

## '100 Percent Selection Guaranteed': *Kota Factory* and Its Portrayal of Shadow Education

Devaleena Kundu, Assistant Professor, UPES, Dehradun, India, [kundudevaleena@gmail.com](mailto:kundudevaleena@gmail.com)

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Since the 1980s, Kota, Rajasthan has gradually emerged as the shadow education capital of India with an exponential rise in coaching institutes that prepare students for competitive examinations particularly in the fields of engineering and medicine. The popularity and success stories of Kota's coaching institutes have reshaped the social understanding of schooling and education to promote a model that is rigorous, intensely competitive, and even discriminatory. Against this background, this paper will examine the social expectations from and experiences of aspirants appearing for the Joint Entrance Examination (JEE) as depicted in the television series the *Kota Factory* (2019-). A coming-of-age narrative, *Kota Factory* addresses important themes of adolescent stress, relationships, and well-being. Through a close reading of the series, this paper explores how the shadow education system exploits the idea of social competitiveness and promotes a model of academic success wherein students find themselves caught up in a viciously competitive academic environment.

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## Introduction

This world is swarming with unsuccessful men with talent. Unrewarded geniuses are not geniuses, but clichés.

— Maheshwari Sir, *Kota Factory* (Season 2, Episode 1)

Shadow education is a system of parallel education that involves private tutoring aimed at improving academic performance in students. Depending on the affordability of the students and the demand for a certain kind of training, such a mode of education can range from one-on-one tutoring to large lecture halls packed with students. Stevenson and Baker (1992: 1639) coined the term ‘shadow education’ to refer to a system that involved ‘a set of educational activities that occur outside formal schooling and are designed to enhance the student’s formal school career’. The name derives from the notion that this form of academic tutoring frequently ‘mimic the mainstream’ (Bray and Lykins 2012: x). Any changes in the mainstream education model, particularly those to the syllabi, are immediately replicated in the shadow education system. Bray and Lykins (2012: 1) establish that shadow education is concerned with tutoring in academic subjects that is provided for a fee and that takes place outside standard school hours. The three main characteristics of such a system, according to Bray (2010), are (i) it is academic in nature and hence, all non-academic forms of training and education such as the creative arts and sports remain outside of the purview of shadow education; (ii) it is supplementary to the education offered by schools; and (iii) it is private and commercial, and involves the payment of required fees. Such a system operates on the principle that an individual’s prospects, particularly when it comes to employability, is strongly linked to their success in education. The purposes of shadow education, hence, are often two-fold. First, they offer remedial learning and second, they are expected to enable accelerated learning (Yung and Bray 2017).

Over the years, shadow education has seen a rapid expansion across the world. In Britain, the estimated value of this sector is said to be about £2bn (Weale 2018). A call-out initiated by the *Guardian* newspaper in the United Kingdom that drew hundreds of responses from parents, school teachers, and tutors revealed that for most parents tutoring was a ‘way of patching the gaps in their children’s education’ (Weale 2018). The U.S. has also seen a significant rise in this sector, with students increasingly opting for private tutoring and after-school classes to improve their performances in SATs and subsequently, their chances at university education (Lee et. al 2022). In Hong Kong, for instance, supplementary education is known as *bou zap* and is especially popular among students in their secondary school (Yung and Bray 2017) and its popularity is on the rise amongst primary school-goers as well as children in their kindergarten. The situation

is similar in Singapore, where shadow education is deemed to be ‘the norm’ (Tan 2017), with Singaporeans spending ‘a staggering \$1.1 billion a year on tuition’ (Yang 2016). In fact, it has come to be seen as ‘collective addiction’ with parents themselves complaining about the increasing dependency on it and the academic pressure that children are put under (Christensen 2022: 179). The situation is also observed in India, where the shadow education system is driven by two primary factors: i) social competition, and ii) desire for additional income. Most families perceive quality education as the basis of a decent standard of employability and living. The better the education, the more enhanced one’s employment opportunities and vice versa. Families enrol their children in shadow education in the hope that this will result in positive academic results for their children, who in turn will get ahead of their peers. A popular destination for enrolling in the shadow education system in India is Kota. From a small industrial town in the state of Rajasthan, Kota has come to be synonymous with shadow education (Rao 2017). In discussing the emergence of Kota as the hub of shadow education in India, S.S. Rao (2017: 437) notes:

