Twitter Thread by Ritika Chopra



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At a time when varsity cut-offs have hit 100, @IndianExpress tracked down a generation of Board exam toppers between 1996 & 2015 to find out the consequences of a convention that celebrates a few students every yr.

Our 3-part deep dive: Tracking India's Toppers ■■■■

■(1/n)

EXPRESS INVESTIGATION PART 1

20 years on, where are the Board toppers? Over half are abroad, most in science and technology

Gender gap; students increasingly from outside metros; US most favoured destination, IIT popular route; minorities, SC/STs invisible: 86 CBSE, ICSE, ISC toppers 1996-2015 tell stories of change — and point to challenges as the new National Education Policy rolls out

RITIKA CHOPRA
NEW DELHI, DECEMBER 26

THEY ARE India's national school board toppers over 20 years. So it's no surprise that one's a cancer physician in New York; another is a PhD fellow at MIT; one is a Harvard professor; one a hedge fund manager in Singapore — and as many as 11 are working for Google.

Each is a story of individual talent and effort, excellence and achievement, outliers all. But taken together, as an investigation by *The Indian Express* reveals, the arcs of their different lives — and careers — tell significant stories of a generation coming of age after India opened up in the 1990s. Of how some aspirations endure, some don't; how some divides have crumbled, some remain as intractable as ever.

More than half the toppers live overseas today, the US being the destination of choice. Most are in science and technology with IITs their most favoured undergraduate pit-stop; more than half of them grew up outside metros, in Tier 2 and Tier 3 cities, and only one is a minority — there's not one Dalit or tribal. And if you are a girl topper, you are much less likely to move overseas than if you were a boy.

These are among the key findings of the four-month investigation by *The Indian Express* that tracked down 86 men and women who stood first in India, between 1996 and 2015, in their Class 10 and 12 exams conducted by the Central Board of Secondary Education (CBSE) and the Council for the Indian School Certificate Examinations.

Amid soaring cut-off marks based on Class 12 Board exams, as the government, in tune with its new National Education Policy, sets up a panel to explore a national test to rejig the college admission process, the findings from the investigation are pointers to the challenges ahead.



WHO'S WHO — AND WHERE



My move abroad gave me phenomenal opportunities to do world-class research with the best people from all over the world

KARUNA GANESH, PHYSICIAN-SCIENTIST AT MEMORIAL SLOAN KETTERING CANCER CENTER IN NEW YORK; CLASS 10 ICSE TOPPER IN 1999





During my PhD at MIT, we got a lot of hands-on experience, something I had never experienced during my undergraduation back home in India

RISHABH SINGH, RESEARCH SCIENTIST WITH GOOGLE X IN CALIFORNIA, CLASS 12 CBSE TOPPER IN 2004

BIG PICTURE
PAGES 8, 9



TRACKING INDIA'S TOPPERS

Over half the toppers live or work abroad

More than half the toppers — between 21 and 42 years of age — are in foreign countries, most of them are employed, a quarter of them are pursuing advanced degrees. Three of every four who are abroad are in the United States. While the US remains the preferred destination, others are based in the UK, Australia, Singapore, China, Canada, Bangladesh and the UAE.

Of those employed abroad, most work in the tech sector, followed by medicine and finance.

Four out of 10 working in the US are in Silicon Valley. Like Biswanath Panda, who graduated from Little Flower School in Jamshedpur in 1999 and is now senior director of engineering at Google in San Francisco. Indeed, Google is home to 11 toppers, the most in any one company.

Karuna Ganesh, 37, left the country soon after topping her Class 10 ICSE exam in 1999 to join United World College (UWC), USA, an international boarding school that brings together 200 students from 80 countries. She is now a physician-scientist at the Memorial Sloan Kettering Cancer Center in New York.

"My parents were supportive about my moving abroad since UWC has a strong track record of sending students to top universities around the world, in addition to the global, multicultural education it provides," said Ganesh, who subsequently earned a BA in Biochemistry, MA in Medicine, PhD in Molecular Biology and MD from Cambridge University.

