

Intersection of Caste and Student Suicide in India: A Scoping Review

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Abstract

The rate of student suicides in India has steadily increased over the years, with a 57% increase in the year 2022 compared to the previous decade. Student suicides in 2022 contributed to 7.6% of total suicides recorded in that year. The aim of the review is to examine the structural injustice faced by students from marginalized communities and the pertinent factors that led to student suicides in the community. This review utilises the Joanna Briggs Institute protocol to conduct a scoping review. A total of 17 articles were selected, which consisted of various qualitative studies, official government documents and reports published between 2014 and 2024. A thorough thematic analysis revealed the factors involved in the interplay between student suicides and caste to be the role of social and parental factors, academic pressure, financial pressure, institutional factors and caste based discrimination in institutes. The findings highlight the interconnectedness of the contributing factors calling for implementation of interventions that address each of the contributors. Interventions include policy reforms, grievance redressal mechanisms, and mental health support programs. By highlighting the profundity of the rate of student suicides, this review aims to prompt swift action for the betterment of students from all backgrounds in India.

Keywords

student suicides, India, caste, caste-based discrimination.

Introduction

India had a population of 1,407,563,842 individuals in 2021, which was expected to increase in the following years¹. According to the National Crime Records Bureau

¹ "India," Place Explorer - Data Commons, accessed November 27, 2024, https://datacommons.org/place/country/IND?utm_medium=explore&mprop=count&popt=Person&hl=en.

(NCRB), the rate of student suicides in India in the year 2022, was 12.8% ². This is a 2.2% increase compared to the rate of suicides in 2018.

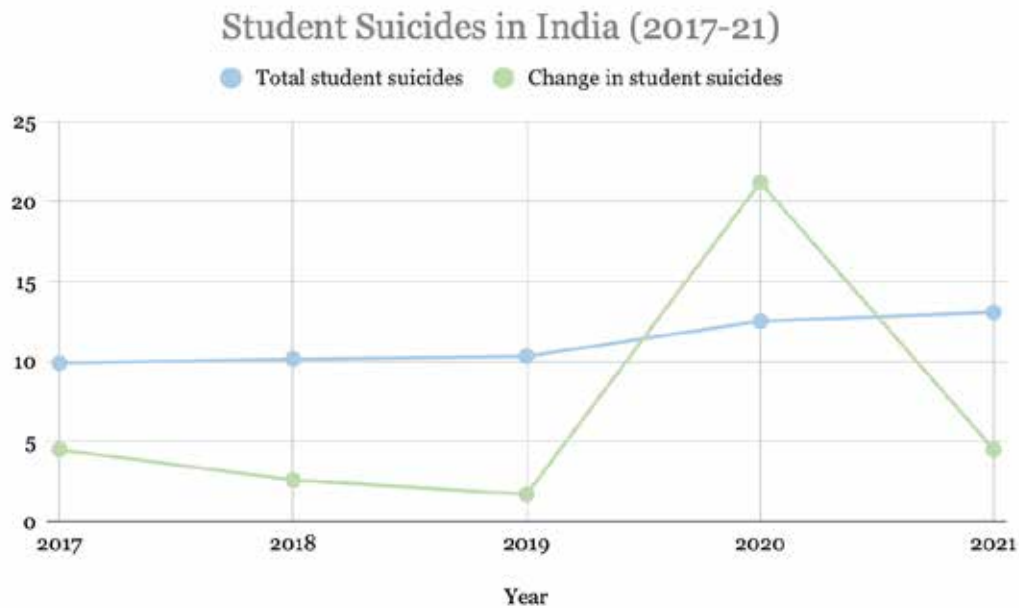


Figure 1. Student suicides in India (2017-21)

Further, a report submitted by the IC3 Institute, a non profit organisation focused on providing guidance to students, showed that there was a 57% increase in student suicides compared to the prior decade (2002-11)³. These statistics were based on the records collected and published by the NCRB. The data reported by the NCRB is based on the recorded FIRs by police personnel only. The number of recorded student suicides in 2022 was 13,089, which means there were around 35 to 36 suicides reported every single day. Student suicides contributed to 7.6% of the total number of suicides reported in India. These staggering numbers call for the attention of the masses and for a change to be brought.

² NCRB, 2022, <https://www.ncrb.gov.in/uploads/nationalcrimerecordsbureau/custom/1701607577CrimeinIndia2022Book1.pdf>.

