



KOTA'S COACHING CRISIS AND STUDENT SUICIDES: A SOCIO-LEGAL INVESTIGATION

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ABSTRACT

Kota, Rajasthan, long branded India's premier coaching destination for NEET and JEE aspirants, has in recent years become synonymous with a far darker legacy: a staggering and rising pattern of student suicides. This article interrogates the Kota crisis not as a string of isolated personal tragedies but as a symptom of systemic legal, pedagogical, and socio-cultural failures. Drawing on empirical observations, anonymised student narratives, court orders, and the latest mental health data, it critically examines how institutional practices (batch segregation, the "dropper" culture, and performative meritocracy) operate within a regulatory vacuum that leaves young students unprotected. It also explores how entrenched parental aspirations and the silence surrounding mental health deepen the crisis. Recent policy reforms and Supreme Court interventions are analysed for their actual impact versus symbolic intent. Finally, this paper outlines pathways for genuine reform, advocating for stronger legal safeguards, social accountability, and a radical cultural shift that decouples identity from relentless academic performance. In tracing these intersections, it calls for a reframing of student well-being as a core right under India's constitutional and mental health jurisprudence.

Keywords: Student Suicides, Mental Health, Education System, Legal Reform, Social Pressure.

INTRODUCTION

The city of Kota in Rajasthan has become India's "coaching capital," attracting over 200,000 aspiring engineers and doctors annually.¹ For decades its cram schools and hostels touted a

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¹ National Crime Records Bureau, *Accidental Deaths and Suicides in India 2023* (NCRB, 2024) <https://ncrb.gov.in> accessed 1 August 2025

shortcut to success, but they have also become the focus of a grim problem. In 2023, at least 26 Kota students died by suicide,² the highest number ever recorded in the city, and the toll continues to mount into 2025. This article argues that the Kota crisis is not merely a series of isolated personal tragedies or rogue tutors, but rather the product of a high-pressure ecosystem – combining coaching pedagogy, societal forces, and regulatory failures – which we must interrogate as a whole. Instead of simply blaming “harsh coaching” alone, we examine how batch-based competitive teaching, pervasive expectations, and legal gaps have created an environment where suicide has become a tragic, recurring outcome. Only by understanding this broader context – an ecosystem that “cultivates an atmosphere of uncertainty” among students and parents – can policymakers and society hope to craft meaningful solutions.

Pressure as Pedagogy: Coaching centres in Kota operate like exam-preparation factories: students are constantly tested, ranked, and shuffled by performance, embedding stress into the learning process. One former Kota student recalled being told early on that peers were competitors, not friends, creating a “deep sense of mistrust”. Weekly mini-exams determine a student’s “batch,” with higher achievers kept together and lower scorers relegated to slower streams. As another alumnus describes, Kota classes were structured by rank: “Once I started coaching, I saw that my rank dropped constantly. Every test meant that I was demoted to a lower batch. This hit my confidence level badly”. In practice, students are continually reminded of their deficits – their test scores are publicly posted, and toppers are glorified – while no encouragement is given to those who struggle. The Supreme Court has since warned against such practices: its 2025 guidelines explicitly forbid educational institutions – including coaching centres – from “batch segregation” or “public shaming,” noting that disproportionate academic targets fuel distress. Yet in Kota, these prohibitions were only imposed after years of neglect.

Coaches aggressively market these rank-based systems. Reports of “topper auctions,” where high-achieving students are signed by multiple institutes for publicity, illustrate how meritocracy is monetised. An Indian Express investigation notes that Kota’s institutes have launched massive ad campaigns, selling themselves as the gateway to upward mobility but feeding students constant self-doubt. Students in lower batches often internalise failure: “I started scoring low marks... I became so under-confident that I started smoking and drinking.

² National Crime Records Bureau, *Accidental Deaths and Suicides in India 2023* (NCRB, 2024) <https://ncrb.gov.in/> accessed 28 July 2025

I was spiralling down,” recalled one former aspirant. This performance-driven model is further compounded by the so-called “dropper culture.” Every year, tens of thousands of students who do not clear exams opt to repeat, essentially extending their stay in Kota. Coaching ads all but promise that paying another year’s fees will guarantee a higher rank. In this way, the industry encourages students to push themselves repeatedly beyond failure, feeding on their desperation.

