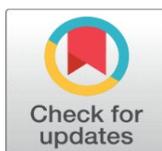


# DEMOCRATIC APPROACH IN ASSESSMENT: A PARADIGM SHIFT IN EXAMINATION REFORM

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## ABSTRACT

The assessment system is one of the most important as well as debatable components of our education system. In higher education of India, teaching-learning process is guided by the assessment rather than assessment for teaching-learning. The age old assessment system is also criticized for its rigid and non-democratic nature. This is appropriate for defining our traditional examination system. But the 21st century is very significant in context of examination reforms at all the levels of education. The revolutionary changes in assessment of students introduced many innovative practices. This article analyses the trend of recent examination reforms and conceptualized it as a paradigm shift in assessment - 'a democratic approach in assessment of students' progress'. It is democratic in approach, because it ensures the spirit of democracy in assessment based on core democratic values. According National Education Policy-2020, Higher education Institutes (HEIs) shall also move away from high-stakes examinations towards more continuous and comprehensive evaluation. The article redefines the term 'assessment' under the democratic approach and explores the democratic values of assessment. This article provides argument in support of democratic approach in assessment for academic excellence.

**Keywords:** Assessment, Examination Reform, Democratic Approach in Assessment, Democratic values of Assessment

## 1. INTRODUCTION

Assessment is the omnipresent affair in human life. Every time we are assessing someone or something and being assessed by others. Rowntree (2003) expressed it as, 'One thing is certain. Assessment will remain with us from the cradle to beyond the grave.' (p. 1). Assessment is indispensable part of the educational process as some form of it is essential to determine the effectiveness of teaching and learning. Brain Cox (1971) said: "To create an education system without examinations is to fail to prepare children and students for the realities of adult life." (as cited in Rowntree, 2003, p. 28). This statement advocates the transaction of assessment skills among students through assessment process. The quality of assessment system directly influences the standard of an educational system. Perhaps this philosophy guides NAAC in giving weightage to 'Evaluation Process and Reforms' adopted by educational institutions under second criteria of its assessment methodology for the institutions.

Assessment processes influence the level of educational achievements, cultures of teaching and learning, teachers' professional image, and motivations of the learners (Libman, 2010). The spirit and style of student assessment defines the 'de facto' curriculum (Rowntree, 2003, p. 1). Norton (2004) opined that one of the most powerful roles of assessment is its effect on what and how student learn. Students' approach to learning is the function of the forms of assessment, and every act of assessment gives a message to students about what and how they should learn (Bound, 2003, p. 37).

## **2. THE AUTOCRACY IN ASSESSMENT SYSTEM**

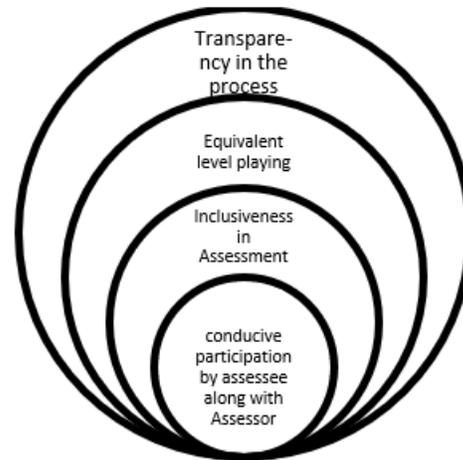
Assessment has been the most debatable issue among all the educational process. The traditional assessment system is dominated by examinations and hence commonly termed as examination system. Knight (2003, p. 11) has evaluated prevailing assessment system as tiresome and harmful necessity. The traditional assessment system is also criticized for its non-democratic elements, which deviate the whole education system from the real goals. The educational institutions and the society recognized assessment results as the sole parameter of quality and a matter of pride. Dave and Hill (1974) describe it in context of India as, 'The examinations thus form the basis of a kind of educational caste system, superimposed on the traditional caste system of the country' (as cited in Rowntree, 2003, p. 20).

Contemporary assessment system is focused on assessment of learning rather than assessment for learning. It has limited scope and leads teaching for assessment. There is need for fundamental change in assessment system (Birenbaum et al., 2006). Differences in learner's characteristics imply that over-reliance on one form of assessment is inconvenient for students, who are able to display their knowledge, skills or abilities more effectively through other methods (Leder et al., 1999; as cited in Watt, 2005). Lauwerys & Scanlon (1969) foresee the examinations as a danger for education system as they are becoming end-in-themselves. Hence there is a mad race for securing maximum marks.

