

Understanding and Preventing Student Suicides in India

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Abstract

India's student suicides are a big problem that is taking its toll on youth's mental and emotional health. High academic pressure, mental health problems and socio-economic inequality cause the increase in student suicide. India has a competitive education system, and mental health resources are not available. The COVID-19 pandemic has made worse conditions for education by long isolation, which has led to more anxiety and suicidal tendencies. The causes of student suicide that this paper investigates, looking over the past decade. It also assesses the weaknesses of the education and health systems, which fail to address these issues. This paper discussed legal changes, such as the Mental Healthcare Act of 2017, factors influencing student suicide, patterns of student suicide, and ways to prevent suicides.

Keywords: Students, Suicide, Academic pressure, Mental Healthcare

Suicide is a sad and alarming issue. The Indian education system is tough and cutthroat and there is no space to nurture emotional and mental support for students who are struggling with their learning abilities: academic stress, societal norms and family expectations for success lead to anxiety, depression and suicidal thoughts. The National Crime Records Bureau (NCRB) has released statistics showing an alarming growth in the number of student suicides, with over 13,000 cases in 2021 alone. The increase is 70%. The COVID-19 pandemic made this crisis even worse by introducing new sources of stress: online learning, isolation, and uncertainty of what's to come. In addition, socio-economic inequality, lack of access to good education, and stigma related to mental health increase the risk of suicide for many students.

Existing Legal Situation

India's legal framework towards suicide has changed. In the past, Section 309 of the Indian Penal Code (IPC) criminalized suicide attempts, and people who were able to survive suicide attempts were imprisoned or given a fine. Under this law, those who attempted suicide were treated as criminals. When the Mental Healthcare Act was passed in 2017, there has been a significant shift. Suicide Attempts were decriminalized under this Act because it understood that anyone who is attempting suicide may be under severe mental stress. The law, instead of punishment, orders care, treatment and rehabilitation. This approach is in line with global human rights standards- it's not a criminal act; it's a mental health crisis. In 2020, the Kerala High Court quashed a criminal case against a survivor of suicide, condemning the prosecution. The state must provide mental healthcare rather than punishment.

Literature Review

- Impact of COVID-19: COVID-19 shuts education, isolates students, and creates new issues like online learning. Lathabhavan and Griffiths' (2020) studies make it clear that the pandemic has helped propel student suicides. Usually, online education was not conducive to many students from lower socio-economic backgrounds left out of social interactions that provided emotional support.
- Predictors of Suicidal Thoughts: The majority of the studies confirm that academic stress, depression and lack of coping skills are substantial risk factors for suicidal ideation among students. According to Desai et al. (2021), high academic pressure is harmful to students who are under pressure, especially in competitive fields, as they have higher chances of depression and suicidal tendencies.

- Sociological Factors: It is essential to account for the student's socio-economic conditions, which decide his mental health. Dandona et al. (2017) also studied that students from underprivileged socio-economic backgrounds experience more stress and lack options for educational resources and mental health care. This gap intensifies barriers to a student's well-being.

Factors influencing student suicides

Some of the key factors contributing to the rising number of student suicides include:

Academic Pressure

If you are new to Indian education, you will know that Indian education is pretty much dominated by exams, especially the exams such as the one which would decide your academic and professional career for the years to come – Joint Entrance Examination (JEE) for engineering and National Eligibility Cum Entrance Test (NEET) for admission to medical college. Academic pressure takes a toll on these exams and the need for higher grades. Students expect, and many feel they are expected, to put in their best efforts. Between the fear of failure and intense competition, they get depressed. Sometimes, when students cannot meet these academic expectations, they feel that it has something to do with them, worsening it and making students feel helpless and hopeless.

The societal and parental pressure and expectation of success add more pressure upon this academic pressure. Academic excellence is often seen by parents as the easy way towards a secure and prosperous future, while blinded to the mental and emotional health cost this imposes on their kids. For students particularly struggling economically, their family's hopes may depend on their academic success, and failure is terrifying. A combination of these two aspects creates a cycle of stress, anxiety, and sometimes a suicidal tendency (Yadav & Srivastava, 2020).

Mental Health Challenges

Student suicides are among the most significant sources of mental health issues. Students experience depression, anxiety, and stress-related disorders, but they are familiar- though often not diagnosed or treated. Mental health is still a taboo subject in many parts of India. Mental health challenges students don't want to talk about because they are afraid of being asocial. The stigma that surrounds mental health problems can create feelings of shame, isolation and hopelessness; these things increase the risk of feeling suicidal.