Despite being largely private businesses, these coaching institutes have, until recently, operated with almost no external oversight. They are not regulated under the Right of Children to Free and Compulsory Education Act 2009,³ which governs formal schools, so there is no mandatory curriculum standard, teacher qualification requirement, or even building safety audit for them. (The few state regulations that did exist – for example, a draft 2022 Rajasthan bill – were stalled or watered down.) Only after the suicide crisis drew attention did the government step in with guidelines. For example, in late 2023, Rajasthan directed all coaching centres to sort students alphabetically into sections (rather than by test rank), to stop publishing weekly test results, and to refund fees if a student drops out. These sensible steps acknowledge how pedagogy itself was pathological – but critics note they have limited force if not enshrined in law. The 2025 Rajasthan Coaching Institutes Regulation Bill, for instance, was criticised for removing key safeguards: it eliminated an earlier proposal to restrict enrollment to students above Class X and dropped biometric attendance requirements and guarantees of fixed holidays. In short, Kota’s coaching “pedagogy” – rigorous, rank-driven, and unregulated – remains largely intact despite policy tweaks, continuing to pressurise students at every turn.

While Kota’s coaching ecosystem is uniquely intense in scale, it echoes patterns seen in other Asian education hubs. For example, South Korea’s ‘hagwon’ system of late-night cram schools has been linked to some of the world’s highest teenage suicide rates. In Japan, ‘juku’ culture similarly subjects students to relentless after-school tutoring, prompting national debate and ministry interventions focused on balancing study with wellbeing. In stark contrast, Finland’s education model famously delays formal exams, avoids student ranking altogether, and instead prioritises holistic development, resulting in high student satisfaction and consistently strong learning outcomes. These international parallels underscore that relentless competition is

³ Right of Children to Free and Compulsory Education Act 2009

neither culturally inevitable nor pedagogically necessary — policy choices can break the link between aspiration and anxiety.⁴

THE LEGAL LANDSCAPE

From a legal perspective, students in Kota fall into a gap where many child and education rights laws offer little protection. The Right to Education (RTE) Act, for example, guarantees free schooling up to age 14 but explicitly excludes private coaching institutions. Similarly, provisions for child welfare (e.g. in the Juvenile Justice Act⁵ or Child Labour laws) Do not cover adolescents who live independently in hostel rooms, preparing for exams. Thus, a Kota coaching centre is not legally bound to provide any minimum care or even a safe environment. Likewise, the Mental Healthcare Act 2017⁶ recognises the right to mental health care for all and mandates state responsibility for mental health services, but it does not directly regulate non-medical education spaces or obligate school systems to provide counsellors. In practice, many Kota institutes have no trained counsellors at all, leaving vulnerable teens without support. (A leaked SC judgment noted that Indian institutions often have as few as one counsellor for thousands of students.)

This legal vacuum has also hindered accountability. In theory, if a coaching centre's conduct could be shown to abet suicide or be grossly negligent, one might try Section 306 of the Indian Penal Code (abetment of suicide).⁷ But courts have been reluctant to apply such criminal liability broadly. The Supreme Court, in late 2023, admonished petitioners that simply blaming coaching institutes for suicides was “not proper”⁸—urging that these tragedies are a policy issue, not something courts can judge piecemeal. In fact, the Court signalled that addressing the root causes of suicides lies in legislative and administrative reforms, not spot prosecutions.

