

## TRENDSPOTTING: WHY THINGS MATTER?

### The Hearth Lecture Series

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#### The Coaching Conundrum: India's Tutoring Industry

In India's sprawling education landscape, the ubiquitous coaching centres represent hope and despair. These institutions have cropped up to plug holes in an education system where school-leaving is increasingly disconnected from college entry and where university degrees may not be enough for jobs. Coaching, however, exacerbates inequality and undercuts the essence of learning. Yet, the coaching industry is perhaps a response to a felt need.

Kota has become known as India's coaching capital. Tens of thousands of students hope the rigorous drill and practice at the coaching centres will get them into elite universities. Yet these hopes are only for a few, as coaching cannot compensate for the inherent demand-supply mismatch in Indian higher education. The centres say that successful students truly “make the most” of what is on offer. Unsurprisingly, this environment is now mired in a mental health crisis.

In January 2023, the Government stepped in with guidelines designed to mitigate students' intense pressures. These include age and educational thresholds for enrolment, mandates for reasonable fees, and transparent claims - efforts to ensure these centres do not exploit vulnerabilities.<sup>1</sup> Yet, the problem persists. Despite these regulations, the allure of coaching centres continues unabated, driven by a stark mismatch between the aspirations fuelled by competitive exams and the realities of the existing educational infrastructure. According to the Pratham Education Foundation, an increasing number of students, particularly from rural areas, are compelled to seek after-school coaching, reflecting a systemic inadequacy that these centres capitalise on.<sup>2</sup> To combat inadequacies in the education system, the response from the coaching industry to new standardised tests like the CUET is nothing short of nimble but does this agility belie a business model more than ready to exploit and exacerbate a deeper economic, cultural, and social malaise.<sup>3</sup>

In urban settings, premier coaching institutes command fees that can slice through family budgets, taking up nearly 40% of their educational outlay. And with the number of students dwarfing the available competitive seats, the stakes are sky-high, pushing even more students into these “pressure-cooker”<sup>4</sup> environments.<sup>5</sup>

This begs the question: are coaching centres beyond reform, and should they be allowed to run? Or are coaching centres merely convenient scapegoats for a system relentlessly fixated on largely unattainable parochial definitions of success? The predicament isn't just about the existence of coaching institutes; it is about whether their removal would significantly change the educational landscape or if it would leave untouched the societal and economic gaps and pressures burdening

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<sup>1</sup>Manjul Paul, The numbers behind India's 'coaching culture' in charts, LiveMint, February 2024. Accessible [here](#).

<sup>2</sup> Ibid.

<sup>3</sup>Monami Gogai, CUET coaching industry is the new boom-EdTech Firms, UPSC Centres, tuition academies are in, The Print, June 2024. Accessible [here](#).

<sup>4</sup> Hannah Ellis-Petersen and Shaikh Azizur Rahman, This is the most stressed city in India: The dark side of coaching capital Kota, The Guardian, October 2023. Accessible [here](#).

<sup>5</sup> Supra 1.

families and leave an open wound where there was once a crucial crutch for social betterment—however slim the odds. Join us in August's Trendspotting session, where educationists, private tutors, teachers, parents, and career specialists deliberate on whether private coaching has a place in our society.

### Suggested Readings

**1. Guidelines for Regulation of Coaching Center, January 2024, Accessible [here](#).**

The Department of Higher Education under India's Ministry of Education released guidelines in 2024 for private coaching centers. This action responds to concerns about rising student suicides, unsafe conditions, inadequate facilities, and poor teaching practices. Without proper regulation, the growing private coaching industry has faced criticism for endangering students' physical and mental well-being. The need for regulation has been a subject under discussion for years. Recently, the National Curriculum Framework highlighted the issue again. The new guidelines aim to tackle these issues by urging states and union territories to develop appropriate regulatory frameworks. Every coaching center must register with local authorities, hire qualified teachers, maintain a safe environment, and avoid misleading claims. They should also provide career guidance and mental health support while being transparent about their courses, fees, and success rates online. These measures are intended to protect students from exploitation and undue pressure, supporting their overall development.

**2. National Curriculum Framework 2023. Accessible [here](#).**

The National Curriculum Framework 2023 (NCF) outlines the entrenched culture of coaching in India, where private coaching classes have become central to the educational trajectory, particularly in the context of competitive exams. NCF indicates that this coaching culture has grown in response to the perceived shortcomings of the formal education system. Coaching institutes are seen as filling gaps left by formal schooling, particularly in areas like engineering entrance exams, where success is often tied to extensive coaching. This has resulted in a systemic shift where students and their families increasingly rely on coaching institutes to achieve academic success, despite the financial burdens. NCF proposes rethinking the emphasis on competitive examinations. One key solution is to shift the curricular focus of Grades 11 and 12 away from being merely a stepping stone for higher education admissions. The NCF advocates for a broader curriculum that prioritises conceptual understanding, flexibility, and a multidisciplinary approach, which could lessen the reliance on coaching centres. Additionally, as per the NCF, introducing high-quality common aptitude and subject-specific tests that focus on conceptual knowledge rather than rote learning can reduce the need for external coaching.

