

# Clear Kota, Get Into IIT - And Then It Can All Go Terribly Wrong



The recent spate of suicides of students enrolled in coaching classes in Kota - 3 in 5 days - should serve as a wake-up call for all stakeholders. In a recent blog, I mentioned the things that make life hellish for so many young people who are pushed into coaching institutes because of peer pressure, parental expectations and the dream of humongous pay packages.

Life at coaching institutes consists of a regimented daily routine, with exclusive focus on studying; the fear of failure reduces relaxation time to almost zero: students study when in class and when outside as well, copying borrowed notes, finishing reams of homework. Many students watch video tutorials and do exercises provided by correspondence courses or other coaching institutes. This "always on" state of life and the sheer monotony of this routine extend through coaching courses that run between 2 to 4 years and can cost around Rs. 2 lakh per annum. Peer pressure discourages students from hanging out; social opprobrium awaits those found indulging in "distractions" with them being judged non-serious and insincere. A reporter from "The Indian Express" who monitored a student helpline in Kota lists the four dominant emotions experienced by students as relentless pressure, shame of failure, guilt of letting parents down and trauma of slipping behind.

Hyper-competitiveness keeps adrenaline levels constantly high. Except for a small minority that top classes, all others live in a constant state of

disappointment; feelings of inadequacy and worthlessness accumulate over time leading to persistent low self-worth. A blog opens tersely with, "No one was your friend here, they were competition. You didn't go to Kota to make friends."

Students are routinely sorted into elite and non-elite sections (the former get the bulk of attention in a bid to maximize the number of successful aspirants); a reward and punishment system relying on scolding's, taunts and reprimands to an extent which would be considered harassment in any conventional educational environment. A heartfelt blog says, "The topmost elite batches would get the elite teachers, the best of everything, and be fuelled (or brainwashed, I should say) more and more to crack the JEE with flying colours. As we descend down the levels of the hierarchy, we find the competence diminishing, the skills of teachers lessening and the pressure of reaching the elite batches increasing."

And God forbid if a student has no interest or aptitude for science and mathematics. Krithi Tripathi committed suicide in Kota in 2016 and she wrote, in her departing note, "I had interest in astrophysics and quantum physics and would have done a BSc...I still love writing, English, history (sic)... and they are capable of exciting me in the darkest times..." There are many like her who do not want to be engineers; yet, they find themselves "locked" into a miserable existence.

Most parents are not sympathetic to the travails and torture of the coaching experience, and advise staying the course for the goodies that will come their way once admission into the IITs is managed. Especially in coaching cities populated by aspirants from small towns and rural areas this, parental pressure can be severe due to a curious mix of feudal control over children's lives, incapacity to comprehend the nature of professional education, and the great financial risks they may have taken to fund the coaching (loans, debts and mortgages).

In 2015, coaching guidelines were issued by the Kota Collector, stressing the need for extra-curricular activities for students, mandatory counselling sessions for students and parents, as also parent-teacher meetings, establishment of helplines and giving students free time. After the recent suicides, these guidelines are being talked of again. But it is impossible to make life in a coaching institute stress-free - the problem is too deep rooted and complex. It is ironic that the lack of easy solutions to this hard problem has led to a focus on the tools that students can use to commit suicide - making ceiling fans suicide-proof.

Coaching classes should be licensed under stringent conditions including the quality of infrastructure, teachers' qualifications, capping of fees,

penalties for misleading advertisements (especially those with student photographs), banning of segregation of students based on performance ("elite sections"), and outlawing practices such as cash awards for students who crack the JEE. Counselling of parents and students at the time of admission should be mandatory, followed by signing of clear and comprehensible contracts between the institute and parents, which explain the possibility of not getting admission into the target institutions. Counsellors should also facilitate exit routes for student wanting to quit midway by emphasizing to parents what their children are going through and what their actual aspirations, aptitudes and interests are. Implementing these will be tough; but they are necessary control measures.

Even if you make it, the worst isn't necessarily behind you. The happy picture of smiling toppers entering IITs in different parts of the country is quite deceptive - many of the 16-17-year-olds arrive with the baggage of total exhaustion, a fallout of the damage and trauma caused by the grind and slog of coaching classes.

As a professor who has taught at IIT for nearly three decades, I believe that the exhaustion or burnout we confront in these new students can be traced to the ingredients that make up the "mental mix" typical of the coaching class environment. When they enter an IIT, "having made it", many students rebound into relaxation mode and immerse themselves into a world of video games, internet browsing, streamed movies and TV shows.

It's combined with their struggle to adapt to learning in a whole new way. Coaching classes almost exclusively focus on problem-solving. The teaching style revolves around taking a brief look at a concept followed by intensive and long sessions of solving related problems. The objective is to make students solve so many problems so that anything that appears in the actual examination looks familiar; it's all about pattern recognition and "speed solving" as the key to getting high scores.

The goal of the whole enterprise, which is crucially built on Multiple Choice Questions (MCQs), is how to "strategically" eliminate the wrong answers (rather than find the right answer) in the shortest possible time. Various tricks are taught to accomplish this. So students get the right answer without clearly knowing why it is correct. Even conceptual material is taught in the BuzzFeed style of "six laws that govern chemical reactions"!

The "used to-ness" to MCQ type of learning and examinations then becomes a barrier to learning inside the IITs. "4-choice" questions, pattern recognition, "speed solving" are not of much use. Combined with

the consequences of mental burnout, all of this leads to low interest in studying, the use of unfair and unethical means including copying and plagiarism and low motivation. The deepest injury is in the form of loss of creativity, curiosity, and analytical ability minds numbed by years of pattern/rote learning and testing are hard to retrain to think afresh and "get out of the box".

The decline in the "quality" of the bulk of incoming students is real.

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