Cracking Under Pressure: A Look At Student Mental Health In India

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Abstract:

India is currently facing an alarmingly high number of student suicide rates. Official data and newspaper reporting of student self-harm incidents refer to academic pressures and high parental expectations among other reasons. As a response, the government has implemented several mental health policies using schools and colleges as their medium to reach out to the students and their families. In doing so, the existing policy framework excludes an important portion of the student population in the country, i.e. those who are outside the ambit of schools, colleges, or universities. In India, many students take gap years to prepare for competitive exams and therefore cannot be reached out to through educational institutions. This essay adopts a neo - institutional approach to advocate for a policy model tackling high student suicide rates that in inclusive to all groups of students. The model focuses on six institutions, both formal and informal, as its main arenas of regulation - family, coaching centres, labour/job market, senior secondary educational institutes, higher educational institutes, and the legal system.

Key words: *students, suicide, neo-institutionalism, mental health, competitive exams*

I. INTRODUCTION

Earlier this August, two students committed suicide in Kota, a city in Rajasthan, India. This has taken the student death rate in the city for the year up to 23 (from 15 in 2022) (Sharma, 2023). While official investigation into their cause of death is ongoing, newspapers report academic stress and peer pressure as the most common reasons for such incidents in the city (PTI, 2023). These students had come to Kota, the county's 'coaching hub', to prepare for two hyper-competitive college level entrance exams in India that receive lakhs of applications each year - National Eligibility cum Entrance Test (NEET) and Joint Entrance Examination (JEE) for admission to the country's most prestigious medical and engineering colleges. Kota hosts numerous coaching centres which prepare students from 16 to 17 years old onwards specifically for these entrance examinations. These students, or 'aspirants' as they are commonly known as, travel from all across the country to live in Kota and aspire to give wings to their dreams.

Kota is just one example in India's extensive labyrinth of entrance examinations and academic stresses. Not only do other cities like Delhi also host students and coaching centres for JEE and NEET, but other competitive exams, like the Union Public Service Commission (UPSC) to enter India's civil services, are also extremely hyper-competitive and pose great levels of stress on the applicants (Gull et al., 2023). Beyond examinations as the ones listed above, other full time students already enrolled in educational institutes are also committing suicides as an increasing rate (Nevatia, 2023). Infact, such incidents are reported to include children as young as in grade 11 to those in colleges and universities (Adhikari, 2023).

The high rates of student suicides across the country begs one to ask several questions - is India going through a student mental health crisis? Why is the country's youth under high stress?

The high number of suicides as well as their spatial distribution forces one to view the issue not with a regional or micro perspective, but rather through a country wide perspective. Far from being isolated instances, students-suicides have become a phenomenon in this country and must be answered through formal policy mechanisms. This essay advocates for the adoption of a macro approach in the discourse of student's suicides in India, especially vis-a-vis forming policy responses for them. It calls for the need of a country wide public policy response to student suicides that is holistic, permanent, and inclusive in nature. In proposing a policy paradigm for the same, the article also contributes to the theorising of student suicides in the country.

Indeed, the Indian government has not been silent about rising concerns over student mental health. Currently, policies that pertain to mental health and suicide prevention for this population are National Mental Health Policy, 2014, programmes like Rashtriya Kishore Swasthya Karyakaram, 2014, National Health Program,

2017, School Health and Wellness Program, 2020, certain provisions of the draft National Youth Policy, 2021, etc. Legally, the Mental Health Care Act, 2017 also draws the link between 'severe stress' and attempted suicide (Ministry of Law and Justice, 2017). One of the most recent additions to this list is the National Suicide Strategy (NSPS), 2022. All these policy documents include measures like curriculum development to include life - skills education, teacher - training, increasing extra - curricular activities, provision of school health ambassadors and creating a common platform to bring together youth organisations to mobilise after their senior secondary school qualification.

However, all of the measures mentioned above can be implemented only through educational institutions. Schools and colleges are seen as platforms where young people socialise and collect due to which their premises are often used for distribution of public services like ration, Aadhaar cards, etc. A similar approach can be seen to have been followed regarding community mental health awareness measures. The recently released Draft UMMEED (Understand, Motivate, Manage, Empathise, Empower, Develop) Guidelines for Schools refer to several measures like gatekeeper training and appropriate curriculum development, for schools.