³ Ic3institute, September 2024, <https://ic3institute.org/wp-content/uploads/2020/09/2020-IC3-Institute-Student-Quest-Survey-Report.pdf>.

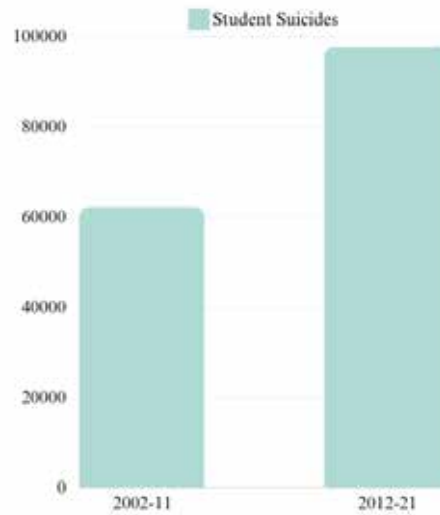


Fig. 1 Student suicides in the decade 2002-11 and 2012-21

Figure 2. Student suicides in India in the decade 2002–11 compared to 2012–21

The Indian caste system was inspired by the Manusmriti scripture which divided the population into 4 distinct castes– Brahmins, Kshatriyas, Vaishyas and Shudras.⁴ Outside of this caste system are the ‘untouchable’ caste, the Dalits, also referred to as Scheduled Caste. Since the establishment of the system, the scheduled caste community has faced continuous discrimination. A Human Rights Watch report highlighted the difficulties faced by the community in India while drawing parallels to other marginalised communities across the globe⁵. The report sheds light on the very deep social hierarchy of the caste system in India and the violent discrimination from which members of the scheduled caste, rather infamously known as “untouchables,” suffer. The discrimination faced by this community is evident in every domain of their lives, from occupation to education. As per reports and the Union Education Minister, over 122 students reportedly died by suicide at the most prestigious organisations in India, such as IIT and IIM in a span of 7 years⁶. From this number, more than 55% belonged to

4 “What Is India’s Caste System?,” BBC News, June 19, 2019, <https://www.bbc.com/news/world-asia-india-35650616#:~:text=The%20caste%20system%20divides%20Hindus,the%20Hindu%20God%20of%20creation.>

5 “IV. Background,” CASTE DISCRIMINATION; accessed November 27, 2024, <https://www.hrw.org/reports/2001/globalcaste/caste0801-03.htm>.

6 Shadab Moizee, “Why Are Dalit Students Dying by Suicide at India’s Prestigious Universities?,” The Quint, March 10, 2023, <https://www.thequint.com/videos/news-videos/why-are-dalit-students-dying-by-suicide-at-iit-iim-nit-central-universities#read-more>.

reserved categories. Furthermore, the number of students from Scheduled Caste (SC), Scheduled Tribe (ST) and Other Backward Classes (OBC) who dropped out from universities across India between 2018 and 2023 was above 19,000⁷.

Students face taunts and casteist slurs from their classmates on a daily basis, but it does not stop at that. The discrimination faced by students is not only from the other students, but even the faculty present, who resort to unfair grading methods for selected students. Marginalised students are subjected to derogatory labels, negative stereotypes, lack of support from management and face discrimination even when it comes to hostel segregation. The overwhelming experiences make it extremely hard for students to pursue higher education even if they have earned their place rightfully in the institutions. As per a study conducted on undergraduate students in Gujarat, exposure to caste based discrimination, caste related conflict and communal unrest put students at a higher risk for suicidal ideation as well⁸.

The Indian education system is extremely taxing. The constant pressure that is put on students to excel and be better than the rest of their batchmates often can overwhelm them. In addition to this, the competitive examinations in India, such as the JEE and NEET entrance examinations have been noted to significantly impact student wellbeing⁹. The everlasting rat race to be the best is ingrained in students right from the time they are enrolled in schools and institutions. In Indian society, marks and academic achievements are linked directly to competence and the assurance of having a successful life ahead. In a society where the stress and pressure is so high that the educational system is likened to be a 'pressure cooker' by media outlets, the strain of simply surviving the educational journey

7 Prema Sridevi, "Unveiling the Tragic Link: Caste Discrimination and Suicides in Higher Education," *TheProbe*, July 28, 2023, <https://theprobe.in/stories/unveiling-the-tragic-link-caste-discrimination-and-suicides-in-higher-education/>.

