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Impact of Supreme Court Judgements on Teacher Eligibility Test (TET) on Teachers in India

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Abstract:

The Teacher Eligibility Test (TET) has emerged as a pivotal mechanism in regulating teacher recruitment and enhancing educational quality in India. Through a series of authoritative judgements, the Supreme Court of India has played a decisive role in reinforcing the constitutional and professional legitimacy of TET. These judicial pronouncements have reshaped the teaching profession by redefining eligibility standards, strengthening merit-based recruitment, and emphasizing accountability and competence among teachers. The Court has consistently interpreted the right to education under Article 21A as encompassing not only access to schooling but also the assurance of effective and qualified instruction. By upholding TET as a valid regulatory requirement, the judiciary has transformed teaching into a regulated profession aligned with national educational objectives.

Keywords: Teacher Eligibility Test (TET); Supreme Court of India; Teacher Recruitment; Article 21A; Right to Education Act; Teacher Professionalism; Educational Quality; Judicial Intervention; Teacher Education Reforms

Introduction:

The role of teachers in shaping society has always been central to the Indian education system. In recent decades, the Supreme Court of India has significantly influenced this role through its judgements related to the Teacher Eligibility Test (TET). These decisions have redefined who can become a teacher, how teachers are recruited, and what professional standards they must maintain. The judicial approach to TET reflects a deeper constitutional commitment to quality education, accountability, and the long-term development of the nation.

The Supreme Court has repeatedly emphasized that education is not limited to access alone but includes the quality of instruction imparted to children. Since teachers are the primary agents of learning, ensuring their competence has become a constitutional necessity rather than a policy choice.

Origin and Purpose of Teacher Eligibility Test:

The Teacher Eligibility Test was introduced following the enactment of the Right of Children to Free and Compulsory Education Act, 2009. The Act empowered the National Council for Teacher Education (NCTE) to prescribe minimum qualifications for teachers teaching at the elementary level. In exercise of this authority, TET was designed as a standardized assessment to evaluate basic teaching aptitude, subject understanding, and pedagogical awareness.

The introduction of the Teacher Eligibility Test was intended to create uniformity rather than exclusion. Prior to its implementation, states followed different criteria for appointing teachers, which resulted in uneven teaching standards and varied learning outcomes across regions. TET was designed to correct this disparity by establishing a single, nationwide yardstick to assess the basic suitability and preparedness of individuals entering the teaching profession.

Judicial Review of the Teacher Eligibility Test:

Shortly after TET came into force, it attracted substantial legal challenges. Various teachers, professional bodies, and educational institutions questioned its legality, arguing that it adversely affected job security, applied retrospectively, and infringed upon constitutionally protected rights. The Supreme Court examined these objections in detail and repeatedly affirmed the legitimacy of TET. The Court ruled that setting minimum eligibility requirements for teachers is a lawful regulatory exercise aimed at protecting students' interests. It further clarified that the right to continue or enter the teaching profession is subject to compliance with prescribed qualifications, and no person can claim an unconditional right to teach without meeting such standards.

Importance of Supreme Court Decisions:

In the landmark case of *Pramati Educational and Cultural Trust v. Union of India* (2014), the Supreme Court upheld the constitutional validity of the Right to Education Act while providing limited relief to minority institutions. At the same time, the Court clearly emphasized that the obligation to maintain educational standards, particularly the quality of teachers, remains fundamental and cannot be compromised.

Across various decisions, the Supreme Court clarified that TET is not an arbitrary examination but a professional filter aimed at protecting students' interests. The judiciary recognized that weak teaching standards directly undermine the right to education guaranteed under Article 21A.

Transformation of Teaching into a Regulated Profession:

One of the most far-reaching effects of Supreme Court judgements on TET has been the transformation of teaching into a regulated profession. Teaching is no longer viewed merely as employment but as a responsibility requiring certification, competence, and ethical conduct.