Most went abroad to study citing better ecosystem

Higher education is the primary reason why toppers left the country. Of those living abroad, over 70% left India to pursue either their undergraduate or postgraduate studies — only a dozen of the 86 went to take up a job.

For example, Somnath Bose, 40, left India in 2008 with an MBBS from Calcutta Medical College and an MD from AIIMS, to pursue training in critical care. Today, he is an assistant professor at Boston's Harvard Medical School and staff anesthesiologist at its teaching hospital, Beth Israel Deaconess Medical Center.

Bose says that when he left India, programmes in critical care were just starting to open up. "The US... had well-established clinical training pathways in that field, plus afforded opportunities to mix clinical work with focus on research," he said.

Janaki Sheth, 28, who studied at a school in Thane and aced the Class 10 ICSE exams in 2008 with 98.6%, has a BTech in Engineering Physics from IIT Bombay. In 2014, she left for the US for a PhD in Physics at the University of California, Los Angeles. On why she decided to study abroad, Sheth, now a postdoctoral scholar at the University of Pennsylvania, said, "Six to seven years ago, scientific research was not very well-funded in India. So while I had some invaluable experiences at IIT, it was not sufficient for a PhD. In the US, science gets a great policy thrust which means there are more places to do good work, and there is constant upgradation of technology," she said.

For Arkya Chatterjee, 24, who topped the Class 12 ISC exam in 2015 from a Kolkata school before graduating from IIT-Bombay in Engineering Physics, the move to the US revealed a different side to the teacher-student equation. "(There is) more honesty about collaborations — professors encourage students to talk to each other and work on homework together. This reduces the incentive for academic dishonesty. This kind of trust was mostly absent at my undergraduate institute back in India," said Chatterjee, who is now enrolled as a PhD student at MIT.

CONTINUED ON PAGE 2

TOMORROW
THE GENDER GAP: TOPPERS ALL BUT WHY IT'S ADVANTAGE MEN

GOVT STARTS WORK ON COMMON TEST FOR UG ADMISSIONS PAGE 11

Each is a story of talent, effort & achievement. But taken together, the arcs of their lives & careers tell the story of a generation coming of age in a liberalised India. Of how some aspirations endure & some don't; how some divides crumbled & some stay intractable.
(2/n)

Over half the toppers (CBSE & CISCE) live overseas today, USA ■■ being the destination of choice.

