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## Features

### Perspectives

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## Cool cats and the not-so-cool CAT exam

Vikram Doctor

LAST Sunday students across India sat down to write the Common Admissions Test for the Indian Institutes of Management, better known simply as CAT, modelled on the Scholastic Aptitude Test or SAT in the US of A.

For most of them this was the culmination of months of preparation. They would have forked out vast amounts to private training institutes, poured over thick wads of paper printed with problems, mugged up long lists of unfamiliar words, and tried to hone up their anagram cracking abilities.

How does such a mass exam really manage to test intelligence, and what does it mean for us to have put our educational system in thrall to this culture of endless third party testing?

If there's one test that has set the style for the type of tests that we have today it's the SAT in the US. The irony is that the SAT and its offspring are attacked these days for creating and perpetuating an elite to which those from less favourable backgrounds have limited access.

Yet when the idea of using SAT for college admissions was first suggested, in the US in the 1930s, it was meant specifically to overturn an elite, though of a slightly different kind.

This was the WASP (White Anglo-Saxon Protestant) ascendancy that then dominated the elite US colleges. Entry to Harvard, Yale, Princeton or similar schools had much more to do with your family background or whether you'd studied in the 'right' school, rather than your academic ability.

James Bryant Conant hated this. Conant's dream was of a pure meritocracy that would create leaders for the nation, and with this in view he systematically set out to destroy the system over which he presided. The SAT, devised by Henry Chauncey was the chosen tool.

SAT soon became a cornerstone of the American educational system, and its effects were immediate. Young people from all sorts of backgrounds were able to enter colleges and the WASP aristocracy was soon in retreat.

Yet today, the same SAT has come in for much criticism. In India, the unfairness of the testing culture and the way it favours those with the money to buy coaching services, or those from more privileged backgrounds is massive.

In the process, most of the educational institutions themselves have become devalued. The idea of education to produce a well rounded individual has largely gone out of the window in the

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competition to pass the tests (and having done so, to pass the next set of tests) till finally those few who have managed to survive can get the jobs that were the aim of it all.

Is there any comfort then for the CAT aspirants sitting down to their tests? Perhaps a small one, and perhaps not one likely to be appreciated by those who have spent the last six months preparing for CAT.

One of the lesser noted spin offs of the internet boom has been the way it has empowered younger people like them. Walk into any dotcom office and you'll see hordes of young people hard at work.

Most don't have post graduate degrees, some haven't even finished college. Yet they're earning well already, and their prospects are good.

This is not to say that the degrees that the SAT type tests can bring are irrelevant. But the internet is at least ensuring that for those who want to forego them and rely on their "innate intelligence" the chances should be there.

That may be some comfort for those who walk out of the CAT examination hall, wondering what the point of it all is.



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