With reference to regulation outside the purview of educational institutions, ad-hoc measures like halting monthly tests and establishing mental health units in Kota to reach out to students in distress are the policy responses being resorted to (The Hindu Bureau, 2023). Moreover, these measures have only been implemented by the government of Rajasthan (where Kota is located) and not in any other city in the country.

In focussing on only school, colleges and other educational institutions, the policy paradigm indeed successfully caters to one half of the aspirant population i.e. those who are preparing for competitive exams while continuing their studies. However, it leaves out the other half from under its ambit - those who are not a part of any educational institute. Most applicants of various entrance exams in India take multiple gap years post school or college to study and prepare for the exams. These people are classified as Not in Employment, Education and Training (NEET) and in 2021, India was reported to have 28% of its youth as NEET ("World Bank Open Data," 2023). Since they are not a part of any school, college or other similar groups, the existing provisions of promoting student mental health do not reach out to them. Due to their rigorous study schedules, the majority of them are also not involved in youth organisations or NGOs. Despite these factors, one cannot ignore the mental health of such a major chunk of India's population as they signify unutilized and unrealised youth potential.

Therefore, the need of the hour is to develop policy solutions that are inclusive and spread relevant awareness for mental health through means applicable to all students, those within educational institutes as well as those outside them. As discussed below, multiple sources affect student suicides. Hence, the solution must also seek intervention through multiple directions. As a result, this essay proposes an neo - institutional model to tackle high numbers of student suicides.

The Neo - Institutional Model of Policymaking

An 'institution' is a loaded term and different approaches define it in different manners. On one hand, while institutions can be called as a set of legal rules that can be enforced by state actors (Knill and Tosun, 2020), on the other hand they can also be conceived as systems of established and embedded social rules that structure social interactions (Hodgson, 2006). Building on this framework, institutionalism studies the role and importance of institutions in public policy making. It analyses how the rules, norms, values and other structures of society affect social behaviour, enables or restricts policy actors and subsequently affects the policy output. In fact, policy making can also be used as a strategy for resolving societal problems by using institutions and at the same time, modifying said institutions to meet the government's goals (Knill and Tosun, 2008).

Within the broader framework of institutional theory, lies the neo-institutional theory (Greenwood et al., 2013). It stands to theorise institutional behaviour within the context of other institutions and larger social forces - especially cultural rules and beliefs. Neo - Institutionalism differentiates itself from old - institutionalism by broadening the scope of study to include informal and cultural institutions as well along with formal institutions.

The rationale for choosing the neo - institutional model lies on the cultural and social significance given to several conventional careers like civil services, engineering, and medicine that these highly competitive entrance exams provide a gateway to. Due to the informal social status provided to such careers, more and more individuals gravitate towards them. Moreover, perceived stability and security of employment in these careers also attracts many individuals. In doing so, an environment of extremely high competition is created and the stakes presented to each student is high, thereby creating pressure and stress for their successful result. As a result, the need of the hour is to focus on both formal and informal institutions influencing student mental health.

Within the neo - institutional model, six institutions, both formal and informal, have been identified as main areas of regulation and intervention. They are - *family, senior-secondary educational institutions, higher - education institutions, coaching centres, legal frameworks surrounding suicide and competitive exams and the labour market.* Moreover, this essay also advocates for a principle of *harmonious co - dependence* among these six institutions.

In proposing a policy paradigm for the issue at hand, this essay also contributes to the theorising of student suicides in the country.

