



Testing exam

The HRD Ministry must pull out all the stops to restore trust in the CBSE exam process

The Central Board of Secondary Education faces a serious erosion of credibility with the leak of its annual examination question papers on Economics for Class 12 and Mathematics for Class 10. Thousands of students are naturally frustrated that their best shot at these papers has come to nought; they must now make another strenuous effort in a re-examination. Clearly, the Ministry of Human Resource Development failed to assign top priority to secrecy and integrity of the process, considering that its standard operating procedure was easily breached, and the questions were circulated on instant messaging platforms. Yet, the problem is not new. State board question papers have been leaked in the past. When the HRD Ministry was asked in the Lok Sabha three years ago what it intended to do to secure the CBSE Class 12 and 10 examinations, Smriti Irani, who was the Minister then, asserted the inviolability of the process, since the question papers were sealed and stored in secret places and released to authorised officials with a window of only a few hours. In addition, the board has dedicated secrecy officers for each region. But the protocol has failed, and HRD Minister Prakash Javadekar should conduct a thorough inquiry to get at the truth and initiate remedial steps without delay. One of the options is to institute a National Testing Agency, although it was originally supposed to take charge of entrance examinations in the first phase. State school boards also need help to reform systems.

A major leak such as the one that has hit the CBSE raises a question often debated in academic circles: is a high-stakes test the best option? To some sociologists, the use of a quantitative indicator with rising importance for social decision-making makes it more vulnerable to corruption pressures, and distorts and undermines the very processes it is intended to monitor. That seems to be an apt description of what has taken place. Today, what is needed is a credible testing method to assess a student's aptitude and learning. But the answer may lie not in one all-important examination, but in multiple assessments that achieve the same goal. Such an approach will end the scramble for high scores in a definitive board examination, and the exam stress that the government has been trying to alleviate. It will also limit the fallout of a leak. These and other options need to be debated by academic experts. More immediately, the CBSE has to restore faith in its processes. The board went into denial mode when the leaks were first reported, but subsequently decided to acknowledge the problem and ordered a fresh examination in the two subjects. In the current scheme, the annual exercise is all-important to students. Everything should be done to inspire total confidence in the board examinations.

Kim in Beijing

His visit strategically brings China into North Korea's hectic diplomatic calendar

The timing of North Korean leader Kim Jong-un's visit to China, his first foreign trip after assuming power in 2011, is not lost on anyone. After travelling to Beijing this week in an armoured train, he held talks with Chinese President Xi Jinping and re-emphasised his commitment to the "denuclearisation" of the peninsula, weeks before his scheduled April 27 summit with South Korean President Moon Jae-in. In May, Mr. Kim and U.S. President Donald Trump are expected to meet for a historic summit. By visiting Beijing now, Mr. Kim is sending a clear message: that he is serious about his offer of talks. The visit has also helped repair relations between Pyongyang and Beijing, which had come under some strain. China was not particularly happy with the North's nuclear tests. Mr. Xi was under pressure from the West to exercise influence on Mr. Kim's regime. And Beijing's support for stringent UN sanctions on North Korea that have cut its exports of coal, seafood and other goods to China has dealt a blow to its already isolated economy. Mr. Kim reportedly rejected overtures from Beijing and purged officials who had close ties with the Chinese. But now, both leaders appear to have decided to set aside their differences.

China has historically played a role in inter-Korean relations. In 2000, Mr. Kim's father and predecessor, Kim Jong-il, had visited China shortly before a summit with South Korea. In 2003, China launched the Six-Party Talks aimed at peacefully resolving the North Korean nuclear crisis, which eventually failed. Mr. Kim's visit to Beijing has reinstated China's central role in talks over the Korean crisis, which both countries see as mutually beneficial. For the Kim regime, China's experience and guidance could come in handy when it is preparing to engage with two of its biggest rivals. China, for its part, would not like to be bypassed by the U.S. and the North in any diplomatic process. If the Kim regime's fundamental objective is its own survival, China's interest lies in a peaceful resolution to the crisis in a stable political environment in its neighbourhood. This enables convergence of interest for both in the diplomatic process. But there is still much uncertainty over the peace process. Mr. Trump may have agreed to meet Mr. Kim. But since then he has inducted into his team two officials with hawkish views on North Korea – Mike Pompeo as Secretary of State and John Bolton as National Security Adviser. As of now, it is anybody's guess what the U.S. would do next if the Trump-Kim summit fails to produce a breakthrough. In such a volatile context, robust multilateral intervention would be needed to stay the diplomatic course. The Xi-Kim meet could be a step in that direction if China agrees to be a balancing force and a facilitator of talks between the North and the U.S.