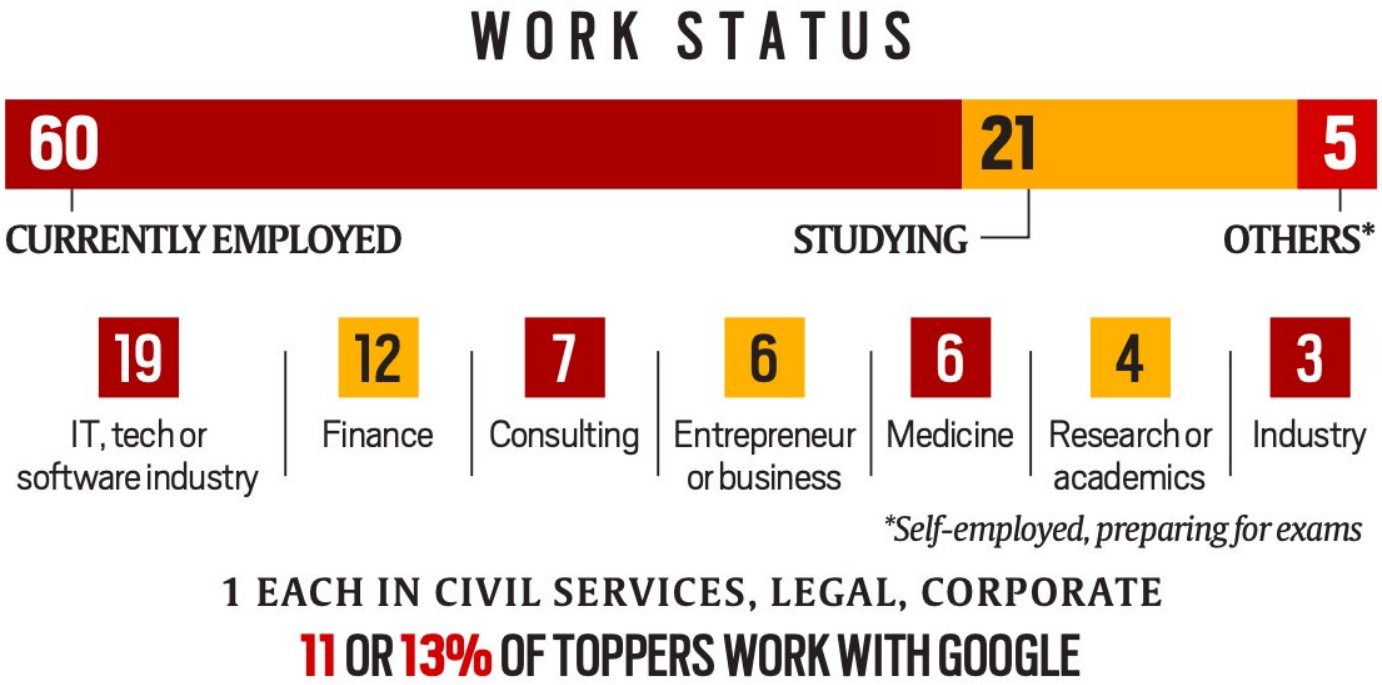
Three of every four who are abroad are either working or pursuing higher education in USA. Others are in the UK, Australia, Singapore, China, Canada, Bangladesh and UAE

(3/n)



Of those employed abroad, most work in the tech sector, followed by medicine and finance.

(4/n)



A quarter of those working in the US are in Silicon Valley.

Like Rishabh Singh (34), who topped the CBSE Class 12 exam in 2004 and is now Research Scientist with Google X.

@Google is home to 11 toppers, the most in any one company!

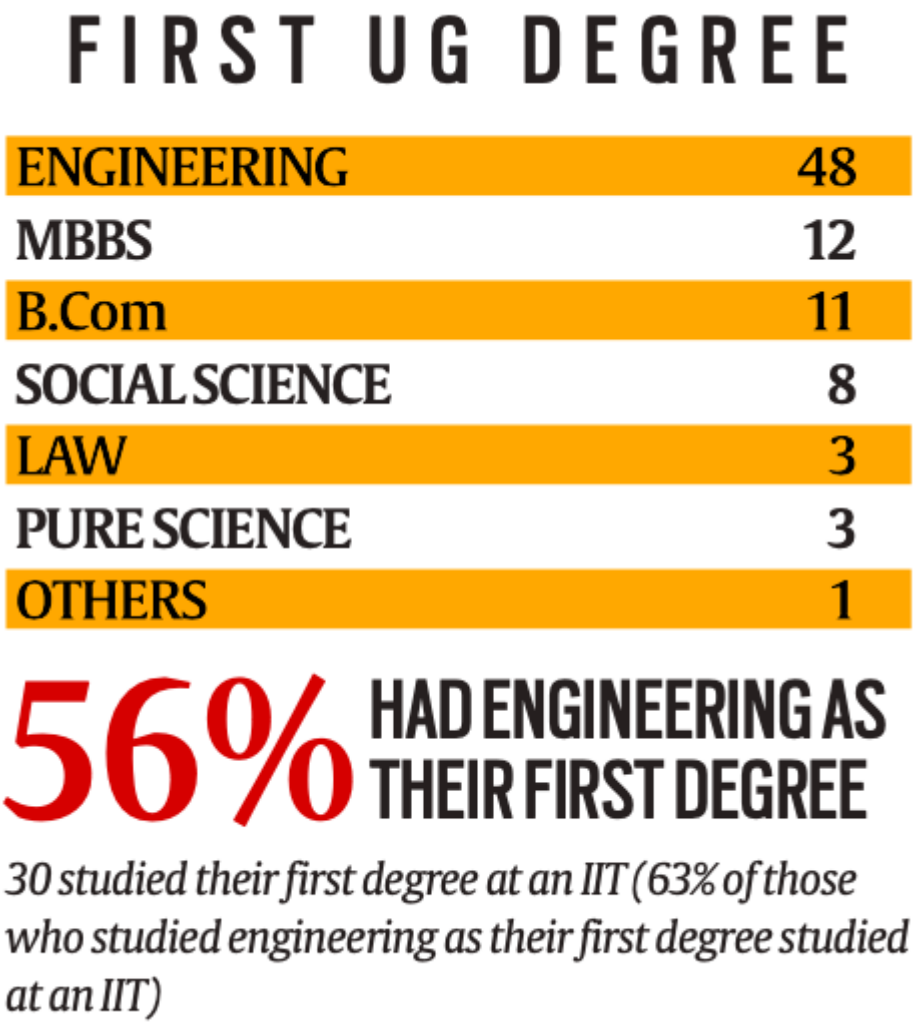
(5/n)



