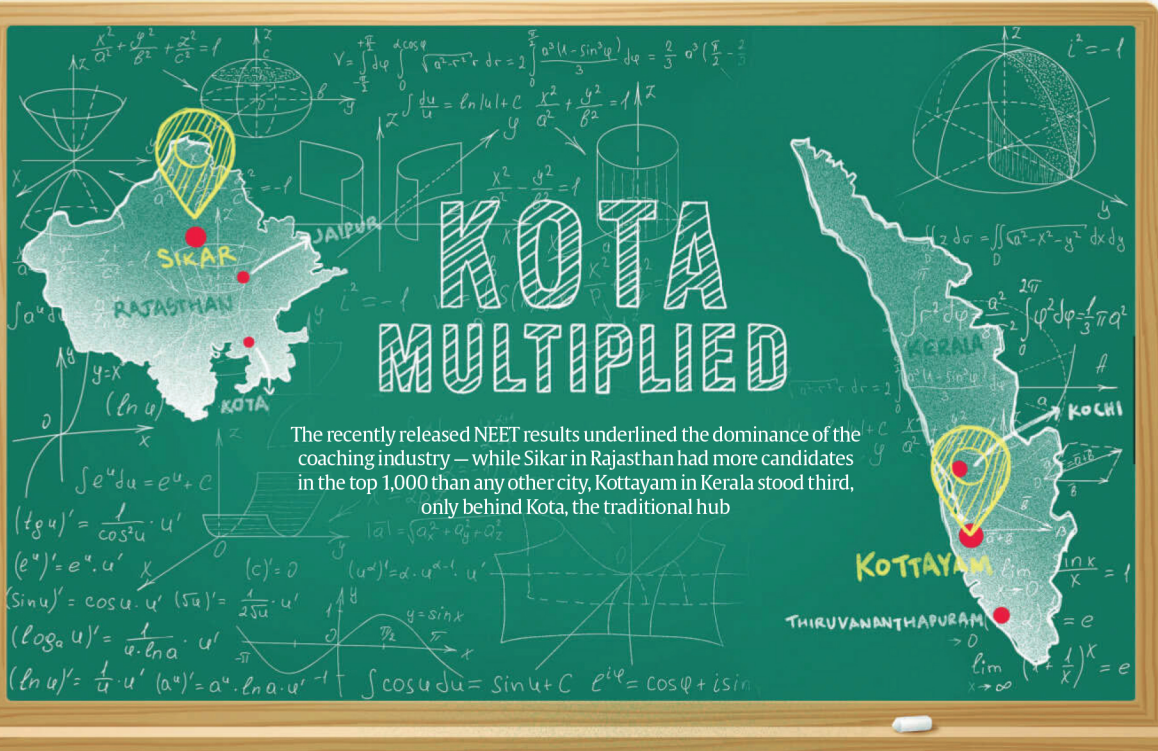


12 BIG PICTURE



The recently released NEET results underlined the dominance of the coaching industry – while Sikar in Rajasthan had more candidates in the top 1,000 than any other city, Kottayam in Kerala stood third, only behind Kota, the traditional hub

SIKAR In two lanes, a growing industry

PARUL KULSHRESTHA

At 7.30 pm on a weekday, a sea of azure, midnight blue and leaf green T-shirts pours out of two congested adjacent streets. Students of Sikar's coaching centres, the names emblazoned on the back of their polo shirts are a walking advertisement for their institutes.

Around 400 km from Kota, another coaching factory has been growing quietly in Sikar, Rajasthan's Shekhawati town of grand havelis, forts, frescoes and pol (gates). In the recently held NEET-UG exams, which were marred by allegations of paper leaks and cheating, Sikar outdid the Rs 12,000-core Kota assembly line, with its students emerging among the top-scorers.

According to the National Testing Agency (NTA), 149 students from Sikar scored over 700 out of 720 marks, nearly double of Kota (74 students).

An analysis of the 2024 results shows that of the 50 centres with the highest percentage of candidates scoring above 650, 37 are located in Sikar district. Aspirants have a chance of securing admission in government medical colleges if they score over 650. Local institutes say Sikar has been outperforming Kota in NEET for the past few years. In the 2023 exam, 23 from Sikar were among the top 1,000 rank holders; Kota had 13. While Kota's share swelled to 35 this year, it was surpassed by Sikar's 55 students. Besides Sikar, even Kottayam, Kerala, has joined this elite club.

