

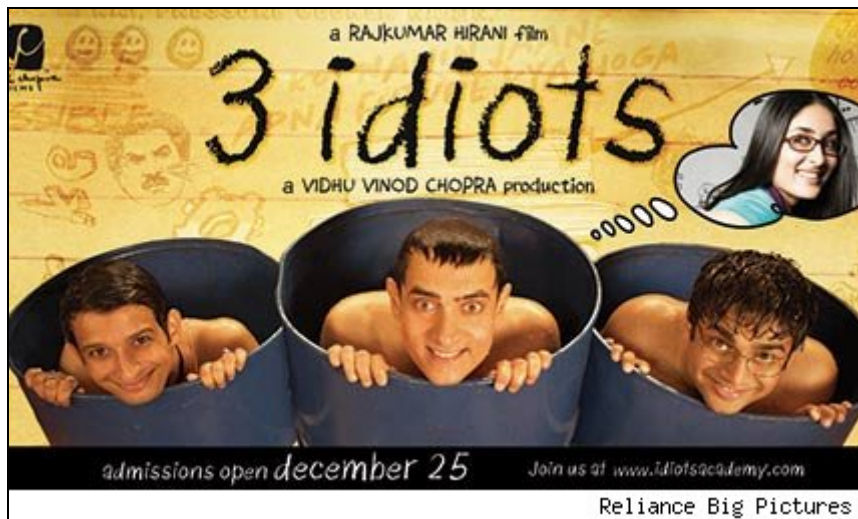
Student Stress in India: '3 Idiots' Shows Hard Truths About Career Paths



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Most Indians will tell you that there are only two career fields in their country: engineering and medicine. Many children aren't asked what they want to be when they grow up -- they're told they'll be an engineer or a doctor.

With the recent release of "3 Idiots," the highest-grossing Bollywood film ever, this phenomenon has made big news. The film follows the college escapades of three friends studying in one of the most intense engineering schools in the country. The main character, Rancho (played by Indian megastar **Aamir Khan**), is a brilliant student who thinks outside the box and encourages his friends to follow their passion, rather than memorize answers to get good grades.

When the "idiots" arrive at school, their professors prepare them for the difficulties ahead -- they need near-perfect marks to be successful. From then on, they struggle under the pressures from teachers and competition with classmates. One character asks for an extension on a project after his father has a stroke, but is denied. Unable to deal with impending failure, he commits suicide. Rancho confronts his dean, blaming the high-stress system for this death. Through it all, Rancho challenges everyone with his passion for creative education, and in the end, the students find

success after learning to follow their dreams. No one is happier -- or more wealthy -- than Rancho, who has moved to the beautiful mountains of northern India to be a businessman-cum-science teacher, instilling the love of learning in his students.

Despite its box office success, the film received mixed reviews, but as one **blogger** said, "It's a wake-up call in this rat race of a world that we live in, that we lose sight of things that matter in the pursuit of success." The film hit home with a lot of Indians and sparked controversy about India's stressful education system.

"A lot of people are able to relate" to the film, said Nischal Mothkuri, a coordinator for the **India Literacy Project** (ILP). "Many of the things that are said in the movie are right, but a lot of bad-mouthing happens on the education system, which is not a good thing to do. But the fact that many people are able to relate to what's being said shows that there is a problem, a very big problem."

Others say the film exaggerates the problem. Altamish Ahmad, 20, is an engineering student at the International Institute for Information Technology Hyderabad (IIIT-H), one of India's top tech schools. He says the film is fun to watch, but the message doesn't hit the mark. "It's not realistic in that it shows that the professors discourage creativity or innovation," Ahmad said. "That's not the case at all. Professors encourage creativity, they encourage you to think freely -- at least in our college."

Ahmad has one year left of computer science studies. He's good at software, and knows he will make a good wage when he graduates, but said he doesn't want a job where he sits at a computer all day. "If you really ask me what my dream job is, it's exploring various countries and studying the cultures," he said. Ahmad says although he also likes literature, after his engineering studies, he will pursue an MBA. For now, "I am stuck at this place," he said. "I like everything which is not associated to engineering."

'To Hell With What You Want'

Many Indian families see little choice when it comes to earning a decent income. Mothkuri says that during the industrial age, the global economy depended on

engineering. But while the West has expanded its job sector, India hasn't, so jobs in the arts or humanities aren't as available or as profitable. "If you are taking art or painting, there are no careers," he said. "There is no good college where you can go and study and do some exhibition -- and there is no money."

It also has to do with a lack of jobs. "Economically the country has to move, and then we'll see business start changing," he said. "But until then, as long as the focus is on money, I don't think you can change much because there are not many opportunities. That is where the government can take a step."

