

SILENT EPIDEMIC AMONG INDIAN STUDENTS: A PSYCHO-SOCIAL UNDERSTANDING

Dr. Prakash Bhue¹, Bikash Bhue² and Priyanka Dash³

¹Lecturer in Sociology, Sarala Mahavidyalaya, Rahama, Jagatsinghpur, Odisha

²School of Education Gangadhar Meher University, Amruta Vihara, Sambalpur, Odisha

³Department of Psychology, Panchayat College, Bargarh, Sambalpur University, Odisha

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ABSTRACT

The growing competition in education and the job market has increased the rate of suicide among youths who are studying in different educational institutions as well as preparing themselves for different competitive examinations. The sudden increase in suicide rates in the last few years among youths has become a major sociological concern. The high expectations of family members and society towards their children in achieving their career goals have forced many of them to kill themselves. The failure of the state to provide adequate facilities and employment opportunities has depressed the youth of the current generation. The present paper seeks to understand the trends and underlying causes of suicide among youths from psychosocial angles and suggest some measures for policy intervention.

Keywords: Depression; India; policy; suicide; India

Introduction

Suicidal tendency among students has been an important health issues in India. Sudden increase of suicide rates among students in the last few years has compelled psychologists, sociologists, educationists and medical practitioners to think critically in this issue. Suicide has been an important area of study in sociology and psychology since long years. Globally, 703 000 people die by suicide every year. Suicide has been one of the leading cause of death after malaria, HIV AIDS, breast cancer, war or homicide. It has become the second leading cause of death globally and the young population (aged 15-29 years) are the prime victims (World Health Organisation,2019). In India, more than one lakh people commit suicide every year. Maharashtra has reported maximum number of suicide in 2022 followed by Tamil Nadu, Madhya Pradesh,

Karnataka and West Bengal respectively. These five states together accounted for 49.3 percent of total suicide reported in the country. Out of the total numbers of death recorded by suicide a majority of 31.7 percent people have committed suicide for family problem, 18.4 percent people for illness. Only 1.9 percent people have committed suicide because of unemployment condition, 1.2 percent people for failure in examination and 1.2 percent for professional and career problems respectively. As per the data, out of the total victims a majority of 14 percent are women (NCRB, 2023). In India, more than 35,000 students killed themselves between 2019 and 2021. As per the data, there was a rise in student suicides from 10,335 in 2019 to 12,526 in 2020 and 13,089 in 2021 (The Times of India, 2023). In every 42 minutes a student commit suicide in India (NCRB, 2020). This means that an average of 42 students die every day. A total of 13,044 students took their lives in the country in 2022 and the student suicides accounted for 7.6 percent of all suicide deaths in 2022. Kota, the capital city of premier coaching centre in India has recorded 26 student suicides in 2023 which is the highest since 2015 (Kalita, 2023).

Suicidal ideation in India is evidently higher among medical students as compared to other disciplines and the female students are more prone to suicidal ideation. The suicidal ideation is found to be higher in nuclear families and those having a family history of suicide (Desai et al., 2021). Study also has evident that the risk of suicide is high among first year medical students. The reason may be that they are not able to adjust with new academic and social environment (Goyal et al., 2012).

Theoretical Underpinning

Psychological Theory on Suicide

Earlier theories like Diatheses-stress-hopelessness model of suicidal behavior by Schotte and Clum (1987) focused on psychological factors of individuals responsible for suicidal behavior. They basically did not study the aspect of transition phase from suicidal line of thinking to attempt or commit suicide. Later on, two distinct theories have been developed to give evidences on such dimension of research study on suicide.

The first among the recent studies is Joiner's interpersonal theory of suicide (2005), who focused on the initiation and the process of attempting or committing suicide. According to his theory, suicidal ideation of an individual is framed by the repetitive rough and struggling circumstances of one's. Through the phases of life, responses towards such stimuli can vary from person to person. Some people posit ideation to suicide and some can resist over time. People attempting or committing suicide have turmoil of emotional responsiveness. They feel themselves as a burden on others called as coexistence of high level of perceived burdensomeness. They tend to feel lonely and develop a sense of lack of belongingness. They usually separate themselves from

their society and tend to live in isolation for a prolonged period. The dysconnectivity from their social being leads to high level of hopelessness in that individual. They start being hopeless about the positive consequences of that problem and fail to find solution, develop a high sense of pessimism towards their survival. But so many people attain this phase and not all of them attempt suicide. Joiner tells us that the high level of acquired capability towards suicide is major cause of suicidal behaviour. When a person acquires high level of capability to attempt suicide, he/she may not be afraid of the fear of death. The exposures and experiences to consistent worsen conditions unfortunately, help them to tolerate excessive physical pain. The line of suicidal concern for a long period of time builds a perception inside them that excessive amount of physical pain once (which leads to death) is better than confronting the situation every single day.