More than half the toppers (48 out of 86) chose engineering as their undergraduate degree -- only 12 did medicine.

Among those who studied engineering, 6 out of 10 did so at an IIT.

(6/n)



Many, however, confess that an interest in engineering wasn't always the motivation behind the decision. They had internalised a societal norm (for those who did in school to study engineering) without questioning it.

(7/n)

No wonder that over a quarter of the employed Board toppers, who studied engineering as their first degree, later switched tracks and are currently working in roles and sectors where their training in a core engineering branch is not directly useful.

(8/n)

To be sure, none of the past toppers regrets her UG degree in engineering. However, many wish they had exposure to other professions or career counseling at that age.

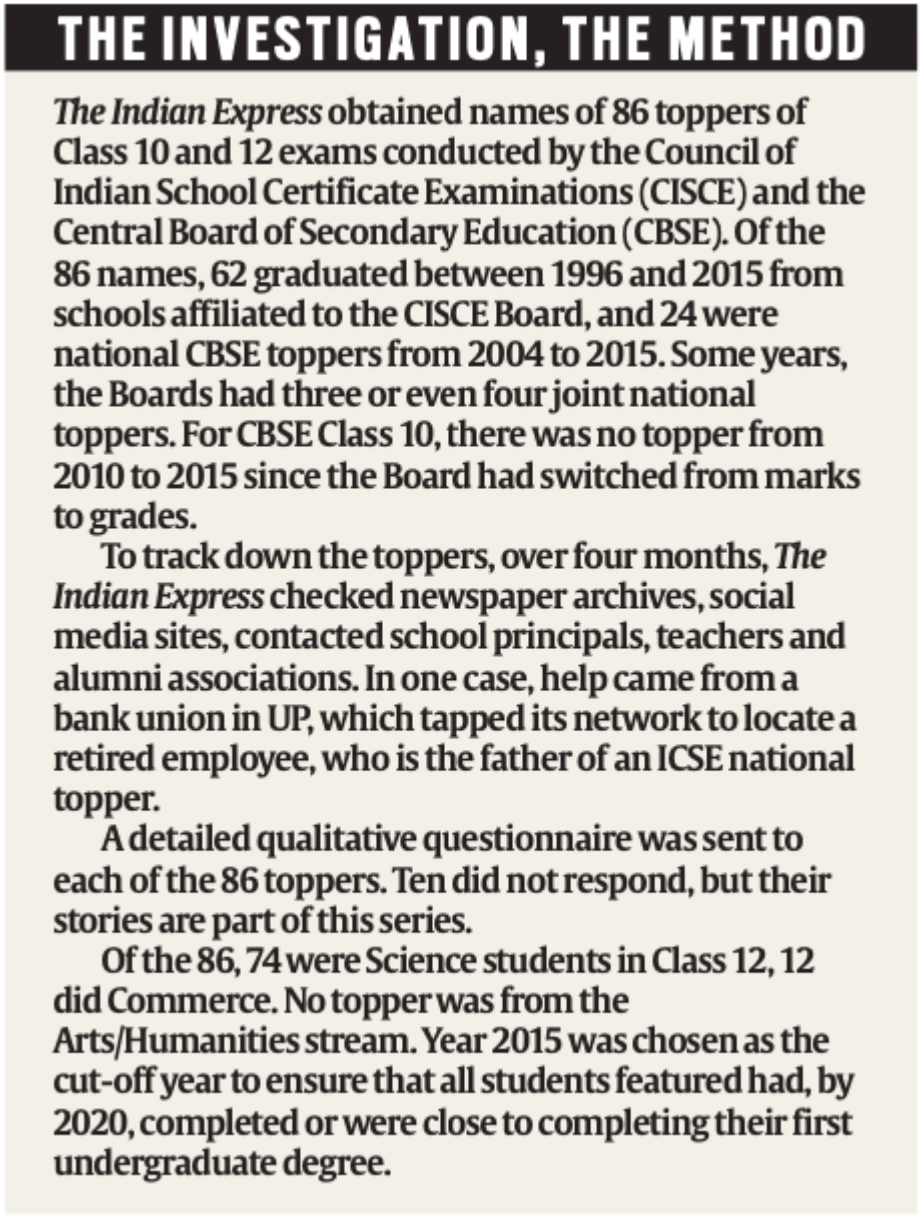
In hindsight, Lekshmi V (29) feels she should have studied Commerce at UG level instead of engineering
(9/n)



