From the Pen of a Disillusioned Learner

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Yesterday, one of my juniors called me. "Samvida, I have my physics exam tomorrow, and I have a doubt. Can you help me?" I was only too happy to assist, and spent a couple of minutes going over the question with her. When we reached a concept she hadn't learnt yet, I began explaining to her, but she cut me off midway. "It's okay, we haven't learnt it, it can't come in the paper," she assured me confidently. When I put down the phone, I did so with some niggling uneasiness.

"It's not in the portions," is a term that, to me, symbolises the biggest flaw in our education system: learning for the sake of passing tests.

I am in the middle of my half-terms now. My classmates are sitting up all night with physics numericals and organic chemistry textbooks by their sides. And I? Despite being a student of science, I'm watching Khan Academy videos on world history and macroeconomics because I find them fascinating. But the most terrible aspect of this is that I am chastising myself for it – "Samvida, it's not in your portions, please go do something useful now," is what I keep telling myself. But I shouldn't be. The purpose of education should be to help me learn, not to help me pass tests, yet I increasingly find myself learning to pass tomorrow's assignment or next month's exam. But where has this attitude sprung from?

Every day, I see it burgeoning around me in classrooms and in homes. It starts small – when a friend is asked a doubt in class–"It's not in portions, don't worry." When a teacher asks if she should cover a topic in depth - "Ma'am, there are only four lines in the textbook, telling us more will just confuse us." When a biology student says she writes computer programmes for "fun", the glances she gets range from curious to, sadly, hostile.

But it gets bigger. Teachers refuse to deal with subjects outside the recommended syllabus. Parents forbid you from reading up subjects that do not pertain to your stream. If you're a JEE aspirant, your coaching institution keeps you far away from the books on biology, economics, history, architecture and twenty thousand other topics. And the excuse that you are given is this – it's only to help you focus." Focus on what? Doing well on an exam.

So to me, the most disabling school environment is the excessive emphasis on studying for the sake of clearing tests. I can't blame students (me included) for learning for a test. That test could be the one deciding your college, your career, and eventually, the kind of life you lead. But that shouldn't be the case. Your future shouldn't hang on a bunch of tests that you write when you're sixteen. Your college shouldn't judge you on one test score. Your prospective employer shouldn't hire you based on your college GPA.

I'm not suggesting we should do away with tests. The thought of the chaos it would create is terrifying. But we need to find a more effective

method of testing. A "test" needn't be a three hour paper that you write in a strictly invigilated exam hall. We need to broaden our thinking on tests and exams, how they connect to learning, and how much importance we finally give to these tests.

It's easy to whine about, but very hard to praise, our education system. Being a product (or should I say, a victim) of Indian schooling, I am almost always cynical when asked about my school environment. But isn't it only through complaints like mine that the system evolves? Unless students like me are here to point out the fallacies, everything will seem dandy, and nothing will ever change. An education system shouldn't be a stagnant pool, it should be a flowing river, forever evolving to meet the demands of the society it creates.

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