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Layered Entrance and Recruitment Examinations in India: Effects on Learning, Equity and Trust

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Abstract: *This study examines how layered entrance and recruitment examinations in India affect learning, equity and trust. These tests, which sit on top of school-board and university examinations, have multiplied, while public debate has focused mainly on their security. Using qualitative document analysis, the study examined 19 documents published between 1966 and 2026: six policy and official documents, nine research and review publications, and four items of expert commentary and news reporting. Statements about the effects of examinations were coded into six themes, and each claim was classified by the kind of evidence behind it. The sources agree that layered testing is costly. National survey data show that nearly 20% of students, and about 30% at secondary level, took private coaching in 2017–18, and the sources report that the burden falls hardest on poorer families. The record of leaks, cancellations and repeated reform committees does not support the assumption that new national tests are more trustworthy than school and university assessment. The case for common tests, that marks from different boards cannot be compared, is valid but calls for better moderation of marks. Only two of the 19 documents supply measured Indian data. The study argues that the goals of the National Education Policy 2020 are best met by fewer, better-linked examinations built on moderated school and university marks, and proposes a six-point agenda for the Ministry of Education, the National Testing Agency, school boards and universities.*

Keywords: *Entrance Examinations; High-Stakes Testing; Private Coaching; School-Based Assessment; Educational Equity; Education Policy; India.*

1. Introduction: A student in India who wants to study medicine or engineering writes the board examination and then prepares for a national entrance test. Law, architecture, management, general undergraduate study and research each have tests of their own, and public employment adds another round (Qamar, 2026a, 2026b). One account counts the entrance tests run by states, universities and professional bodies in the hundreds, with students applying to dozens (Qamar, 2026b).

These tests began as a remedy. Boards and universities differ in syllabus, rigour and marking, so a common test seemed a fair way to compare candidates (Qamar, 2026b). Over time the remedy has produced problems of its own: leaks, cancellations, delays and a large coaching industry. In July 2026, after the NEET-UG controversy, the Government announced a high-powered task force on examination reform (Outlook News Desk, 2026).

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Most public discussion is about how to run examinations safely. This paper asks a broader question: what do layers of examinations do to learning, fairness and trust, and how can government policy respond? It reviews the literature, states the need and objective of the study, sets out the method, presents results with a discussion, and ends with policy implications, limitations and a conclusion.

2. Review of Literature

2.1 Why the layers were built: Early policy reports treated examinations as central to quality. The Education Commission (1966) argued for examination reform and more weight on internal, school-based assessment, and the Yash Pal Committee (1993) and the National Curriculum Framework (National Council of Educational Research and Training [NCERT], 2005) criticised rote learning and heavy load. Entrance tests arrived for other reasons. Qamar (2026b) records that they were introduced because school and university results varied in curriculum, rigour and marking, and because institutions were suspected of favouritism, although he argues that the malpractice behind these fears was occasional, not system-wide. Deshpande (2026) adds that the public examination is, for most Indians, the main route to opportunity not inherited by birth, and that it lasts because it is the cheapest and most widely accepted way to assess large numbers.

2.2 Tests, teaching and learning: Alderson and Wall (1993) cautioned that the effect of a high-stakes test on teaching, often called washback, is not automatic and must be shown with evidence. Messick (1996) argued that a test has a good effect only when it rewards the abilities the curriculum wants to develop. Au (2007) reviewed 49 qualitative studies, mainly from the United States, and found that high-stakes tests mostly narrowed content, fragmented knowledge and moved teachers towards lecturing, although in a minority of cases they widened content, so test design mattered. Campbell (1979) warned that the more a single indicator drives decisions, the more pressure there is to game it.

2.3 Coaching, equity and stress: Private tutoring that follows the school syllabus, often called shadow education, is a worldwide pattern, and Bray (2009) shows that it can distort mainstream schooling and widen gaps between rich and poor. India's 2017–18 household survey found that nearly one in five students took private coaching, and about 30 per cent at the secondary level (National Statistical Office [NSO], 2019). Gupta (2022) found that families see tutoring as a response to weak formal schooling. Qamar (2026b), citing published estimates, puts the industry's yearly revenue at ₹58,000 crore. Kellaghan and Greaney (2019) note that success on public examinations often favours or disadvantages candidates by region, school type and socio-economic background. Deb et al. (2015) found that academic stress and examination anxiety among Indian senior secondary students were linked with psychological problems.

