

# Tyranny of high-stake exams in South Asia

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A FEW experiences shape South Asian childhood as profoundly as the examinations season. Whether it is the SSC and HSC exams in Bangladesh, the CBSE board exams in India, or the O Levels and A Levels that dominate elite schooling across the region, education has long been synonymous with the test. These exams are supposed to measure knowledge but in practice, they often define worth. They decide who gets to move forward, who is left behind and who is labelled as a ‘failure.’ In doing so, they reflect not only an educational system but a social order, one that prizes memorisation over imagination, conformity over curiosity and submission over self-expression.

In theory, high-stake exams promise fairness. Everyone sits for the same paper; the marks determine merit; and opportunities follow from performance. But this illusion of meritocracy quickly fades when one looks closer. In Bangladesh, for instance, the Secondary School Certificate and the Higher Secondary Certificate exams are decisive gateways. They determine access to college, university, scholarships and even government jobs. Yet, access to quality preparation is far from equal.

Students from affluent families in Dhaka and other urban centres attend coaching centres and private schools that drill them for the tests. Meanwhile, students in rural or under-resourced areas, often without proper teachers or learning materials, are told that their future depends on competing in the same exams. What masquerades as a 'neutral' test of knowledge is, in fact, an amplifier of social inequality.

This disparity is not unique to Bangladesh. Across South Asia, exams reflect a deep class divide, between those who can afford the right coaching and those who cannot; between English-medium and vernacular systems; and between urban privilege and rural neglect. The system rewards compliance with exam patterns rather than genuine understanding. What matters most is not what students learn but how well they can reproduce the 'right' answer under pressure.

## **Learning as reproduction**

IN MOST Bangladeshi classrooms, particularly in government schools, the teacher remains the unquestioned authority. Lessons are delivered as lectures, textbooks are treated as sacred and examinations are the ultimate measure of both learning and teaching. This structure produces students who are technically literate but intellectually dependent, capable of reproducing knowledge but rarely of interrogating it.

When these students sit for their SSC or HSC exams, they face not a test of creativity or critical thinking but of memory. A student who can reproduce an essay word-for-word is rewarded while one who rephrases with personal insight risks being marked down. It is a system designed to produce

clerks, not creators, mirroring a colonial legacy in which education served administration rather than emancipation.

The psychological toll is equally severe. Studies show that high-stake exams in South Asia are a leading cause of student anxiety, depression and even suicide. In Bangladesh, the period before SSC or HSC results is marked by nationwide tension. Families rearrange their lives around their children's exams. Media count down to the result day. Success brings glory to entire neighbourhoods; failure brings stigma. Education becomes not a joy but a battlefield of expectations.

This fixation with exams is not uniquely Bangladeshi. It is a regional phenomenon, rooted in shared colonial legacies and postcolonial anxieties. The British education model introduced to South Asia in the 19th century was explicitly designed to produce a class of subjects 'Indian in blood and colour, but English in tastes and intellect,' as Thomas Macaulay famously wrote. Exams were the gatekeepers of that system, selecting a small elite for bureaucratic service.

After independence, South Asian states inherited not only those institutions but the mentality behind them. Success in exams remained the primary route to upward mobility. In India, students compete for the IITs and civil service exams with military precision. In Pakistan, the intermediate and matriculation boards function as national bottlenecks. In Sri Lanka, the GCE O and A Levels determine access to the public university system. Across the region, education remains the most prized yet most oppressive institution — both the promise of liberation and the machinery of discipline.

## **Tyranny of numbers**

AT THE heart of the problem lies an addiction to quantification. Education is reduced to numbers: GPA 5, GPA 4.8, 1600 SAT, 9A\*s, percentile scores. The assumption is that learning can be measured precisely and the measure defines the person. This reductionist logic is deeply entrenched in Bangladesh's SSC-HSC results system, where a perfect GPA 5 is not just an academic achievement but a social status symbol.