Every year, thousands of students arrive in Kota and the city is required to accommodate them for at least for 2 years, if not more. The statistics are astounding: Every year, something like 70,000–100,000 students arrive in Kota city for shadow education. Another 70,000–100,000 would have already been in the city who are into their second and third years of stay in the city: it takes 2–3 complete years of preparation and coaching, to try their ‘destiny’ through the examinations. That means, close to 150,000–200,000 students live in the city during the period of April, when the fresh classes begin, to the month of March next year when they complete the annual cycle.

The many institutes and coaching centres spread across Kota sell a dream—that of cracking the JEE (for the IITs) or NEET or some such prestigious exam.<sup>1</sup> However, the overall success rates are rather slim. *The Hindu* reported that, in 2024, from across India, 1.8 lakh candidates had appeared for the JEE (Advanced), of which only 48,248 had qualified.<sup>2</sup> In its approach, Kota’s shadow education model offers only the promise of a better educational experience and improved career choices with no guarantee of success. By looking closely at the intensely competitive, rigorous, and

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<sup>1</sup> IIT stands for Indian Institute of Technology. IITs are public funded universities that are amongst the premier institutes in the country. Initially they catered solely to engineering and the sciences. In recent years, they have also opened departments for social sciences and liberal studies. In India, JEE or Joint Entrance Examination is a national level entrance test conducted for admissions to the engineering colleges. NEET or the National Eligibility-cum-Entrance Test is a national level entrance test that students undertake to pursue medicine as a field of higher studies.

<sup>2</sup> In the Indian system, one lakh is equivalent to a hundred thousand.

even discriminatory environment of the shadow education hub of Kota, this paper deliberates on how the shadow education model encapsulates the neoliberal ethos centring success in Higher Education (HE). Considering the television series *Kota Factory* (2019– present), this paper explores how the shadow education system exploits the idea of social competitiveness and promotes a model of academic success wherein students find themselves stressed out and caught up in a viciously competitive academic environment.<sup>3</sup>

### ***Kota Factory*: A Background**

The television series *Kota Factory*<sup>4</sup> portrays the shadow education network of Kota as it follows the life of sixteen-year-old Vaibhav, who moves to Kota from Itarsi in the hope of cracking the IIT JEE. The narrative is a *bildungsroman*.<sup>5</sup> In Kota, Vaibhav is initiated into a life away from home where he forges new friendships, finds love, and struggles with the pressures and expectations of the shadow education system. The series is as much the story of Vaibhav, as it is of his friends Meena, Piyush, Uday, Vartika, and Shivangi, and their teacher-cum-brother Jeetu Bhaiya. By focusing on two coaching institutes—Prodigy Classes and Maheshwari Classes—the series serves as a microcosmic lens to critique the shadow education system and its impact on the lives of thousands of students who move to educational hubs like Kota in the hope of transforming their future. The series begins with Vaibhav and his father trying to get him enrolled in one of the top-rated coaching institutes of Kota. As the auto-driver who drives them around the city reminisces, Kota was not always a factory; it used to be just another small city. But today Kota is no longer a city but one large student housing. The industrial metaphor is at the heart of the series. The title of each episode points to how education has come to be industrialised. The plot takes us from ‘inventory’ to ‘overhaul’ in Season 1 and from ‘reasoning’ to ‘packaging’ in Season 2. The episodes encapsulate the assembly line mentality that the shadow education system perpetuates. Education becomes a commodity that is measured, rated, priced, and sold.

Numerous coaching centres spread across Kota profit from mass education and the prevailing sense of social competition, hallmarks of neoliberal education. The series depicts that for most institutions, it is money that is the driving force behind

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<sup>3</sup> Directed by Raghav Subbu, *Kota Factory* currently has two seasons. While the first season was released in 2019, the second was released in 2022.

<sup>4</sup> ‘*Kota Factory*’ is originally in Hindi. Wherever necessary, translations of certain terms and dialogues have been offered in English for readers who are unfamiliar with the language.