2.4 Trust and integrity: Kellaghan and Greaney (2019) warn that changes to examinations can bring unplanned harm as well as benefit. In India, the 2024 expert committee led by K. Radhakrishnan made 101 recommendations and found that paper leaks were symptoms of weaknesses across the whole examination process (Outlook News Desk, 2026). Qamar (2026a, 2026b) reads this record as evidence that the layered system is itself unreliable.

2.5 The gap: The National Education Policy 2020 (Ministry of Education, 2020) accepts the problem. It aims to reform board and entrance examinations so that coaching is no longer needed (para. 4.37), yet it proposes a common national aptitude test (para. 4.42) rather than abolishing national tests. Qamar's recent pieces differ too: one would base admission on moderated school-leaving results (2026a), the other would cut the number of tests so that one score opens many doors (2026b). Measured evidence from India on how layered testing affects learning and equity is limited, and the arguments are scattered across policy documents, research and opinion. This paper sets them side by side and tests them against the evidence.

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3. Rationale and Need of the Study: Three reasons make this study necessary. First, the stakes are national: millions of young people sit these tests, and each failure to conduct an examination smoothly delays admissions and recruitment (Qamar, 2026b). Second, current debate leans towards security and administration (Outlook News Desk, 2026), and the educational effects receive less attention. Third, education faculties prepare the teachers whose assessment must be trusted if school marks are to carry more weight. The study offers a base for policy discussion, for teacher education and for later field research.

4. Objective of the Study: The objective of this study is to examine critically, through a documentary analysis of policy documents, research and expert commentary, how layered entrance and recruitment examinations affect learning, equity and trust in the Indian education system.

5. Research Methodology

5.1 Design: This is a qualitative study based on document analysis, in which documents are read systematically to answer a research question (Bowen, 2009). The method suits a question about arguments and evidence already in print, for which no survey covers the whole layered system.

5.2 Sources and selection criteria: Documents were chosen on purpose, not at random. A document was included if it (a) dealt with entrance, recruitment or board examinations, coaching, or the effects of high-stakes testing; (b) came from a government body, a peer-reviewed journal, a scholarly or international agency publication, or a named expert in an established outlet; and (c) was published between 1966 and 2026. Coaching-company marketing and unsigned web pages were excluded. Newspaper and magazine commentary was treated as expert opinion, not as measured evidence.

6. Data Collection and Analysis

6.1 Data collection: Documents were located through targeted searches of government websites and publisher platforms and through the reference lists of key articles. Nineteen documents met the criteria: six policy or official documents (Education Commission, 1966; Yash Pal Committee, 1993; NCERT, 2005; Ministry of Education, 2020, 2024; NSO, 2019), nine research or review publications (Alderson & Wall, 1993; Au, 2007; Black & Wiliam, 1998; Bray, 2009; Campbell, 1979; Deb et al., 2015; Gupta, 2022; Kellaghan & Greaney, 2019; Messick, 1996), and four items of expert commentary or news reporting (Deshpande, 2026; Outlook News Desk, 2026; Qamar, 2026a, 2026b). The set was finalised in November 2026. Four further sources on current policy developments (Section 8) were used for description only and were not coded.

6.2 Analysis: Analysis followed the basic steps of thematic analysis (Braun & Clarke, 2006). Each document was read, and every statement about the effects of examinations was marked and sorted into themes, starting from five headings drawn from the objective: cost, equity, trust, learning and alternatives. A sixth theme, the case for common tests, emerged from the sources. Statements from different documents were compared for agreement and difference, and each was labelled by the kind of support behind it: measured data, peer-reviewed research, official statement or expert opinion. This labelling matters because a claim backed by a national survey weighs differently from one backed by opinion.

