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1. Why was the no-detention policy rolled back?

Introduction

WHAT IT MEANS FOR STUDENTS



For representational purpose

- Students of Classes V and VIII who will score less than 33% overall marks will undergo detention process
- Detained students shall be given additional instructions and granted a chance for re-examination within two months from the date of declaration of the result
- States were to decide whether to follow the amended rule from this session or next

The Union government amended the Rules of the Right to Education Act, 2009 in December 2024 to allow schools to detain students in Classes 5 and 8 if they are unable to meet the promotion criteria after a year-end examination. Students will be given a second chance re-examination after two months of extra teaching. This rollback of the RTE Act's vision of a no-detention policy was initially brought through an amendment of the law in 2019, following which 18 States and UTs have reinstated the option to detain students; the 2024 amendment now extends the option to Central government-run schools too.

What was the rationale behind the original no-detention policy?

When the RTE Act was passed in 2009, it included Section 16, which stipulated that “No child admitted in a school shall be held back in any class or expelled from school till the completion of elementary education [Classes 1 to 8]”. “The spirit of a no-detention policy was to ensure that children can learn without unnecessary pressure. Detention is demoralising to children. There was also an understanding that a single final year-end examination is not the best way to assess learning and decide on their progress,” said Vimala Ramachandran, a former professor at the National Institute of Educational Planning and Administration. “But it was implemented very shoddily. No detention became no testing, and in many schools, no teaching. It was a slippery slope.”

She noted that government schools in many States simply stopped testing in any form until Class 5, automatically promoting children without bothering to find out if they had acquired grade-specific skills and knowledge. Monitoring systems focussed on inputs or maybe indicators, rarely on outcomes.

Efforts to introduce a Continuous and Comprehensive Evaluation (CCE) programme instead, in coordination with UNICEF, were largely stymied by a lack of resources and training, and teacher apathy. In many schools, NCERT’s CCE forms were simply filled en masse by teachers without an assessment of individual children’s skills. A number of boards abandoned the model of multiple formative and summative assessments, retreating to the familiarity of a final year-end examination.

Why has it been rolled back?

Surveys conducted by both government and private entities in recent years have documented an alarming learning gap in India’s schools.

The Annual Status of Education Report (ASER), a respected survey spearheaded by the NGO Pratham, found that only 42.8% of Class 5 students could read a Class 2-level text in 2022, a fall from 50.5% in 2018. Only 25.6% of them could do basic arithmetic problems in 2022, a slight drop from 27.9% in 2018.

Even more worryingly, ASER 2023 tested foundational skills in youth aged 14 to 18 years and found that a quarter of them still cannot read a Class 2 level text fluently in their regional language. More than half struggle with division (3-digit by 1-digit) problems, a skill taught in Class 3 and 4.

The Department of School Education’s National Achievement Survey 2021 also showed clear declines as students moved up the school ladder. Out of a maximum 500, Class 3 students scored an average of 323 in language and 306 in Mathematics. By Class 5, the scores dropped to 309 and 284 respectively, and to 302 and 255 by Class 8.

A government analysis of Classes 10 and 12 results across 59 State and national boards in 2023 showed that more than 65 lakh students had failed to clear their examinations, with a failure rate ranging from 12% in national boards to 18% in State boards.

“In the name of promoting all students in the younger classes, we are adversely affecting them in later life,” said Joseph Emmanuel, who was academic director of the Central Board of

Secondary Examination (CBSE) till a few months ago, when he took charge of the Council for the Indian School Certificate Examinations (CISCE). "There is a clear learning gap that was exacerbated by the COVID disruptions. This [rollback of the no-detention policy] is a good example of evidence-based decision making."

Dr. Ramachandran said the amendment represents a regression, and instead called for better mechanisms to assess children's learning and hold teachers accountable.

What is the way forward?

"Timely remedial action is needed at every stage. There must be regular assessment done at the school level in every class, not at the board level. Who is the best judge of a child's learning? It is their own teachers. We must trust teachers and equip them," said Dr. Emmanuel.

He noted that the Rules require the class teacher to "provide specialised inputs after identifying the learning gaps at various stages of assessment" and stipulate that the school Head personally monitor the progress of the children who are held back. "More accountability is being brought in," he said.

Dr. Ramachandran said the focus of accountability must change. "Instead of detaining and punishing the child for not doing well, we need a way to hold the teacher responsible and accountable," she said. Too many teachers only focus on the children in the front rows of their classroom, often discriminating against those from lower socio-economic backgrounds who may struggle more and are more likely to be detained. "Rigorous teacher appraisal is needed to ensure inclusive teaching. There must be some consequences for the teacher, not just the student, as well as incentives to ensure this," she urged.

