

For a new paradigm

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THE TAMIL Nadu Government decided this month to do away with a proven system — the Professional Courses Entrance Examinations. The affected students knocked at the doors of the Madras High Court, and it found the decision to be unacceptable in law. The matter has now gone before the Supreme Court.

But some of the social and academic questions involved are being neither raised nor debated. Politics that has held centre stage in every aspect of life in Tamil Nadu, including in films and the entertainment industry, has now encroached into the academic space. Academic decisions are being taken in the name of representing certain sections. Arbitrary changes are being sought to be effected without even a semblance of academic inputs. The biggest stakeholders, the students, feel left out.

The common entrance test (CET) system for admissions to professional courses was introduced in 1984. That was the point of time when higher education was formally opened for private players. A need arose to infuse transparency in the admissions process, at least with regard to the government quota seats in unaided professional education institutions.

The CET system evolved over time and got its present structure in the early 1990s. Admissions to courses in medical, paramedical, engineering, veterinary and agriculture and allied sciences are based on a combination of marks obtained in the higher secondary examinations and the CET. The proportion was 4:1. Then it came down to 2:1. The methodology in Tamil Nadu of combining the marks obtained in the qualifying examination and the CET is widely seen as an ideal one. The Plus Two, or higher secondary, examination evaluates a student's knowledge of the syllabus content. The CET, by means of its objective methodology, tests a student's problem-solving capability, speed, memory and understanding of the fundamentals in science and mathematics.

While scrapping the CET system the Tamil Nadu Government gave a reason: that it put rural students at a disadvantage. Urban students, it was stated, had the advantage of getting coached in tuition centres.

However, rural Tamil Nadu's biggest provider of higher secondary education is public-funded — institutions run by the Government and the local bodies. Privately funded schools account for only a third of the entire higher secondary system. These are urban-based.

If the rural students feel deprived, the blame must go to the Government and local body schools in the hinterland. Some of the so-called rural schools

are also institutions that levy high levels of fees. Their students are from the elite sections, coming from all parts of the State to study Class XI and XII. By no means can they be called rural students.

Social differences in access to education, as in other domains of life, are a reality in Tamil Nadu. The surest means of bringing in equity here would be to infuse more money into the government schooling system.

The CET system brought in equity and parity. It remains the only gateway that can evaluate a student's ability and aptitude objectively, compared with several other methods. When the system is removed, students from other streams, especially those run by the all-India boards, feel disadvantaged.

But the State has a counter-argument. The national level CETs are based on the CBSE syllabus. This proves a disadvantage to students from the State Board stream seeking to enter the Indian Institutes of Technology or the National Institutes of Technology. A majority of the aspirants to higher education cannot compete with a minority that gets trained in premier academic institutions to enter the IITs. When an entire nation turns its back on a majority coming from humbler backgrounds, what is wrong in the State reciprocating the gesture? This is one line of thinking among different political parties in Tamil Nadu.

But is there not a way out of this competitive chauvinism — State vs Centre; Urban vs Rural? Or the Elite vs the Humble?

A possible solution

Experts and academicians show the way: build on the strengths of the CET and simply add it to the higher secondary examination system. Out of the 200 marks given for each subject in the Class XII examinations, questions that carry 100 marks can be in CET style: make these objective-type. The rest of the theory papers could be in the existing subjective or descriptive style. So an examiner can evaluate a student's knowledge, on the one hand, and the crucial life skills, on the other, all in one examination.

How do we build a consensus on this? Political parties need to remove themselves from the scene and let the academics decide on a scientific methodology that is enduring. Perhaps, a committee can thrash out the details. It can produce a report in the next three months so that a new and reformed examination system could be put in place at least from the next academic year. It can make life simpler for the poor urban learner, who now has no support from any quarter.