Time to reach out across the border

India and Pakistan must seize the resolution of the diplomatic spat to normalise bilateral ties



HAPPYMON JACOB

Islamabad's decision to send High Commissioner Sohail Mahmood back to India just in time to host the Pakistan National Day reception in New Delhi, and New Delhi's decision to send the Minister of State for Agriculture and Farmers' Welfare, Gajendra Singh Shekhawat, to attend the reception indicate that good sense may have prevailed on both sides. More pertinently, since the 19th of this month, India and Pakistan have not fired at each other across the border in Jammu and Kashmir barring one exception, a welcome calm after several weeks of incessant ceasefire violations.

And yet, unless the two governments are willing to discuss and resolve the triggers that may have led to a series of incidents of harassment of diplomatic personnel, we may see a repeat of such incidents. Harassment of High Commission personnel requires critical attention because maintenance of diplomatic courtesies is not just a matter of instrumentality and convenience, but also represents the civility of the host state and its people. Put differently, how we, and Pakistan, treat the representatives of each other reflects what we essentially are as nations. Wallowing a diplomat's vehicle carrying young children is disgraceful.

Disruption of utilities

Reports indicate that there were two proximate causes behind the recent diplomatic stand off. The first one appears to be the disruption of utilities to the under-con-

struction residential complex of the Indian High Commission in Islamabad, a property adjacent to the present High Commission building. Pakistani authorities also raided the complex and expelled Pakistani service providers. India termed this unjustifiable given that the complex, duly authorised by the Pakistani authorities, was being constructed to house its diplomatic personnel. Pakistan responded that while the Indian housing complex in Islamabad is at an advanced stage of construction, a request by Pakistan to allow construction of a housing complex within its High Commission premises in New Delhi has not yet been approved by the authorities, despite reminders.

Club membership

The second issue was of club memberships for diplomats. Pakistan has refused to admit Indian diplomats to the Islamabad Club in retaliation for corresponding Indian clubs charging what it considers exorbitant amounts for membership. India points out that the government cannot interfere with how private clubs manage their membership procedures. Pakistan, however, argues that there should be a Memorandum of Understanding for reciprocal club memberships for each other's diplomats. While letting the other side carry out construction of their respective residential complexes can be worked out at the government-to-government level, the membership of private clubs is a more complicated issue.

Disagreements and spats stemming from these issues, in the generally tense atmosphere of ceasefire violations and the resultant political rhetoric, have led to highly undesirable acts of harassing diplomatic personnel who are protected under the 1961 Vienna Convention. It is also of concern



that the two establishments allowed routine disagreements to become a major diplomatic stand off at a time when relations are so tense.

Aggressive surveillance of each other's diplomatic personnel is nothing new in the India-Pakistan context. Back in 1990, during the initial years of the insurgency in Kashmir and the heightened fears of an India-Pakistan military escalation, it had become particularly difficult for diplomats to work in each other's countries. The situation was far worse than it is today, and yet the two Foreign Secretaries were able to reach an agreement on the treatment of diplomatic personnel. They agreed to a code of conduct in November that year "to protect diplomatic personnel, guaranteeing them freedom from harassment".

Over and above the political sanction given to such harassment of diplomatic personnel, there was also a feeling at the time that much of the harassment happened because the local authorities were not properly informed about how to deal with the High Commission staff of the 'enemy' country. Hence the two sides further decided to translate the code of conduct into Hindi and Urdu and make it available to local police stations and lower-ranking officials. However, such thoughtful measures never stopped the habitual mistreatment of the 'rival' state's di-

plomats.

This brings us to an indirectly related topic – of dealing with each other's spies. How should India treat Pakistani spies caught in India and vice versa? For the record, both countries have claimed that they do not carry out espionage in each other's countries. When their operatives get caught, they routinely feign ignorance even though when released from the captor's custody, the former spies cross over to their own country to claim that they were indeed engaged in espionage on the other side. What is worse is that undercover operatives are often subjected to the most inhumane forms of torture by the captors if they happen to get caught.

Dealing with spies

Moving forward, we must admit and acknowledge that first, our countries spy. Second, that espionage is very much part of statecraft that all modern states engage in, as do India and Pakistan. To claim otherwise would be no less than laughable hypocrisy masquerading as pious platitudes. Third, that those engaged in espionage should be expelled rather than tortured or killed. As a matter of fact, the Cold War was replete with instances of spy exchanges with or without the general public knowing about it. As recently as in 2010, Russia and the U.S. exchanged spies in the city of Vienna.

