

Examination Scandal

Our public examination system has seldom been above board. It has indeed been a keen contest for maintaining a facade of fairness on the one hand and ingenuity for defeating all precautions on the other. Leakages of question papers have not been uncommon. Copying in the examinations became almost a right. There was a time when answers were dictated at places from outside through microphone. The casualty in the process was credibility to an extent that even local institutions preferred to hold their own admission tests rather than rely on these public examination results. Despite this unenviable backdrop, the episode this time is being mentioned as 'the worst ever examination scandal at secondary level.'

The Secondary School Certificate (SSC) Examination, the first public examination that students face in their academic career, is obviously of utmost importance in the life of the individual. The very fact that some 741,862 students are taking the examination this year indicates how important it is in national life. There is hardly any family which is not in some way or the other concerned with the process.

But the examination this year did not really have smooth sailing right from the very beginning. The first day, which passed off peacefully enough, saw expulsion of over 1,200 examinees for adopting unfair means in the Bengali first paper. A total of 233 examinees were expelled under Dhaka Board, 579 under Rajshahi Board, 236 under Comilla Board, 26 under Jessore Board and 126 under Chittagong Board.

On the second day of the examination a total of another 1,026 examinees were expelled — 306 from Dhaka Board, 500 from Rajshahi Board, 91 from Chittagong Board, 76 from Jessore Board and 233 from Comilla Board — for the same offence in the examination of Bengali second paper.

The scandal moved on to a different kind on the day of the examination for English first paper. On that day over 1,224 examinees were expelled and trouble also sparked off. The venue was Chouddagram Pilot High School. There a group of high officials, including seven magistrates led by the Additional Commissioner (ADC) revenue, entered the examination centre and expelled some 74 examinees at about 11-00 a.m. Later the expelled examinees grouped and attacked the police and the magistrates with the support of the local people.

The police fired some 42 rounds from rifles and shortguns and lobbed 19 rounds of tear gas shells to bring the situation under control. One college student was killed and 50 others, including 19 police personnel, were injured. There had been reports of violent incidents from a number of other places on the day on the suspicion that questions of English first paper had been leaked. The guardians reported that many students bought the question paper the previous day and found the same questions in the set paper.

Later the authorities postponed the examination in English second paper scheduled for Saturday March 15 for "unavoidable reasons." Meanwhile rumours were afloat about leakage of question papers on Mathematics and Geography. But a high-powered committee set up by the government could not find any sound basis for the allegation.

Education Minister A S H K Sadeq said: "Actually we have no concrete evidence regarding leakage of question.... so we will hold the examination according to schedule". He however apprehended "a centrally controlled organisation behind the leakage of question papers". Deputy Commissioners, Board officials and Special Branch of police were put on a massive hunt for the clue. Some of the reports implicated a section of the education-board officials, some teachers of leading schools in the city, and a few coaching centres. Some also suspected involvement of employees of the Government press. One person has been arrested and the Dhaka Board has announced a handsome reward for information leading to apprehension of the culprits.

But the Government has since issued a press note on the incident which gives quite a plausible account of the development.

What, however, surprises us most is that even after years of experience we have not been able to make these routine exercises foolproof. Indeed, no ingenuity is needed for it and there will be no accusation of copyright infringement if we simply copy one of the best managed public examinations anywhere. We may possibly have a model from the UNESCO just for the asking.

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