

EVA STALIN IAS ACADEMY

12/24, Muthuranga Mudali St, next to Deepam Hospital,
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A cry for help, a call for reflection and action

The current socio-academic climate in India raises significant concerns in the context of the nurturing of students. The transformation of socio-economic dynamics is not only instilling a sense of despondency among youth but is also becoming a cause for stress in their academic endeavours. This often causes students to go into a spiral, manifesting itself tragically in a spate of suicides.

Take for example, reports of a note that a teenager from Bihar wrote before fading away in Kota, Rajasthan (the hub of tuition/coaching). The stress that the child was facing was evident in the reference to the 'Joint Entrance Examination' (JEE) that the child was preparing for. In 2023, there were reports of youngsters preparing for various competitive exams in Kota ending their lives. Based on police records, 15 students faded away in 2022; 18 in 2019 and 20 in 2018. There was negligible data during the COVID-19 pandemic years of 2020-21 when traditional coaching centres were either closed or operated virtually.

Coaching and student welfare in Kota

Every year, over 2,00,000 aspirants from every corner of India flock to Kota in pursuit of 'academic excellence', to prepare rigorously for 'coveted' entrance examinations such as the JEE and the National Eligibility-cum-Entrance Test (NEET), the gateways to engineering and medical education in India, respectively. Enrolling in its residential coaching institutes, they ensure that Kota's economy thrives – an impressive annual revenue of "approximately ₹10,000 crore" due to these educational pursuits.

While the children pursue their goals, the management of these institutes have taken several significant, yet sombre, measures. Hostels have now been equipped with 'anti-suicide features' that include devices fixed to ceiling fans to prevent children from harming themselves and iron grills across balconies and passage ways. However, it is difficult to maintain uniformity in the approximately 25,000 paying guest accommodations in Kota.

In another preventive measure, the local government has stopped all routine testing in coaching institutes for over two months as a temporary measure. Hostel staff are also being trained and prepared to deal with the welfare of their wards. In the push towards professional development there is specialised training in mess administration, psychological support, behavioural counselling and an emphasis on overall student welfare. The Kota police have pushed hostel wardens to become more proactive by endorsing campaigns such as "darwaze pe



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The unyielding quest for scholastic distinction often causes many an Indian student to go into a spiral, with tragic outcomes

darwaze pe knock on door," while kitchen workers and meal service providers have been encouraged to alert authorities immediately if they notice students missing their meals or leaving their food untouched.

In 2022, according to data in the "Accidental Deaths and Suicides in India 2022" report by the National Crime Records Bureau (NCRB), over 13,044 Indian students ended their lives – 7.6% of the total suicide fatalities in that year. Another grim statistic was that the number of suicides (students) rose from 10,335 in 2019, to 12,526 in 2020, to 13,089 in 2021. As in NCRB data (2018), nearly 95,000 students faded away between 2007-18.

There is also another grim fact. Over half of India's populace, specifically 53.7%, is made up of individuals under the age of 25. However, a significant barrier to their entry into the labour force is widespread deficiency in essential skills. The last decade has seen a distressing rise in student suicides, which is also connected to a lack of viable job opportunities.

The education system

In contemporary India, the lack of (suitable) job opportunities, a limited number of seats in government institutions and the high fees charged in private institutions have all created a climate where there is intense competition. This is deeply troubling and an issue that requires urgent attention. The relentless strain of competition plays on the young student, which is made worse by the pressures imposed on the child by parents without understanding their child's wishes. While some are coerced, often relentlessly, into achieving the 'pinnacle' of academic excellence, others are urged to aspire for admission in a 'desired institution'. Many others face harsh criticism for failing to 'meet expectations'. When the weight of these demands proves unbearable, or their aspirations seem impossible to satisfy, some choose to escape all of this in a tragic way.

An All India Survey on Higher Education (AISHE) report (2019-20), showed that only 21.4% of colleges are under governmental administration, with 78.6% under private entities (as reported by the Union Education Ministry). A study in 2008 in *The Lancet* revealed that nearly 61% of global suicide fatalities were concentrated in Asia. Numerous families in India (especially in the middle and lower-income brackets), face financial constraints that prevent them from providing their children with supplementary educational resources such as coaching and tuition. This lack of support in turn places immense and intense pressure on students to

succeed in examinations of various kinds. A lack of success then leads to tragedy. Additionally, there are numerous instances of faculty members in institutions often chastising students for their subpar academic performance, when they should be offering encouragement and assistance instead.

Society and family expectations

In contemporary Indian society, there is a noticeable shift in family structures with a weakening of crucial connections between children and their families. This in turn impacts a child's ability to engage with their relatives. Various factors influence a child's development within the Indian context, in turn affecting social relationships. The lack of establishing strong bonds between parents and children becomes clear when parents impose their academic preferences on their child. Parental control, emotional detachment, and societal expectations contribute to the sidelining of a student's individual interests. As a result, students grapple with the hurdle of meeting parental standards, especially when they have no innate interest in the subject or course forced upon them. A feature in Indian society is the emphasis on expectations, performance, and personal interests in family interactions. These dynamics can either propel students forward through positive reinforcement or negatively affect them due to socio-economic circumstances.