7. Results and Discussion

7.1 Results

Table 1 sets out the six themes, what the sources show under each, and the kind of support behind the claims.

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Table 1

Themes, Evidence and Sources in the 19 Documents Analysed

Theme	What the sources show	Kind of support	Main sources
Cost	Coaching is widespread (about 20% of students; about 30% at secondary level, 2017–18). Preparation takes months or years, and examination pressure is linked to stress.	Survey data; peer-reviewed study; opinion	NSO (2019); Deb et al. (2015); Qamar (2026a, 2026b)
Equity	Costs fall hardest on low-income families. Success varies with background. Coaching grows where schooling is seen as weak.	International review; qualitative study; opinion	Kellaghan& Greaney (2019); Bray (2009); Gupta (2022); Qamar (2026b); Deshpande (2026)
Trust	Leaks, cancellations and repeated reform point to weaknesses across the whole process.	Official committee (as reported); opinion	Outlook News Desk (2026); Qamar (2026a, 2026b)
Learning	High-stakes tests tend to narrow teaching. The effect depends on test design.	Peer-reviewed review; theory	Au (2007); Alderson & Wall (1993); Messick (1996); Campbell (1979)
Case for common tests	Boards differ. Common tests offer scale, anonymity and comparability.	Policy statement; opinion	Ministry of Education (2020); Qamar (2026b); Deshpande (2026)
Alternatives	Moderate school marks; cut the number of tests; share one score; train teachers to assess.	Policy statement; opinion; classroom-assessment research	Qamar (2026a, 2026b); Ministry of Education (2020); Black & Wiliam (1998); Education Commission (1966)

Four results follow.

1. **Agreement on the problem, not the cure.** The National Education Policy keeps and improves a national test. Qamar (2026a) would make moderated school-leaving results the main basis for admission. Qamar (2026b) would cut the number of tests and share one score.

2. **Thin Indian evidence.** Only two of the 19 documents give measured Indian data on these matters: the national coaching survey (NSO, 2019) and one stress study (Deb et al., 2015).

3. **A real case for the layers.** Boards differ, and a common test offers scale and anonymity (Deshpande, 2026).

4. **A central assumption that fails.** The layers were meant to bring trust and fairness, but leaks, cancellations and repeated committees show that the new layer has the weaknesses it was meant to cure.

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7.2 Discussion: On trust, the case for the layers assumed that a national test would be freer of unfair means than school assessment. The sources do not support this. Campbell (1979) helps explain why: when one test carries a person's whole future, the pressure to game it grows and the risk is concentrated, so a failure in a national test affects millions at once.

On learning, international evidence suggests that what a test measures matters more than how many there are (Au, 2007; Messick, 1996). Removing tests will not by itself improve teaching, and one well-designed national test may do less harm than several poor ones. This is why the National Education Policy hopes a better common test can reduce coaching, though that depends on the testing agency delivering the quality.

On equity, coaching grows where families doubt the school (Gupta, 2022), so school marks must earn trust through moderation and audit. Deshpande's (2026) description of the examination as a route to opportunity for people without inherited advantages adds a caution: any move towards school-based selection must stay transparent and guard against favouritism, which was one reason central tests were created (Qamar, 2026b).

Taken together, the results support a middle path: fewer, better-linked examinations with strong moderation of school and university marks. Black and Wiliam (1998) show that good classroom assessment raises standards, so a system that wants to rely on teachers' judgement must first prepare them to make it.

8. Policy Implications and Recommendations: The results speak to a policy field that is already active. This section links the findings to existing government initiatives and sets out what each responsible body could do. The recommendations are the author's reading of the results.