The Court's endorsement of TET placed teaching on par with professions such as law and medicine, where entry is regulated to protect public interest. This judicial recognition has enhanced

the dignity and credibility of teachers in society.

Impact on Teacher Recruitment Processes:

The mandatory nature of TET has significantly altered recruitment procedures. Appointments in government and aided schools are now based on objective criteria rather than discretion. This has reduced favoritism, political interference, and regional disparities.

The Supreme Court's insistence on merit-based recruitment has strengthened transparency and public trust. Teachers are now selected based on demonstrated ability, ensuring fairness and uniformity across states.

Effect on In-Service Teachers:

In-service teachers appointed before the introduction of TET faced unique challenges. Many were required to qualify TET within a fixed timeframe to continue their service.

While acknowledging the anxiety and hardship caused, the Supreme Court maintained that professional continuity cannot override students' right to quality education. The Court allowed reasonable relaxation in timelines but refused to compromise on standards.

Professional Growth and Skill Enhancement:

TET-related judgements have encouraged teachers to engage in continuous learning. Teachers increasingly participate in training programs, academic workshops, and digital learning initiatives.

This emphasis on professional growth has helped teachers adapt to modern pedagogical practices, inclusive education principles, and learner-centered methodologies.

Changes in Classroom Dynamics:

The impact of TET is also visible inside classrooms. Teachers who prepare for TET develop a stronger understanding of child psychology, assessment strategies, and differentiated instruction. Classrooms are gradually shifting from teacher-dominated instruction to interactive and participatory learning environments. This change supports better learning outcomes and student engagement.

Accountability and Ethical Responsibility:

The Supreme Court's stance on TET has introduced greater accountability in the teaching profession. Teachers are now expected to justify their role through competence rather than tenure alone.

This accountability reinforces ethical responsibility and strengthens the relationship between teachers, students, and society.

Challenges and Criticism:

Despite its advantages, TET has drawn criticism. Teachers from rural and disadvantaged backgrounds often struggle due to lack of access to quality preparation resources.

Language barriers, examination stress, and repeated attempts have affected morale. The

Supreme Court acknowledged these concerns but emphasized that support systems, not dilution of standards, are the appropriate response.

Impact on Teacher Education Institutions:

Teacher training institutions have been compelled to realign their curricula with TET requirements. Greater emphasis is placed on pedagogy, assessment techniques, and inclusive education.

Judicial oversight has indirectly improved institutional accountability and academic rigor in teacher education programs.

Balancing Teachers' Rights and Students' Interests:

A defining feature of Supreme Court judgements on TET is the balance struck between teachers' service rights and students' educational interests. The Court clarified that professional standards enhance, rather than diminish, teachers' dignity.

The judiciary consistently prioritized the larger public interest, recognizing education as a transformative social tool.

Long-Term Implications for the Teaching Profession:

Over time, TET has contributed to a shift in professional culture. Teachers increasingly accept qualification exams as part of career progression. The profession has become more competitive, respected, and aligned with national educational goals.

Need for Future Reforms:

While TET has strengthened entry standards, it cannot be the sole measure of teaching effectiveness. Experts advocate integrating classroom observation, mentoring, and continuous assessment. The Supreme Court has indicated that regulatory frameworks must evolve to address emerging educational challenges.

Future Outlook:

Judicial interpretation of TET will continue to shape the future of teaching in India. Technology-based assessments, blended training models, and performance-linked promotions may define the next phase of reforms. Teachers will be expected to balance professional competence with constitutional values and social responsibility.

Conclusion:

The Supreme Court's judgements on TET have fundamentally reshaped the teaching profession in India. By affirming TET as a mandatory qualification, the judiciary has strengthened quality, accountability, and professionalism.

Although challenges remain, these judgements serve the long-term objective of delivering meaningful education. The Supreme Court has ensured that teachers remain central to the constitutional promise of equality, development, and social justice.

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