



Gates or barriers?

College entrance exams should test for potential, not achievement, or it risks dividing society further, says **Shubhashis Gangopadhyay**

Some time ago my colleagues and I were working on indoor air pollution resulting from fuel use in India. In our findings, indoor air pollution was caused to a large extent by the use of firewood for cooking and, to a lesser extent, by kerosene in rural areas. In our team there was a young Indian Institute of Technology (IIT) student who helped us in collecting scientific material on the heat efficiency and emissions of firewood, kerosene and gas (LPG). Our basic questions were: (a) Do people know how these efficiencies and emission rates stack up? (b) Why is it that they are choosing fuels in a way that affects their health due to pollution within the house? (c) How much of this distorted choice was because of misplaced policies?

However, I am not going to comment on our work, but on the young IIT student who helped us with the study as our research assistant (RA). He was simply brilliant. He had done little or no economics and, hence, spent time first understanding the methodology we were using. Second, he knew exactly what the steps in the argument were and took the initiative to stay one step ahead of what we were asking of him. Third, he collected a very relevant set of research papers and documents that helped us understand better the scientific principles and methodology behind the technical calculations that we used in the study. I have seldom been so impressed with someone who came to me during his vacation simply because he was interested in what we were trying to do. I wrote a very strong recommendation letter for him and he went away for higher studies to one of the best universities in the US.

Why am I writing about him today? I am remind-

ed of him because of what I see in the papers regarding admission tests for the IITs and “cut-offs” in Delhi University. Are we doing enough in our higher education admission systems to ensure that students from small towns can make it big? Are we ensuring that we take in those with the highest potential? Or, are we simply ensuring that students with parental resources to pay for coaching centres and access to costly schools in big cities are being rewarded with a shot at higher education? This is a pertinent question in India since we have a peculiar asymmetry in our education system. While the government has failed miserably in providing good schools – most will want to send their wards to private schools – institutions like the IITs are world-beaters and highly subsidised by the government. What this tends to do is widen the gap between the rich and the poor; children growing up in bigger towns and in wealthier families have greater access to the better training in costlier schools which, in turn, enable them to have better access to the highly subsidised institutions of higher learning. Since higher education reaps higher returns, this system strengthens the divide between the rich and the poor. Our RA was a small-town lad and not from a well-off family. He and his family had struggled very hard so that he could get a good education. Will he find it easier to join the IITs today than when he did?

For me, government-funded higher education has to admit the very best. This is not because I am an elitist but because I think that when we are using public money (which includes the taxes paid by the poorest

of the poor) we better come up with solutions that yield the highest returns. The question to ask of our admission system, therefore, is whether we are taking in those who have the highest potential. The reason for harping on the word “potential” rather than on “achievement” is that the latter depends on many more things than simply potential. And the impact of good training on high potential is many times more than the same good training on low potential. Unfortunately, achievement in school-leaving examinations is a very imprecise estimate of the potential to do well in higher education.

Think of a poor child in a village school studying science. Her physics and chemistry laboratories are no match for the ones in a costly private school in Delhi. Her teachers are usually absent. Given that nobody from her school has ever been admitted to any of the IITs, she has no pointers from any of her seniors. Of course, if she is someone like Ramanujan, she may “achieve” in spite of this. However, if she is a notch behind him, she may be lost to society forever. Are we doing enough to bring such students into higher education? I am afraid that the current debate between the higher education minister and the directors of the IITs is not addressing this issue.

Take, for instance, the proposed compromise of an 80 per cent cut-off to be able to sit for the IIT entrance examination. Is Maya, who obtained an average of 79 per cent in a village school, worse than Dilip, who got 81 per cent in a Delhi school? The former will never enter any IIT while the latter will, at least, have a shot at it. Of course, life is not fair, but there is no reason for brilliant people not to put their heads together to try and make it fairer. Therefore, when we say that Maya’s entry into an IIT at the expense of Dilip will dilute the average quality of an IIT student, we should have a better argument than simply pointing to their performance at the school-leaving examination.

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