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The NEET exam scandal has emerged as an enormous breach of trust and appears to have caused irreparable harm to the Modi government's social and political contract with its citizenry, particularly aspiring youth.

The rhetorical pitch for an alternative development model in Prime Minister Narendra Modi's 2014 electoral pitch, away from cycles of corruption, administrative incompetence and policy inertia, was supposed to offer hope and faith among India's young people in participating (and constructing) India's growth story. It has done quite the opposite.

Their undistilled faith, hope in being able to contribute towards nation building and serving in its best interests, is credibly damaged when the nation's main elected government – year after year – fails to effectively ensure a corrupt-free, centralised examination system, or stop paper leaks that have by now become a systemic norm in most states, from Gujarat to Uttar Pradesh to Bihar.

If the Civil Services exam competitive system collapses, for example, this may very well result in the actual collapse of the elected state machinery and sever its competency. That's where the current breakdown in trust between young people and the Indian state seems to

be heading.

There is a deeper systemic rot that goes far beyond seeing this crisis as an episodic event embedded in the NEET scandal.

Psychological damage

What it does is cause immense damage to the psychological state of India's younger generation, who sit for exams, putting all their hopes in one basket, in search for a better, more progressive future.

As the former Vice Chancellor of Ashoka University and columnist Pratap Bhanu Mehta remarked, "...Beyond the immediate crisis, this (NEET) scandal poses large questions for India's democracy and the governance of India's institutions. The Indian Republic runs on two procedural legitimating devices: elections and exams.

In reality, both can be distorted by the operations of power and money. But both are, all things considered, the fairest forms of procedural legitimation, at least compared to any other institution in society. They are the only two sites where fairness can at least be demanded. Both also produce enough churn and mobility, again compared to any other institutional setting, to be the source of hopes and dreams."

The Modi government's overall record on investing (or spending) towards the education sector has also been quite dismal to say the least.

Education spending falls

In the BJP's 2014 manifesto, it promised to raise public spending on education to around six percent of the GDP. From 2014 to 2024, the Union government allocated an average of only 0.44 percent of the annual GDP to education each year (the Congress-led UPA had allocated an average of 0.61 percent in between 2004-2014).

The last decade has also seen the largest scale of student-led protests across the country, which may only intensify the NEET scandal.

Students have protested on issues like deeper privatisation, waning academic freedom, cancellations of fellowships, delays in disbursement of stipends, cuts for research fundings, apart from infrastructural issues and campus-saffronisation activities (pursued under the BJP-rule).

All of these have only further accentuated a crisis of legitimacy in the state-youth trust contract.

The “surprise” election verdict in the state of Uttar Pradesh had the issue of “paper leaks” acted as a critical wedge against the BJP. Its anti-corruption image, ‘*Na khaunga, na khane dunga*’ (Will neither partake nor let anyone partake in corrupt activity) slogan by Modi has also rung hollow among young people.

The inability to conduct centralised exams fairly also provides a deeper crisis of legitimacy within the Indian state to effectively harness, adopt, use, and upgrade its existing technological know-how and capacity.

No edu-tech system, even if adopted, machinery can enable a more accessible, competent exam process, unless the government ensures a better environment for competitive exams to be scheduled and carried out, across all states in a systematic manner.

Exams, in this way, then have a functionary role in legitimising collective state-action (like elections, transportation-mobility) in an otherwise deeply unequal system where educational opportunity macro learning outcomes remained plagued by a deeper divide in access to decent educational resources, further marked by growing spatial concerns (rural-urban context) and identity-based characteristics (gender, caste, ethnicity, class, etc.).

What is worse is that the current government has been consciously ignoring most of these structural issues for almost a decade (engaging in partisan blame game). Simultaneously, it has silently pursued a practice of ideological control (through greater saffronisation of academic campuses) in and across education institutions.

A deeper issue

The growing scale of administrative incompetence in the overall management of the education system is also contributing to greater functional illiteracy amongst Indians, when observed in the larger ambit of global competitiveness space. This has serious costs for the youth’s employability as well (as explained in more detail here).

On the more specific concern of fairly conducting exams, the government has proposed new law(s) with stricter punishments and deterrence for those convicted. Several states are also proposing a greater decentralisation of the process of conducting exams, which can help minimise instances of paper-leaks or lapses in centralised systems.

In what is one of the lowest points in India’s federal polity and the centre-state relationship, to what extent these measures are acknowledged, or adopted, or may help restore the broken trust between the aspiring young and the Indian state, remains to be seen.

In the meantime, a more disillusioned youth, especially those coming from humble socio-economic backgrounds (with no option to travel abroad or pursue other greener pastures), stands to lose the most.

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