Impact of the Indian Examination System on Student Stress: A Pressing Issue

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Abstract

The Indian examination system, deeply rooted in the nation's educational framework, has undergone significant changes over time, transitioning from traditional Gurukul practices to a more structured and examination-centric model. This system, particularly characterized by high-stakes tests such as board exams and competitive entrance tests, has emerged as a major source of stress for students. Factors contributing to this stress include societal expectations, parental pressure, rote learning, and the rigid structure of assessments. The emphasis on academic performance and the resultant competition has fostered an environment where students face substantial emotional, psychological, and physical strain, adversely impacting their well-being and academic success. This article explores the sources of stress within the Indian examination system, the student experiences related to this stress, and the broader implications for their mental health. Despite reforms introduced through the National Education Policy (NEP) 2020, the examination framework still prioritizes academic results over holistic development, necessitating systemic changes to reduce stress and promote healthier learning environments.

Keywords: Examination System, Stress, Mental well-being, Academic Performance

Introduction

The Indian examination system serves as a critical component of the educational landscape, having evolved from traditional Gurukul systems to a more structured, examination-centric approach influenced by colonialism and westernization (Amani, 2024; Sharma, 2021). It encompasses various assessments, including school-level exams, board examinations, and competitive entrance tests, significantly influencing students' academic trajectories and career opportunities. This high-stakes environment is characterized by intense pressure, fueled by societal expectations and limited access to prestigious institutions, leading to heightened stress levels among students (Praveen & Abhishek, 2024). Factors contributing to this stress include the rigid nature of assessments that prioritize rote learning over critical thinking, the competitive atmosphere that fosters anxiety, and the lack of adequate support systems for mental health. Public examinations, conducted by state educational authorities, play a crucial role in determining students' grades and prospects (Dave & Hill, 1974). The implications of this examination-related stress are profound, adversely affecting students' mental and physical well-being, academic performance, and overall development. Prolonged exposure to such stress can lead to mental health issues, decreased cognitive functioning during exams, and in extreme cases, increased dropout rates, underscoring the need for a revaluation of the examination framework to promote a healthier educational environment that prioritizes holistic development over mere academic results.

The National Education Policy (NEP) 2020 marks a significant shift, aiming to revitalise the system by integrating Indian Knowledge Systems, focusing on skill-based education, and promoting multidisciplinary learning (Praveen & Abhishek, 2024; Amani, 2024). However, challenges persist, including the need to balance traditional knowledge with modern education and address the emphasis on grades over practical skills and holistic development (Amani, 2024; Sharma, 2021).

Review of Literature

The Indian examination system is deeply embedded in the country's educational and social frameworks, significantly shaping and reflecting societal expectations (Dave & Hill, 1974). It contributes to educational inequalities among different social groups, including class, caste, and gender (Sharma, 2023). Academic stress is a prevalent issue among students, particularly in higher education, with common causes including high expectations, academic overload, peer pressure, and lack of support from parents or teachers (Ng, 2016; Mahipal & Shivappa, 2020). For instance, 63.5% of high school students in Kolkata report stress due to academic pressure (Deb et al., 2015), and 35% of private secondary school students experience high levels of stress (Deb & Strodl, 2014). The manifestations of academic stress are diverse, affecting students academically, socially, physically, and emotionally, often leading to negative impacts on academic performance, internet addiction, insufficient sleep, changes in dietary behaviour, and mental health problems (Ng, 2016; Rana et al., 2019). This stress adversely affects mood parameters and increases salivary cortisol levels in medical students (Singh et al., 2012), with parental pressure and socio-economic factors further exacerbating these issues (Deb et al., 2015; Deb & Strodl, 2014). Stress can also lead to depression, anxiety, and other health issues (Deepthi et al., 2024). Despite these challenges, students anticipate improved income and career prospects, although actual outcomes vary based on individual abilities (Dhesi, 2001). The system's competitive nature fosters academic rigour but often leads to substantial pressure, resulting in 32.6% of students showing symptoms of psychiatric issues (Deb et al., 2015). The emphasis on rote learning further exacerbates stress (Singh, 2022), highlighting the need for strategies such as developing support systems, creating a conducive learning environment, and providing counselling services to help students cope with academic pressure (Mahipal & Shivappa, 2020; Singh et al., 2012; Singh, 2022; Deepthi et al., 2024). Additionally, stress management techniques and minor adjustments in daily life can further aid in alleviating academic stress (Deepthi et al., 2024). Research indicates a significant relationship between well-being, stress, and academic performance among students. Positive well-being is associated with better academic achievement, while academic stress can negatively impact both well-being and performance (Preoteasa et al., 2016; Gräbel, 2017). A systematic review found that emotional and psychological well-being positively correlate with academic achievement, with factors like positive emotions, intrinsic motivation, and engagement playing influential roles (Gräbel, 2017). However, the academic environment can contribute to mental health issues, highlighting the need for institutions to foster holistic student well-being (Garces Garces et al., 2024). Studies have shown that well-being tends to decline over the academic semester, particularly during examination periods (Preoteasa et al., 2016).

