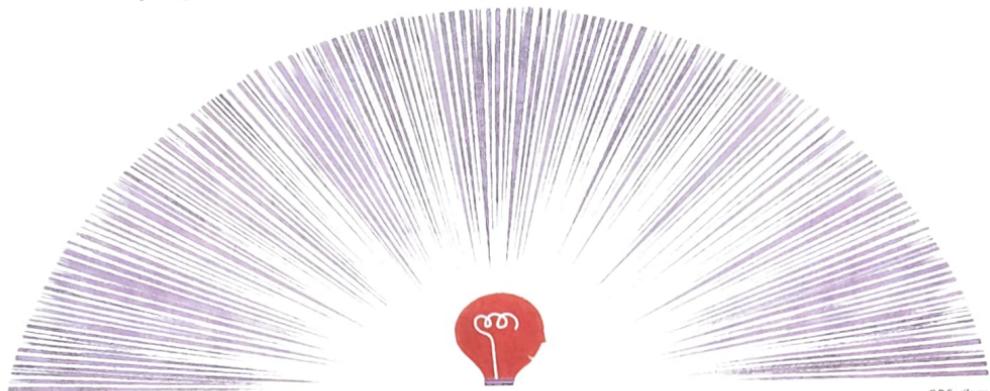




DIS/AGREE

THE BEST OF BOTH SIDES

A fortnightly column, which offers not this-versus-that, but the best of both sides, to inform the debate



C R Sasikumar

CBSE has suggested Open Book Examinations in select classes. Is the education system prepared for a new form of assessment?

Classroom is ready for change

Open minds before open books

By weaving technology into fabric of learning, open book exams promote inclusivity and innovation

Open book exams will only work if students are encouraged to apply their knowledge, not focus on rote learning



RADHEY SHYAM SHARMA

THE OPEN BOOK examination (OBE) system simply means teaching, training and empowering individuals to translate theory into practice. One may also say that it is a system that protects the basic nature of human beings, that is, to remain curious and innovative. OBE stands at the frontier of India's educational evolution, signalling a return to our roots of experiential learning, as cultivated by ancient sages and encapsulated within our revered texts. This method, designed to solve real-world problems through discussion, debate, and critical thinking, diverges sharply from the conformity-over-creativity model introduced during colonial times.

Despite owing much to this traditional system for producing leaders across sectors, the prerequisite for embracing OBE lies in recognising the need for an educational transformation propelled by globalisation and technological advancements. The steps to achieve this involve marrying ancient wisdom with modern pedagogical practices, thereby preparing

the Indian youth for a global leadership roles. A major precaution in this endeavour is to ensure that the integration of OBE does not disregard the valuable aspects of the traditional system. Success criteria for this shift would be a balanced educational ecosystem that nurtures curiosity, critical thinking, and problem-solving skills, with flexibility for mid-course corrections based on evolving educational and global needs.

The introduction of OBE marks a significant departure from the conventional emphasis on rote memorisation... In the shadow of emerging artificial intelligence (AI), machine learning, and deep learning technologies, there is a threat of 'monorisation of masses'.

India, celebrated as the youngest country globally, stands at a critical juncture. The demographic dividend, often touted as an asset, hinges on the realisation of its youth's potential. Students who are unable to focus due to the background of a tsunami of distraction due to overuse and abuse of mobile phones and similar gadgets need protection and help to grow and flourish. OBE is the key to unlocking this potential, fostering a generation of thought leaders — 'thoughtpreneurs' — capable of navigating the complexities of the modern world.

This paradigm shift is essential in an era where traditional academic achievements, signified by marks, are increasingly disconnected from the prerequisites of higher education and the professional world, as evidenced by initiatives like the Common University Entrance Test.

OBE promises an educational ethos where learning transcends memorisation limitations. In fact, the transition began over the past few years when the proportion of competency-based, analytical and applied questions gradually increased during the examinations. The success of this approach will be mirrored in the educational environment akin to ancient gurukuls, with continuous evaluations to incorporate innovative teaching methods.