The inability to satisfy parental expectations can leave young individuals feeling humiliated, dejected, desperate, and harassed. It is crucial to create an atmosphere of empathy and acceptance to cancel out any potential negative consequences for our younger generation.

The unyielding quest for scholastic distinction often overshadows the social facets of a student's existence, driving them to sacrifice interpersonal bonds and pursuits that are essential for a well-rounded persona. It is disconcerting to find young students voicing their inner turmoil on social media, signalling distress. Educational purveyors themselves fail to provide the requisite emotional scaffolding that these young minds require. Moreover, pupils from socioeconomically underserved communities are confronted with the stark actualities of endemic discrimination, thereby intensifying their hardships.

So, it becomes clear that there is an urgent need for our social infrastructure to grow more supportive and accommodative and support these young lives.

Those in distress are encouraged to seek professional help, visit counsellors or call helplines

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Set the wheels in motion for a cyclists' manifesto

Cycling in India should not just be considered as another transport issue. Contemporary western discourse on cycling is often framed within the context of decarbonising transport, and rightly so. In India, however, cycling is a matter of social justice with a transformative impact on people's lives.

Data on cycling ownership and use

Against the tide of a relentless growth of car-centric road infrastructure and an incessant increase in the ownership of motor vehicles, cycling in India has remained surprisingly resilient. Consider the household ownership of cycles over the two decades, from 1998-99 to 2019-21, using data from rounds two and five of the National Family Health Surveys, respectively. While, nationally, ownership increased only marginally, from 48% to 55%, in some States, however, the growth has been phenomenal. In Madhya Pradesh and Rajasthan, for example, the increase was from 30% to more than 75%, while in Uttar Pradesh, it was from 26% to 71%, and in West Bengal, from 53% to 79%. In comparison, population-weighted average car ownership across these four States was a measly 5.4% in 2021.

Data suggests that this increase in ownership of cycles also translates to higher use. In a working paper, a team at the Transportation Research and Injury Prevention Centre at the Indian Institute of Technology Delhi analysed the data from the three rounds of National Sample Survey Organisation surveys on household consumption on education (2007-17). Among the many indicators, this data reported how children go to school – walking, by cycle, bus, or other. We independently collected data on the implementation of bicycle distribution schemes



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Political parties
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(BDS), using Right to Information applications, when necessary. Under these schemes, different State governments provide free bicycles to children using either in-kind or in-cash transfers.

Nationally, cycling to school increased from 6.6% in 2007 to 11.2% in 2017. In rural areas, the levels nearly doubled (6.3% to 12.3%) while, in urban areas, the levels have remained stable (7.8% to 8.3%).

We found that the States that saw the greatest decadal increase in cycling to school were those where BDS had been implemented. In Bihar, for example, BDS was launched in 2006, and the level of cycling to schools quadrupled from 3.6% in 2007 to 14.2% in 2017. The Sabooj Saathi scheme in West Bengal started in 2015, and the levels there increased from 15.4% in 2014 to 27.6% in 2017 – a 12 percentage point increase over three years. The success of BDS across various States in India is a testimony to the huge latent demand for cycling.

Social outcomes

Access to cycles can have a profound impact on children's lives. Under BDS in Bihar, the State government provided funds to girls who enrolled in class nine to buy bicycles. Evaluations from Bihar and Karnataka suggest that the BDS is associated with the enrolment of girls in class nine and girls appearing for secondary school certification exams. Most importantly, these outcomes indicate that some children did not go to schools, or went there infrequently, as the schools were too far to walk to, and they could not afford a bicycle.

We recently evaluated the impact of a small-scale experiment in Bengaluru where a non-governmental organisation provided free bicycles to 170 low-income women working in

garment factories. We found that two-thirds of those who were given a bicycle, along with some training, switched to cycling to go to work. Earlier, they either walked long distances or took a bus. When we asked why they had not considered buying a bicycle before, almost half responded that they could not afford it.

For many, owning a cycle remains a luxury. It is for a similar reason that there was a jump, by 23%, in daily bus ridership after Karnataka implemented the Shakti scheme, which provides free bus travel to women. Out-of-pocket expenses can be a major barrier to transport use.

More State governments should consider implementing BDS schemes, and these should be broadened in their coverage (for example, remove the restriction to rural areas, and extend them to urban areas). There are rare cases of States that have schemes for adults, such as Uttar Pradesh, that provide free bicycles to labourers. These should be considered for large-scale implementation.

Cyclists and urban challenges

In urban areas, though, the provision of cycles will not be enough. Roads are designed in ways that make cycling an experience full of hazards. Multi-lane roads, flyovers, and wide junctions make it extremely risky for cyclists to navigate through the traffic without inviting risks. According to an estimate this writer did for Delhi, for the same distance travelled, a cyclist is 40 times more likely to be involved in a traffic fatality than a car occupant. Cities should invest in dedicated cycling infrastructure such as cycle tracks, safe and secure parking, and repair shops.

In the parliamentary elections, political parties in India have the opportunity to promise a cyclists' manifesto.