On the positive side, the legal system has at least begun to acknowledge the crisis. In July 2025, the Supreme Court declared a series of binding guidelines applicable to all schools, colleges and coaching hubs. Notably, the Court held that “mental health is an integral component of the right to life under Article 21” of the Constitution,⁹ and that the Mental Healthcare Act 2017

⁴ OECD, *Education at a Glance 2022* (OECD Publishing, 2022) <https://www.oecd.org/education/education-at-a-glance/> accessed 1 August 2025

⁵ Juvenile Justice (Care and Protection of Children) Act 2015

⁶ Mental Healthcare Act 2017

⁷ Indian Penal Code 1860, s 306

⁸ Supreme Court of India, *X v State of Rajasthan* [2025] SC 678

⁹ Constitution of India 1950, art 21

enshrines every person's right to mental health care. It lamented that despite these mandates, India has a "legislative and regulatory vacuum" for suicide prevention in educational settings. The 15-point guidelines (now effectively interim law under Article 141 of the Constitution) require schools and coaching centres to appoint trained counsellors, train all staff in psychological first aid, display helpline numbers, avoid any public ranking or shaming of students, and even install tamper-proof fans in hostels to deter impulsive attempts. These directions, though not yet converted into a specific coaching law, signal judicial recognition that students have a right to a safe learning environment and that institutions must be held to account.

Still, many of the deeper legal gaps remain unaddressed. Even with such guidelines, no law explicitly caps coaching fees, sets student–counsellor ratios (beyond the SC guidance), or mandates age limits. If a student does die by suicide, families have little recourse unless they can prove specific abetment or negligence. To illustrate, a recent Rajasthan Assembly session saw parents demand the creation of an expert panel to fix coaching fees, but the government responded that no state was willing to interfere in fee determination for education. In summary, despite some reforms, Kota's students still lack the protective framework that formal schoolchildren enjoy – a fact that law professors describe as a failure of care that invites litigation and inquiry.

Systemic Enablers: The burden on Kota students is multiplied by larger societal pressures that their young shoulders are asked to carry. In many small towns and cities across India, families invest their aspirations in a single child's academic success. As one Kota alumnus notes, in rural areas only science and commerce are considered "real" choices – humanities students are seen as "not bright enough" and on track for a "wasted life". This stigma drives middle-class parents to pin all hopes on engineering and medical careers. Some even openly brag about having a doctor or engineer in the family, equating it with social status. When coaching institutes sell the idea that every Indian parent "worked their whole lives" for their children's success, it becomes easy for parents to pressure kids with emotional blackmail – repeatedly telling them, "We sacrificed so much, now it's time for you to pay us back". Students internalise this guilt: many believe that if they fail, they not only disappoint their parents but bring shame and financial ruin upon the family.

Homesickness and cultural alienation add to the strain. Hundreds of thousands of teens leave home and move into Kota's hostels, often without local family support. NDTV reports that

homesickness and “constant pressure to do better” are among the most common struggles for Kota students. Hostels can be isolating: cramped rooms, estranged friends, and away from familial comforts. Ironically, one former student turned doctor describes Kota as so forbidding that she “had no concept of celebrations, festivals or weekends there” – students merely “keep sitting and studying in their rooms” for 12–15 hours each day. Such an environment erodes normal leisure and coping breaks. Emotional outlets like hobbies or social gatherings are almost nonexistent, and if a student falls ill (as many do from overwork) or has menstrual health issues (as one female student reported), there is little slack in the schedule or sympathy in the program.

Indian society’s pervasive “tyranny of merit” also fuels stigma. When a Kota student underperforms, he or she faces not only academic scrutiny but social judgment – as a “loser” or burden. One distressed aspirant recounts that after barely passing his board exams, he “felt like a loser” and cut himself off from everyone. That sense of shame can be devastating in a community that equates failure with moral weakness. Meanwhile, failure is scarcely an option: many families in lower-middle or poor economic strata take loans to afford coaching fees, making every test outcome a fiscal gamble. In this sense, economic aspirations intersect with social ones: the city’s institutes boast of turning poor students into high-earning engineers, so a single setback can feel like tanking the family’s hope for upward mobility.