The journey towards implementing OBE may further prepare the ground to ensure a solid foundation from primary levels. This preparation entails developing critical thinking, argument-formation skills, and a propensity for asking original, out-of-the-box questions. It is a journey from information to knowledge and from knowledge to wisdom, safeguarding our cognitive resources from the distractions of information overload. OBE is not merely an examination reform; it is a step towards developing a new psychological domain where excellence becomes common.

Implementing OBE is a collective endeavour, necessitating engagement from educators, policymakers, parents, and students. The prerequisite for this collective journey is the recognition of the need for collaborative effort to overhaul teaching methodologies, assessment strategies, and educational infrastructure supported by continuous training. However, clear communication and support are needed to mitigate resistance to meeting educational aspirations, with channels for ongoing dialogue to refine the OBE system as needed.

OBE's flexibility offers a lifeline to students with diverse learning preferences and abilities. It acknowledges and celebrates the myriad ways individuals absorb and process information, from auditory learners to visual thinkers. This inclusivity extends to students of humankind, who often find their subjects undervalued in traditional examination systems. In fact, students with different learning abilities will also find their equal place in the classroom and examination with pride as they can express their specific dominant ability rather than just replicating information based on memory.

The introduction of OBE is a departure from tradition, transforming educators into facilitators of inquiry and champions of a lifelong learning ethos. By weaving technology into the fabric of learning, promoting a culture of inclusivity and prioritising the adaptability of students and educators alike, OBE promises a revolution in education that prepares students not just for the challenges of today but for the opportunities of tomorrow. As we embrace this journey, OBE's promise is clear: To cultivate a generation ready to lead with confidence, creativity, and a deep sense of social responsibility — a true testament to the enduring spirit of innovation and excellence in Indian education and the global market.

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AMIT KAUSHIK

RECENT MEDIA REPORTS suggested that CBSE was considering the introduction of open book examinations (OBE) in select schools on a pilot basis, although it was later clarified that only a study on their feasibility was under consideration. Should the study recommend their introduction, OBEs would initially be introduced in grades IX and XII, and not as part of the board examinations.

As a form of assessment, OBEs can be useful tools to determine the progress made by an individual learner. The New Education Policy 2020 (NEP) recommended a shift to a more inquiry-based, competency-based system of learning and assessment. OBEs require students to be able to think, analyse, and apply acquired knowledge to given situations, thus allowing evaluators to assess their ability to utilise the crucial 21st century skills of learning, creativity, collaboration, and communication that are increasingly valued all over the world.

Assessments are primarily of three types — classroom-based, that enable a teacher to assess the progress made by her students and take corrective action; diagnostic, usually standardised, for instance, the National Achievement Survey run by NCERT; that allow policy makers and stakeholders to understand the health of their education system; and, external, which are competitive and used to determine achievement against specified criteria, or to identify those appropriate for higher studies, jobs, etc. While the first two are low stakes assessments, the third is intrinsically high stakes. Yet, all three are equally important and have their place in an education system.

In India, board examinations at grades X and XII have become annual anxiety-inducing, high-stakes exercises, with unsuccessful students often harming themselves. The run-up to the board examinations is nearly as bad, with students being pressured to perform from grade IX onwards. Anything that boards can do to reduce the stress of students, parents, and teachers is a welcome step, and the open book format should be seen in this light.

It is worth recalling that CBSE had introduced OBEs in 2013-14, but they were eventually withdrawn based on feedback from parents and teachers. A major reason for discontinuing them was the lack of preparation within the system. Reintroducing OBEs will require more than just a change to the form of examination. Since such assessments require students to be able to analyse and apply knowledge, teaching in the classroom will also need to

privilege independent thinking and creativity, the business-as-usual form of rote learning will no longer be appropriate. Nor will the kinds of questions presently set in school examinations — exam setters will have to learn how to craft original and imaginative questions that challenge students to think and apply learning. And finally, teachers will need to be trained to evaluate OBE submissions in a fair and consistent manner, which, in turn, implies empowering them and returning to them some of the academic autonomy that has been lost over the last several years.

The NEP provides a broad policy direction within which several steps need to be taken to improve school education and move away from rote learning. Several initiatives will be needed to support these reforms, at both central and state levels, and some changes are already becoming visible. For instance, Delhi became the first state in the country to deliver a fully competency-based board examination for grades X and XII in 2023, through the newly established Delhi Board of School Education. The reintroduction of OBEs would be in keeping with the policy intention of NEP.