While things are looking grim in Kota, which has reported a dip of nearly 40% in admissions this year, business in Sikar is booming. A NEET aspirant from Maharashtra's Nashik, who scored 88% in his Class 10 board exams, says he chose to study in Sikar after consultations with his Kota-based relatives. Sitting in the waiting area of his institute – where the staff is speaking to his parents before processing his side-day request so he can return to his single-occupancy room – he says, "My family was concerned due to reports on Kota – student suicides, the pressure and overcrowding. So I moved to Sikar in April. This year's results from Sikar have given me hope."



Piprali road in Sikar houses many of the coaching centres. Parul Kulshrestha

ist with institutes, a smattering of flyovers, cafes, mid-sized shopping centres, and car and bike showrooms.

Given Sikar's newfound popularity, a growing business is of paying guest (PG) accommodations and hostels that charge as low as Rs 3,000 for a shared room and Rs 10,000 for a single room with an air conditioner. Many parents, especially mothers, stay in Sikar while their children study. Sikar already has around 500 hostels, with up-and-coming constructions each day.

At one end of Piprali Road, which is just wide enough for a single car to pass through, stands one of 11 centres of Gurukripa Coaching Institute, one of the largest in city. The four-storey building has a swanky reception-cum-waiting area, beige floor tiles that mimic Italian marble, chrome waiting chairs and a backlit sign bearing the centre's name in rose gold.

Among those waiting there is Deepak Parihar, 53, from Churu, Rajasthan. "I am here to help my niece with her NEET admission formalities. We chose Sikar over Kota since it is closer home and did much better this year," says Parihar.

An employee at Gurukripa, which is coaching more than 30,000 aspirants this year, claims that over 1,800 of their students "scored enough marks to get government medical college seat this year". Besides Gurukripa, which has one centre dedicated solely to JEE preparations, Matrix, CLC and Prince are the other big names run by local in Sikar. Even national brands like Physics Wallah, Unacademy, Aakash Institute and ALLEN Career Institute, have a presence here.

While Sikar headlines this year, it had started to come into its own long before the 2024 results. In fact, before the 2000 coaching boom, Sikar's population was less than Kota's annual student enrolment of 2.5 lakh. In 1996, Sikar's first coaching centre, Career

Line Coaching, opened its doors. While it is still around, many of its former teachers have opened their own institutes, Gurukripa being one of them.

Despite a lower student turnout when compared to Kota – Sikar institutes have around 1 lakh aspirants – the annual fee of Rs 1 lakh is nearly the same. An official says it's not uncommon for institutes in Kota and Sikar to "poach" each other's faculty. Like Kota, the official says Sikar's institutes typically hire IT students or teachers as faculty. "In Sikar, even the founders take daily classes," says an institute employee.

But unlike Kota, all major coaching centres in Sikar have hostels. Piyush Sunda of Prince Coaching says hostels make it easier for them to "moonlight" students directly. "To keep students of social media, we don't allow them to use phones in our hostels, except to call home."

In spite of its impressive show, Sikar's NEET accolades were marred by allegations of irregular conduct of the exam, including cheating, by its coaching centres. Pradeep Budamiya, 55, one of Gurukripa's founders, dismisses the allegations: "These accusations were made due to Kota's high score. Our students did well because of their hard work."

But the success comes with a lingering fear. According to Sikar Police, 14 students died by suicide here between 2021 and June 2024 due to "academic pressure". Collector Kammer Choudhary admits that the administration is "concerned" about the safety of the students. "Our district committee meets monthly to discuss the welfare of students. I visit hostels and meet hostel owners to make them aware of students' problems. Although the issues in Sikar are not as extreme as the ones in Kota, we keep trying to ensure it does not become another Kota."

KOTTAYAM Rubber hub scripts NEET story

SANDIP G

THE CORRIDORS of Brilliant Study Centre at Mutholy in Pala, a town in central Kerala's Kottayam district, gushes with an unstoppable teenage torrent during the forenoon break – intense eyes offset by smiling faces, chatter and giggles. Some stream down the four-storey building to the cafes on campus, many squeeze into the libraries, heavy books clasped to their chests, and some slide into the staffroom to gather around the lecturers. The break ends, the wave recedes and calm is restored.

Every monsoon in the midlands of central Kerala, as rain lashes down from the hills on the Western Ghats and the sinuous Meenachil River spills over, vehicles wheeze into the idyllic countryside, offloading nearly 30,000 teenagers, mostly from Kerala and neighbouring states, who hope to crack nationwide entrance exams for medical and engineering seats at the institute.

The 200-metre walk from Mutholy Junction to Brilliant Study Centre – where about 200 smiling faces peer at you from flexes, banners and posters – provides a quick brief on why the institute is one of the hottest destinations for medicine and engineering aspirants in the state. The institute claims that the Top 20 ranks in the state, including four who scored the first rank in this year's controversy-riddled NEET exam

– the single-window test for admission to all undergraduate medical programmes in the country – studied here. Of the 194 candidates who scored 700-plus marks (out of 720), 172 enrolled here, they say, putting Kottayam on the NEET factory map.