Another theory named integrated Motivational volitional model of suicidal behavior propounded by O'Connor (2011) gives special attention on suicidal ideation being factor of a person die by suicide. He said that psychological disorders are not the core and only cause of suicidal cases always. This theory consists of two phases – motivational phase and volitional phase. In the motivational phase, the person starts having feelings of defeat on all aspects of her/his life through a due course of triggered emotion. They feel trapped by humiliation and defeated circumstances and cannot get over it. Such fragile conditions develop high level of intend towards suicide. The second phase – volitional phase is the determination of that person to give up his/her life. The lack of social support and the persistent feelings of being trapped and defeated contribute to commit suicide. Several motivational moderators like social support, exposure to other suicidal cases are the reasons behind this.

Sociological Theories on Suicide

In every society, individuals commit suicide for various reasons. These suicides are normal and individual phenomena. However, when the rate of suicide increases abruptly in a particular region or over a period of time, it is of pathological nature and a social phenomenon. Sociologists mainly focus on the later one and try to establish a relationship between individual phenomena (suicide) and social phenomena (the suicide rate). Emile Durkheim, the French sociologist, has done a major work on suicide He rejects the idea that suicide is psychologically explained. He acknowledges that suicide has a psychological tendency. However, societal factors—rather than psychological factors—determine suicide (Aron, 1967).

Durkheim examined the suicide rates of various regions using multiple variables and found that there was no correlation between psychopathological states, hereditary tendencies, or suicide. Durkheim discusses four types of suicides on the basis of the degree of integration and regulation of an individual with society. These suicides include egoistic, altruistic, anomic, and fatalistic.

He has shown the least interest in fatalistic suicide because of its rare prevalence. The first type of suicide is egoistic, where individuals feel that they are not integrated with social groups. They feel lonely and detached from society and kill themselves. The second type is altruistic suicide, which is characterized by over-integration into society. The individual chooses death for collective pursuits.

The third type of suicide is anomic, which probably interests Durkheim most because it is most characteristic of modern society. Anomic suicide is a type of suicide that increases during an economic crisis. When individuals cannot adapt themselves to sudden, changing situations, they try to kill themselves. The last one is fatalistic suicide, in which individuals kill themselves because of excessive regulation in society.

Jack Douglas (1967) was not fully agree with the suicide theory of Emile Durkheim. Douglas wanted to interpret how individuals who commit suicide define and give meaning to their act. Consequently, it is important to examine suicide notes, diaries, reactions of the family members, friends and the event leading to the suicide. He argues that Durkheim's types of suicide has nothing to do with the meanings that victims give to their action.

Students set goals themselves or with the choice of their parents and pursue that goal to achieve the meaning of life. However, not every students can reach the goals set by themselves or can fulfil the expectation of their parents because of excessive competition and other social factors. This sense of failure gives frustration and may result in suicidal behaviour, which better explains anomic suicide (Kar and Singh, 2023).

Causes of Suicide among Students

Relationship Issue

Engaging oneself in some good relationships helps decrease stress and become a factor in happiness. Today, the young generation is going through serious relationship issues. Failure in love, separation from the loved one, and breaking of relationships have severely impacted students' lives. Feelings of loneliness and fear of being ignored have forced many young people to commit suicide. Research studies found that interpersonal stress was one of the major causes of suicide among youths (Balaji et al., 2023).

Prevailing Social Norms

In India, male members are considered the primary breadwinners in the family. From the early days of their lives, children are socially injected with the idea that, without a good job, life has no meaning. Those who are engaged in government services are always recognized by society

over those in private sector jobs. Even despite getting a good salary from a private job and having a luxurious life, you are not recognized as a government servant. Generally, parents do not want to give their daughters a private job. Consequently, everyone runs behind on a government job after a formal college education. However, employing all the educated youths in government sector jobs is not possible in India because of its huge population. Despite a good career, some students do not get a job as per their choice.

