

# The Epidemic in Indian Education: Tuition Centres

**How tuition centres in India cultivate echo chambers.**

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For an average Indian school student, a day looks like this: wake up, go to school, come back, go to a tuition centre, finish homework, sleep. On their way to tuition centres, they encounter countless advertisements of other tuition centres plastered on billboards or even on public transport. According to 2018 statistics, students in the Indian state of Maharashtra spend an upwards of 27 hours per week at tuition centres compared to a mere six hours per week<sup>1</sup> at their schools during the final few years of schooling (Bhorkar et al., 2018). Even in the economically weaker rural India, 31% of schoolchildren between 6 to 14 years of age attend tuitions (The Economist, 2024). In short, tuition centres are an integral part of student life across different age groups in India.

These tuition centres teach the same or more content than formal schools, with added focus on examinations. However, tuition centres have various negative impacts such as extremely long work hours, high academic pressure leading to mental health disorders, and most importantly, reduction of education to mere examinations (Guidelines for regulation of coaching center, 2024). Despite the abovementioned, if you ask parents why they send their children to tuition centres, the general response will include inadequacy of schools, the difficult nature of examinations, and the need to maintain an academic comparative advantage over other students (Bhorkar et al., 2018; Gupta, 2021)<sup>2</sup>. I believe this response is reasonable. Parents would want the best for their children. However, the underlying assumption is that formal school education is insufficient and cannot be trusted. Is the Indian education really that

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<sup>1</sup> This is not a typing error. The number is indeed shockingly low.

<sup>2</sup> The general responses are a summary of individual responses given by parents during interviews conducted by Bhorkar et al. and Gupta.

bad? I would disagree. In my opinion, the education system is made to look bad by the tuition centres. I believe that tuition centres have created an echo chamber<sup>3</sup> where everyone distrusts the formal education system, and they have done this by gamification of education. An echo chamber is a structure in which the members distrust all the non-members, while interacting with and discrediting outside sources, as described by C Thi. Nguyen, professor of philosophy at the University of Utah (Nguyen, 2018). This structure is extremely dangerous because it is notoriously difficult to break and neglects all negative effects it might cause. Therefore, in this paper, I will first consider an objection that we can simply convince parents and students by showing them the negative effects of tuition centres, and an echo chamber analysis is not required. I will explain this objection lacks merit, and then explain how tuition centres have created the echo chamber through gamification of education. Lastly, I will show how such structures are difficult to break which is why I call it an epidemic in education and try to give a suggestion on how we can break free from them.

Firstly, I present an objection before my argument because the objection seems obvious. Why can't we just convince the parents and students by showing them evidence of high workload, suicide rates, stress, etc? After all, headlines like "Teen preparing for NEET ends life, family blames coaching institute's study pressure" (Times of India, 2024) and "Student deaths in India's coaching hub spotlight 'pressure-cooker' academic culture: 'I'm sorry mum and dad'" (SCMP, 2023) are very common. If this was possible, we could call parents and students to be inside an *epistemic bubble* instead of an echo chamber. According to Nguyen, "*an epistemic bubble is a social epistemic structure which has inadequate coverage through a process of exclusion by omission*" (Nguyen 2018, pg 143). This definition includes two necessary conditions: (i) "inadequate coverage" which is incomplete exposure with differing

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<sup>3</sup> There is also the slim possibility that I am inside an echo chamber, where I am criticizing the outside world. However, such philosophical discussion is beyond the scope of this paper.

views, and (ii) “exclusion by omission” which implies the incomplete exposure is because of not interacting/being unaware of sources with different opinions and views. If we were to assume that parents and students (the “stakeholders”) are in an epistemic bubble which believes that school education is insufficient and tuition centres are a requirement for education, this would imply (i) the stakeholders are unaware of the negative effects of tuition centres and (ii) have not interacted with mainstream media or government releases that says the same. However, our assumption would be false.

In January 2024, the Education Ministry of India outlined regulatory guidelines for tuition centres. These included minimum age requirement, cap on monthly fee, curriculum, and physiological support systems among other things (Guidelines for regulation of coaching center, 2024). The government states rising suicide cases and improper teaching methodologies as the main reason for making the guidelines (Guidelines for regulation of coaching center 2024, pg. 2). The negative impacts are clearly stated, and one would expect this might motivate parents to not enrol children in tuition centers. However, this was not observed. One parent reacted *“For a middle-class family who want their children to excel in their education, the exorbitant fees charged by the coaching institutes are worrisome. If the guidelines can put a cap on the expensive fee collected by the coaching institutes, then this would help many students and parents”* (Hindustan Times, 2024). Notice how the focus is on fee and not any other negative impact such as mental health. Anubha Shrivastava Sahai, President of the India-Wide Parents’ Association raised the question *“Undoubtedly, it’s a welcome move, but the age limit criteria may not be a prudent decision as many students commence preparation for competitive exams like NEET and JEE from the age of 15...”* (ABP News, 2024). Again, the focus turned to questioning the guidelines instead of acknowledging the severe mental health issues. As shown by the abovementioned example, the parents are aware of the negative impacts of tuition centers because they are interacting with sources that states the same, and even have opinions

on them. Therefore, I believe the view these parents are stuck in an epistemic bubble and the belief that the problem will solve if they are more aware is incorrect. They are inside a more malicious epistemic structure, the echo chamber, which is why they ignore the negative effects.