<sup>5</sup> A *bildungsroman* (German) is a novel form that describes the protagonist’s journey of personal development from childhood to maturity.

student intake and not merit. In his first conversation with Meena, Vaibhav learns that admissions into Maheshwari, one of the top coaching institutes, is dependent on one's financial capacity. Complete payment of yearly fees confirms a student's entry into an institute. Yet, it is meritocracy that such institutions promote and advertise to draw new cohorts of students each year and to encourage aspiring students to continuously work hard. These institutions uphold the hope that it is through their guidance and support that students will fulfil their dream of studying at an IIT, a dream that is laced with notions of prestige, privilege, and social status. The rise of these shadow education institutions that serve as pathways to gaining higher education (HE) is tied to the discourse of financial stability and upward social mobility. As Levya (2021) notes in the neoliberal model, HE is largely evaluated based on its use value in a competitive market. Existing scholarship also establishes that students are often seeking employability and financial returns when investing in HE (Naidoo and Williams 2015; Gourlay and Stevenson 2017; Rapper 2018). Hence, families often aim to send their children to prestigious universities, a move that could potentially guarantee a certain social standing and financial security. Children, therefore, become the means through which families can achieve higher socio-economic status. In *Kota Factory*, Vaibhav and his father represent that section of society who, when given the promise of upward social mobility, choose to sign up for the shadow education system, being well aware that enrolment in the coaching centre or such forms of private tutoring does not guarantee success in IIT-JEE. Children become financial investments for their families, cogs within the larger matrix of neoliberalism.

### **Commodification of Education**

In their report entitled 'Decoding the dark side of Kota', IndiaTV News (2022) revealed how the fear of failure amongst students is frequently coupled with the fear of disappointing their parents since most parents would have invested a huge amount towards their coaching and education. Several studies have established a positive correlation between parental pressure and students' experience of academic stress and performance (Deb, Strodl, and Sun 2015; Verma, Sharma, and Larson 2002). Through the characters Vaibhav, Uday, and Piyush, the series comments on this rather dismal state of the parent-child relationship. Forced to carry the weight of their families' expectations, these children struggle with their own well-being.

On moving to Kota, Vaibhav is seen trying to contact Piyush, a friend from his hometown, Itarsi. Piyush's father had proudly claimed that on joining Maheshwari coaching classes, his son had shown significant improvement in his academics. However, it is only after Vaibhav meets Piyush that he learns about Piyush's inability to

keep up with the academic pressure and expectations of Kota. Not only had Piyush lost his seat at Maheshwari classes, but he also had to keep this a secret from his parents for fear that he would be deemed a disappointment. Like Piyush, Vaibhav too puts up a strong front in front of his mother. He assures her repeatedly that things are working out fine for him when in reality, he finds it very difficult to cope with his classes. He does not eat on time, struggles with sleep, and finds it increasingly difficult to focus on his studies. As his health becomes a growing concern, Meena suggests that he should perhaps consult a therapist or a psychiatrist. Vaibhav responds with the words:

Koi mental problem hai? Depression mein hun main? Anxiety hai mujhe? Suicidal ho raha hun? Pagla gaya hun jo un counsellors se milun? Aur waise bhi yahan k aadhe counsellors na fraud hai!’

*Translation: Do you think I have some kind of mental disorder? Depression? Anxiety? Am I being suicidal? Am I crazy that I will go and meet a counsellor? In any case, most of the counsellors here are frauds!*

Similarly, Uday who usually bears a happy-go-lucky demeanour almost breaks down when he shares with Meena and Vaibhav his inability to concentrate in the classes. Uday speaks for all those students who find it difficult to learn in an environment where the teaching-learning experience does not address their individual academic needs.