Of the total 86 toppers, only one belonged to the OBC category. None was Dalit or tribal, just 5 were first-generation college-goers -- all pointing to a connection between academic achievement and privilege.
(10/n)

Here's the method (to the madness that played out over the last 4 months) ■■.

Honestly, it was much harder to locate former toppers than I imagined. Not everyone is on social media, it turns out.
(11/n)



THE INVESTIGATION, THE METHOD

The Indian Express obtained names of 86 toppers of Class 10 and 12 exams conducted by the Council of Indian School Certificate Examinations (CISCE) and the Central Board of Secondary Education (CBSE). Of the 86 names, 62 graduated between 1996 and 2015 from schools affiliated to the CISCE Board, and 24 were national CBSE toppers from 2004 to 2015. Some years, the Boards had three or even four joint national toppers. For CBSE Class 10, there was no topper from 2010 to 2015 since the Board had switched from marks to grades.

To track down the toppers, over four months, *The Indian Express* checked newspaper archives, social media sites, contacted school principals, teachers and alumni associations. In one case, help came from a bank union in UP, which tapped its network to locate a retired employee, who is the father of an ICSE national topper.

A detailed qualitative questionnaire was sent to each of the 86 toppers. Ten did not respond, but their stories are part of this series.

Of the 86, 74 were Science students in Class 12, 12 did Commerce. No topper was from the Arts/Humanities stream. Year 2015 was chosen as the cut-off year to ensure that all students featured had, by 2020, completed or were close to completing their first undergraduate degree.

A big shoutout to the kind souls who helped me track down the toppers when everything failed.

** To the office bearer of a bank union in UP who tapped his network to help locate a retired employee who is the father of an ICSE national topper

(12/n)