Any plans to reintroduce this format of assessment should take into account the learning from the last short-lived attempt to do so, as well as the distortions that crept into the so-called Continuous Comprehensive Evaluation (CCE) that became overly prescriptive. An ideal solution would be for the board to introduce broad guidelines for such assessments, leaving the autonomy to administer them as they consider appropriate in the context of their individual schools and students.

As any class teacher will tell you, students in a classroom are usually at varying levels of ability; a small portion will be one to two grade levels ahead, a similar proportion will be one or two grade levels behind, while the bulk will be more or less at grade level. An assessment, whatever its form, is merely a tool to provide information about where a learner is on their individual path of learning.

As such, a student's development should be judged not only by the outcome of a single assessment such as an OBE, but by putting together a variety of progress indicators.

One reason India performed poorly the only time it participated in the OECD's Programme for International Student Assessment (PISA) was because of our singularly rote-focused assessments — while our students were no less capable, those who participated in PISA had no idea of how to answer application-based questions. Assessments like OBEs could help build the capacities of students and teachers to look at education differently, developing their skills of thinking and questioning, and placing them on par with other international students.

The writer is a former director in the erstwhile Ministry of HRD, and CEO of the Australian Council for Educational Research (ACER). ACER is the global manager for PISA 2025

'USTM Journal of International Studies' launched

SHILLONG, MAR 13: The 'USTM Journal of International Studies' was launched yesterday by Prof. Gauri Dutt Sharma, Vice Chancellor, University of Science and Technology Meghalaya and President, Association of Indian Universities at 9th Mile, Khanapara, in Ri-Bhoi district.

of the journal will be on the integration of scholarship and practice with equal emphasis on the publication of articles of serving and retired diplomats providing practitioners' perspectives and insights, and also articles and research papers by scholars with a focus on empirical stud-



Prof G.D. Sharma VC USTM launching the 'USTM Journal of International Studies'.

The 'USTM Journal of International Studies' (UJIS) is a peer-reviewed online journal of the Centre for Advanced International Studies at USTM — that seeks to advance the frontiers of research and scholarship in International Relations and Area Studies. It will provide an open-access platform for academics, scholars and practitioners in the field of International Relations, Diplomacy, and Area Studies.

Two eminent members of the Editorial Board of this journal, namely Prof. Zbigniew Wojnowski, Associate Professor, University of Oxford and Prof. Catriona Kelly, Senior Research Fellow, Trinity College, University of Cambridge attended the event online. Prof Amitabh Mattoo, Dean, School of International Studies, Jawaharlal Nehru University and Former Member of the National Security Advisory Board of India attended the event as the Guest of Honour.

In his address, Prof. Gauri Dutt Sharma, Hon'ble Vice Chancellor, USTM thanked the Prof. Zbigniew Wojnowski and Prof. Catriona Kelly for accepting to be members of the editorial board of the journal. Prof. Sharma said that the focus

ies as well as on papers that make theoretical and conceptual advancements in the field. Prof. Sharma thanked Dr Rejaul Karim Laskar, Director of the Centre for Advanced International Studies, USTM and the Editor-in-Chief of USTM Journal of International Studies for his hard work and dedication in bringing out the journal.

Prof Amitabh Mattoo, Dean, School of International Studies, Jawaharlal Nehru University and Former Member of the National Security Advisory Board of India congratulated the journal team for being able to bring in some of the world's most renowned scholars in the field of international and area studies.

Prof. Zbigniew Wojnowski in his address said that the journal is a great endeavour and is an honour for him to be part of the editorial board of this journal. He said he looks forward to working together with Dr Laskar and his journal team over the coming months and years.

Prof. Catriona Kelly in his address said that she is very glad to work with Dr Laskar, Prof. Zbigniew Wojnowski and other members of the editorial board. She said "It is a real coup" for Meghalaya to have a project like this.