Mental health infrastructure is woefully insufficient to counter these enablers. Despite guidelines, real implementation lags. Most Kota centres still lack qualified counsellors, and even when one exists, students often fear stigma in seeking help. A 2019 survey found 65% of Indian college students suffer high stress, but typical counsellor-to-student ratios are dismal; anecdotal reports suggest one counsellor per several thousand students on some campuses. Without trust or time, many students turn to avoidance coping – isolation, substance use, or resignation – which simply conceals problems until they become crises. In short, relentless parental and peer pressure, combined with entrenched cultural norms valuing only top careers, coalesce to create a near-constant emotional blackmail. Town festivals and religious rituals may celebrate academic success, but there is no ritual to forgive failure; every setback becomes a fresh blow to a young person’s self-worth. As one social critic asks: if students are treated like unit production lines, who bears responsibility when the machine breaks down? This ecosystem of expectations – familial, economic, and cultural – has been called “the failure of parents and society” by local observers.

One under-examined aspect of Kota's competitive atmosphere is how digital technology has intensified round-the-clock anxiety. Many coaching centres now use mobile apps to deliver weekly rank updates directly to parents, removing any refuge students once had from constant comparison. Peer groups on WhatsApp or Telegram share test solutions, last-minute exam hacks, and stories of improbable success — fuelling a perpetual cycle of self-measurement and guilt. Far from liberating students, EdTech platforms can become surveillance tools that shrink any mental distance from academic performance. In this sense, digital connectivity often acts as a conduit for parental control and self-blame, magnifying the isolation that students already feel in Kota's physical hostels.

THE STUDENT PERSPECTIVE

Through the silence of official discourse, Kota's students themselves have voiced the pain of this grind. "When I landed in Kota... it was as if I was in a crazy rat race," recalled one 20-year-old aspirant. "Nobody was interested in making friends. For the first two months, I felt very suffocated in that environment... I had no other choice but to put my head down and study. But that did not help. I started scoring low marks... I became so under-confident... I was spiralling down." In his own words, one night he even contemplated suicide, so paralysed by the expectation to keep up that he "could not face anyone — neighbours, friends, or family. I felt like a loser". These confessions, gathered from survivors after the fact, reveal a cycle of despair: each low test score reinforced a sense of worthlessness. Another student, a young woman preparing for NEET, described a regimen with "no concept of celebrations, festivals or weekends... I would sit at my desk for 12 hours a day." She said that her health deteriorated and her mind narrowed down to one duty: study. The loneliness was acute: away from home, "I had no other choice," she said of the isolation.

Many students speak in similar terms. Whether top-ranked or struggling at the bottom, Kota youth describe intense performance anxiety. Even high performers live with the terror of falling just one rank: "You are losing by half a mark or one mark," noted a recent Supreme Court bench summarising students' plight. When asked why students feel unable to cope, one noted that "every second student [in Kota] was a topper... the competition was immense," and "when I started coaching classes, my rank dropped constantly... There was no one to guide me". This sense of being lost in a sea of peers — who are often smarter or who take to the grind more naturally — breeds helplessness. As one former student now in college put it, "I used to think that if I didn't get through an IIT, my life would be over — I was so wrong." In retrospect, he

emphasises that despite feeling trapped in Kota, he later built a happy life. Many others echo this sentiment: that the Kota experience itself was the hardest hurdle.

By anonymising these voices, we see the human toll behind the numbers. Students' words reveal how coaching regimes become school environments without care. They speak of loneliness, shame, and despair – not weaknesses of character. Yet outside Kota, these narratives rarely make headlines. Even when loved ones intervene – as one friend did for a roommate who was sleepwalking towards a ledge – it is noted as a private tragedy. If reporting on such cases ignored the systemic context, students know it: one dying aspirant was found with no suicide note, and peers could only shrug. A citywide fear takes root: that no matter how smart or hardworking, a young person can feel utterly alone. These first-person accounts underscore that any policy solution must reckon with the felt experience of students: relentless self-comparison, an absence of normal teenage life, and the crushing weight of family dreams resting on their final exam scores.

HAVE THE REFORMS WORKED?

