

Perspective

Kota suicides for National Eligibility cum Entrance Test—A problem demanding urgent attention

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Student suicide has become an issue so big that even the Prime Minister had to intervene and take matter into his own hands and conduct *Pariksha pe charcha*. What is going on here? Why are the children so tense? Where is that happy childhood gone? Where is that adventurous and fun-filled adolescence? Does anyone know that in 2019, as many as 7% of all deaths by suicide were in students? According to the National Crime Records Bureau (NCRB), over 13,089 students died by suicide in 2021 and the number of students who committed suicide in India rose by 70% between 2011 and 2021!¹ Is this not a matter of concern?

The big change that has come about in our education system since we were in school is the undermining of the regular schooling system and the extraordinary importance that is being given to the coaching classes today. Schooling is a very important part of our lives, not so much because of the new knowledge it imparts but because of everything else that it offers to shape our personality and turn us from children into confident young adults. Education is what remains in us after we have forgotten everything that we had learnt inside classrooms. Now, if one takes a child out of school and puts him/her in a coaching class in Kota, far away from home, the intentions might be noble, and the child might happily agree with the decision, but we have not let his/her brain attain that level of maturity which the new life with a grueling schedule in an alien city without parental support demands. That is the nidus from where the problem starts.

These coaching classes are not cheap. Middle-class families often take bank loans—mortgaging their house or their agricultural land—and the child knows it. The coaching is intense and fiercely competitive. After some time, if the child finds the going tough and falls behind the batch toppers, his/

her anxiety level starts rising. This is an unfamiliar situation for these children. Throughout, they have been toppers in their school and even their district. They are used to success, but that success came when they were in the care of their loving parents. Here, the children are fighting a lone battle for scholastic excellence to qualify for a competitive examination and not a simple qualifying examination. A competitive examination in which only 2% get selected! Or, in other words, 98% will not be selected, will not be able to pursue their dreams, and will not be able to live up to their parents' expectations! Imagine the state of mind of these children; they are not able to keep up with the toppers and they cannot go back home! Is it in any way justifiable to put these children under so much stress that they start thinking of ending their lives?

Every child is precious. The lost child may not have qualified the Joint Entrance Exam (JEE) and become a Visheshwarraiya, may not have passed the National Eligibility cum Entrance Test (NEET) and become Christian Bernard, but he could have been the next Raja Ravi Verma or Jamini Roy, he could have become the next Uttam Kumar or Amitabh Bachchan, he could have matured into the next Shakespeare or Munshi Premchand, he could have become the next Sachin Tendulkar or Kapil Dev! How can the nation afford to lose even a single precious gem from its glorious future necklace?

Suicide is a disease

Suicide is a disease, and one doesn't commit suicide on the spur of the moment. The tension gradually builds up, the child shows definite signs:

- He/she tries to reach out to the parents, gives them hints that things are getting more and more difficult.

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- He/she becomes less attentive in class and then starts skipping classes.
- He/she starts giving away books and notes to friends with whom he/she is in competition.
- He/she starts withdrawing from friends and starts studying in solitude.

These are early signs, and parents should be able to pick up these signs; they should go to Kota to spend some quality time with these children, reassuring them, and encouraging them to do their best without an iota of worry because failing in the upcoming competitive exam will not make them useless. If there are 3000 seats for which 1,500,000 students are competing, then how can the guy in 3000th position be smart and the one in 3001 position be useless? Not being able to compete should not be interpreted as a failure. All it means is that this is not the child's chosen destiny; this is not his/her true field of interest. He/she is going to excel in some other field.

Suicide Cluster

The situation in the coaching institutes of Kota needs our urgent attention. Eighteen students committed suicide in 2022, and in 2023 till the end of August, 24 students committed suicides. The US Center for Disease Control and Prevention defines a group of suicides or, suicide attempts or self-harm events that occur close together in time and space than normally expected in a given community as "Suicide Cluster." Kota coaching classes should surely qualify to be labeled as a suicide cluster. One person's suicide due to circumstances and the publicity around it triggers the risk of suicide ideation, suicide attempt, and death by suicide of others; this is surely a contagion. This contagion affects the most immature, the most vulnerable, and the most hyper-ambitious, leading to suicide clusters. Failure in examination was listed as the cause of suicide in 1,673 cases in 2021. Failure in examination was the reported reason for suicide in 1.2% of students, and suicide clusters have been reported in Kota, Thrissur, and Chennai as these cities are famous for their coaching institutes targeting competitive professional examinations.²

So what can be done about this?

This is a serious problem and addressing it requires a multipronged approach. There are specific things which parents, coaching teachers, coaching institutes, policy-makers, job recruiters, and society should be doing to put a stop to this menace.

Parents

The parents should educate themselves. The world changed a long while back, and medicine and engineering

are not the only two professions for earning a decent livelihood. The fact is that doctors in India do not earn much, and some can't even afford to retire. There are far fewer fabulously rich doctors with ranches and private planes than the number of superstars in Bollywood. Engineers are so many that they have either branched out into sales and management or are unemployed. But there are opportunities galore for your children, as many more industries are prospering and flourishing in India like sports, business and finance, real estate, advertisement, entertainment, research, education, biotechnology, and travel and tourism. There is enormous scope for attaining dizzying heights of success in all these spheres, and most certainly earn a decent living and lead a respectable life. So please stop imposing our dreams on the children. They surely deserve better parenting. The authoritative parenting style, which fosters a supportive and communicative environment, may help students handle the stresses of competitive exams more effectively. In contrast, authoritarian or neglectful parenting styles may contribute to higher levels of stress and anxiety, potentially leading to suicidal ideation in highly pressured environments like Kota's coaching centers.³

Once a child is admitted in a coaching center in Kota, the responsible parents should remain in close touch and do a video call at least once a day. It's advised that the parents talk to them less and listen to them more. It's important to pick up the first and the faintest hint of concern or anguish in their voice and leave everything and reach out to them. If the child wants to quit, it is important to respect their decision and not to make them feel guilty about it. They have tried their best, and now they want to go home and try something else; so encourage them at every step.