Bronwen and Ball (2023) elucidate how neoliberalism has changed the way individuals relate to education. Be it a parent, a student, or a teacher – the role of each one has changed within this model of education. Kumar (2011) notes that teaching, which is an inherently relational activity, ceases to be relational in a neo-liberal modus operandi. The neoliberal model mandates that for education to be legitimised, it needs to be mapped within the discourse of utilitarianism and hence, teaching has to be planned and delivered, predicated on the objectives and outcomes (Kumar 2011). Just like in an industry, the shadow education system creates a structure where students and teachers are expected to work at a certain speed towards a pre-determined goal – students must qualify in the JEE examination. Such a goal-oriented set-up demands that they lay emphasis on amassing information rather than understanding concepts. As a result, the role of the teacher is to ensure that knowledge has been transferred.

In the series, teachers rush to complete the syllabus and hence discourage classroom engagement that would eat into the class time. Instead, they schedule ‘doubt classes’, which again add to a student’s class hours. Not only do students lack critical thinking but they are also unable to genuinely problem-solve and analyse. Moreover, the system refuses to acknowledge that teachers have a profound impact on the students, their

academic as well as emotional and psychological well-being. Individual pedagogic needs are rarely considered when assigning instructors to a particular batch, ultimately causing a vast majority of students to feel unattended to. The absence of personalised learning that caters to individual learning styles implies that certain students find themselves unable to cope with the classroom teaching, leaving gaps in their learning and understanding of a particular subject. The series makes it evident how every student within the structure of shadow education is closely monitored to avoid irregularities and discrepancies that would affect the production line. Students enrolling in the system are expected to abide by the rules of the institution such that their progress can be tracked. Students operate like industry workers, in sync; they are dehumanised and programmed to operate like clockwork. Any exception to this order would mean that the assembly line stops functioning effectively.

The branding of each institute depends on the number of IIT rank holders they succeed in churning out. To this purpose, at the very start of the term, most institutes not only identify a select number of students with the potential to qualify in the exams but also ensure that they get the best academic inputs. The remaining majority are pushed towards rote learning. This systemic sifting out of potentially successful students results from the commodification of education. Not only is the child 'as a bearer of academic results' commodified by academic institutions interested in admitting those who would improve their rankings, it is also the self that gets commodified as both the child and the teacher 'are exhorted to see themselves as sites of investment and projects to be worked upon' (Bronwen and Ball 2023: 1974). The worth of the teacher is contingent upon success stories that can be quantified and documented.

In discussing the concepts of positive schooling, Deb (2018: 6) notes that '[a] large number of teachers nowadays are not interested in teaching... [they fail] to satisfy the needs of the students and to overcome their own limitations'. On the contrary, they create a fearful environment in the classroom and resort to a vindictive attitude if any student asks any question in the classroom for clarification. Although Deb's study focuses on school teaching, the problems he raises are comparable to the shadow education system, as is evident from the television series. On several occasions, teachers in *Kota Factory* can be seen either dissuading or scolding those curious minds who intend to understand the process behind solving a problem. Batla, for instance, deflects student queries. His pedagogic engagement is determined by the batch of students he is addressing at that moment. This is evident when, in response to Meenal's query regarding a certain question in the paper, he says it is a 'chocolate problem' meant for students of A1 batch (students who are expected to perform well and qualify) and that Batch A5 need not focus on such questions. Students are not only discouraged from



asking questions, but they are also subtly reminded that it is perhaps not in their capacity to succeed. Most faculty members harp on the notion that memorizing questions and solutions is the best possible way to crack the IIT-JEE. Unable to truly learn from the teacher Batla, students Vaibhav and Meena make use of the student feedback system to replace Batla with a different instructor. However, to their misfortune, the teacher who replaces Batla proves to be far more demeaning. He abuses the class and publicly humiliates one of the students, calling her a 'jackass'. Uday makes a very pertinent point when he states, 'Batla should be changed. In fact, every teacher in this coaching should be changed. No, no. This coaching industry should change. Exam pattern, syllabus, curriculum, pedagogy should change. IIT should change. This whole education system should change.' Uday's frustration exposes a much larger problem—shadow education is but a by-product of a larger academic set-up that operates primarily on the principle of performance and success.