Psychological Disorder

Psychological disorders are a major cause of suicide among students in India (Pandey, 2017, Khan et al., 2005). Exam-induced anxiety and stress have been common symptoms among students. Particularly, those who are preparing themselves for competitive examinations over a period of time and not getting the job as per expectation are experiencing depression. These students initially withdrew themselves from social life and started living alone. They develop over thinking about their future and lose sleep. They think that nobody is with them to understand their situation. At last, they decide to take their own lives.

Failure in Examination

This is the bitter truth we have to acknowledge: the game of success and failure can take one's life. Today, youths are very sensitive to their success rate. The social perspective of making an image through a high success rate in exams pushes students to see such aspiration as a parameter of life existence. They drag them into the worst condition to qualify for an examination with good marks. But in such a competitive world, it becomes very challenging for some students to fulfil their own expectations. Taking their own life becomes easier for them than confronting such failures. The prevalence of such suicidal cases is high in elite educational institutions in India. The National Testing and Eligibility Test (NEET) is the toughest and most competitive examination conducted by the National Testing Agency (NTA) in India for admission to medical school. For one lakh seats, more than one million students appear for the examination. Sometimes the NTA cannot conduct the examination on time and extends the date of the examination frequently. The examination itself is tough and stressful, and in addition, the examination date adds extra stress. The uncertainty of examinations unnecessarily increases anxiety among students, which has a negative effect on their performance. Consequently, students choose an easy way to escape from the mental pressure and kill themselves (Kar et al., 2021).

Substance Abuse

Substance abuse is another risk factor associated with suicidal attempts. Today, students are very sensitive. They cannot cope with different emotions and stress easily. In order to relieve stress,

they start taking alcohol, drugs, and other harmful substances. Initially, these substances work as stress relievers, but gradually they become addicted to them. Financial hardship, family conflicts, interpersonal problems, delusional jealousy, and social rejection are all comorbid outcomes of alcoholism, and these can lead to suicide thoughts in the sufferer (Radhakrishnan, 2012)

Caste Factor

Caste is one of the important factors in suicide in educational institutions in India. Despite legal and constitutional guarantees of equality, caste-based discrimination persists in educational institutions as a social reality. Numerous suicide deaths by students from prestigious universities over the years have been connected to caste based harassment and discrimination (Sharma, 2023). However, some other students commit suicide because of caste-based reservations. They think that they could not qualify for an examination with good scores, but students from backward sections qualified for the same low score in the examination. It has been evident that in many educational institutions, teachers, department heads, and authorities show a very negative attitude towards students from marginalized sections (Singh, 2016). Students from lower castes are ill-treated by their classmates and roommates in hostels in new places. These students cannot hang out with other students out of fear of discrimination and remain isolated most of the time. Loneliness and fear of being avoided by the friends lead to anxiety and depression among them, which causes suicide in the future.

Institutional Harassment

Institutional harassment refers to the acts committed by the institutional heads, department heads, teachers, and students against other students that cause defamation, obstruct official work, delay fellowship, use harsh words, and emotional pressure. According to the Union Ministry of Education, 98 students committed suicide in the last five years. These students were studying at India's leading educational institutions, like Central Universities, IITs, IIMs, NITs, and IISERs. In the year 2023, twenty cases were reported in higher education institutions. These include nine cases from central universities and seven from IITs (The Economic Times, 2023).

Parental Expectation

Parental attitude and behaviour play a significant role in the mental health of a child. Parental approach determines the career selection of their children. In the last few years, parental high expectations have been proven to be a strong contributor to suicide cases among students. Basically, NEET and JEE aspirants are sent to top-class coaching centres in India with the prospect of qualifying for such a difficult examination, undoubtedly. The rigidity of parents, their acceptance of children's weak performance, a huge gap between parents-children relationships, resistance to validate their genuine issues, mocking them with comparison, putting their own

choice on the child while choosing a career—all these are confirmatory reasons behind students suicidal cases. The lack of parental approval drags them to take such a barbaric step by taking their own life.