There is a massive deficit of mental health services in India, in particular in rural areas. Counselors or psychologists are absent from many places that students in rural regions and small towns do not have. Health services for mental health are usually poorly funded and cannot be scaled up even in urban areas such as schools and colleges. The result is that many students do not receive the necessary care until it is too late (Nebhinani et al., 2017).

Socio-economic Disparities

Students' socio-economic background is significant concerning mental health. It includes pressure to do well at school to get out of poverty or to better their family's financial status. Things are even worse for students from rural or lower-income backgrounds. Adding to their stress, they may have to work part-time to help their families with their studies. In addition, there exists an unequal playing field of access to mental health services between rural and urban districts. This inequality in assets further complicates for students from marginalized backgrounds how to handle stress and mental healthcare, all leading to enhanced suicidal behavior (Dandona et al., 2017).

Bullying and Social Isolation

Physical bullying, emotional bullying, and cyberbullying are significant factors in student suicides. Bullying may be teasing, name-calling, or physical assaults, but it can occur in schools and colleges. Students who are bullied usually lose self-esteem and feel helpless and socially isolated. They can feel so bad about themselves, and these feelings can cause severe mental health problems like depression, anxiety and, ultimately, suicidal thoughts. However, the COVID-19 pandemic contributed to this by forcing online

education and reducing face-to-face interaction with students. Online platforms have become fertile ground for cyberbullying; some of the students are harassed and trolled online.

Substance Abuse

Some students take drinking and drugs as a way of coping with stress and depression. The use of substances can heighten despair and lead students to commit suicide. Many educational institutions don't have an awareness of substance abuse with preventive programmes. If students don't know about the dangers of substance use and access to support systems, then drugs or alcohol can become a means to remedy the emotional distress, but in reality, it only feeds that suffering.

Circumstantial Experiences

Sometimes, just a few personal circumstances or unexpected events in life can cause you to have suicidal thoughts suddenly. A student whose father or another loved one dies, who fails exams, or otherwise gets humiliated in public may find their inability to cope all by himself and their feelings are overwhelming. These personal setbacks can prove problems for some students. The student who is not emotionally supported feels an increasing sense of despair, resulting in suicidal behavior.

Patterns of student suicide in India

In India, there has been a steady rise in the number of student suicides for the past decade. National Crime Records Bureau (NCRB) data shows that student suicides increased by 70 percent between 2011 and 2021. However, with the recent COVID-19 pandemic increasing these trends, students are struggling with remote education, isolation, and uncertainty of the future. Gender disparities exist in student suicides also. In the past, male students tended to take a much higher proportion of suicides, while in recent years, female students have recorded a growing trend for suicide. This is the change that can be put down to high societal pressure, gender-based discrimination, and stress in managing academic and family expectations. The pattern of student suicides also involves regional variations. Most states like Maharashtra, Madhya Pradesh and Tamil Nadu have been consistently reporting the highest number of suicides.

Ways to prevent student suicides

The following are key strategies to reduce the risk of student suicides:

Educational Reforms

The current Indian educational system heavily emphasizes rote learning and exams. Education needs to change to a more holistic approach to reduce academic stress. Instead of only being oriented towards academia, schools and colleges should try to bring out well-rounded individuals. It can be done by weaving life skills, critical thinking and mental health education into the curriculum. Also, students should have multiple routes of success, including vocational training and skill development, instead of the traditional academic route. The schools should also have counseling centers established by trained mental health professionals. It can also provide students a place to manage personal issues, mental health, and academic pressure before the situation worsens.

Mental Health Support

Preventing suicides is critical because access and services to mental health are needed. There is a need for the government, schools, and colleges to provide affordable and inclusive mental health services which can help students to manage their emotions. Mental health programmes like counseling services, peer support groups and stress management workshops should be organized regularly. Schools and colleges need to have routine mental health screenings of students. Awareness campaigns about the importance of mental health should also be launched to teach students, teachers, and parents.

Community and Family Engagement

Families and communities also help students, which can help reduce the stigma around mental health. Parents must be educated about what the signs are for stress, anxiety and depression in their children. They should also talk with their children about what mental health and well-being are and encourage them to have open conversations. Workshops can also be organized in schools for parents and guardians to help support their children's emotional conflict.

Conclusion

The issue of student suicides in India cannot be solved overnight. It requires an intensive effort from all stakeholders, including educational institutions, families and policymakers. There is a dire need for reforms that create an environment where students can flourish without the weight of unrealistic expectations. Without significant changes, the crisis will only worsen, and India will lose its brightest young minds. As adults, we must listen to our children and students, understand their challenges and aspirations, have faith in their abilities and include them in our efforts to build a safer world for all of us.

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