

India's garish free market in education



About 150,000 students pour out of small buildings, swarming around the city on bicycles



**THE
COACHING
CAPITAL**

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The first of a two-part series on Kota, which is both a beacon for educationally deprived and a cynical place in which 16 year olds live in Dickensian boarding houses while teachers drive Audis

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Kota, 30 December

In the mid-1980s, Kota girl Purnima Padmanabhan sat at V K Bansal's dining table in the JK Synthetics employees' colony, along with other aspiring engineers and was taught mathematics with a rigour she had not experienced before. By 1994, Bansal would become so well-known for helping students crack the Indian Institute of Technology entrance exam that parents from other cities would arrive at his doorstep, beseeching him to

take on their children, and he would, famously, subject them to a stiff entrance test. But, as thousands poured in, Bansal lowered the bar and became Kota's coaching czar — until more aggressive players overtook him. And Kota, a struggling industrial city in Rajasthan, with JK Synthetics closing down in 1997, and the Kota-headquartered Instrumentation Ltd turning sick, embraced a lucrative rebirth as a nucleus for engineering and medical entrance coaching.

In 1986, Bansal was a mechanical engineer with JK Synthetics, who had been diagnosed with muscular dystrophy and was in search of

an alternative career. "He was a fantastic teacher," says Padmanabhan, a vivacious 46-year-old, who went on, after a degree in engineering, to an MBA from Stanford University and a successful career in the software industry. She returns regularly to Kota from her home in the San Francisco Bay area to find the city — and her parents' home — changing, with new sets of women enrolled at coaching institutes coming to stay as lodgers.

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EssarOil...

Refining comprises over 95 per cent of Essar Oil's business.

Sources said the delisting would pave the way for Essar Oil to finalise its deal with Rosneft. The Essar Group has also secured a \$330-million loan from Russian bank VTB to delist Essar Oil.

"Delisting was a prerequisite for the Rosneft deal as it becomes easier to work in terms of compliance and valuation

company said.

India'sgarish...

Market leader Allen Career Institute says 31 per cent of its 77,000 students in Kota are young women, and you meet a tiny sample of them in Padmanabhan's parents' living room, 18 year olds from places like Bijnore and Gorakhpur watched over by alert and kindly landlords as they work 15

hours a day to beat the 1:90 odds of getting into medical college.

Former lodger Almas Fatima, from Lucknow, who did beat the odds, believes she would not have made it to medical college in Kanpur, had Kota not given her the tools. "School," says the second year student in a phone conversation, "doesn't prepare you to solve mcq (multiple choice questions) with negative marking in 30 seconds. Coaching centres in Lucknow

only give you past papers to solve. Kota teachers devise their own questions, hundreds and hundreds of them. They get you to understand concepts, they make you mentally tough."

Yet, many distraught students took their lives in Kota this year (15 says the district administration, but 26, according to media reports citing local police) clearly feeling anything but mentally tough. As Kota's District Collector Ravi Surpur,

himself a medical doctor by training, points out, these numbers cannot be dismissed as tiny. "For every child who commits suicide," he says, "there could be a thousand at various stages of depression. Suicide is at the end of the spectrum which originates in worry, stress, anxiety, competitive pressure, exam pressure, and the inability to meet the expectations of parents."

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