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(Deb et al., 2015; Deb & Strodl, 2014). Stress can also lead to depression, anxiety, and other health issues (Deepthi et al., 2024). Emotional intelligence and academic stress were found to predict subjective well-being in college students (Julika & Setiyawati, 2019). Despite these challenges, students anticipate improved income and career prospects, although actual outcomes vary based on individual abilities (Dhesi, 2001). The system's competitive nature fosters academic rigour but often leads to substantial pressure, resulting in 32.6% of students showing symptoms of psychiatric issues (Deb et al., 2015). The emphasis on rote learning further exacerbates stress (Singh, 2022), highlighting the need for strategies such as developing support systems, creating a conducive learning environment, and providing counselling services to help students cope with academic pressure (Mahipal & Shivappa, 2020; Singh et al., 2012; Singh, 2022; Deepthi et al., 2024). Additionally, stress management techniques and minor adjustments in daily life can further aid in alleviating academic stress (Deepthi et al., 2024). These findings underscore the importance of implementing multifaceted interventions that address both mental well-being and academic performance in education settings (Garces Garces et al., 2024).

Objectives
1. To understand the impact of the Indian examination system on student stress and identify the primary sources of stress within this system.
2. To analyze the student experiences with stress and the examination system.

The results of the study have been organized objective-wise, which are as follows:

Objective 1. To understand the impact of the Indian examination system on student stress and identify the primary sources of stress within this system.

1.1 Concept of the Indian Examination System
The Indian examination system reflects the dual tensions present in the broader education system. Historically, education systems serve two key purposes. The first, often referred to as the "human development" role, focuses on imparting knowledge, skills, and shared concepts of identity and citizenship. The second purpose is the "sorting" function, where students are assessed and classified based on their academic performance, with high achievers being funnelled into higher education and prestigious occupations (Muraleedharan, 2019). Since India's independence, the education system has leaned more toward this sorting function, prioritizing examination performance over holistic development. There is a stark inequality among students in India: while some excel and achieve global recognition in their fields, a significant portion of students, particularly at the primary level, remain functionally illiterate or innumerate, struggling to reach even second or third-grade proficiency.

A major consequence of this focus on sorting is the prevalence of **rote learning**. The emphasis on examinations and marks has led to a system that encourages students to memorize information rather than develop conceptual understanding. This reliance on memorization means that students cannot often apply their knowledge in practical situations. Vocational training and practical skills are undervalued, further limiting the potential of students in the real world. In addition, there is **unequal respect for subjects** within the Indian education system. The hierarchy of streams places science at the top, pushing students toward high-profile subjects, while areas like languages, communication, and the arts are undervalued. This system forces students to follow career paths based on societal perceptions rather than their interests, stifling creativity and diversity in learning (India Today Webdesk, 2019). Another key issue is the presence of **unskilled teachers**. Teachers are central to the education process, yet they often lack the necessary

training and support to meet the demands of an evolving curriculum. Constant syllabus changes leave many teachers feeling stressed and ill-prepared, which in turn impacts their students. The strained relationship between teachers and students can diminish the quality of education. Moreover, the Indian education system suffers from an **unmindful purpose**. Much of the current educational framework is inherited from colonial systems, which were designed to produce workers rather than independent thinkers. Education is often viewed as a means of economic advancement or preparation for citizenship, but it rarely focuses on helping students develop into their authentic selves. As Dhankar (2015) argues, education in India has been reduced to "teaching for testing," where students are funnelled into rigid categories based on exam results. The individual potential of each student is often overlooked, with assessments focusing on limited, unreliable measures of human capability. The central design challenge in the Indian education system is that it was built for sorting, not for human development. Nearly every structural aspect of the system reflects this. To address this, Indian education policy must shift away from a focus on sorting and selection. The goal should be to embrace a **human development paradigm**, where every citizen is equipped with the foundational knowledge and skills needed for lifelong learning and personal growth in whatever field they choose.

1.2 Primary Source of Stress within the Examination System

The Indian examination system is widely regarded as a major contributor to student stress. This system emphasizes standardized testing, high-stakes exams, and competitive rankings, creating an environment where academic achievement is often seen as the sole indicator of success. As a result, students are subjected to significant pressure, which can lead to increased stress levels. Bernstein et al. (2008) define the sources of stress as any circumstance or event that threatens to disturb the day-to-day functioning of an individual and forces them to make adjustments. These sources of stress, called "stressors," are demands from the internal or external environment that upset the balance, affecting the physical and psychological well-being of an individual, thus requiring immediate action to restore balance (Lazarus & Cohen, 1977). Stressors differ in their degree of severity and duration; what is stressful to one individual may not be a stressor to another. Cherian and Charian (1998) identified the main sources of student stress in categories such as studies, work, career, and future, as well as personal issues like confidence, family, and economic problems.