8.1 What government has already done: Five initiatives bear directly on the problem. The National Education Policy 2020 aims to reform board and entrance examinations so that coaching is no longer needed, proposes more than one attempt at board examinations, asks the National Testing Agency (NTA) for a high-quality common aptitude test, and proposes PARAKH, a national assessment centre, to bring consistency to board examinations (Ministry of Education, 2020). The Central Board of Secondary Education has moved to two Class X board examinations a year from 2026 (Central Board of Secondary Education, 2025). The Ministry's 2024 guidelines on coaching centres set rules on registration, student age and conduct (Ministry of Education, 2024). Parliament strengthened the Public Examinations (Prevention of Unfair Means) Act on 29 and 30 July 2026 (All India Radio, 2026), with penalties of up to 10 years in jail and fines of up to ₹10 crore (S. Shukla, 2026). Finally, the 2024 expert committee made 101 recommendations on the NTA, a high-powered task force under Nandan Nilekani was announced in July 2026, and NEET-UG is to move to computer-based testing from 2027 (Outlook News Desk, 2026; V. Shukla, 2026).

8.2 Recommendations: Six recommendations follow. Each is tied to an existing instrument so that it can be carried out within current policy.

1. **Make the coaching goal measurable.** NEP 2020 aims to end the need for coaching, so progress should be tracked. The Ministry of Education and the National Statistical Office could report coaching use and spending at regular intervals, building on the 2017–18 baseline (NSO, 2019).

2. **Adopt a one-test principle.** No public body should run its own examination where an existing national or state test can validly assess the same competencies (Qamar, 2026b). The NTA's common tests, as NEP 2020 envisages, could be that single measure, with institutions publishing selection criteria in advance.

3. **Use PARAKH to make board marks comparable.** It could publish common methods for moderating and equating board marks, so that board results can carry more weight in admission (Qamar, 2026a).

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4. **Pair security reforms with fewer high-stakes events.** Computer-based testing makes each test safer but does not reduce how many tests a student takes. Multi-session and multi-attempt designs, which the 2024 committee and NEP 2020 point towards, would lower the stakes of a single day (Ministry of Education, 2020; Outlook News Desk, 2026).

5. **Enforce the coaching guidelines and strengthen schools.** States could adopt the 2024 guidelines (Ministry of Education, 2024), while boards and schools strengthen senior secondary teaching, since families turn to coaching partly out of doubt about schools (Gupta, 2022).

6. **Train teachers to assess.** If school marks are to carry more weight, teachers need training in setting sound tests and marking consistently (Black & Wiliam, 1998), and teacher education institutions are the natural place to begin.

8.3 Cautions: Three cautions apply. The recommendations rest on thin Indian evidence (Section 7.1), so each should be piloted and evaluated. Giving more weight to school marks needs safeguards against favouritism and uneven standards (Deshpande, 2026). And the sources disagree on the remedy: some would keep a strengthened national test, others would move to moderated school results. The recommendations aim at the common ground of fewer duplicate tests, credible moderation and measured results.

9. Limitations of the Study: This study rests on documents, not on interviews, surveys or classroom observation, so it can show what is claimed and argued but cannot measure effects. Several sources are opinion pieces, and two are by the same author (Qamar, 2026a, 2026b), who therefore weighs more in the set than a balanced sample would give him. Some details of the 2024 committee come from a news report, not from the committee's own report. International studies, mainly from the United States, may not transfer to India. Coding was done by one reader, and events are moving quickly, so the findings reflect sources available by November 2026. Future work should measure coaching spending by income group, survey students on stress and study habits, and compare the later progress of students admitted through board results and through entrance tests.

10. Conclusion: The layered examination system began with a reasonable worry: that school and university marks could not be compared fairly. Set against the evidence in 19 documents, the worry is real, but the layers have not answered it. The sources agree on the costs in time, money and wellbeing, and that these costs fall hardest on poorer families. The record of recent years does not support the belief that more national tests bring more trust, and the best argument for them, comparability across boards, calls for better moderation, not more examinations.

India already has much of the policy architecture it needs: the goal in NEP 2020 of reducing dependence on coaching, the 2024 coaching guidelines, the strengthened anti-leak law and the reform of the National Testing Agency. The task now is to connect these instruments, so that security and technology reforms are matched by fewer tests, moderated school and university marks, and measured results. Students study for what the system rewards. The aim of reform is to make sure that what the system rewards is learning.

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