The major autocratic elements of assessment system can be concluded as: passive participation of students and teachers, subjectivity in assessment, lack of transparency in assessment, rigidity, one-exam-fits-all principle, assessment guided teaching-learning process, assessment only for quality control, and assessment as an educational cast system. These elements not only make the system non-democratic but are also among the root causes of the failure of traditional assessment system. Given these weaknesses the existing assessment system should be defined as an obedient assistant of education has become the bad master of education.

## **3. CONCEPT OF DEMOCRATIC APPROACH IN ASSESSMENT**

The concept of democracy has its origin in ancient Greek. The basic meaning of democracy as a form of governance rests on its etymology as rule by the people. Jame-Erik & Svante (2003, p. 2) have defined democracy as a political regime where the will of the people ex ante becomes the law of the country (legal order) ex post. Explaining the democracy Dewey (1968, p. 87) accepts broadness of shared concerns and liberation of individual diversity as its characteristics, while Newman (2012, p. 9) highlights the status of citizen in democracy as both 'author' and 'addressee' of law. The whole world is shifting towards the democracy. Democracy is also adopted by non-political institutions of the society and the democratic values are assumed as the best option for nearly all the social institutions. Experts have clearly acknowledged that democracy is a broad conception than a form of government (Dewey, 1968; Jame-Erik & Svante, 2003). According to Dewey (1968, p. 87), it [democracy] is primarily a mode of associated living, of conjoint communicated experience. Interpreting the concept of democracy scholars also perceived it as a way of life, philosophy of life, a code of behaviour, way of responding, state of mind and an attitude. The term democracy used here not as a form of government, but as a particular system of action or behaviour. Education is one of the most important social institutions considered as a powerful tool for democracy. Education has seen many paradigm shifts; the most important is the democracy in educational process. Now the 21st century is experiencing one more paradigm shift in education – that is – Democratic Approach in Assessment.



**Figure1** Components of Democratic approach in Assessment

It has four major components. Transparency in the all process of assessment is the core component of the democratic approach. It must be based on well define and informed Curriculum, mechanism accessible to all and congenial access to feedbacks given by the assessors. It characterized with equivalent level playing with respect to Curriculum, Medium of Instruction, Socio-economic background etc. Inclusive Assessment i.e. all learners have equal opportunity in participating in assessment, questions are prepared taking inclusiveness into account and process should respect the diversity of the group to be assessed. Last but not least, learner's participation in the due process of assessment along with teachers ensure the democracy in the assessment. Participation should be conducting and congenial as well. These components are related to each other in a compact manner shown in Fig.01.

This paradigm shift may be regarded as a cure of many problems of assessment system. In fact, it is an outcome of a long course of examination reforms. The democratic approach in assessment refers to an academic assessment based on certain principles and values of democracy. The term 'assessment' under the democratic approach may be defined as: The assessment is of the pupil, for the pupil and, by the alliance of teacher and pupil. The assessment of the pupil refers to the assessment truly designed to ascertain the learner's performance and not for something else. The notion assessment for the pupil implies that assessment must facilitate effective learning and welfare of students. It incorporates the issues of individual differences among learners and scope of flexibility for the same. According to the last notion, assessment system must ensure the collaboration, responsibility and accountability of teachers and students.

#### 4. DEMOCRATIC VALUES OF ASSESSMENT

All educational commission, committees, and policy documents unanimously agree that education system of India should be designed to inculcate and disseminate democracy. It implies that all educational process including assessment should also follow democratic principles and values. Hence assessment system under the democratic approach must adopt certain democratic values, which ensure the optimum development of learners, assessment for learning, cohesion among stakeholders especially teachers and students, less examination anxiety, participation and accountability of stakeholders, chance for improvement in performance, and development of assessment skills among learners. It is accepted as a responsibility and taken as a joy rather than a phobia or pressure.

The democratic values of assessment may be derived from the core and well accepted vales of democracy (equality, freedom, & justice). The preamble of Indian constitution reflects the core democratic values- Justice, Liberty, Equality, and Fraternity. Kothari Commission (1966, p.31) highlights scientific temper of mind (outlook), tolerance, respect to all culture as the value of democracy. Pandey (1994) also accepted liberty, equality and fraternity as democratic values in context of psycholinguistic. Inter-Parliamentary Union (1998) also recognized freedom, equality, transparency & responsibility, non-discriminatory participation and decentralization of power as the values of democracy. Gardia (2007) identified dignity of individual, liberty, equality, justice cooperation and tolerance as six core democratic values. International IDEA framework proposed two key principles of democracy- popular control & political equality - and seven mediating values- Participation, Authorization, Representation, Accountability, Transparency, Responsiveness,

and Solidarity (Landman, 2008). Brettschneider (2006) proposed a moral account of democratic values and articulated three core values of democracy: Equality of Interests, Political Autonomy, and Reciprocity. He emphasized that the core values of democracy require the guarantee of substantive individual rights as well as rights to participate in democratic procedures.

