

Anti-suicide measures should be implemented swiftly and strictly

Last year, five students committed suicide at the Indian Institute of Technology, Kharagpur, one of the most prestigious engineering colleges in the country. Although the rigours of academics and the pressure to succeed are higher in engineering colleges, they are not the only ones facing the brunt of student suicides. Between 2011 and 2016, 49,249 students in India killed themselves. Statistics from the National Crime Records Bureau show that 6,654 students committed suicide in 2012; 8,423 in 2013; 8,068 in 2014; and 8,934 in 2015. The number went up to 9,474 in 2016, says NCRB data shared by the ministry of home affairs in Parliament last month.

Concerned over the spate of suicides in our colleges, the ministry of human resource development has circulated a manual to the country's higher education institutions, asking the authorities to adopt measures to prevent students from taking the extreme step. The manual, prepared on the basis of a study conducted across the Indian Institutes of Technology (IITs) by IIT-Kharagpur, lists measures such as early identification of suicidal tendencies, a buddy programme and a double-blind helpline where both the caller and the counsellor are unaware of each other's identity. Other experts have suggested proactive steps at the adolescent stage itself with the introduction of mental health in school curricula.

One big drawback in India's fight against suicides is the inadequate mental health infrastructure in the country. The country has only 0.301 psychiatrists for every 100,000 people suffering from mental illnesses. There were just 3,800 psychiatrists, 898 clinical psychologists, 850 psychiatric social workers and 1,500 psychiatric nurses nationwide, according to a reply from the ministry of health and family welfare in the Lok Sabha in December 2015.

Given the seriousness and enormity of student suicides in the country, merely sending out an advisory listing preventive measures cannot be enough. The State should ensure that these measures are implemented strictly and not just in government-run colleges. Privately-run institutions and coaching centres, many of them with little or no counselling services, should not be allowed to get away lightly. That is the least the State can do in a country that is likely to become the youngest nation in the world (with an average age of 29), by 2020.

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