

NEET: The Supreme Court Order - What does it tell us.

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The Supreme Court order on the NEET UG 2024 imbroglio has brought some much-needed closure. There will be no re-test. The Chief Justice of India himself was part of the bench. The full judgment has been reserved and will appear later. So this is a good time to review the order and its import.

As per the order, the 40-odd petitioners had made two claims: One, there has been a leakage of the question paper of the exam, and two, there were systemic deficiencies in the modalities of the conduct of the exam. Based on this, they had requested the court to direct a re-test. The government of India was the principal respondent.

The bench casts the petition as three questions. One, is there a breach and is it systemic? Two, does the breach affect the integrity of the entire examination? Three, is it possible to identify the beneficiaries of the fraud? Much of the questioning was on the breach at Hazaribagh and its extent. IIT Madras was given the data for the last three years and asked to provide a report. Their findings state that such a breach is not noticeable in the data.

The bench therefore concluded that though there has been a breach, it was limited to about 155 beneficiaries who have been identified. Moreover, “there was an absence of material” to conclude that “there was a systemic breach of the sanctity of the exam”. A re-test was not warranted as it would disrupt the lives of about 2 million students as well as the conduct of medical education. It could even “impact the availability of qualified medical professionals in the future”!

There are several troubling points about the order.

Firstly, the petitioners’ claim that there was a breach was indeed accepted. But the second claim, about the systemic deficiencies in the conduct of the exam, is left open. The facts presented in the court and the cases registered by the CBI, for example, at Hazaribagh, Godhra or Latur, demonstrate that many of the malpractices and omissions were committed

by invigilators, city coordinators and other people authorised by the National Testing Agency (NTA). Most of these were brought to notice by agencies outside the NTA and not through its own mechanisms. Moreover, it is not clear what actions the NTA or CBI undertook to ascertain if there were other centres which were similarly compromised. Thus, the claim of systemic deficiencies appears inadequately investigated.

The order does identify a committee with the remit to study and strengthen the processes of the NTA. But that is like closing the stable doors after the horse has bolted.

The second point is about the statistical analysis of the data. This was done by IIT Madras and aided by NTA. The report is perfunctory and makes several inaccurate statements. The “bell curves” of 2024 and 2023 are different — the 2024 data seems to indicate that the exam was disproportionately easier at the top end of the spectrum. The city or centre-wise data is not bell-shaped nor does it follow the trend of previous years, as claimed. Coaching centres such as Kota and Sikar have done substantially better this year, especially at the top end. The report also misses several important threads — the performance of those who got a change of centre or the trajectory of second-attempt students. And as pointed out by Professor Vishal Vaibhav of IIT Delhi, the IIT Madras procedure would not have detected a malpractice even if it involved as many as 5,000 students. On the whole, the report seems to be the output of a government department and not an eminent public and scientific institution.

Then there was the question of wrongly-awarded grace marks for a factual multiple-choice question (MCQ). That it needed the Supreme Court and three IIT professors to settle the matter just shows the intellectual vacuum at the top. In fact, the MCQ format and national rankings in exams such as NEET or JEE come from excessive centralisation, and not from any wisdom.

Finally, the centre-wise data, grudgingly made available, is quite depressing. A rank above 29,000, that is a percentile of 1.3 per cent, gives the aspirant a fair chance at a good government college. However, the geographical spread of this 1.3 per cent is extremely skewed. About 3,000 come from just two cities — Sikar and Kota — with a success rate of 7 per

cent and 4 per cent, respectively. No city in Maharashtra gets to even 2 per cent, though Latur, the coaching hub of Maharashtra, comes close. In Ratnagiri, 3 out of 1,300, and for Buldhana, 23 out of 5,200 aspirants could make the mark. This tells us that students must move to coaching hubs if they want to become doctors from a government college. But that typically is an additional expenditure of about Rs 2 lakh per year! So, there is an economic skew in favour of the rich.

This also has a gender factor. While about 55 per cent of all NEET 2024 aspirants were female and 58 per cent qualified (that is, were in the top 50 per cent), there are only 20 women in the top 100 ranks. After all, even if one is rich, one may not send one's daughter to a coaching class in a city far away.

The consequences are severe for most of us. Since even middle-class girls and boys from Buldhana cannot become doctors, the district, as a whole, has poor access to healthcare. The coaching class revenues, which exceed Rs 20,000 crores per year are recouped by doctors through their own fees. All of this makes medical care expensive and scarce, adversely impacting public health. Finally, in places like Ratnagiri, it is causing a flight of the middle class to cities with CBSE schools.

So, what is to be done? The first step is to make all the relevant data public and to undertake long-term studies. The Rajan Committee Report, commissioned by the Tamil Nadu government is an example. Only through such studies will we find a way to balance the branding and mobility of centralisation and the inclusivity, relevance and development outcomes of more regional higher education policies. And we should hope that such advice comes from the Supreme Court.

The author teaches at IIT Bombay. Views are personal