A possible list of such democratic values for conceiving a paradigm shift in the existing assessment system may be as follows:

- **Active participation:** Active participation is the essence of democracy and it should be based upon equity (proportionate representation). All stakeholders should have active and judicious participation in assessment procedure, especially teachers and students. The assessment system should, therefore, be designed to ensure participation of both and students enabling to have their contribution in selection of criteria, techniques, tasks and feedback of assessment. In the existing assessment system only the teachers are the master decision-makers. The need, however, is to share their sole authority with the students by pro-actively inviting their suggestions and feedback on above mentioned issues of utmost concern to the students. Such an active participation of students will ensure better academic achievement. It will also develop sense of ownership in assessment and assessment skills among learners. Innovative practices like peer-assessment and self-assessment can enhance the active participation as well as assessment skills of student.
- **Decentralization of power:** As the assessment is the joint venture of administrator, teachers and students; the whole power should not be concentrated to anyone. Heron (1981) characterized the assessment as the most political among all processes of education and the issues of power are particularly significant (in Knight, 2003, p. 147). Bisen (2010) called for decentralization of university examination system as the first and foremost requirement in order to reform it. He advocates the internal assessment system in universities. It implies that teachers are the appropriate assessors of their students and for this purpose internal assessment is a better option. It reduces the unnecessary over control of examination department in assessment process. Lamba (2010) also emphasized that examination system should be governed by academic people instead of administrative people.

Nevertheless, it is important that active participation of students in the internal assessment should be ensured as a core value. Hence, the students should also have rights like: Right of proper assessment, Right of information, and Right to review. After all Good assessment is the right of all our students. Students must have right to access the information regarding assessment criteria, process and other related queries. We can't hide assessment related information in the name of confidentiality except procedure like preparation of question paper. The students should have a right to challenge the assessment result and allow them to apply for the review of the result.

- **Transparency:** The different components of assessment need to be clearly specified and well communicated to the stakeholders. Transparency here refers to practices and procedure adopted to ensure objectivity in the assessment of students' learning performance, minimization of errors and maximization of reliability and validity of the assessments. It also ensuring that students should be aware about what, why and how related to assessment (Moore, 2003, p. 101). Hence, students should be made aware of their progress throughout their course of study. A good practice, in this context, may be that the evaluated answer books should be returned to students for their feedback.
- **Accountability:** It is a crucial value which crafts the assessment system more democratic. The responsibility and role of each stakeholder need be specified and it must be assumed as their fundamental duties. There must be a defined system to check the accountability of each one. The system should ensure the accountability of teachers to the fairness and objectivity in assessment done by them and also toward the overall performance of their students. A scrutiny of evaluated answer books should be done randomly by higher authority. This strategy will help in finding out the unfair practices of teachers, like favouritism, carelessness and biasness etc. Similarly, students should also be made responsible to malpractices in assessment like copying, and creating pressure on evaluators to gain favour etc. In such cases use of ICT in assessment and provision of punishment would be helpful to handle these problems.
- **Flexibility:** The assessment system should be flexible in terms of chance provided to students, time, space, and techniques of assessment. The assessors should use verity of assessment techniques. Similarly, students have a freedom of choice from a given set of assessment techniques. Examination on demand is an exemplar for flexibility in assessment. The students may be allowed to select the assessment techniques within a given range. The institution may allow the students to complete their evaluation in parts. On-line assessment is another innovative approach

which provides flexibility in terms of time and space including other advantages. It is also gaining warm acceptance from higher education institutions of international standard.

- **Welfare:** The assessment should be considered as a tool for welfare of students and teachers by integrating it with teaching-learning process. Assessment should facilitate the teaching as well as learning. It advocates the provision of continuous assessment so that student gets a chance to improve their performance. As a whole assessment should contribute to the academic excellence. In democratic approach of assessment, methods and techniques of assessment will use the specific abilities of learners. Naturally, the performance of students will be improved and this strategy will act as a motivation for learning also. In this course of actions teachers will try to adopt innovative assessment techniques, which in turn enhance their professional abilities. Consequently, institution will gain academic excellence.
- **Individuality:** Individual differences need be given due importance in the assessment of learners. One method of assessment may not fit for all students as limitation at individual level also exists. The limitations and demands of the learner must be kept in mind during designing and the execution of assessment. If physical or psychological disability of a student is unfavourable for a particular assessment technique, then such a student should not be assessed through that technique. In such case, either other techniques of assessment should be used or the criteria of assessment should be scaled down for that student.