II.   THEORISING STUDENT SUICIDES: LITERATURE REVIEW

Suicide has been a matter of sociological enquiry since a long time. Wray et al. provide a review of sociological studies on suicide, dividing the timeline according to the one of the subjects most prominent scholar, Emile Durkheim's, works (2011). They showcase how sociological enquiry into suicide differentiates suicide with mere individualistic behaviour and present it within a social and ecological framework. Durkheim himself classified it into different types revolving around levels of social integration and regulation. Put simply, they are - Egoistic (when individuals feel detached from society and experience weak social integration), Altruistic (when individuals are excessively socially integrated and tied to collective conscience), Anomic (when individuals face a breakdown in social regulation like a social or economic crisis) and Fatalistic (when individuals feel oppressed due to excessive regulation and control and see no way out) (Durkheim, 2005). When put in context with student suicides, several studies (even those falling within the larger bracket of adolescent or youth suicide) attempt to classify them into one of these four types. Godor associates student suicides and student drop outs from higher education institutions with academic fatalism due to the high level of academic pressure and regulation on students (2016). Thorlindsson and Bjarnason also study how integration and regulation relate to youth suicides and conclude that those who are more integrated into their families stand at a lower risk of committing suicide (1998). However, Meuller and Abrutyn, on the topic of integration, conclude that excessive integration is also harmful as it leads to quick spread of information about an individual's actions and achievements resulting in emotional reactions (2016).

Ultimately, however, each study focuses on the social and structural conditions that are present as a determining factor in leading to suicides.

Indian scholarship on student suicides also focusses on which factors seem to determine a student's decision to inflict self-harm. Some of the factors that have been identified are concerns about academic performance (Arun and Chavan, 2009), cultural discrimination (Nath et al., 2011), stiff competition, insecurity about future job prospects and fear of failure in exams (Watson et al., 2020). However, there has not been any uniform consensus of the number or type of factors that affect student suicides as well as collective effort to theorize them.

One study that does attempt to theorise such a phenomenon uses the socio-ecological model to do so (Kumar and Patel, 2022). It stresses on depression and other mental health concerns arising out of high family expectations.

Official reports on student suicides in India are scarce. The most widely referred to are the National Crime Records Bureau's annual Accidental Deaths and Suicides in India report (National Crime Records Bureau, n.d.). Data regarding the most vulnerable age groups as well as their most stated cause of suicide remains important in analysing student suicide.

Since 2010, '18 to below 30' has been the most vulnerable group in the country (with the exception of 2015 when it was superseded by the '30 to below 45 age group'). Table 1 shows that while the percentage share of suicides has gone down slightly, it still consistently accounts for more than 30% of the total suicides in the year.

Year	Percentage Share	In Numbers	Total Deaths
2010	35.4	47625	1,34,599
2011	35.4	48014	1,35,585
2012	34.6	41793	1,35,445
2013	34.4	46368	1,34,799
2014	34.1	44883	1,31,666
2015	32.8	43852	1,33,623
2016	33	43213	1,31,008
2017	34.8	45217	1,29,887
2018	34.9	46912	1,34,516
2019	35.1	48774	1,39,123
2020	34.4	52718	1,53,052
2021	34.5	56543	1,64,033
2022	34.6	59108	1,70,924

Table 1: Suicide Rates for the '18 to below 30' age group. Source: National Crime Records Bureau

The data presented above is put into context and becomes crucial when the most vulnerable age group and the ages eligible for most entrance examinations collide. School graduates above the ages of 18 are eligible for entrance exams like JEE and NEET and college graduates above the ages of 21 for UPSC and other job-based exams. The upper age limit for all these examinations ranges from 25 to 32 years. Moreover, given the hyper competitive nature of such examinations, coaching institutes also begin enrolling students from classes 9, 10 and 11 (14 - 16 years) to prepare them for these exams. Recently, Hindustan Times, a national daily, reported that committees in Kota are looking to limit the enrolment of student below class 8 in the city's coaching institutes (Sengupta and Saini, 2023).

Due to lack of official sources beyond the NCRB data, newspaper articles and surveys that report the cause of each incident as they occur also become important sources. Leading national newspapers like The Hindu and The Wire report academic stress, 'Failure in Examinations' and family expectations to cause excessive mental health crises among students (Nevatia, 2023) (The Wire, 2023).

Globally, there is ample literature on college and school student suicides. Haas et al. provides a systematic review of existing student suicide literature in America and Europe (2003). Similar to the Indian context, most studies talk about the socio - economic demographic distribution of reported cases and are distributed across different University campuses. For e.g. Silverman et al. collect suicide data from 10 Universities in the US and study the demographic and correlational data of all reported suicides over ten years (1997). However, out of all these, a few studies stand out due to their innovative approach to reducing student suicide numbers.

