

Gangs in India Help Exam-Takers Cheat

BY VIBHUTI AGARWAL

NEW DELHI—This year, hundreds of students were bused in for an overnight stay at the Nature Valley Resort, a mid-budget hotel just outside India's capital.

There wasn't much partying or communing with nature. Instead, the students pored over an exam paper at which they had each paid about \$15,000 to \$20,000 to have an advance peek.

Now, many of the people who planned and hosted that cheating holiday have been arrested. Police have filed a 900-page indictment against at least half a dozen suspects—including a police officer with advance access to the exam paper—for gaming an exam to

recruit thousands of officers.

India is facing an epidemic of cheating in college-entrance and job-recruitment exams, as the sheer number of people competing for a tiny pool of opportunities creates a lucrative opportunity for people to help students gain an advantage, often at an enormous cost to their families.

"It's a game of money. Whoever has money can get these question papers," said Vivek Pandey, an activist who helps students and their families file lawsuits over exam cheating. "The deserving candidates feel shattered and demoralized."

The money charged for access to exam papers means that even if just a few thousand students cheat on an exam, cheat-

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In India, Gangs Aid In Cheating

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ing rings can earn millions of dollars each time, police said.

“Question papers are sold at extravagantly high prices,” said Ashok Rathore, a police officer who investigated cheating linked to India’s medical school exam in two states this year. “It’s a nexus of desperate students, parents, tuition centers and printing presses.”

Unlike U.S. universities, where essays, test scores and interviews are combined to assess if a student should gain admission, the route to a university education in India is largely through competitive testing. Exams are also the route to many government jobs, which are sought after amid a shortage of good private jobs.

More than four million people took the police exam this year, competing for 60,000 jobs in India’s largest state, while two million people took a medical-school exam for about 100,000 spots that also became embroiled in an investigation.

Harsheen Khera, 17 years old, spent her high school years taking extra classes to get into medical school. She felt good about her chances after she took the exam in May. But a month later—when the exam results were released unexpectedly on the same day as India’s election results—her hopes were dashed.

Khera had a good score, but her ranking was pushed down by an unusual number of perfect scores this year. Some of the other high scores were mathematically impossible given the exam’s marking system, exam trackers said. Soon, the buzz of disquiet among students exploded into allegations, street protests and lawsuits.

“After studying so hard, all

we get is cheating and fraud,” Khera said. “Why should I study when some people easily make it to the top just by buying question papers or paying someone else to write the test on their behalf?”

The exam scandals are turning into a major problem for India’s government. In Uttar Pradesh, where the ruling Bharatiya Janata Party held most of seats, the party came in second to an opposition alliance during national elections this year. Several young voters attributed the shock result in part to anger over the police exam, whose results were declared invalid as the cheating allegations grew.

Police officers said people cheat in several ways. In some cases, candidates have had someone else take the exam for them or have smuggled in phones to search for answers during the exam.

But much of the cheating happens well before students get into the exam hall, often organized by cheating rings that operate as exam-coaching centers and that have cultivated an inside person with access to the exam answers. In some cases, according to police investigations, cheating rings have sent people to printing presses to steal exam papers.

Then they gather students who have paid up on the eve of the exam and help them memorize the questions and answers.

In India’s eastern state of Bihar, where cheating scandals are particularly prevalent, police have arrested about two dozen people in connection with the medical exam paper leak, investigating officers said.

In a confession made to the police, 22-year-old aspiring medical student Anurag Yadav said he was studying in Kota, a hub of coaching centers in northern India for India’s various competitive exams, when he got a message from his uncle that “the medical exam had been arranged.” When he returned home to Bihar, his uncle introduced him to two people who gave him the question pa-



Students in New Delhi in July protested alleged irregularities in the results of exams to gain coveted spots in medical school.

per and answers to memorize.

“When I went to my test center, I found the exam paper was exactly the same as the one I was made to memorize,” said Yadav, who was arrested but not charged.

Awadhesh Kumar, the father of another student who took the exam, said in a confession to the local police that he paid four million rupees—the equivalent of nearly \$50,000—to a gang for the medical exam question paper.

Yadav and Kumar couldn’t be reached for comment.

In the case of the police exam, some of the cheaters forgot to stay off social media, which gave investigators helpful clues.

“The candidates were reading the question and answer keys sitting in one of the lawns of the resort,” said Brijesh Kumar Singh, a senior police official on a special task force investigating the police exam. “One or two of them clicked photos and made videos sitting in the lawn of the resort and put them online.”

As some exams become computerized, high-tech cheating is happening, too. In 2022, India’s federal investigative agency arrested a Russian national for allegedly hacking the software for the exam to enter the country’s top engineering schools so some exam takers could give remote ac-

cess to others who completed their exam for them.

Authorities have tried blocking the internet and installing video surveillance inside exam halls to prevent cheating. A new law implemented this year lays out up to 10 years of prison time for people who enable others to cheat. In June, as allegations of irregularities over the medical school entrance exam grew, New Delhi replaced the head of India’s National Testing Agency, which conducts that exam.

At the end of August, the state of Uttar Pradesh held the police-recruitment exam again, this time with beefed-up security protocols. The state’s police chief, Prashant Kumar, said that officials went to great lengths to ensure the test was conducted fairly.

The security measures included fingerprinting, iris scans and facial-recognition tools to check the identities of the test takers, as well as drone surveillance. Cameras livestreamed feeds from the test-taking centers to a control room and the boxes containing exam materials were monitored at all points, he said.

“We ensured that fairness and transparency passed with flying colors,” Kumar said. “Even a bird couldn’t fly near the exam centers without permission.”

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