Trends of Suicide

Gender

As per NCRB data, the overall male-female ratio of suicide victims for the year 2022 was 71.8:28.2, which is less as compared to the year 2021. The major causes of female suicides were dowry, impotency, and marriage-related issues. The age group 18 to below 30 years is more vulnerable, accounting for 34.6% of suicides. This is the age group where most people appear for various competitive examinations to build their careers. Although specific data on the age of students who committed suicide is not available in the report, 18 to 30 years of age is a period where students go for higher studies and career building.

Marginalised Students

The certain young section of Indian population like lower scheduled castes (SCs), scheduled tribes (STs), other backward classes (OBCs) and minorities have always been treated as inferior and backward. Recent conduction of researches show the harsh image of suicidal tendency among the young coming from the underprivileged backgrounds.

Table: 1 Social category wise student suicides from 2019-2023

Sl. No.	Institutes/Universities	SC	ST	OBC	Minority	Total
1	Indian Institutes of Technology (IITs)	5	1	9	2	17
2	Indian Institute of Management (IIMs)	0	0	1	0	01
3	All India Institute of Medical Science (AIIMS)	0	2	4	1	07
4	National Institutes of Technology (NITs)	4	0	8	1	13
5	Indian Institute of Information Technology (IIITs)	0	0	2	0	02
6	School of Planning and Architecture (SPASs)	0	0	2	0	02
	Total:	05	03	26	04	42

Source: Open Government Data Platform India, 2023a

Data revealed that a total of 42 students have died by suicide in the premier educational institutions of India between 2019 and 2023. A majority of 17 students have been reported from IITs, followed by 13 from NITs. All these students were from marginalized sections. It is also observed that a majority of OBC students have died by suicide within the last five years. As the rate of suicide among marginalised section is a matter of concern, the section is in serious need of attentive and persistent initiatives.

Educational Status

As per NCRB data, the maximum number of suicide victims (23.9%) in 2022 were educated up to secondary education, followed by 18% at the middle level, 15.9% at the higher secondary and university levels, and 5.2% were graduates. As there is no specific data on the educational qualification of student suicides in the NCRB report, it cannot be generalized that the majority of students were in secondary schools.

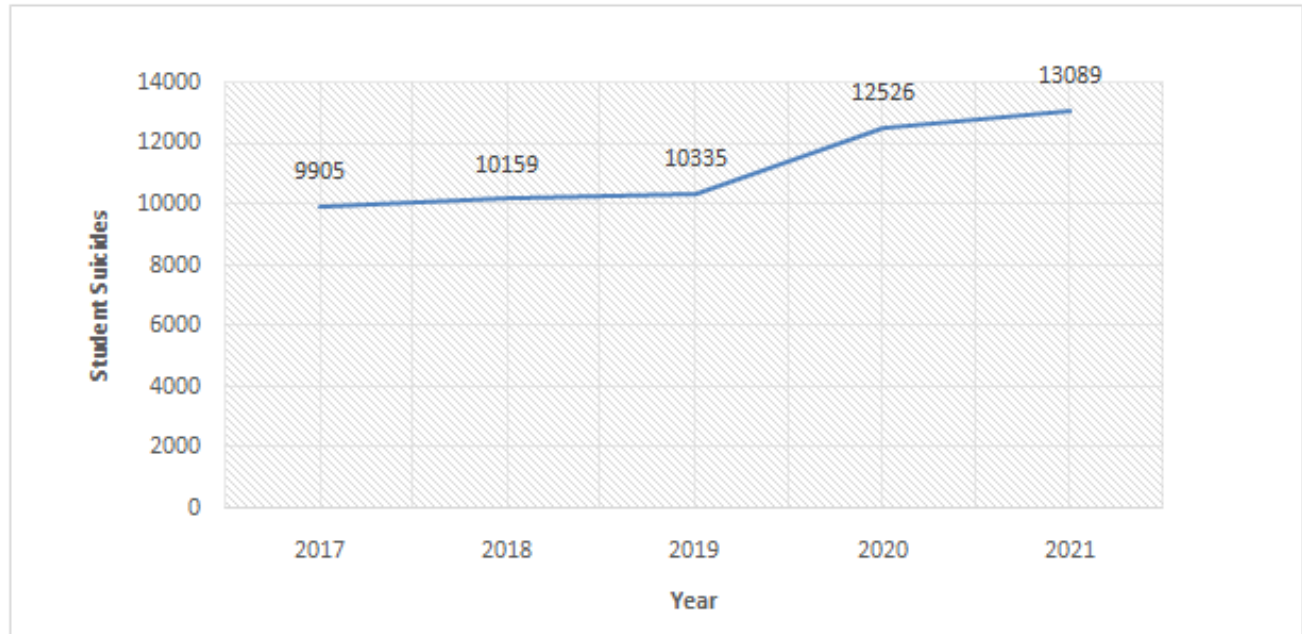
Table: 2 Year wise suicide rates among students in different educational institutions