Washburn and Mandrusiak talk about a Canadian 7 Step Suicide Prevention Program implemented in the University of British Columbia (UBC) to prevent student suicides (2010). It is based on Jed Foundation's 'Framework for Developing Institutional Protocols for the Acutely Distressed or Suicidal College Student' (The Jed Foundation, 2006). The seven steps range from enhanced student connectedness and engagement to increasing community suicide awareness and gatekeeper training. It moves on to specialized training in assessment and treatment of suicide and an increased accessibility to counselling services and finally to and enhanced crisis management policy. Apart from UBC's program, the JED Foundation framework also identifies 'lead' institutions responsible for specific tasks. One of the foremost features of this program is its emphasis on multi-institutional collaboration for identification and intervention at various stages.

Other studies also discuss the more practical aspects of suicide prevention programs. eg. Though slightly dates but still quite relevant, a study investigates round-the-clock counselling units and suicide prevention policies making it compulsory for faculty members to report at-risk students at The College of William and Mary in the US. While the paper acknowledges the success of such a policy, it also raised questions about the financial costs raised by such counselling units and programs (Meilman et al., 1994). On a similar note, with regards to referring at-risk students to counselling units, a hospital–school–community tele partnership (HSCT) has also be looked into as an area of policy possibility to prevent student suicides (Shahidullah et al., 2023). Several studies also talk about gatekeeper training mechanisms (Hill et al., 2023) (Ross et al., 2023).

Building on the above presented theoretical underpinnings of student suicide as well as adapting from international measures, the following section provides policy model that rests on a harmonious functioning between the different institutions involved.

III.   FROM THEORY TO PRACTICE: THE POLICY RESPONSE

As mentioned above, neo - institutionalism, when applied to the case of student suicides in India, highlights the followings entities as separate institutions - family, educational institutions (both Senior Secondary and Higher Educational institutions), labour/job market, coaching institutions as well as prevalent laws and policies relating to mental health and suicides in India.
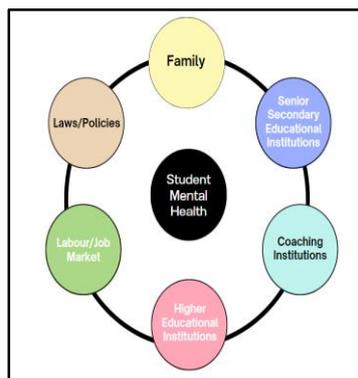

Diagram 1: An institutional model of policy making to reduce rising student suicides in India.

In a nutshell, each of the factors highlighted in the discussion above should be looked upon as a stand-alone institution that needs to regulate its functioning in favour of student mental health.

a) *Family:* Beginning with the first institution i.e. family. Expectations set by family is a common factor of students facing stressful situations (Kumar and Patel, 2022). A study conducted by the Centre for the Study of Developing Societies (CSDS) (Attri, 2023) of more than 1000 students of Kota stated that 49% of survey respondents had been sent to Kota by their parents. Recently, the Supreme Court of India also highlighted on the negative role played by high parental expectations on student suicides (Thomas, 2023). It is here that sensitization programs need to be conducted for family units where a cost-benefit analysis of excessive expectations on children and setting high standards of performance is shared with parents and guardians. Family is the first unit of socialisation that a child experiences. Hence, it is imperative that change be brought in family environments. Some ways through which such measures can be implemented is through widespread media dissemination of mental health and sensitization programs.

b) *Educational Institutions* Moving on, with regards to educational institutions, both *senior-secondary (schools) and higher educational (colleges and universities)* need to be brought within the ambit of policy making. The former is already associated with providing counselling services and spreading mental health awareness among the youth. The latter needs to be looked upon through the lens of student to university ratio. It is due to the low number of quality affordable universities and colleges that the competition for each seat goes up. Therefore, in this case, a top-down approach is necessary to increase the number of university choices for students to apply to and reduce the stiff competition for each seat.