BIJU

DHARMAPALAN

Scientists play key role in a nation's progress

In times of crisis, society instinctively turns its gaze towards the scientific community, seeking solace and solutions amid turmoil

The public always looks at the scientific community whenever they are in dire straits. Farmers seek help from agriculture scientists when serious pests affect their crops, or there is a drastic decline in productivity. Similarly, the public looks to medical scientists for help whenever a pathogen attacks humans. During the COVID-19 pandemic, we have seen how, every day, the ordinary person eagerly looked at research work from various labs. Covid-19 reinstated the common man's confidence in scientists. The current generation that has overcome the COVID-19 catastrophe is deeply indebted to scientists for their lives.



them. Whenever humanity is in disarray, scientists bring glee and a ray of hope through their discoveries.

In many parts of the world, scientists also create confusion because of conflicts of interest and interference from policymakers. It's an open secret that most of the food products available in our market are adulterated, and in some cases, they contain toxic substances. Even scientists working in industries will secretly admit it, but they are not allowed to publish the results or speak publicly. Most of the scientific work related to pesticides, drugs etc is linked with industry, and none of the industries will support a genuine scientist. Industries may influence the design of research studies to ensure outcomes align with their objectives.

There is always a conflict between proponents of mod-

ern medicine and traditional systems of medicine. Many scientists blatantly state that Ayurvedic or Homeopathic drugs have side effects, forgetting the fact that all modern medicines have severe side effects. Scientists should strive to be impartial in pursuing knowledge and understanding of the natural world. This dedication to objectivity is fundamental to the scientific method, which relies on systematic observation, experimentation, and analysis to uncover truths about the universe. However, scientists, like all humans, are susceptible to personal beliefs and biases that may subtly influence their work.

These biases can affect everything from the questions scientists choose to investigate to the interpretation of their findings. Furthermore, external factors such as funding sources, societal pressures, and political climates can also influence scientific research. Research funding, in particular, plays a significant role in shaping the scientific agenda, as scientists often rely on grants from government agencies, private foundations, or industry sponsors

to support their work. The priorities of these funding sources may align with particular agendas or interests, potentially influencing the direction and focus of research. Societal pressures and political influence can also distort scientific results. Despite these challenges, the scientific community is committed to upholding certain principles of objectivity, transparency, and peer review to ensure the integrity of scientific research.

While scientists may not always be entirely free from bias, these principles help to minimise the impact of personal beliefs and external influences on the scientific process. The scientific community can maintain public trust and credibility by upholding these standards. Moreover, scientists should proactively engage with societal concerns, prioritising research that tackles urgent issues like public health, and social inequality. If scientists lose public trust, society will be in disarray.

(The writer is an adjunct faculty at the National Institute of Advanced Studies; views are personal)

Dying young

MONIDEEPA SAHU

Year after year, stressed students continue to commit suicide in India. In recent days, a 24-year-old M Tech student from IIT Delhi was found hanging in his hostel room. An IIT student fell to death from his hostel roof in Rourkela, Odisha. A 19-year-old student at MAHE University in Karnataka jumped to death from a building after going through the exam question paper. A 16-year-old JEE aspirant hanged himself in Kota, the third case from the coaching hub this year.

West Bengal has its share of student suicides. In November 2023, a 20-year-old NEET aspirant from Birbhum hanged himself in Kota. In June last year, the Calcutta High Court constituted a Special Investigation Team to probe the unnatural death of an IIT Kharagpur student.

Such news doesn't even shock us any more. It's easy to blame the SYSTEM and demand some miraculous solution to this alarming issue. But we too are a part of this destructive 'system' as teachers, parents, government officials and policy makers, and also as unconcerned spectators.

The young have always successfully overcome pressures and obstacles. Wars, natural disasters, revolutions, and epidemics—young people have triumphed over upheavals through the ages. Very few have committed suicide. They are resilient and have repeatedly taken the lead to improve the world we live in. As responsible members of society, each of us needs to be aware of the threats and treat vulnerable youngsters with sensitivity. We mustn't allow precious young lives to be destroyed by suicide.

Academic pressure alone doesn't cause student suicides. Self-destructive tendencies are fuelled by a toxic cocktail of unrealistic parental aspirations, peer pressure to 'fit in,' and concerns unrelated to academics. An otherwise balanced youngster, for example, may be already depressed by the death of a parent, financial difficulties, or taunting by peers for being unfashionable and shy.