Hayes (2015) makes clear that HE today is directly linked to the impact it has on the global economy and therefore any academic degree is expected to meet the requirements of the industry. HE hinges on 'colonisation by business logic' which pushes students to continually enhance their skills to meet the requirements of the competitive job market (Rojo and Percio 2019; Highet and Percio 2021). In fact, as degrees turn into products that would help secure employment, students pursuing these degrees take on the role of consumers who are investing in the pursuit of these degrees for utilitarian gains (Driscoll and Wicks 1998; Argenton 2015; Hayes and Jandrić 2021). 'Experiential consumption', therefore, can be demanded of the institution and one does see the students in *Kota Factory* press their claims as they approach the authorities, demanding that their favourite teacher Jeetu Bhaiya be reinstated.

Jeetu is viewed favourably by students as he breaks the institutionalised order of Kota's shadow education system and encourages students to move out of their comfort zones and work hard towards improving their academic performance. He builds a sense of inclusivity amongst his students. He crushes the notion that '[e]very child is special'. Instead, by universalising their worries, troubles, he instils in them a sense of belonging. While coaching institutions and tutoring centres pushed students into their study coops, Jeetu encourages them to forge friendships, to learn to care for one another. He repeatedly talks to them about burnout and the importance of taking care of one's health. It is through him that the students learn to find a balance. Eventually, they find a sense of comfort and belonging with each other. Unlike the other teachers, such as Batla Sir or Bansal Sir, Jeetu humanises each of them. For Jeetu, students are more than just an item of inventory. He reminds his students that before preparing for



IIT-JEE, they must prepare themselves to survive in Kota. In Jeetu, they not only find a teacher but also an older brother. As his students would fondly exclaim:

Baki log padhate hain, ye feel kara dete hain

*Translation: Others merely teach, he makes us feel the subject*

He is focused on problem-solving rather than rote-learning. When Jeetu finally opens his own coaching centre, he maintains student needs as his top priority, thereby instructing his assistant that classroom infrastructure should help students be comfortable in the classroom. He also acknowledges that the coaching institutes might be preparing them for the entrance test, but they are not preparing them for the dynamic challenges of the personal and the professional world. Through Jeetu's character, the series attempts to redefine the ideas of dream and success in a neoliberal context. For Jeetu, success is determined by one's aim, something that one would achieve; dream on the other hand was somewhat of a wish-fulfilment. Jeetu perceives success as growth, a step towards bettering oneself as opposed to the philosophy of shadow education. Not only does he recognise that success goes beyond academic excellence, but he is also mindful of the fact that most students coming to the Kota factory do not have a Plan B and that qualifying the entrance means everything to them. Acutely aware that academic success would eventually be measured via scorecards and ranks, he prepares his students for failure by instilling in them a zeal for life.

### **Academic Pressure and Student Suicides**

One of the looming tropes in the series is that of student death and suicide. There are multiple conversations that the students have amongst themselves as well as the ones they have with Jeetu Bhaiya and their parents regarding physical and mental well-being, the academic pressure, societal expectations, individual versus familial hopes and disappointments. From the very start, Season 2 builds up the trope of suicide. In episode 1, for instance, Vaibhav receives a frantic call from Sushrut's mother asking him to check in on Sushrut. The panic intensifies as Vaibhav runs up to Sushrut's room, breaks open the door and enters to find Sushrut lying still in bed. For a brief moment, Vaibhav, Sushrut's mother (on the call), and the audience are waiting for a tragedy to strike them. Although Vaibhav finds Sushrut safe, he realises just how emotionally dishevelled Sushrut was. The audience learns that Sushrut's father had taken a loan to send him to coaching classes, and Sushrut unable to keep up with the sessions was afraid he would fail. Such isolated episodes and conversations eventually culminate in a student suicide at the end of Season 2.

As several students gather at Jeetu Bhaiya's house to celebrate their failure, Jeetu's assistant receives a phone call informing him that Vernali, one of his students, has attempted suicide.<sup>6</sup> The happy faces of all those celebrating are contrasted with the anxious cries from the female voice-over, the one who discovers Vernali's body. Against the gradually intensifying siren of the ambulance, we hear Jeetu Bhaiya's words:

Kuch bachche hote hain jo chalein aate hain aur padhai k har steps mein mere saath hote hain. Unhein jab jaisa bol do karte chale jate hain, subah sham, din raat, haftey, mahiney, saal bhar . . . jo bolta hun karte hain. Jab bolo sote hain, jab bolo khatay hain. Aur jab aise bachcho ka nahi hota toh main unse aankhein nai mila pata. Inn bachcho se bohot darr lagta hai.