Coaching Teachers

The teachers at the coaching center should remember that their role doesn't end in the coaching class. They are actually a foster parent for the child, and so they identify the signs of concern in a vulnerable child and have a heart-to-heart conversation with them. They should also decide whether the parents should be informed and do so well in time. They will soon come to know the child and perhaps be the first person to realize whether the child has the aptitude for the chosen field. They should give unbiased feedback to the parents and suggest other alternative career options. They should do the psychological autopsy where the student's state of mind and stream of thoughts are picked up ahead of the tragedy. The "Gatekeeper Training Program" should be initiated where teachers are trained to identify the students at risk by teaching them the signs of the suicidal tendency.

Coaching Centers

Kota is now home to a INR 60 billion coaching industry. The fact that this coaching is a business enterprise is perfectly understandable, but business should be conducted fairly and not “at any cost.” They are competing with other coaching centers in attracting children from all over the country with glossy advertisements, attractive social media pop-ups, and enticing phone calls all that is acceptable. But along with weaving the dreams of a golden future, which even they know is there for only 2% of their students, have they thought what will happen to the remaining 98%? Are they offering them other bail-out career options?

Within two months, they are in a position to identify a small subgroup of excellent performers, and these centers put them in a STAR batch and put all their energies in teaching this group how to crack the coming competitive examination. But what is happening with the mediocre and the tailenders? They should put in extra effort with the mediocre students so that they also could have an equal chance of going through and achieve a level playing field to score. And, even more importantly, these coaching centers should be telling the parents of the tailenders that they are wasting their time in this field and they should seek different pastures. Encouraging the meritorious with scholarships is good, but unnecessarily fleecing the parents of the tailenders, and wasting the parent's money and the child's time can surely not be honorable.⁴

Policy-makers

Our people in the Department of Education must think why is it that only a bunch of Indian Institutes of Technology (IITs), Indian Institutes of Management (IIMs), and medical colleges in the country are considered premier institutes, worthy of aspiration of so many students? Why are other educational institutions not equally good? What is being done to improve their standard and their reputation? Why are overseas educational institutes of excellence not opening campuses in India? Post liberalization in 1991, we opened our automobile sector and the inefficient perished, but the industry flourished, and Indian companies are today purchasing even overseas automobile companies. When will the education sector see a similar liberalization? Let the mediocre institutions perish and let the best prosper.⁵

Job recruiters

We always wonder why a company would need a B.Tech (Civil/Mechanical Engineering) and MBA to sell medicines, hire people for a call center, or plan holidays in a travel agency. How is her/his civil or mechanical engineering degree being used? If the corporates go for recruitment to only engineering

and management institutes even for jobs that do not require the skills taught there, then who will recruit the students passing out of degree colleges and universities? Surely they are not second-class citizens, but these job recruiters are making every effort to segregate society, and that too quite unnecessarily. This smart B.Tech, MBAs will skip from job to job for their career progress, which they should, but the institutions hiring them will suffer.

Students

The students should accept that life is a struggle. Qualifying and competitive examinations are two different animals: the former is docile, domestic, and a pet, the latter is ferocious, wild, and dangerous. One may not be a good lion trainer, but one can surely be an excellent wildlife conservationist. Not being among the 1–2% of the students who cracked NEET or JEE does not reduce the worth of students.

Failure, disappointment, and unfairness are all stepping stones of success. Not qualifying in NEET is certainly not time wasted or dreams shattered. It is just a nudge—telling the students to continue working to the best of their ability, but now in a different direction. This failure will make them battle hard in the future. The hard work they put in for the lost attempt in one career will prepare them better for an alternate career. In life, one must have a plan B and a plan C because the success of plan A is not guaranteed. The bottom line is that being an excellent car salesman is any day better than being a lousy surgeon! A recent study concluded that academic stress among medical students and residents and marital discord among physicians were the most noticeable reasons for suicide. The reported risk factors for suicide were mental health problems, negative or traumatic familiar issues, academic stress, social/lifestyle factors, violence, economic distress, and relationship factor.⁶ In a cross-sectional study, stress levels were found to be more prevalent in female students, 12th class students, those belonging to urban and middle-class backgrounds, and those whose stream was chosen by their parents.⁷

Last, it's important to remember that life is precious. Every student in a coaching center may have dreams, but they are also the dreams of many. If one has hit rock bottom today, then look at the brighter side, they can only go up now. So it's important to not abandon hope and not to end up doing anything stupid.

CONCLUSION

Suicide is not about a child losing hope and quitting life. It is not just loss of precious life, but the loss of hopes and dreams of a family and loss of the unknown and unexplored

talent that could have added infinite value to our society, to our nation, and to our world. It is time we wake up to this challenge and confront it head on.

Authors' contributions

KB and NB: Study conception and design; SB and NB: Data collection; KB, NB AND SB: Analysis and interpretation; KB, NB AND SB: Manuscript preparation.

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