Kottayam this year has 25 candidates in the top-1,000 list of the NEET exam, which was attempted by more than 2 million candidates, a success rate that's only behind the Rajasthan towns of Sikar and Kota.

But unlike Kota, the most established of the country's coaching hubs, Kottayam's position on the NEET list is almost entirely driven by Brilliant Study Centre, an institute that came up four decades ago as a tuition centre set up by an unemployed postgraduate in Arunapuram, two kilometres from Mutholy, for those that had failed Class 10.

The institute claims to have produced nearly a lakh doctors and about twice as many engineers. But director George Thomas, one of the four founders, insists they are not chasing numbers. "I am a mathematics post graduate, but I am not a man of numbers. I am just happy seeing the smile on the faces of my students," says George, who is today dressed in a heavily-starched white khadi shirt and mundu.



At Brilliant Study Centre in Pala, Kottayam. Sandip G

"Talking of how they began, he says, "We rented a room in a tea shop for Rs 1,500. Then five pre-degree students requested us if we could help them with engineering and medicine entrance exams. We gave it a try, hired a couple of retired professors and all five of them cleared the tests."

The name 'Brilliant' was accidental. Before then, it was a typewriting centre that ran out of the room in the tea shop. "Since we didn't have the money to repair, we simply erased the 'type institute' part with limestone," he adds.

On its NEET campus, spread over 20 acres, are the classrooms, besides hostels for students and staff, cafes and libraries. Around 2 km away is the campus for JEE (the entrance exam that's a ticket to the IITs and other top engineering colleges). Brilliant's centre is arguably the only one that caters to NEET aspirants in Pala and all of Kottayam. Brilliant has eight such centres in the state, all equipped with state-of-the-art facilities.

Both students and teachers (called "mentors") at the centre are picked after multiple levels of screening. "Let's make no pretence about it, the cut-off is strict for admissions. There are tests and interviews and our teachers examine the portfolios of our prospective students," says George.

A two-year NEET course costs between Rs 70,000 and Rs 90,000, plus hostel fees. Justy Joseph, an assistant director at the centre, says they "try to recreate home" for their students. "We understand it is a pressure-cooker situation. There is a lot of expectation from parents and peers, besides the expectation students have of themselves. Our duty is to ensure that they don't feel the pressure but at the same time not lose the competitive edge," he says.

Or as George says, "We don't crack the whip, though the children need to be disci-

plined for their own good."

But the schedule is gruelling, with most students logging in 12-14 hours of study time. "You have to be the best, and for that you have to work really hard. You know you are plunging into a deep sea, you have to swim along, and sacrifice a lot to reach the shore. There are test papers happening almost every other day, and you have to prepare," says Rihan Rashed, an 18-year-old from Kollam district, who aspires to clear the NEET entrance next year. A year ago, his sister too cracked the NEET exam. On an average, a student sits for 300 tests a year, both online and offline. "So much so it becomes part of your system," says Justy.

A cradle of the state's rubber industry, Pala is the hometown of late Kerala Congress leader K M Mani and the town nearest to the tomb of Saint Alphonsa. But the institute has bestowed the town with a newfound identity – as the NEET coaching hub of the South.

A whole new ecosystem has sprouted around the institution. The narrow alleys are stuffed with boarding houses and restaurants offering home-made tiffin services to students. Shops at the junction sell everything from soap and mattresses to motivational books and pictures of gods. Restaurants offering a wide spread of cuisine and bakeries have sprung up.

Old-timers say their town is nothing like the village they grew up in. "Back then, you wouldn't see a spot of light, but you could listen to the merry songs of drunks who hung around till midnight in the arrack shop," says Thankappan Nair, who owns a sidewalk tea stall by the junction. "Now, all you see is light (from hostels), though it is so quiet that you feel it's almost like a stretch of ghost houses."

**Total number of medical seats in govt and priv colleges*

27,216
Candidates appeared in 2024

5,232
Number of candidates in Top 1,08,000*

19.22%
Success rate

12,443
Candidates appeared in 2024

1,373
Number of candidates in Top 1,08,000*

11.03%
Success rate

NEET IN NUMBERS
23.5 LAKH
NEET candidates

1.08 LAKH
medical seats

SUCCESS RATE OF OTHER COACHING HUBS

Tanuku (AP)	16.98
Namakkal (TN)	16.044
Howrah	12.31%
Kota	12%
Bikaner	11.48%
Jhunjhunu	11.1%

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