Thomas Edison would react to the mobile phone if he visited the 21st century."

I saw a question in the mathematics paper required a basic arithmetic, but needed the student to apply the mind to figure out how to approach it. In addition to Chinese and mathematics, students must take a foreign language (English, Russian,

Japanese or French) and either science or humanities. Many of the questions require reasoning and application, not a mere rehearsal of what was in the syllabus.

Now consider this: Every student in China needs to clear this exam to get into any kind of college. Not just elite or professional colleges, but any college. Even foreign universities have slowly begun to admit students based on their Gaokao scores.

India's entrance tests, in comparison, are mostly tests of memory, speed and technical skill. As soon our kids enter high school, they get into the entrance exam mode (now increasingly also coaching classes) to prepare for engineering or medical entrance exams four years later. During my own high school days we trudged

through history, civics, geography and language classes that distracted us from science and mathematics that were "important".

The result is a narrow education that does not broaden at the university level because engineering or medicine (and to a lesser extent law) colleges have little time or inclination for other subjects. Those of our children who opt for a broader education in science, arts or humanities often find them-

selves condemned to appallingly low quality colleges where they learn little and often the wrong things.

What all this means, if I have to spell it out, is that more Chinese people will be better educated and globally competitive in the coming decades. At the same time, an increasing number of Chinese are learning English (even as Indian politicians are disparaging it) which means it's only a matter of a few years before our linguistic competitive advantage erodes. Demography will eventually catch up, the Chinese population will grow older relative to ours, Xi Jinping might end up reversing the Deng era, and things will slow down. That's still two decades away and 20 years is a long time.

It is unclear if India's Union and state governments realise the urgency of the situation. What happened in India after 1992 owes in large parts to the investments made in the decades before that. If it were not for the IITs, IIMs, engineering colleges and good English language education India wouldn't have been able to ride the IT, BPO, biotech and services wave that propelled our international prominence. Those early investments created the virtuous cycle that gave us nearly three decades of unprecedented prosperity.

We should have been making similar strategic investments for the future over the past decade. We did not. And we still are not. Our schools, colleges and universities are trapped in a self-deluding game of rote learning, outdated curriculum, attendance requirements, hall tickets and *sarkari* faculty. Politicians across the country see education as a mere vehicle to carry their ideological, partisan or chauvinistic payloads, while their own children study in elite English-medium schools before going to Western universities.

Human capital is the basis of national power. Do we really think we can compete with China if we carry on like this? Even in technology and services, our champion sectors, we will move further and further down the food chain as China joins the West in making fundamental breakthroughs. As football teaches us, the trick is to run to where the ball is headed, not where the ball is. Yet in the three key areas that will shape the future — quantum computing, cognitive sciences and genomics — we are minnows making perfunctory investments.

It's not as if we do not know how to reform higher education. What I'm alerting you to, dear reader, is that it is an urgent strategic imperative.

Tailpiece. From the 2018 Gaokao: "The containers for milk are always square boxes, containers for mineral water are always round bottles, and round wine bottle are usually placed in square boxes. Write an essay on the subtle philosophy of the round and square."

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THE ASIAN BALANCE

NITIN PAI