Complex reasons drive young people to suicide. Parents are



behind some of these. It's important for parents to guide and encourage children to do their best. But 'tiger' parents with unrealistic expectations who pressure kids to win every prize, always stand first in class, and outdo the neighbour's children in every way can only distress a child. Adverse comparisons with others demotivate children. That's not all. Many Indian parents add to their children's stress by pushing them to excel in sports and hobby classes. Hobbies are meant to be fun. But these should not be forced on children.

Parents also tend to stifle their children under their own unfulfilled ambitions. A friend now in his forties shared how his father mercilessly beat him as a boy so he would become a high court judge like his uncle. With his inner positivity, he became a competent lawyer, with lifelong regrets because his father was dead against his joining the Army. A weaker-spirited youngster may end his life under such pressure.

The craze for unconventional new-age careers can also cause misery. Only a few can become rich and famous as social media influencers, models, or fashion designers. Youngsters who blunder into such professions may end up paralysed by the fear of failure. Teachers and parents need to impress upon youngsters that behind the perceived glamour of any profession is the foundation of dedication and

hard work. There is no shortcut to lifelong success. To help youngsters cope better, parents and elders can build up a healthy understanding with the young, offering them emotional support when they need it.

Peer pressure can pull young people down by making every relationship needlessly competitive. The craze for the latest fashions, phones and gadgets, the compulsion to grab social media attention, party and seek girlfriends or boyfriends, can distract and destabilise youngsters.

Poverty and social isolation appear to have led to the recent suicide of a 17-year-old student at a government IIT in Cuttack. The boy came from a village to a city of strangers. He shared a room with a classmate and worked in a catering service to pay for his studies. As responsible citizens, we should be sensitive towards the struggling youngsters in our midst.

Government policymakers and educational institutions need to ensure our children learn how to adapt and cope. Mental health public awareness campaigns, mental health screenings as part of general health checkups for students, ensuring that educational institutions have trained counsellors, and sensitising teachers are some important steps.

According to experts, suicide is usually a planned decision and not an impulsive act. A suicidal person often shows signs of sudden behav-

Pan India Mental Health Rehabilitation Helpline 'KIRAN' 24x7 Toll-Free (1800-599-0013). (This helpline offers 1st stage advice and counselling in 13 languages) by Union Minister for Social Justice and Empowerment. iCall by TISS: 022-25521111 (Monday to Saturday, 8 AM to 10 PM)

Bengaluru: VISHWAS (+91 80 41154948 +91 6364320707)
Bhubaneswar: Manam Foundation (+91 776377140 6371978394)

our changes well beforehand. Alert teachers, parents and friends can watch out for these signs and try to help the suicidal person.

A suicidal person usually shuts out others and withdraws into isolation. Uncharacteristically poor performance and disinterest in studies, uncontrolled anger outbursts, mood swings and talking about death and dying are other early warning signs.

They may suddenly start or increase their use of alcohol and drugs. They may drive recklessly and show other uncharacteristically risky behaviours.

We all need to understand that suicide can be prevented. Trained counsellors and psychologists can intervene most effectively if suspected suicidal people are brought to them early. It is our duty as responsible citizens to be kind and caring to everyone in our social circle. Spending just a little time and attention on vulnerable youngsters around us might make a difference between life and death.

The writer is a senior independent Journalist and author, based in Bhubaneswar.

India ranks 134 out of 193 in UNDP's '22 HDI, a notch higher than in '21

New Delhi: India ranked at 134 on a list of 193 countries in 2022 as per the latest Human Development Index, a notch higher than 135 out of 192 countries in 2021, attributed mainly to improvement across all HDI indicators over the previous year – increase in life expectancy from 67.2 to 67.7 years, expected years of schooling going up to 12.6 from 12 and per capita gross national income increasing from \$6,542 to \$6,951, among others, **reports Ambika Pandit.**

According to UNDP's Human Development Report 2023-24, India showed progress in reducing gender inequality, ranking 108 out of 166 countries in Gender Inequality

NORDIC TOPPERS

➤ With HDI value of 0.644, **India in '22 figures among 'medium human development' countries (134/193).** Its HDI value & rank in '21 was 0.633 (135/192)

➤ **Top 3 Countries:** Switzerland: 0.967; Norway: 0.966; Iceland: 0.959

➤ **Pak (164) & Af (182)** figure in 'low human development' category; **China (75)** and **Sri Lanka (78)** in high category

ty Index (GII), as compared with 122 out of 170 nations in 2021. With a GII value of 0.437 in 2022, India fared better than the global average of 0.462 and South Asian average of 0.478.