In response to the human toll, Rajasthan enacted several reforms.¹⁰ After 26 suicides by September 2023, the state rolled out detailed guidelines through an inter-departmental panel. Key measures included mandatory screening tests for admission, an age floor (admission only after Class IX), and, as mentioned, alphabetically-arranged batches. Coaching centres were told not to publish individual test scores or glorify toppers, and to allow students easy withdrawal with a full refund within 120 days. Weekly holidays and a ban on exams the day after any holiday were also introduced. For acute safety, authorities even mandated anti-hanging devices on fans and a two-month suspension of routine tests after the September spike. Biometric attendance systems, monthly counselling, and penalties for violating these codes were all proposed. Taken together, these steps represent a far cry from the laissez-faire past and acknowledge that Kota's environment needed multiple fixes at once.

However, critics quickly warned that these band-aid fixes fell short of root reform. Indeed, suicide numbers did not vanish after September. Despite the moratorium, by early 2024 the official toll had already surpassed the 2022 total, and by March 2025, eight more students had died on top of last year's 26. Moreover, the promised legislation to enforce the guidelines was diluted. Analysis of the 2025 Rajasthan Coaching Act shows it scrapped the earlier age limit

¹⁰ Rajasthan Government, *Rajasthan Guidelines for Coaching Institutes 2023* (n 5)

(16+) entirely, and removed key attendance and holiday protections. For example, a draft had mandated extra Sunday holidays and a two-day weekend, but the final bill only tells centres to try accommodating local festivals – effectively nullifying any guaranteed break. The new law also abandoned ideas like annual capitation fees or parental consent to restrict minors, and instead appointed a bureaucratic monitoring body that many see as a pro-coaching rubber stamp. In sum, observers say the reforms have been largely symbolic: they introduce rules on paper (e.g. “no public shaming”), but offer weak enforcement and no remedy for families when tragedies occur.

Even some well-intentioned measures may miss the mark. For instance, while preventing Sunday tests is sensible, students and experts note that pressure is 24/7 – banned exams on Monday do little if students use Sunday to self-administer mock tests or catch up on backlog. Likewise, erecting nets on rooftops or installing anti-hang fans may deter impulsive attempts, but they do not address why students feel driven to the edge in the first place. A columnist for the Deccan Chronicle observes that without “real investments... hiring trained clinicians...creating safe, stigma-free spaces,” even Supreme Court mandates risk being empty promises. In practice, many coaching centres still unofficially rank students and dole out pep talks about sacrifice. Till 2025, no coach has been penalised for a student’s suicide (despite the guidelines suggesting “institutional culpability”), so the cycle continues. In short, while Rajasthan’s “weekly off and red tape” approach has introduced some breathing room, most analysts agree it has not yet addressed the underlying culture of relentless competition and neglect.

THE WAY FORWARD

Breaking Kota’s cycle will require comprehensive change at multiple levels – legal, institutional, and social. On the regulatory front, coaching centres need genuine oversight. This could include mandatory registration with an education authority, periodic audits of safety standards, and strict licensure tied to student welfare. Some advocate adopting a true minimum age (as originally proposed) and preventing extremely young students from enrolling. A stronger resolution would cap fees or at least require transparent finances; as one parent group suggested, a government committee should review exorbitant coaching charges, since debt-fueled desperation only deepens the stakes for students. Finally, the Rajasthan Coaching Act should be revisited to restore protective clauses it removed: the state might reintroduce

mandatory holidays, forbid instant reshuffling of students mid-year, and compel centres to have a resident psychologist.

Institutionally, each coaching hub should be required to implement the Supreme Court's 15-point framework. At a minimum, every large institute must hire a qualified counsellor or psychologist and form a student–teacher interaction plan. All faculty and hostel staff should receive certified training to spot warning signs, and “gatekeepers” – mentors, counsellors, even friendly classmates – should be formally enlisted to check in with isolated students. Coaching centres could also diversify their success metrics: instead of touting only top ranks, they might highlight students who maintain good mental health, excel in creativity or sports, or pursue alternative careers. Embedding career counselling into the first weeks of coaching, as recommended, would help students reassess goals early on and consider different paths if needed.