**3. Jakob Williams Ørberg, Uncomfortable encounters between elite and “shadow education” in India—Indian Institutes of Technology and the Joint Entrance Examination coaching industry, Springer, 2017. Accessible [here](#).**

The paper examines the relationship between India's elite engineering institutions, specifically the Indian Institutes of Technology (IITs), and the rapidly growing coaching industry designed to prepare students for the Joint Entrance Examination (JEE). It highlights how "shadow education"—referring to the widespread coaching culture—has become a crucial yet contentious component of India's higher education system. This shift raises concerns about whether the dominance of coaching is eroding the IITs' autonomy in selecting students based purely on merit. Additionally, the paper delves into the

social impact of this coaching culture, noting its role in shaping student lives, reinforcing socioeconomic disparities, and fuelling aspirations among India's middle and lower-middle classes. Ultimately, the author suggests a need to reassess the role and influence of coaching on the education system, student outcomes, and national education policies.

**4. Wei Thang, Non-State Actors in Education: The Nature, Dynamics and Regulatory Implications of Private Supplementary Tutoring, 2022 UNESCO GEM Report Fellowship.**

The report discusses the global proliferation of private supplementary tutoring, often referred to as "shadow education." It emphasises the significant growth of this sector, particularly in East Asia, where it has become firmly established in countries such as Japan and Korea. The report explores the regulatory challenges that have emerged alongside this expansion, as private tutoring increasingly operates parallel to formal education systems. Governments are progressively recognising the need for regulation, driven by concerns over social equity, consumer protection, and the potential adverse effects on public education. The paper proposes a five-dimensional regulatory framework designed to address issues such as the involvement of teachers in private tutoring, the functioning of commercial tutoring enterprises, and the safeguarding of students from potential exploitation. Through detailed case studies of Japan, China, and India, the document examines diverse regulatory approaches, highlighting varying degrees of success. It calls for well-structured partnerships and coherent policies to ensure that the growth of private tutoring complements the education sector while addressing its associated risks.

**5. Hai-Anh H Dang and F. Halsey Rogers, The Growing Phenomenon of Private Tutoring: Does It Deepen Human Capital, Widen Inequalities, or Waste Resources? The World Bank Research Observer, May 2008. Accessible [here](#).**

The authors investigate the growing prevalence of private tutoring, questioning its impact on human capital development, the exacerbation of social inequalities, and the efficiency of resource use. The paper provides an analysis of how private tutoring has become a substantial sector globally, particularly in developing countries, where it supplements formal education systems. The paper also examines the micro and macroeconomic factors driving the demand for private tutoring and considers the associated equity and efficiency implications. It identifies key issues such as the potential for private tutoring to deepen social inequalities, given that wealthier households are more likely to afford these services. Furthermore, the study explores the role of government policy, the risks of corruption within the tutoring sector, and potential measures to regulate or encourage private tutoring.

**6. Briggs, Derek C. 2001. "The Effect of Admissions Test Preparation: Evidence from NELS: 88." Chance 14(1):10 – 18. Accessible [here](#).**

The article examines the effects of test preparation on SAT and ACT scores, particularly focusing on commercial courses, private tutoring, and other preparation activities. Using data from the National Education Longitudinal Survey (NELS:88), the study finds that while test preparation can lead to modest improvements, particularly in SAT math and verbal scores, the effects are generally small, with average gains of around 14-15 points for math and 6-8 points for verbal. Similarly, the impact on ACT scores is limited, with no significant improvements for most sections except for slight increases in English. The study questions the substantial claims made by test preparation companies, highlighting the minimal returns on investment in such services, especially for students with less academic or socioeconomic advantage. The study also underscores the broader concern that many students, particularly those from lower socioeconomic backgrounds, may opt out of taking these tests despite engaging in test preparation activities, thereby raising equity issues in college admissions.

7. **Bray, Mark. 1999a. The Shadow Education System: Private Tutoring and Its Implications for Planners. Fundamentals of Educational Planning 61. Paris: United Nations Education, Scientific and Cultural Organization, International Institute for Educational Planning. Accessible [here](#).**

This work explores the phenomenon of private tutoring, often referred to as a 'shadow education system,' highlighting its increasing global presence and its implications for both the mainstream education system and broader social structures. Key takeaways include the significant impact of private tutoring on academic performance, but also concerns over its role in exacerbating social inequalities, as wealthier families are better able to afford these services. The research stresses that while tutoring can supplement school learning, it may distort curricula, create undue pressure on students, and worsen disparities in educational outcomes. While policymakers are urged to consider more equitable solutions, such as better resource allocation within public education to diminish the reliance on private tutoring and address the challenges posed by this growing industry, the work recognises the complexity of the problem and acknowledges that different societies will require different policies and mechanisms to address these challenges.

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