c) *Coaching Institutions:* Next, the sheer quantity and magnitude of coaching institutions in the country has assured that they cannot be overlooked when finding a solution for this problem. According to the CSDS survey mentioned above, 85% of the students spend around 6-7 hours per day in coaching institutions in Kota. Coaching institutes, being private organisations, have long been outside of state regulation. However, while they may not be the primary or sole cause of student suicides, they do have a large say in influencing student mental health given the amount of time and money students invest in them. Therefore, this essay proposes certain levels of regulation over coaching institutes as well such as placing a ceiling cap on their high fees, regulating the accommodation they offer to students. Already one of the decisions taken by the government recently was to limit the number of weekly tests in coaching institutions to reduce stress over students. Similarly, more sustainable and long-term solutions need to be developed keeping coaching institutions at the decision table.

d) *Labour / Job Market:* Public sector jobs and careers like engineering and medicine are highly valued in Indian society (Mangal, 2021). In fact, the belief that certain professions can ensure the ability to 'settle down properly' accounts for the rush behind those few jobs like engineering and medicine (Borbora, 2023). Moreover, high levels of unemployment in the country pushes more and more youth towards long years of preparation for government exams in hopes of securing permanent jobs ("Unemployment rate remains elevated," 2020). Therefore, in the answer to reducing student suicides, the labour markets needs to be seen as an institution in itself. It should be gauged on its accessibility and inclusivity towards accommodating fresh graduates as well as the opportunities it provides for career progression and increasing quality of life.

An important measure to streamline labour market reform with low levels of stress among students is facilitating an increase in their employability and access to more entrepreneurial avenues. The need of the hour is to provide adequate employment opportunities to the youth to reduce the high stakes to clearing government exams and achieving academic excellence. At the same time, it is also important that socially, such alternative employment opportunities gain respect as equal to those in conventional career options. As established above, youth gravitate towards conventional careers due to the high social status accorded to them. Therefore, any alternate career opportunity must also be socially accepted in order to successfully attract individuals towards itself.

e) *Legal System:* Lastly, the legal system has indeed taken several positive steps towards promoting mental health and preventing student suicide. For long, attempt to suicide was a punishable offence under Section 309 of the Indian Penal Code of 1860. However, in recent time, the Mental Health Care Act, 2017 rebuts this provision and states -

"Any person who attempts to commit suicide shall be presumed, unless proved otherwise, to have severe stress and shall not be tried and punished under the said Code. The appropriate Government shall have a duty to provide care, treatment, and rehabilitation to a person, having severe stress and who attempted to commit suicide, to reduce the risk of recurrence of attempt to commit suicide" (Ministry of Law and Justice, 2017)

At the same time, with regards to the official functioning of several exams themselves, the National Testing Agency has in recent years begun to conduct two cycles of the Joint Entrance Exam (JEE). Such changes

provide the student more scope to improve their score. As a result, the pressure and stress to perform in the examination hall is significantly reduced. Such positive measures should be implemented more in the future in order to keep the legal system in support with all the other institutions involved to prevent student suicides.

Harmonious Co-Dependence - Here, apart from the need to govern each institution as a separate identity, it must also be remembered that each institution ought to exist in a harmonious co - dependence with each other. This relationship is reflected in Diagram 1 that places the individual student health in the centre and all institutions are connected around it in a ring, showcasing that they all are connected to each other. This is an essential part of the policy response due to the extremely sensitive nature of the issue at hand. A healthy mind and body cannot be ensured lest all forces work in tandem to produce an environment where each mind can flourish with ease.

IV.   CONCLUSION

As Franklin D. Roosevelt opined, "We cannot always build the future for our youth, but we can build our youth for the future". India's young demography provides it a competitive edge globally. Compared to India, the working population of many developed nations increases its average age every year. A demographic dividend as such paves the way for India to claim global power and build its own identity. However, if the same youth in focus remains limited due to their mental health concerns, evidenced by attempted suicides, the future looks bleak.

Students in India undergo immense amounts of stress due to high competition levels and unemployment rates. In order to help them cope with such challenging circumstances, both top - down and bottom - up approaches must be resorted to. The policy framework cannot only function through schools and colleges. These are important mediums to reach out to the stakeholders, there must also be regulation of other institutions like coaching centres, the labour market and the legal system to ensure that the student in the centre is protected and nurtured for a bright future.

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