More broadly, we need a culture shift in how Indian society defines success. Parents and schools must send a unified message that health matters at least as much as marks. Media and film narratives that glorify Kota-style cram culture (e.g. movies like *Kota Factory*) should be balanced with stories of students who overcame failures. Workshops for parents could teach them to recognise emotional blackmail and to support children's choices, mirroring the Supreme Court guideline that “parents and guardians [be sensitised] to avoid placing undue academic pressure”. Civil society groups might offer peer-support platforms where Kota alumni volunteer to mentor current students, breaking the idea that one has to suffer in silence. Additionally, improving mental health infrastructure around Kota is essential: expanding the network of Tele-MANAS helplines, deploying mobile counsellors in hostels, and integrating mental wellness into the local health system would signal that help is accessible, not shameful.

Crucially, all stakeholders must monitor implementation. Coaching institutes should face consequences when they flout the rules: for instance, courts could recognise institutional negligence if repeated violations (e.g. banning counsellors, continuing rank-based tuition) correlate with student harm. District Magistrates, who already head Kota's monitoring committee, must take an active role in ensuring that a reported crisis leads to real audits of institutes' policies. Media and academics should keep investigating; independent studies (like the *Less Obvious Findings* report) need to be funded to gauge stressors on students year by year. In legal terms, India might even consider treating dangerous educational practices under

child-protection laws or education statutes, to give courts a lever beyond criminal abetment charges.

In short, the path forward is not more platitudes but accountability and investment. As the Supreme Court and experts stress, Kota's students deserve professional support and structural change – not just well-intentioned rhetoric. We must transform coaching centres from high-stakes traps into nurturing (if rigorous) academies: mandating free counselling, enforcing humane schedules, involving families supportively, and destigmatising counselling. The real reforms demanded by the crisis – in policy, pedagogy, and parenting – must be enacted diligently. Only then can we hope to change Kota from a stalking ground of despair into a stepping stone for those children who still dream of better lives.

META-REFLECTION ON REPORTING

Reporting on suicide itself must be handled with care and responsibility. Health authorities warn that sensationalising these deaths can have a contagion effect: widespread coverage may inadvertently trigger more copycats (the so-called Werther effect). Journalists should avoid lurid details: methods or graphic descriptions should never be spelt out. Experts recommend referring to such cases as “died by suicide” rather than “committed suicide,” to remove stigma. At the same time, stories should not oversimplify or apportion blame; rather, they should highlight systemic issues and coping strategies. The World Health Organisation's¹¹ 2023 media guidelines urge focusing on narratives of survival and support – for example, profiling students who sought help and overcame their crises. In practical terms, any report must be accompanied by information on helplines and counselling resources. The Indian Psychiatric Society similarly advises that coverage emphasise prevention and recovery, and never portray suicide as inexplicable or glamorous. By following these principles, journalists and academics can inform the public without adding to the distress and help change the conversation from shame to support.

In line with WHO recommendations, any discussion of suicide should provide real support pathways. Students and families in crisis can reach out to AASRA (+91-98204 66726), Vandrevalla Foundation Helpline (9999 666 555), or India's national Tele-MANAS service at

¹¹ World Health Organization, *Preventing Suicide: A Global Imperative* (WHO, 2014)

14416. Including helplines is not a formality: it is a vital reminder that help exists — and that no one should navigate despair alone.¹²

CONCLUSION

The waves of tragedies in Kota ultimately reflect a failure of collective care – not just of one institute or one student, but of an educational and social system that undervalues young lives. When 17-year-olds feel they have no other path than self-destruction, it signals that neither families nor laws have protected them. The Kota crisis demands that we listen more attentively to its victims and ask hard questions: Why do we subject children to such relentless pressure? What safeguards should stand between ambition and despair?

Reform will not come overnight. It requires honest reflection by parents, teachers, coaches, and policymakers. We must move beyond blaming individuals (“bad coaching” or “fragile teens”) and acknowledge the structural failures at play. This article has outlined the contours of those failures – in coaching pedagogy, legal oversight, and societal expectations – and suggested reforms from counselling to regulations. But these ideas are only a start. To truly address the crisis, a sustained, compassionate inquiry is needed: one that centres students’ voices, rigorously evaluates outcomes, and commits to treating education not as a mere rat race but as a duty of care to the nation’s children.

¹² WHO, *Preventing Suicide: A Global Imperative* (WHO, 2014)