*Translation: There are some children who come here and accompany me on every step of this academic journey. They do exactly as they are told, mornings, evenings, day in and day out, month after month, year-round . . . they do exactly as I tell them. When I ask them to sleep, they sleep; when I ask them to eat, they eat. And when such children do not make it, I am unable to face them. These are the children am most afraid of.*

Jeetu's words betray a weariness towards students who labour to the best of their capacities to succeed but are unprepared for failure. The shadow education system is designed such that students are constantly made to chase success, despite the year after year data that point to the significantly low success rate of JEE Advanced. Vernali becomes representative of the many students whose dreams remain unfulfilled and who, at times, take extreme measures when met with failure. Is Vernali dead? or does she continue to fight for her life? — the narrative leaves it unanswered. The uncertainty around success and career that the narrative has been building towards climaxes in this very moment. The ambulance rushing through Kota's deserted highway, its siren blaring through the night as rain pours down on the city, serves as a reminder that the shadow education system fails many. Yet, the acuteness of such an incident is short lived. Students like Vernali are but blips in the larger operating system which is geared towards success. Towards the end of season 2, as the camera cuts to the numerous hoardings of coaching institutes, Vernali's tragedy as well as the many tragedies like hers get drowned by the numerous success stories that the world chooses to momentarily recognize before a new day in the shadow education industry begins with a fresh 'inventory' of aspiring students.

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<sup>6</sup> Every year Jeetu throws a party for those who fail to clear the JEE because as their teacher he understands that these are the students who are in need of encouragement and support. He uses the time to boost their morale and encourage them to work harder and reappear for the exam the following year.

For a city like Kota that has one of the reigning shadow education industries in the country, cases of suicide continue to be a hard-hitting truth. In their study on the relevance and status of career counselling in India, Gladding and Batra (2018: 383) state that one of the primary factors leading to an increasing number of student suicides in Kota and other such cities is the inability of students to cope with stress. They further note that ‘deficit coping and parental support can cause dissatisfaction, demotivation, lack of productivity, increased dropouts, alcohol, tobacco and substance abuse, frustration, low self-esteems, suicide, future failure or burnout in career and higher rate of drop out in jobs’ (Gladding and Batra 2018: 383). In recent years, the city has witnessed a consistent rise in cases of student suicides. *India Today* (2023) reported that a ‘distressing trend’ of student suicides continues in Kota. In August 2023 alone, Kota reported 5 student suicides, raising the numbers to 23 for the year. Cases of student suicide have steadily increased over the years. Sharma (2023) in his article for the *Frontline* reports, stated ‘15 took the extreme step in 2022, one in 2021, four in 2020, eight in 2019, 12 in 2018, and 10 in 2017. In most cases, either police investigations are pending, or the reason for suicide is stated as stress over low test scores. Not only is Kota being deemed as the ‘suicide hub’, reports of student suicide have raised concerns about the system of education that coaching centres and institutes there have been practising and promoting.

Suicide deaths in India rose by a staggering 40% from 1990 to 2016. The National Crime Reports Bureau (NCRB) in its 2021 report stated that student suicide accounted for 8.0% of suicides in the country. The number of deaths, which was 12,526 in 2020 (NCRB 2020), rose to 13,089 in 2021 (NCRB 2021). Although academic stress and fear of failure in exams are not the only factors pushing young people towards acts of suicide, they nonetheless continue to be one of the challenging drivers of it. Dr Lakshmi Vijayakumar, who founded SNEHA, an NGO dedicated to suicide prevention in India, shares that the frequency of calls to their helpline increases significantly during the exam season, especially around the time when results are expected (Tripathi et al. 2022). Based on the research they conducted, she also groups young victims of suicide into two categories, ‘[o]ne was people who wanted very high marks and got something below their expectation. But a sizable portion were people who failed in one or two subjects by a few marks’ (Tripathi et al. 2022).