Sl. No.	Institutes/Universities	2018	2019	2020	2021	2022	2023	Total
1	Central Universities (CUs) (under UGC)	8	2	2	0	4	9	25
2	Indian Institutes of Technology (IITs)	8	8	3	4	9	7	39
3	National Institutes of Technology (NITs)	3	8	1	2	7	4	25
4	Indian Institute of Information Technology (IIITs)	0	1	0	0	1	0	02
5	Indian Institute of Management (IIMs)	1	0	1	1	1	0	04
6	Indian Institute of Science Education and Research (IISERs)	1	0	0	0	2	0	03
Total:		21	19	7	7	24	20	98

Source: Open Government Data Platform India, 2023b

According to the data in the above table, 98 students from premier educational institutions have committed suicide in the last five years. Maximum numbers of suicide cases have been reported in such institutions in the year 2022. Data reveals that a majority of students (39) have died by suicide in IITs in the years 2018–2023, followed by CUs and NITs.

Figure: 1 Year wise increasing trend of student suicide (2017-2021)



Source: The Wire, 2023

The above diagram shows the increasing trend of suicide among Indian students. As per the data, the number of suicides, which was to be 9905 in 2017, has increased to 13089 in 2021. The number of student suicides in India has increased over the years. suicides, which was to be 9905 in 2017, has increased to 13089 in 2021. The number of student suicides in India has increased over the years.

Suggestions for Policy Implication

Life Skill Education

Students' lives are full of stress and challenges. Today, students are equipped with numerous skills, but they lack life skills. Life skills are one of the important skills that enable individuals to cope with various situations in life. Adolescents and youths, particularly during their student's life, go through various changes like psychological, physiological, emotional, and social. Life skills would empower them so that they could deal with various emotional changes. Consequently, both the state and the central government should introduce life skills as a compulsory subject at the school and college levels. Sessions on stress management, coping with emotion, conflict handling strategies, problem-solving behaviour, academic behaviour, and happiness should be imparted to students.

Counselling Centre in Educational Institutions

In India, mental health has always been neglected by the people because of a lack of knowledge. People hardly consult with psychologists and psychiatrists when they experience psychological disorders. The reason may be that there is a severe shortage of psychologists, psychiatrists, and counsellors in various health centres in the country. As per the World Health Organisation (WHO) report 2017, there were about 9000 psychiatrists practicing in India, which equates to 0.75% per lakh of people. However, India actually needs three psychiatrists in one lakh population (Jha, 2023). To resolve the shortage of psychologists and counsellors in the country, educational institutions with post-graduation, M.Phil, and research degrees should create counselling centres.

Mental Health Awareness Campaign

The government should make it a strict guideline to organize seminars and workshops on mental health in schools and colleges. Some important psychological days must be observed in schools and colleges so that faculty as well as students will be aware of mental health. These seminars and workshops will be able to remove the stigma associated with mental health and enable them to take responsibility for their mental health.

Conclusion

Suicides among Indian students have increased abruptly in the last few years. It has become a silent epidemic. Nobody is interested in knowing why students are committing suicide, what mental pressure they are going through while pursuing higher education, and different competitive examinations. Both the central and the state governments are expected to be serious about the matter. It is a matter of sorrow that a large number of students have committed suicide in the most prestigious higher educational institutions in India. If the rate of suicide increases in this trend, then India will lose some valuable human resources. Parents will question the country's education system. The country will face a large morbidity in the near future. Consequently, it is a crucial time for social scientists, psychologists, educators, and other researchers to think critically about this issue. More empirical studies should be conducted by the researcher to get details on it. The central government, state governments, and various funding agencies should provide financial support to the researchers to initiate research in this area. Institutional moral supports through caregivers and counsellors should be provided in educational institutions so that students will be able to cope with various changing situations. Significantly, the government should open up more medical and engineering colleges so that the maximum number of students can be enrolled.

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