The above list of democratic values of assessment is neither complete nor final. These values are overlapping in nature rather than exclusive. And there is no need to draw fine lines among these values. According to pragmatic axiology, values are neither absolute nor static and are changing with respect to time and space. The democratic values of assessment are also having scope for modification on the basis of their pragmatics. There is need of research studies to determine the well-defined democratic values of assessment.

## 5. ADVANTAGES OF DEMOCRATIC APPROACH IN ASSESSMENT

The democratic approach in assessment has excellent potential to resolve many crises of prevailing assessment system and can establish it as a trustworthy and fruitful sub-system of education. The following positive points highlight its superiority over non-democratic approach in assessment:

- Active participation of teachers as well as students and sense of ownership in assessment
- Teachers as the assessors and students as co-assessors
- Flexibility and transparency in assessment process
- Assessment facilitates teaching and learning
- Emphasis on assessment for learning including assessment of learning
- Provision of more chances to students for improvement
- Continuous diagnosis and remediation to students
- Proper and continuous feedback to and from students for continuous improvement
- Develops assessment skills in students

## 6. RECENT TREND OF REFORMS IN ASSESSMENT

The 21st century is very significant in context of examination reforms at all the levels of education round the globe. The philosophy and practices of assessment is now undergoing qualitative changes to new approaches regarding its aims and mechanism. Fetterman (2001) regards recent developments as a quiet revolution undermining all the basic assumptions related to assessment and its consequences (in Libman, 2010). The policy documents of UGC for higher education pay due importance to quality enhancement through academic and administrative reform, in which examination reform got the prime attention. The 11th Five-Year Plan of higher education targeted the examination reform as a vital tool for quality and excellence. In this context, UGC (2009) provided a comprehensive action plan to implement examination reforms in higher education.

The innovative practices like continuous internal assessment, alternative assessment strategies (self-, peer-, and co-assessment), showing evaluated answer sheets to students, and entertaining student's claim against evaluation can be

assumed as a move towards the democratic approach in assessment. These practices make the assessment system more flexible, transparent, objective, reliable, and valid. Such assessment techniques ensure the active participation, responsibility, and accountability of teachers as well as students. The provision of feedback for improvement and scope for correction of error in assessment through review make the assessment more democratic. This leads to establish a self-corrective social examination system. Students can also learn how the assessment skills can be utilized for taking decisions in real life situation. According National Education Policy-2020, Higher Education Institutes (HEIs) shall also move away from high-stakes examinations towards more continuous and comprehensive evaluation. Continuous internal assessment is more democratic in nature than single external examination-based assessment of students. It is intended to continuous diagnosis and remediation of students' learning. The teachers are the assessors of their students, which ensure the active participation of teachers and their sense of ownership in assessment. Students get more chance to improve their performance. Alternative assessment strategies like self-assessment, peer-assessment, and co-assessment inculcate the active participation, transparency, and accountability of both teachers and students. The UGC (2003) recommended the practice of returning answer books to students and responding to students' queries on the evaluation procedure in order to maintain transparency.

The list of such practices is increasing day by day as examination reform is a continuous process, which will enhance the democratization of assessment system. In this context, assessment of teaching by students, examination on demand, single national assessment body, and omission of 'minimum marks' as eligibility criteria for entrance and selection tests are the innovations waiting for us.

## 7. CONCLUSION

One of the most important goals of examination reform should be the democratization of assessment system. The democratic approach in assessment is need of the hour and has potential to resolve the crises of present assessment system. It bestows a new horizon to the examination reforms to instill trust on our assessment system. The democratic elements in assessment are also present in the traditional assessment system, but the non-democratic nature of assessment became dominant due to erroneous perception and misuse of assessment in education. The democratic values of assessment are very precious and fruitful for academic excellence. However, the concept of democratic values of assessment proposed through this paper is rather in cloud form and need to be précised and concretized. It is possible through in-depth analysis of literatures and explorative research studies. The dominance presence of ICT and advent of its tools for Assessment has the potential of Democratic approach. The online examination, Questions banks, Proctored examination, on screen Marking system are some of them based on ICT. Nevertheless, NEP-2020 observed there are numerous challenges to conducting online examinations at scale, including limitations on the types of questions that can be asked in an online environment. System of examination need to be reoriented and redesign periodically on the empirical evidences obtained from reflective researches. A research and development (R& D) department will be very helpful in this regard.

## CONFLICT OF INTERESTS

None.

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