Schools advertise their GPA 5 counts as proof of quality. Parents boast of their children's results as badges of honour. Those who fall short are quietly stigmatised as if grades were moral judgements rather than statistical outcomes. The tyranny lies not in the exams alone but in the collective faith in their finality, the belief that a person's potential, character and intelligence can be captured by a few digits on a report card.

This obsession distorts teaching and learning at every level. Teachers are pressured to ‘complete the syllabus’ rather than cultivate understanding. Students prioritise past papers and ‘question patterns’ over curiosity. Coaching centres flourish by promising shortcuts to grades, not pathways to thinking. In this ecosystem, imagination is collateral damage.

## **A Freirean alternative**

THIS culture of exam obsession finds an eloquent critique in the work of Paulo Freire, the Brazilian educator whose 1970 classic *Pedagogy of the Oppressed* remains a foundational text for critical educators worldwide. What would Paulo Freire have say if he had visited a Bangladeshi classroom today? He would have probably recognised it instantly: the hierarchy, the rote culture, the silence of students, the fear of failure. But, he would also see hope because the very frustration that students feel is the beginning of critical consciousness.

Freire believed that education must begin with dialogue, not dictation. It must start from learners’ lived realities, not abstract curriculums. Instead of treating students as empty vessels, teachers must engage them as co-creators of knowledge. This requires transforming classrooms from sites of memorisation into spaces of reflection and participation.

Bangladesh has experimented with some of these ideas. The National Curriculum and Textbook Board’s 2023 competency-based curriculum aims to move from content memorisation to skills development and continuous assessment. The idea is to make learning more formative, experiential and relevant to real life. But implementation remains patchy. The weight of tradition, and of high-stake exams, continues to pull the system back towards the comfort of predictability and control.

Freire’s approach would demand something bolder: the dismantling of the examination culture itself. He would argue that if education is to serve liberation, assessment must measure growth, not conformity; creativity, not compliance. It must help students discover their voice, not silence it.

## **Lessons from regional reforms**

SOME lessons may be drawn from other parts of South Asia. In India, the National Education Policy (2020) calls for reducing board exam stress and introducing multiple opportunities for assessment. In Nepal, the School Education Bill (2023) proposes continuous evaluation to replace final-exam

dependence. And in Bhutan, the shift towards 'Education for Gross National Happiness' integrates mindfulness, civic responsibility and ecological awareness into schooling.

These initiatives, though imperfect, recognise that education must prepare students for life, not merely for tests. Bangladesh, with its deep pool of committed educators and a rapidly modernising economy, has the opportunity to lead this transformation if it can loosen the grip of the exam machine.

Ultimately, the tyranny of high-stake exams in South Asia is not just an educational problem; it is a cultural one. Parents, policymakers and the media all participate in sustaining it. A child's worth is too often equated with their marks, and success stories are defined by grades, not growth.

Breaking this cycle requires more than curriculum reform. It calls for a cultural redefinition of success. We must value creativity, collaboration, and compassion as much as we value competition. We must see learning as a lifelong process, not a one-time performance. Poet Rabindranath Tagore, himself an early critic of colonial education, once warned that a system obsessed with examinations 'stifles the spirit and kills curiosity.' More than a century later, his words ring painfully true across South Asia.

## **Reclaiming education**

IF SOUTH Asia's young generation is to inherit not just jobs but freedom — freedom to think, to question, to create — education must be reclaimed from the tyranny of exams. This means designing schools where failure is seen as feedback, not shame; where teachers are facilitators, not enforcers; and where the measure of success is not how well students conform but how deeply they care and think.

Freire's vision of education as 'the practice of freedom' remains urgent in a region where education still too often functions as the practice of fear. The SSC and HSC exams may continue to exist, but their dominance must be challenged. For a nation that aspires to a 'smart Bangladesh,' it is not enough to produce test-takers; it must nurture thinkers, dreamers, and citizens.

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