Students are facing various academic problems in today's highly competitive world, including exam stress, lack of interest in attending classes, and an inability to understand topics. Academic stress is the major cause of stress among adolescents and can result in low self-esteem. Most psychological problems, such as depression and suicide, occur as a result of low self-esteem (Nikitha et al., 2014). Hussain et al. (2008) observed that the magnitude of academic stress among public school students was significantly higher, while government school students demonstrated better adjustment levels. Singh and Upadhyay (2008) noted that first-year students experienced more academic stress compared to third-year students, and female students perceived more stress than their male counterparts.

- **High-Stakes Testing:** The focus on exams like board exams and competitive entrance tests (e.g., NEET, JEE) places immense pressure on students, as their future educational and career prospects largely depend on these results. Failure or underperformance in these exams can lead to significant emotional and mental stress.
- **Parental and Societal Expectations:** In Indian society, academic success is often equated with personal and familial honour. Students face high expectations from parents and society to excel in

exams, which can add to their stress levels. The fear of disappointing their families or falling short of societal benchmarks is a common source of anxiety.

- **Rote Learning and Memorization:** The examination system often prioritizes rote learning over conceptual understanding and creativity. The need to memorize large amounts of information in a short time can overwhelm students, leading to academic burnout.
- **Fear of Failure**: The fear of failing or scoring poorly in exams can have a profound psychological impact on students. This fear is amplified by the high value placed on academic results in determining future opportunities, such as college admissions or career options.
- **Competition and Peer Pressure:** The highly competitive nature of the examination system fosters a sense of rivalry among students. The constant comparison with peers' performance can create feelings of inadequacy, leading to stress, anxiety, and a decline in self-esteem.
- **Inflexibility of the System:** The one-size-fits-all approach of the Indian examination system leaves little room for alternative learning or assessment methods. Students with different learning styles, abilities, or needs may struggle to cope with the rigid format, further contributing to their stress levels.

Wills and Shiffman (1985) classified stressors based on their duration: major life events (acute but short-term, like an illness or school transfer), everyday problems (hassles like long queues or arguments), and enduring life strain (long-term pressures such as academic roles). Pereira (1997) further categorized sources of stress into areas like personal problems, academic issues, financial concerns, and security challenges, all of which can intersect with the stress caused by the Indian examination system.

2. To analyze the student experiences with stress and the examination system.
2.1 Student Experiences with Stress and the Examination System

Students' experiences with stress related to the examination system are multifaceted, deeply impacting their emotional, psychological, and social well-being. Research consistently shows that examinations are a significant source of stress for students across different educational levels. In the Indian context, immense pressure to perform well arises from parental expectations, peer competition, and institutional emphasis on grades. Studies have found that examination stress is experienced idiosyncratically, with various factors contributing to its manifestation, including anticipation of failure, poor competence beliefs, and the value placed on academic credentials (Putwain, 2011). This pressure often leads to significant anxiety, panic attacks, and depressive symptoms, which can result in burnout and disengagement from academic responsibilities. Jain (2014) notes that the stress experienced during examinations can adversely affect academic achievement. Physically, students may experience sleep disturbances, headaches, and changes in appetite, which can detract from their ability to focus and perform well academically. While some students adopt positive coping strategies, such as effective study habits and seeking social support, others may resort to unhealthy mechanisms like procrastination or substance use, which exacerbate their stress. Social isolation frequently occurs as students withdraw from social interactions to concentrate on their studies, leading to feelings of loneliness and further strain on their mental health. Koudela-Hamila et al. (2020) highlight that examination periods are associated with social withdrawal and a desire for solitude. Many students develop negative perceptions of the examination system, viewing it as overly focused on rote learning rather than critical thinking, which diminishes their interest in learning.

The long-term implications of examination-related stress can include persistent mental health issues and career choices that do not align with students' true interests, driven by the stress they experienced during their academic years. While some studies have found no significant association between examination

systems and stress levels (Ali et al., 2019), others have observed multimodal effects of examination periods on students, including psychological changes such as lower calmness, more negative valence, and higher task-related stress, as well as physiological alterations like lower ambulatory systolic blood pressure and changes in cortisol levels (Koudela-Hamila et al., 2020).

Conclusion

The Indian examination system, with its focus on high-stakes assessments, continues to be a significant stressor for students across educational levels. The pressure to perform well, driven by societal expectations and competitive environments, has adverse effects on students' mental, emotional, and physical well-being. Rote learning, fear of failure, and the hierarchical nature of subjects compound these challenges, limiting students' personal and intellectual growth. Although the NEP 2020 aims to introduce reforms by integrating Indian Knowledge Systems and fostering holistic education, the system still heavily emphasizes academic performance. Addressing the root causes of student stress requires a paradigm shift towards skill-based learning, mental health support, and an examination system that values conceptual understanding over rote memorization. These changes are essential for nurturing well-rounded individuals capable of thriving in both academic and real-world contexts.

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