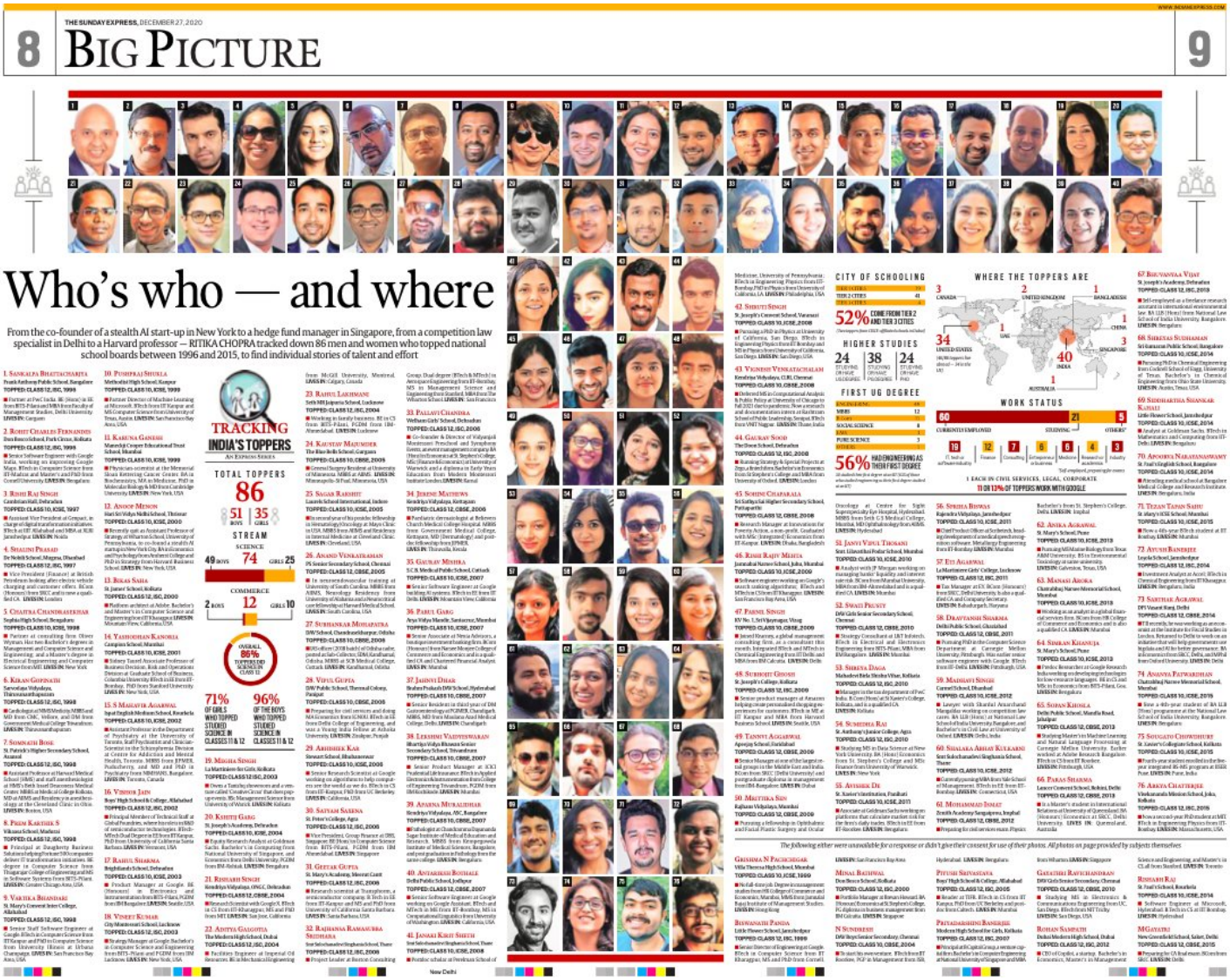
** To the kind lady attending phone calls at @harvardmed's Beth Israel Deaconess Medical Centre. She went out of her way to connect a (desperate & tired) journalist from ■■ with a staff doctor, who I suspected was the same person as the1998 ISC topper.

And many more ❤■
(13/n)

Here's the link to the first part of our deep dive: https://t.co/f4jBxQZaOy

We also have a double spread today listing out who's who -- and where ■■

Link: https://t.co/FjzNLAB6Sz



Also, do check out the second part tomorrow.

The Gender Gap: Toppers all, but why it's advantage men

(16/n)

Series edited by the brilliant @umavishnu & @rajkamaljha!

(17/n)