India and Pakistan should also, therefore, look at the issue of espionage as part of essential statecraft and deal with spies in a professional and humane manner. Hypernationalism and grandstanding can make professional handling of these issues difficult.

Sorry state of contact

The state of communication between India and Pakistan is at its lowest ebb in more than a decade:

the Directors-General of Military Operations (DGMOs) have not considered it appropriate to meet despite constant firing across the J&K border; contacts between the respective High Commissions and the host governments have been reduced to 'demarches', 'summons', 'notes verbale' and stern warnings; and high-level political contacts, such as the visit of Pakistan's Commerce Minister Pervaiz Malik to India, have been called off. While the discreet meetings of the National Security Advisors are welcome, they have hardly achieved anything. Given that the year ahead is critical for India and Pakistan and the bilateral relationship, the focus should be on enhancing and improving communication.

On the positive side, however, there has been some subtle messaging from the Pakistani side about its desire to normalise ties with India. In a rare interaction with a group of Pakistani journalists, Pakistan's army chief, General Qamar Bajwa, laid out his view of the country's future course. A close reading of his recent and earlier statements suggests that there is a desire on the part of the Pakistan army to normalise relations with India, something decision-makers in New Delhi should capitalise on. Clearly, for this to happen, Pakistan should also initiate tough action against anti-India terrorist groups based in Pakistan. The fact that the Indian High Commissioner and the defence attaché were in attendance at the military parade to mark Pakistan Day in Islamabad indicates that the channels of communication have begun to open up. The two sides must build on it.

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All that's been left unsaid

Rahul Gandhi has still to explain what differentiates his Congress from other parties

PRADEEP CHHIBBER, HARSH SHAH & RAHUL VERMA

With one of his most scathing attacks on Prime Minister Narendra Modi and his government, Rahul Gandhi sounded the poll bugle for the 2019 general elections during the 84th plenary session of the Congress party in Delhi recently. The session, the first since Mr. Gandhi's elevation as the president of the party, witnessed several Congress leaders taking jibes at the Modi government's record on corruption, economic mismanagement and deteriorating social harmony among groups. Mr. Gandhi also candidly admitted his party's failure to live up to people's expectations during the last few years of UPA-II, and promised a new Congress where there would be no distance between the leadership and party workers.

A real alternative

Notwithstanding the sound bites that followed the plenary, what is the significance of Mr. Gandhi's speech? After all, the plenary of a party, especially the one just before the general elections, is an important platform for the leadership to interact with party workers and provide them with a clear message to take to voters.

While Mr. Gandhi's speech may have worked for the party faithful,

it did not offer either party workers or voters a vision for the future. With power in only three States, and less than 50 seats in the Lok Sabha, the Congress is facing its worst crisis. More than leadership and organisation, it is facing an ideological crisis. What does the party stand for, and what differentiates it from others? Does anyone know? The Congress criticises the performance of the Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP) but so do many others. The Congress projects itself as a secular and plural party. But so do many others. The Congress is for the poor man. But which party in India is anti-poor? The Congress is against corruption. Is there a party in India that favours corruption? The electoral plank of the Congress appears to be quite simple – vote for us because the BJP is bad for the country, and we used to govern, so we can govern again. Is that a real alternative? With the BJP, at least voters are aware that it stands for hard nationalistic and majoritarian politics which differentiates the party from the rest.

Need for an ideological vision

Some would argue that Mr. Gandhi highlighted the problems with the Modi government, promised voters that his party will focus on development of all, and, finally, vowed to preserve social peace and communal harmony in India.



But this is not an alternative ideological vision. First, criticism of the incumbent is not an electoral vision. For many decades in independent India, the Congress's performance in government was severely criticised by many but that criticism was never enough to overcome the TINA (there is no alternative) factor. It is also not enough to enthuse citizens to vote for a party unless the electoral strategy is to make a large segment of voters feel that the current situation is so bad that the ruling BJP has to be voted out. Also, is the Congress sure that it will benefit from a negative campaign?

Second, at the plenary, the Congress leadership stressed development for all. Development is what political scientists term a valence issue. Valence issues are issues on which a vast majority of voters have similar views. In other words, all Indian citizens would like development, the reduction of poverty,

and an improvement in the conditions of rural (and even urban) India. Taking a contrary position would lead a political party to committing electoral *hara-kiri*.

Third, Mr. Gandhi stressed the inclusion of marginalised sections of society into the decision-making elite. This could, perhaps, form a part of an alternative ideological vision for the Congress, but the party has always been ambivalent about accommodating the marginalised. As Kanchan Chandra has pointed out, the Congress's failure to incorporate the rising aspirations of lower castes into its fold was one of the main reasons leading to the formation of State-level parties. It may be difficult for the Congress to pursue this strategy because at this point in time the 'marginalised' groups in many parts of the country have their own State-level parties.

