

Mass promotions mark a great leap back

R N Bhaskar shows how such policies have lowered standards of education

Most educationists shuddered as they read the news report in major Indian dailies on September 1 that the state government of Maharashtra had decided to grant mass promotions to all students of Class XI to Class XII. It only pointed to an inevitable worsening of educational certification standards. The Association of Mumbai Junior College Teachers is aghast and has protested against the move. But cynics don't see the government relenting. They know that the recent move has a history that points to a total lack of vision in respect of the educational system in the state.

They are aware of how similar moves were made seven years ago. The state government had then decreed that no student in classes I to V would be detained by the local school authorities. In effect, the state government had announced a mass promotion scheme for all students studying in any primary school class right from I to V.

Of course, the state government justified such a policy on the grounds that many parents had complained against the arbitrary standards for promotion that each school had adopted. It also claimed that young, tender minds should be allowed to explore their surroundings and discover things

for themselves, and not be regimented by an examination system of education. Certainly, such justifications sounded lofty. But in reality, such misplaced loftiness has only resulted in the further deterioration of educational standards in the state.

Horrifying reality

How bad is the situation? Consider, for instance, a survey of 34 private, English-medium schools in Mumbai, conducted by E-convergence Technologies Limited (ETL) in the first half of 2002 (the author is closely associated with this company). All the schools were located in the not-so-affluent, north-eastern part of the city. By selecting private schools, ETL hoped to ensure that the exercise would not come up with distorted findings caused by the clubbing together of schools run by the municipal corporation and schools run by private educational trusts. Likewise, by narrowing the choice to English-medium schools, ETL hoped to normalise the sample base even further.

A total of 16,500 students were covered in this survey. Each child was asked to answer 10 questions in English and 10 in mathematics (many of the questions were as simple as putting the numbers in the right order). The age group covered was from 11 to 13 years (classes VI to VIII). The choice

of English and maths was based on the growing awareness that any child—in order to become employable—must have oral and quantitative skills. The first helps him articulate effectively what he wishes to express, and the latter is the first step towards logical thinking. The results were startling. Over 60 per cent failed in mathematics and over 70 per cent in English.

Worse than Bihar

Initially, there was an apprehension that perhaps the questions in the quiz contest were too difficult. But then, just a couple of months later, came the two-volume Probe Report on Education in India published by the Oxford University Press. The report had compiled together other similar tests conducted by non-governmental organisations (NGOs) in four states—all aimed at finding out if students had the language and mathematical skills they would need at the secondary-school levels.

In all the states where such tests were administered—Bihar, Madhya Pradesh, Rajasthan and Maharashtra—the failing rates were in excess of 60 per cent, going up to well over 70 per cent in the case of Maharashtra. In effect, such data showed that Maharashtra had a higher percentage of failures than even Bihar.

Under normal circumstances that does appear a bit incredulous. Ma-

harashtra is believed to be way ahead of Bihar on all counts. But all these tests and the compiled results point to a malaise in Maharashtra that the state government has only been aggravating year after year. That could also explain why many recruits at lower levels, where numeric and verbal skills are critically important, invariably come from other states.

And this state of rot began setting in more than 30 years ago. For instance, this writer was an examiner for school and university examinations in Mumbai for almost 10 years from 1973 to 1982. Even then, it was a common practice for the local moderator to advise each examiner to ensure that the number of candidates who had secured failing marks did not go beyond 40 per cent of the total. In many cases, such advice could not be implemented as the educational standards of the candidates was far too poor.