► **Related report, P 28**

India's Gross National Income per capita up 287%: UNDP official

► Continued from P 1

GII measures gender inequalities in three key dimensions — reproductive health, empowerment, and labour market.

On GII, the report states that India's performance in reproductive health is better than other countries in medium human development group or South Asia. India's adolescent birth rate in 2022 was 16.3 (births per 1,000 women aged 15-19), a marginal improvement from 17.1 in 2021. However, India showed one of the largest gender gaps in labour force participation rate— a 47.8% difference between women (28.3%) and men (76.1%).

However, on Gender Development Index (GDI), India continued to figure among Group 5 countries that have ranked low on eradicating the gap. GDI measures gender gaps on three dimensions — health that is measured by life expectancy at birth; schooling years for adults; and living standards. While life expectancy at birth for females was 69.4 years and that for males was 66.3 years in 2022, but when it came to mean years

for schooling, it was 5.5 for females and 7.6 for males. Gross National Income (GNI) per capita for females stood at \$2,958 and for males at \$10,696.

"India has shown remarkable progress in human development over the years. Since 1990, life expectancy at birth has risen by 9.1 years; expected years of schooling have increased by 4.6 years, and mean years of schooling have grown by 3.8 years. India's GNI per capita has grown by approximately 287%," said Caitlin Wiesen, Resident Representative at UNDP India on data on HDI. The report showed that between 1990 and 2022, India saw its HDI value increase by 48.4% (from 0.434 to 0.644).

India's loss in HDI due to inequality was measured at 31.1%. South Asia's loss in HDI due to inequality was among the highest in the world (after sub-Saharan Africa), followed by the Pacific. Nepal at 146 and Bhutan at 125 share space with India in 'medium human development' category. Pakistan (164) and Afghanistan (182) figure in low human development category. China at 75 and Sri Lanka at 78 figure in the 'high human development' category.

Open to granting autonomous status to more universities: UGC chairman

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New Delhi: University Grants Commission has said it is anticipating more universities into graded autonomy system that will give them different degrees of freedom in academic and administrative decision-making.

Speaking to **TOI**, UGC chairman **Mamidala Jagadesh Kumar** explained why graded autonomy system is effective, saying this enables universities to restructure existing courses and introduce new ones.

Last week, UGC had **granted autonomy to eight central universities** in India, including Delhi University.

“Universities, inherently autonomous in their establishment regardless of type, can restructure existing courses and introduce new ones aligned with local, national, and international demands,” Kumar said.

On how graded autonomy is provided, he said, “Universities can apply to UGC twice a year,” adding that the commission then reviews applications and publishes categorisation decisions within 30 days.

In 2018, UGC had introduced norms for granting graded autonomy to universities. As per that, universities are classified into Category I, II, and III based on pre-

defined parameters.

“Goal for autonomous universities is ensuring equal access for all students, irrespective of their background and socioeconomic status. This commitment to inclusivity aligns with the broader vision of fostering a diverse and dynamic learning environment,” the chairman said.



“These institutions should actively work towards creating a supportive atmosphere that encourages innovation, research, and overall academic growth. Success of graded autonomy model hinges on universities embracing these principles and continually striving for educational excel-

lence,” Kumar added.

Kumar said UGC believes that autonomous universities will play a pivotal role in shaping future of Indian education in multifaceted ways. Endowed with freedom to design curricula and experiment with teaching methods, these universities can pioneer and follow best practices, fostering innovative and student-centric learning.

Over 60 HEIs were granted autonomous status in 2018. Some of them are reputed centers of learning such as JNU, AMU and BHU. “Success of autonomous universities serve as inspiration, motivating other higher educational institutions to adopt similar practices,” he added.