Abinash Mohapatra, 20, is in his third year at IIIT-H. He's a computer science major, but not by choice. "For me, I'm not much interested in studying computer science," he said. "I am just here because of pressure. You see it's very tough to convince Indian parents. So to hell with what you want."

Mohapatra took the national engineering tests at the end of 12th class (equivalent to senior year of high school). He scored high enough to get a coveted seat at IIIT, which is consistently **listed** as one of South Asia's best engineering schools. His parents said that as long as he was going to a good university, he should study the school's specialized -- and most lucrative -- subject, computer science.

Mohapatra and Ahmad stories -- bright students, good at engineering, but whose passions lie elsewhere -- are the sort that is told all too often in India.

Over the last 20 years, India has become the second largest software exporter in the world. The IT industry **grew** from \$150 million to \$52 billion from 1991 to 2008. Though it's currently facing a backward slide after the U.S. recession, the service sector still accounts for 51 percent of India's GDP. With **480 million people** younger than 19, India is expected to become the world's third largest economy by 2040. This means a lot of money, but a lot of competition for good colleges and high-paying jobs. Someone working for a software company earns a minimum monthly salary of 20,000 rupees (about \$450), roughly four times that of a public school teacher.

Fierce Competition

Last year over **400,000 students** took a national entrance exam, vying for only 8,000 seats in the Indian Institutes of Technology (IIT). The entrance exam for India's National Institutes of Technology (NIT) drew nearly a **million students**. These schools admit less than 3 percent of applicants, but students who make the cut are more likely to be recruited by high-paying employers. (India's biggest companies, including **Infosys** and **Tata**, conduct job interviews on campus at IIIT-H.)

"It is the aspiration of every student, every middle-class family to send their student into those colleges," Mothkuri said of the national engineering schools. "Once you go there, your life changes forever. You get jobs -- very high-paying jobs -- and that is what parents aim for."

Students start studying two to four years in advance for these entrance exams, and they know the end of high school will be an extremely stressful time. "No one complains about it because everyone wants to achieve a seat in that particular college, which is compulsory to survive in this world," said Sree Deepya, a masters student at IIIT-H.

A Lesson Learned

Not many know the phenomenon more intimately than ILP Coordinator Nischal Mothkuri, 24. He ran the gauntlet of family pressure, heart-wrenching entrance exams, and an unfulfilling IT job. He grew up in a low-middle-class family, and his father, a computer-science lecturer, made it clear that becoming an engineer was his only choice.

"I never knew in intermediate and 10th that there were courses beyond medicine and engineering," Mothkuri said. "And my father never told me. He knew the options that there are other things, but he never told me."

Mothkuri was a good student. He studied hard and had a natural gift for learning and

test-taking. He got some of the best marks in the state and received a government award for academics. But he began to feel the weight of expectations from his family and friends. He studied constantly, even waking up at 3 a.m. to attend classes at 4 a.m. He attended test **coaching centers**, on track to enter a nationally renowned college, but the pressure became too much.

"You get very little sleep, you just keep studying, studying, studying," he said. "You don't go to a movie, you don't go to a restaurant, you don't go and meet your friends, there is no holiday. So much pressure."

When the time came for exams, Mothkuri was burnt out. He chose not to take the national test, and didn't study for his internal exams. Even so, he was surprised at the good grades he earned, and entered a four-year engineering program in Hyderabad, eventually landing a job with Microsoft. But he still wasn't happy.

"I was hurt during the process," he said. "Now I see that there was a lot of damage done. I ended up being closed [off], not very confident."

Companies like Microsoft partner with the India Literacy Project to mentor high school students. In December 2007, Mothkuri started volunteering, and realized this was where he belonged. A few months later Microsoft was making cuts, and Mothkuri hoped he'd be fired. He wasn't, but seriously considered leaving his profession. "I reached a state where I could not continue working for Microsoft, but [I had] no support," he said. "My parents were not for it and the more I talked to them, the more they said, 'No, no, don't do it.' . . . Everyone else's mind was already made for me."

After seven months of sleepless nights, he quit his job and began working for the ILP. He's been at it for almost two years now, and manages 50-100 volunteers to work with low-income students as mentors and English-language tutors. The ILP employs less than 10 full-time employees across India, and Mothkuri is the only one in Hyderabad.

Mothkuri, a real-life "Rancho," does his best to challenge the education system and its students. He travels to elementary and secondary schools around the city,

encouraging kids to stay in school, question the world around them, and, most importantly, to study what they love. "It is easy to say 'follow your passion,' " Mothkuri said. "In real life it may not work. There are a lot of hurdles. But if you ask me, it is worth taking that step. It is easier to struggle when you're doing something you love."

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