

# **Beyond the Game of CAT and Mouse**

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The leakage of the Question paper of the Common Admission Test [CAT] is unfortunate; the reaction to the event has been varied: ranging from indifference to investigation to paranoia. On one side there is a feeling that the IIMs have failed to deliver and so the government should have more say in managing the affairs. On another side many feel that IIMs are not at fault; if an employee of a printing press or a courier or some one down the distribution line leaks the Question Paper how could the hallowed IIMs be blamed for it? The truth is some where in between. We need to look at the situation in its totality and look for solutions that are sustainable over the long-term.

## **Relevance of IIMs and CAT**

One of the great things that the GOI has done over the last half century is the creation of the concept of IIM. In the chaos that the educational arena has become IIMs is one of the few oasis of excellence that has survived and blossomed. GOI must be thanked for its vision in creating the IIMs and also for the relative independence that it has allowed the IIMs to enjoy all these years. Thanks are also due to the academic community of the IIMs for nurturing an excellent ambience to attract the best talents of the country and in nurturing them to be thought leaders across the globe. There cannot be any doubt about the IIMs continuing to enjoy the independence and academic freedom in future also to sustain the spirit of excellence and leadership. World over, centers of excellence have flourished only on the bedrock of total freedom and independence in pursuing innovation and creativity

A quarter century ago, Directors of three IIMs got together and created, rather half-heartedly, the concept of a Common Admission Test. Half-heartedly, because they believed in their differences and could not agree on more than administering a common test as the first level of screening in the complicated and sensitive selection process. The subsequent screening was left to each IIM as per its own perception of objectives of its own programs. Thankfully this arrangement worked well all these years. Worked well for the IIMs definitely.

It worked well for the CAT-coaching centers also. Groom your candidates for the one and only test in a year. Did the test measure the intellectual capabilities of the candidate or his robotic abilities? It did not matter because there was not an alternative in the market both in terms of testing and also in terms of B-Schools. No wonder many an aspirant thought of dropping all other activities for a year or more only to prepare for the CAT. Did it offer convenience to the aspirants like those offered by GMAT of taking the test at any time of the year or of transferring the scores to another admission season? No. The candidates did not have any other options either. Did the IIMs who managed the CAT ever do any research on the patterns of performance of the candidates or on better methods of selection? If they did it would have enriched the education system and the

society. In a monopoly situation it would be unfair to expect anything of this sort. Twenty-five years is not a small duration when you compare the life cycle of any product. This product too is entering its decline phase. Either you modify the product and extend its life cycle; or a new product will replace it soon.

### **Role of Govt**

The GOI has done well to promote the concept of IIMs and letting them have their independence. The system has matured and soon enough they may be able to sustain and grow without any further funding from GOI. In a situation when GOI is not all that comfortable managing its own departments and universities, it is less than pragmatic to try to run the IIMs as another department or another university.

### **Changing times, New Challenges**

Demand for management education has increased significantly resulting in a large number of aspirants to the CAT. With the onset of globalisation and India getting integrated more and more with the world, with more B-Schools training their sights on the international markets, the number of aspirants for management education is bound to increase further. Can CAT in the present format cater to this increasing demand?

Managing an admission test across the length and breadth of a country like India has its own challenges in terms of logistics. What is the organization that IIMs have to manage the CAT? Is there a permanent structure or is it mobilized in the season like the Election Commission does during the elections? We must operate on the premise that there are individuals and clandestine organizations always trying to break into systems like CAT for their own benefits. The recent incident of leakage only proves that the security system that the IIMs have put in place is grossly inadequate. For this the IIMs cannot absolve of their responsibilities. To manage the numbers, to manage the logistics, to manage the security you need a professional organization.

It is also necessary to offer more than one chance during a year for the candidates to match his convenience. Some years down the line this could become on-line like they do in GMAT, GRE etc. This also demands the creation of a permanent and professional organization. There is a secondary benefit of offering the test more than once: the number of candidates appearing at each offering will be lesser and this may reduce the complexity of management a bit.

There is the requirement of research on the testing methods, testing process and the performance of the candidates on various aspects of the testing process. Similarly high level of professionalism is required in generating question papers on a continuous basis. The system must be able to respond speedily to breakdowns like the one that happened recently. This calls for alertness of the system. All these point to the urgent need to create an independent organization to manage the test on a continuous basis.

It is time that the CAT moved out of the backyard of IIMs. Ideally the IIMs should take the lead to create a separate independent organization that fulfills the needs of the future.

The IIMs can control this organization at the board level ; but the organisation should become independent and professional on its own. Just as IIMs expect to be free from GOI in day-to-day matters, this organization too must be free of IIMs in all operational matters.