Why is it important for the party leader to articulate an ideological vision? Leaders who embody particular ideologies are better placed to hold the party organisation together. They are also able to better motivate party workers and vote mobilisers who work for the party during election time, helping in increasing the turnout and thereby giving party workers an incentive to be aligned with the leader.

This plenary was the occasion for Mr. Gandhi to articulate his vi-

vision for India, chart out a strategy for Congress's revival and signal autonomy to state units to figure out tactics to get battle ready for the 2019 elections. Instead he chose to focus almost all his energy on criticism of the BJP and Mr. Modi, and ended up proposing merely a tactic, not a strategy. The Congress's plan for 2019 as outlined in the political resolution is rather straightforward – to prevent the fragmentation of anti-BJP votes, the party would be open to alliances with like-minded parties without claiming leadership.

A contest of ideas

Elections are not only about sharing the spoils of the office, they are also a contest of ideas. These ideological visions, often opposing, act as a framework for leaders to chalk out long-term strategies to realise their vision. This also gives their followers and party cadres the conviction to persuade voters and fulfil the immediate objective (of winning elections). There is a reason why some leaders manage to take advantage of a crisis and turn it into an opportunity, while others fail to realise that an opportunity was knocking on the door.

Pradeep Chhibber is currently visiting the University of Barcelona; Rahul Verma is with the University of California, Berkeley; Harsh Shah is an alumnus of the University of California, Berkeley

LETTERS TO THE EDITOR Letters emailed to letters@thehindu.co.in must carry the full postal address and the full name or the name with initials.

Exam papers leak

The fact that students are given a three-hour examination to test everything they have learnt over a year and that those scores are used to determine their admission into colleges is itself unfair. It is even more bizarre that thousands have to rewrite a paper for no fault of theirs ("After leaks, CBSE to hold fresh exams for two papers", March 29). Is there any guarantee that the students will not face similar problems in the re-exam?

VICTOR FRANK A.,
Chennai

As a former principal of a CBSE school, it pains me to think of the students who

have to go through this. The procedure laid down for the conduct of CBSE examinations has failed. The question papers are delivered by the CBSE to a bank that is close to the exam centre. The bundles are taken out off the bank lockers on the date of the exam by the school principal and the bank's representative. The bundles are opened at the exam centre in the presence of the main examiner. The leak may have happened either at the time of drafting the question paper or at one of these stages. The HRD Minister should not rest till the whole issue is investigated.

RAMALAKSHMI ARUNACHALAM,
Chennai

A dispute prolonged

It is strange that the Centre has doubts in the Cauvery dispute only when its deadline to frame a scheme is coming to an end ("Centre likely to move SC for clarification on Cauvery verdict", March 29). This is nothing but dilatory tactics to appease the Karnataka electorate. The Supreme Court should be stern and castigate the Centre for taking so long to understand what "framing a scheme" means.

V.N. GOPAL,
Chennai

For a strong opposition

Trinamool Congress chief Mamata Banerjee's call to UPA chairperson Sonia Gandhi comes at the right

time ("Mamata wants Congress on board", March 29). It's been astonishing to see the ease with which the BJP has been winning elections all over the country; this must have led to some panic among the opposition parties. Without a strong opposition, wrestling back power from the BJP would be a tall order. Only with a strong opposition can democracy be strengthened.

N.J. RAVI CHANDER,
Bengaluru

Killed on the job

The shocking killings of journalists must be condemned in the strongest terms possible ("UN chief express concerns over deaths of Indian

journalists", March 28). If the fourth pillar of democracy is not safe, why does India call itself the largest democracy in the world? Journalists Sandeep Sharma, Navin Nischal and Vijay Singh's deaths come after the brutal murders of Gauri Lankesh and Santanu Bhowmik. According to the Impunity Index, between 1992 and July 2016, 27 Indian journalists were killed in the course of their work. Murder of journalists is one of the greatest threats to the freedom of the press today. While international attention to the issue seems to have grown, there has been little progress here in making the country safer for journalists. States have

to demonstrate far more political will to tackle this problem. It is not just a story that ends with a journalist's death; a climate of intimidation builds up. If no one is punished, killers are emboldened, and violence repeats itself in an endless spiral. Journalists have no choice but to censor themselves or flee the country, if they can afford to. Governments often talk of a free press, but they seem unwilling to do much. We must act now to stop this culture of impunity. Shooting the messenger cannot be allowed.

R. SAMPATH,
Chennai

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