In her conversation with *The Wire*, Itisha Nagar, who teaches psychology at Delhi University, spoke of the need to redefine success and allow students to understand their worth: ‘Just giving counselling to a student will not matter much, because society defines a ‘successful’ student as someone who clears IITs or such competitive exams by defeating lakhs of other students. We need a society where a child’s worth is tied to

talent or extra-curricular activities or hobbies they enjoy, not marks.’ Unfortunately, the shadow education system is a result-driven industry that has little concern for the holistic development of students. The industry views success as a measurable, quantifiable unit; the marks/rank obtained in the IIT-JEE test determine whether students are a success or not. Institutes treat students who secured top ranks as celebrities and use such students for future institutional branding and marketing. The rank holders are the lure that these institutions use year after year to draw newer batches of students to their classes and to remain profitable. That a certain student or a handful of students had managed to achieve their ‘dream’ then becomes the sales pitch; that is the idea promised to younger aspirants. How exactly does the life of a rank holder pan out in the long run is not so much a concern. Since most of these institutes are profit-oriented, they strive for immediate returns through high-achieving students. What is disconcerting, however, is that at times students set such unrealistic demands of themselves that these students fail to recognize and appreciate their own worth and success. Hariharan and Rath (2008: 45) note the stress levels of high-achieving students ‘are relatively high because of their fear of losing their rank, facing the disapproval of parents and society at large’. One such instance in the series is when Vaibhav, Uday, and Meena find one of the top rank holders crying for not having secured the all-India first rank. It is in that moment that the three friends realise that success could be terribly lonely and that the ones who miss out on success are those who need to be supported the most. On another occasion, students are seen undertaking an oath where they promise to be successful and make their families proud. The oath that is administered to all students enrolling in Maheshwari classes underlines how the shadow education system determines the worth of a student solely through their ability to succeed. It is not unsurprising, therefore, that between success and failure, the stakes seem as high as risking one’s life.

## Conclusion

The emergence of shadow education hubs like Kota is a result of the push towards privatisation, a key feature of the neoliberal education system. In the neoliberal age, education is contingent on commercialisation. In depicting how the shadow education system has reshaped the understanding of education, *Kota Factory* touches upon the risks of an academic structure that is geared towards profit and expansion. As it delves into the lives of young aspirants caught up in the mire of the shadow education system, the series raises concerns about the neoliberal ethos, which pivots on success. In India, every year, approximately 1.5 lakh students take the Joint Entrance Examination (JEE) to enrol into the top engineering colleges across India, specifically the IITs. The

percentage of students who manage to clear the JEE Advanced is somewhere between 25–30%. While 2020 saw a 28.64% pass rate, in 2021 it was 30%, and in 2022 it stood at 26.17%. 2023 saw a further dip, with only about 24.26% students qualifying. *Kota Factory* is driven by this reality. For the majority of aspirants, days of untiring preparation do not always yield the desired results; and if hard work does not always pay off, then it is perhaps ‘destiny’, as Rao (2017) suggests, that determines one’s success.

The series draws attention to the gaping disparity between the promise that such a system of education holds and the reality that it metes out to both students and parents. Students – the smart, the ambitious, the gifted – are put together in an intensely competitive system in the hope that the ones who emerge as the champions can enjoy a certain degree of economic fulfilment. And those that do not make it are immediately pushed to the periphery of recognition, soon to be replaced by a new cohort of ambitious aspirants. It is a microcosmic representation of a society that commercialises hard work, dedication, and education for utilitarian purposes. It is important to note how the production of such a series can serve as a conversation starter on the status and relevance of the shadow education system prevalent in India. Changing the shadow education industry would inevitably entail bringing about changes in the entire HE set-up. Through a reflective and dialogic discourse, the existing model of the shadow education system needs to be redesigned to complement the academic pursuits of students and contribute to their holistic development. Besides, in light of the numerous reports of student suicides, especially from Kota, what is imperative is for educators, policymakers, parents, and students to rethink the structure of not just the shadow education model but also the educational model of formal schooling.

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## Competing Interests

The author has no competing interests to declare.

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