Unlike epistemic bubbles where the individuals are unaware of other views and opinions, members of an echo chamber are aware of differing opinions. Nguyen defines it as “*an epistemic community which creates a significant disparity in trust between members and non-members. This disparity is created by excluding non-members through epistemic discrediting, while simultaneously amplifying insider members’ epistemic credential*” (Nguyen 2018, pg. 146). There are three main conditions here. First, the necessity for a disparity in trust. The members of an echo chamber are exposed to contrary and differing views of the non-members; however, they actively undermine, dismiss and are ignorant of them. Therefore, the members hold the views inside the echo chambers with a high degree of trust, but do not trust anything outside it. Secondly, this issue with trust arises from *epistemic discrediting*, which is actively calling outside sources, views and opinions untrustworthy due to some inherent demerit with them. Lastly, the views inside the echo chamber are placed on a very high pedestal. As echo chambers breed on mistrust, they become extremely difficult to break.

Inside our echo chamber reside students and parents mediated by the tuition centres. They have lost trust in the schools. Their core belief is that schools and formal education is inadequate, which is why tuition centres are a necessity. At this juncture, it must be made clear that I do not think the Indian education system is perfect — there are various issues such as over-reliance on entrance exams, low teacher-to-student ratio, etc. However, at its core, it is not terrible. Regardless, to understand how the narrative that schools are inadequate is popular, we need to look at how tuition centers have gamified the education system. This process allows tuition centers to build mistrust.

In Chapter 9 of his book *Games: Agency as Art*, Nguyen explores the process of Gamification and Value Capture. Gamification is the process of bringing elements of games into non-game scenarios (Nguyen 2020, pg. 200). Tuition centers gamify education extremely subtly. They use rankings. Rankings are a common feature in videogames; climbing higher on the leaderboard by winning more matches in Geoguessr gives me immensurable pleasure and pride. Similarly, tuition centers provide rankings through weekly tests so that students can compare their standing with respect to others. Some bigger tuition centres, with branches across different cities also boast their All-India-Rank Test series, where the rankings are not only for one class, but rather across all classes in different cities of India (ALLEN JEE, 2024; FITJEE Program, 2024; Aakash, 2024). These rankings are extremely dangerous, as they *value capture* education. Value capture is a phenomenon in which our values are usually complex and diverse, but we encounter a quantified system which simplifies our values, and we get captured in these new values (Nguyen 2020, pg. 201).

Let us assume our initial values come from school. For example, the Central Board for Secondary Education (CBSE) necessitates 2 language subjects, Social Sciences, Mathematics, Science, Skill-based Subject, third language, health and physical education, work experience, and art education as important parts of the school's academic curriculum (CBSE Guidelines, 2023). Beyond these, the school themselves host interdisciplinary science fairs, literature festivals, sports event, and other activities. Overall, I would argue the system does not appear completely examination based. However, it is often difficult to analyse the benefits of this. Will skipping one day of school to attend a talk on ethics and morals provide me more value than what I would've gained in that one day at school? Is playing the synthesizer in band more beneficial than solving all the extra problems in my mathematics textbook? Often, the values we gain from formal schooling are more diverse and complex. They teach us various qualities (such as leadership, sportsmanship, academic integrity, etc) which are useful, but we might

think they would be useless in the future. Comparing this with tuition centers, the value is very simple and straightforward: doing well in examinations to get a higher rank implies I am doing good. This sounds like a very good proxy to measure how the efforts I am putting in equates to the outcomes, i.e., the ranks. However, there is no guarantee that 10 years down the road my All-India-Rank 1 in a tuition test would benefit me, yet it sounds so lucrative because it is an easy measure. Nguyen says such gamified systems gives us “*The Fantasy of Value Clarity*” (Nguyen 2020, pg. 194). We think we have a clear goal — higher rank implies greater success — when there is no proof that is true. Us, as humans, would be attracted to a system where the value is straightforward, and easily measurable, but that is usually attributed to games and reality is rarely that way. This is why we end up preferring tuition centres but, in the process, drop the rich values formal schooling could provide.