Relevance: GS Prelims & Mains Paper III; Economics

Source: The Hindu

2. Major Defence Deals Near Finalization with France

Introduction

India and France are on the verge of finalizing two significant defence agreements, collectively valued at over \$10 billion. The deals coincide with Prime Minister Narendra Modi's anticipated visit to Paris in February for the Artificial Intelligence Action Summit hosted by French President Emmanuel Macron.

Key Defence Agreements

1. Rafale-M Fighter Jets

- Purchase of 26 Rafale-M jets for the Indian Navy.
- Includes 22 single-seater jets and four twin-seater trainers (not carrier-compatible).
- Aims to address a gap until India's indigenous twin-engine deck-based fighter is operational.

2. Scorpene Submarines

- Acquisition of three additional Scorpene-class conventional submarines.
- Part of an ongoing collaboration between Mazagon Dock Shipbuilders Limited and France's Naval Group.

Approval and Timeline

- Both deals are in advanced stages and await approval from the Cabinet Committee on Security (CCS).
- Final approval and signing are expected in the coming weeks.
- The Rafale-M deal, being a government-to-government agreement, is anticipated to progress swiftly post-approval.

Strategic Importance

1. Rafale-M Jets

○ Enhance operational capabilities for India's aircraft carriers: INS Vikramaditya and INS Vikrant.

○ Support naval operations until the indigenous fighter is ready for service.

2. Scorpene Submarines

○ Address the Navy's ageing fleet and delays in the procurement of advanced submarines under Project-75I.

○ Critical for maintaining underwater capabilities. The first of three new Scorpenes is expected by 2031.

Additional Developments

- The last Scorpene from the previous contract, Vagsheer, will be commissioned on January 15 in Mumbai, in the presence of PM Modi.
- The Rafale and Scorpene procurements were approved in principle by the Defence Acquisition Council in July 2023.

AI Summit Invitation

PM Modi has been invited to the Artificial Intelligence Action Summit in Paris on February 10-11, focusing on:

1. Public interest AI.
2. Future of Work.
3. Innovation and Culture.
4. Trust in AI.
5. Global Governance of AI.

India and France are aligning strategic defence needs with technological advancements as part of their growing bilateral partnership.

Relevance: GS Prelims & Mains Paper II; Bilateral Relations

Source: Indian Express

3. Several workers stuck in a coal mine in Assam: What is 'rat-hole' mining?

Introduction

Several workers have been trapped for more than 12 hours in a coal "rat-hole" mine after it was flooded with water on January 6 morning in Dima Hasao district of Assam.

The rescue operations have been taking place at a slow pace, with two motor pumps working to remove water flooded into the pit of the mine, reported to be a few hundred feet deep.

PEOPLE TRAPPED IN ASSAM COAL MINE



Assam's Chief Minister Himanta Biswa Sarma said the National Disaster Relief Force and the State Disaster Relief Force are on their way to the site to aid in rescue efforts. He also said the Army's assistance has also been requested.

What is 'rat-hole' mining?

Rat-hole mining is a method of extracting coal from narrow, horizontal seams, prevalent in Meghalaya. The term "rat hole" refers to the narrow pits dug into the ground, typically just large enough for one person to descend and extract coal.

Once the pits are dug, miners descend using ropes or bamboo ladders to reach the coal seams. The coal is then manually extracted using primitive tools such as pickaxes, shovels, and baskets.

OP Singh, professor of environmental studies at North Eastern Hill University (NEHU) in Shillong, told The Indian Express in 2018 that rat-hole mining is broadly of two types. "In the side-cutting procedure, narrow tunnels are dug on the hill slopes and workers go inside until they find the coal seam. The coal seam in the hills of Meghalaya is very thin, less than 2 m in most cases," he said.

In the other type of rat-hole mining, called box-cutting, a rectangular opening is made, varying from 10 to 100 sqm, and through that a vertical pit is dug, 100 to 400 feet deep. Once the coal seam is found, rat-hole-sized tunnels are dug horizontally through which workers can extract the coal.

What are the environmental and safety concerns?

Rat-hole mining poses significant safety and environmental hazards. The mines are typically unregulated, lacking safety measures such as proper ventilation, structural support, or safety

gear for the workers. Additionally, the mining process can cause land degradation, deforestation, and water pollution.

This method of mining has faced severe criticism due to its hazardous working conditions, environmental damage, and numerous accidents leading to injuries and fatalities. Despite attempts by authorities to regulate or ban such practices, they often persist due to economic factors and the absence of viable alternative livelihoods for the local population.

When was it banned, and why?

The National Green Tribunal (NGT) banned the practice in 2014, and retained the ban in 2015. The NGT observed, "It is also informed that there are umpteen number of cases where by virtue of rat-hole mining, during the rainy season, water flooded into the mining areas resulting in death of many... individuals including employees/workers."

The order was in connection with Meghalaya, where this remained a prevalent procedure for coal mining. The state government then appealed the order in the Supreme Court.

Relevance: GS Prelims; Disaster Management

Source: Indian Express