Grace as disgrace

But, even then, the author and other examiners like him were aware of the futility of failing such students. Irrespective of whether the candidates were failed, or promoted, the moderators invariably ensured that they would give grace marks to all the students across the board to ensure that the number of failed students was never too large a percentage. After

The top low scorers

Distribution of mean scores of students in Bihar, Karnataka, Maharashtra and Rajasthan in language, mathematics and environmental studies

Test score	Language				Mathematics				Environmental studies			
	Bihar	Karnataka	Maharashtra	Rajasthan	Bihar	Karnataka	Maharashtra	Rajasthan	Bihar	Karnataka	Maharashtra	Rajasthan
0	0.3	0.9	6.0	1.4	2.3	3.0	8.4	1.4	1.5	4.4	9.1	1.0
1-10	6.0	18.2	24.8	4.5	8.1	17.3	24.0	5.9	6.0	14.6	17.7	6.7
11-20	8.0	12.6	13.4	5.8	14.3	19.1	16.9	8.8	9.6	10.8	9.4	6.7
21-30	12.0	16.4	11.1	11.3	12.3	20.3	15.8	11.0	9.7	14.0	10.0	8.4
31-40	11.9	12.7	8.8	9.5	11.2	15.1	10.3	11.5	9.1	11.7	9.5	8.6
41-50	8.1	12.2	8.6	11.4	12.5	11.6	10.0	14.7	10.1	15.3	12.5	14.1
51-60	7.6	10.4	7.1	14.7	9.9	5.9	5.6	12.3	10.2	11.1	10.6	13.6
61-70	13.0	7.4	7.7	12.4	9.7	4.6	4.4	14.2	11.2	9.5	11.9	16.4
71-80	13.8	6.2	7.4	14.4	9.3	2.2	2.6	11.7	9.4	5.5	5.9	9.7
81-90	10.7	2.3	4.3	8.6	4.7	0.9	1.6	7.6	14.1	2.6	3.3	10.3
91-100	8.6	0.7	0.8	6.0	5.7	0.0	0.4	0.9	9.1	0.5	0.1	4.5
Total	100	100	100	100	100	100	100	100	100	100	100	100
N	616	769	1554	780	616	769	1554	780	616	769	1554	780
Mean*	53.8	35.7	32.6	53.3	44.5	29.2	26.5	48.2	53.5	36.8	35.2	52.2

Note: *Calculated from the original scores.

Source: Aikara (1997)

this act of charity, the answer papers and the marksheets would go to the state moderators, where the results would be further "moderated" to ensure that not too many failed. Even during those years it was evident to examiners that anyone securing 25 per cent marks had a fair chance of being promoted.

Now consider what happens when mass promotion is introduced. Assuming an average 10 per cent failure rate for each class—half the rate of 20 to 25 per cent that the state government finds acceptable—there is a good chance of the filtering out of weaker students year after year. Consequently, 100 students appearing for the Class I exams would get reduced to 90 in Class II, and then to 81 in Class III, 73 in Class IV, and further to 66 in Class V. By abolishing all exams from classes I to V, the state government had ensured that as many as 35 per cent of the students in Class V were those who did not deserve to be there. Since schools

would be loath to "fail" 35 per cent of their students in Class VI, the pressure on schools to cope with weaker students had become that much greater.

Opening the floodgates

Not surprisingly, this showed up in the tests that ETL administered in Mumbai. Compounding this was the slackening of controls that parents, too, had on their children. Aware that automatic mass promotion had become the norm, many parents took their children's studies lightly, and began putting pressure on the child only from Class VI onwards. The child in the secondary school was unfairly burdened, and the deterioration of standards became inevitable.

Such an approach has caused a large number of students, who do not match the proposed educational standards, to appear for the SSC (Class X) examinations. And since grace marks have been invariably granted by examination moderators under an age-

old convention, the consequences are predictable. Many students who do not deserve to get the SSC passing certificate will get promoted nonetheless. These students then go to college.

This would normally have been the next quality-control checkpost where college managements could decide which students were competent enough to appear for the HSC (Class XII) examinations. Now the state wants to do away with this checkpost as well.

And in the absence of small checkpoints at each and every stage, the state now expects the major state level exams at Class X and Class XII to stem the rot! Wishful thinking. And the consequences will have to be borne by the government and the corporate sector that will have to find some way of employing this youth.

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