This disparity in values create mistrust. The tuition centres’ values are assumed to be better by parents and students. The students think they know how well they are doing, and the parents think they can quantitatively see the improvement of their children through increasing ranks. However, a school cannot guarantee the same. Therefore, the students and parents do not trust the school to showcase how well the students are doing, and hence an echo chamber is created. The epistemic discrediting here is showcasing the school values as useless and insufficient to show the student’s worth. The amplifying of epistemic credentials take place through benefits given to students with higher ranks — scholarships, “better” teachers, etc. As shown here, tuition centres are very successful at creating this echo chamber.

However, just creating a disparity in values might be insufficient, and they need to convince parents further to ensure the stability of the echo chamber. Going back to the example of new regulations, Kunal Singh, operator of a tuition centre, said “*I believe this regulation is dictatorial and draconian natured and is a step to hide the failure of Government school and college education system where majority students are not even able to solve simple science*

*numerical because government resources had not covered exam questions qualitatively. Almost all toppers in competitive exams are from coaching centers”* (Hindustan Times, 2024). This comment showcases all the qualities of echo chambers: (i) create distrust in the school system, (ii) call out the inability of schools to *practice enough questions* in a negative light to epistemically discredit them, and (iii) improve the credibility within the chamber by stating the successful students are mostly from coaching centres. Some tuition centres even try to showcase artificial values that might sound good, even though their ranking system does not follow it whatsoever. For example, ALLEN career institute, the largest tuition centre in India, calls its buildings *Samyak* (Proper), *Samayik* (Periodical), *Sarokar* (Concern), *Satyarth* (Truthful), *Gurukripa* (Teacher’s Grace), *Samanvaya* (Coordination), *Savinay* (Humble), *Samarth* (Capable), *Sabal* (Strong), *Sankalp* (Resolution), *Sakaar* (Realized), *Safalya* (Success), and *Samadar* (Respect) (ALLEN Map, 2024). It looks like the naming pattern has an ulterior motive of convincing parents and students that ALLEN cares about such values, however it is most likely a façade given their main value is still success through rankings.

The worst part, is the rigidity of this structure. As Nguyen also comments, *“echo chambers are much harder to escape”* (Nguyen 2018, pg. 141). There have been various attempts to reduce the need for tuition centres. Consider the abovementioned regulatory guidelines, which stated the minimum age for students in tuition centres would be 16. Ignore the unregistered tuition centres, even the large corporate centres still allow for admission as early as Grade 6 or age 12 (ALLEN PNCF, 2024; FIITJEE, 2024; Resonance, 2024). Governmental regulations are ignored, because both parents and students support these tuition centres. Furthermore, when school tries to include more elements, that backfires as well. Modern High School for Girls in Kolkata started a program called MEDHA in STEM in 2017 which aimed at exposing students to industry level STEM activities and research (MHS, 2017). However, it only lasted for a year because parents were unwilling to send their children to

school on Saturdays, as it clashed with tuition timings<sup>4</sup>. The value derived from the new program was complex, and the better and simpler option were tuition centres and their rankings with clear values. In this case, the special program solidified the beliefs of the echo chamber, instead of breaking them. This rigidity makes tuition centres an epidemic: a disease that is reducing education to mere examinations and rankings.

Is there any hope to break free? Maybe. Nguyen describes theoretical methods such as the *social epistemic reboot*<sup>5</sup>, but he agrees such methods are impractical (Nguyen 2018, pg. 157). Therefore, we need to instead solve the issue of mistrust. Efforts must focus on rebuilding trust between schools, parents and teachers instead of just regulating tuition centres. More transparent communication between schools and their students regarding the value of education, and seminars with parents. These methods might work, but unfortunately, I cannot lay down more details for a country of 1.4 billion people.

Concluding, I argued that tuition centres have created an echo chamber through gamification of education (and not an epistemic bubble). It is harmful as it causes parents and students to neglect the negative effects of tuition centres such as high stress and suicides and reduce the value of education to rankings. Yet it is lucrative because it offers us the fantasy of value clarity. These structures are rigid, and it seems they are hard to break. Even though I am unable to explicitly lay out a method to escape this epidemic, I believe understanding we need to work on building trust and even acknowledging the existence of this echo chamber is a step in the right direction. Millions of Indian students, including myself, have spent countless hours cursing our education system. Maybe it is time we stop, take a step back, and look at the

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<sup>4</sup> This reason was verbally told by the principal to a friend of mine involved in the MEDHA program. I assume the validity of my friend's statement to be true here.

<sup>5</sup> This theoretical method involves getting rid of all your beliefs and thoughts and starting anew. We will need to build our beliefs from the group up again.

malicious influence of tuition centers in our life. Until then, any measure taken by the government or schools would be fruitless.

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