8 Yogini Nath et al., "Prevalence and Social Determinants of Suicidal Behaviours among College Youth in India," *International Journal of Social Psychiatry*, June 1, 2011, https://www.researchgate.net/publication/328039672_httpjournalssagepubcomdoiabs1011770887302X07303626.

9 Sigy George, "The Dark Side of India's Education System: The Silent Suffering of Its Youth - Information Matters," *Information Matters - Information Matters*, October 23, 2023, <https://informationmatters.org/2023/10/the-dark-side-of-indias-education-system-the-silent-suffering-of-its-youth/>.

plays a significant toll on mental health¹⁰. A study found that self expectations related to academics, perceived burden and a thwarted sense of belongingness significantly impacted suicidal ideation in Indian students¹¹.

The research problem that this review aims to investigate is how does caste and student suicide intersect in terms of the Indian population. The distressing rates of student suicides and the growing discriminatory practices against marginalised students calls for the implementation and creation of strategies to foster a safer environment for the mental and physical well being of students. By utilising a scoping review methodology, existing studies on student suicides and caste have been analysed to determine common themes. The use of these themes can prove to be extremely valuable for the formation of policies and guidelines that can be enforced to address the rising rate of scheduled caste student suicides. The identified themes aid in the identification of relevant factors that need to be considered to develop a holistic and effective plan of action. Drawing upon the literature and existing data for a sensitive topic such as the one chosen allows for in depth exploration into the topic to identify areas that need more focus and to consolidate available information. This review draws upon published material to identify the factors contributing towards student suicides due to caste related factors and attempts to provide solutions to resolve the underlying contributory factors.

Method

Taxonomy

For the purpose of this study, suicide is defined as per the definition provided by the National Institute of Mental Health, i.e. death caused by self-directed injurious behavior with intent to die as a result of the behavior¹². Caste refers to the social

10 Frontline Bureau, "India's Pressure-Cooker Education System," Frontline, July 29, 2024, <https://frontline.thehindu.com/the-nation/education/india-pressure-cooker-education-system-the-dark-side-of-coaching-centres-student-suicides/article67314505.ece>.

11 Ortiz, Shelby, Pankhuri Aggarwal, Anjali Jain, Nikhil Singh, Tony S. George, April Smith, and Vaishali V. Raval. 2022. "Examining the Relationship between Academic Expectations and Suicidal Ideation among College Students in India Using the Interpersonal Theory of Suicide." *Archives of Suicide Research* 27 (4): 1163–79. doi:10.1080/13811118.2022.2110026.

12 "Suicide," National Institute of Mental Health, accessed November 24, 2024, <https://www.nimh.nih.gov/health/statistics/suicide>.

class that the individual belongs to in the Indian class system. In this review, the terms student suicide and youth suicide have been used interchangeably even though youth refers to a much larger demographic group.

Search Strategy

In this scoping review, the Joanna Briggs Institute protocol for scoping reviews was followed¹³. A scoping review of published materials was conducted in order to map the existing literature related to caste and student suicides in India. The studies analyzed were expected to include diverse populations encompassed under different caste subgroups. A meta analysis or systematic review has not been used to enable the researcher to observe genuine differences in the effects and due to lack of substantial quantitative data for the research topic¹⁴.

To identify peer reviewed publications, online databases (Google Scholar, PubMed, JSTOR and ScienceDirect) were used. These databases cover literature in fields of psychology and health sciences. The search terms included 'student suicide', 'caste' AND 'India'. To identify relevant gray literature, Google was used. Publications published in the last 10 years were only considered, i.e. from 1st January 2014 to 24th November 2024. Relevant studies were identified based on an initial screening of the title and abstract. The identified studies were compiled in a reference list which was screened to identify studies meeting the inclusion criteria. The Preferred Reporting Items for Systematic reviews and Meta-Analyses extension for Scoping Reviews (PRISMA-ScR) guidelines have been followed¹⁵. Gray literature from sources such as government reports, NGO reports, conference proceedings, media reports, and technical reports were also eligible to be included.

13 JBI, March 27, 2024, <https://jbi-global-wiki.refined.site/space/MANUAL/355862497/10.+Scoping+reviews>.

14 "Cochrane Handbook for Systematic Reviews of Interventions," Cochrane Handbook for Systematic Reviews of Interventions | Cochrane Training, accessed November 24, 2024, <https://training.cochrane.org/handbook/current>.

15 "Scoping," PRISMA statement, 2018, <https://www.prisma-statement.org/scoping>.

Inclusion and Exclusion Criteria

Papers publications published from 1st January 2014 were considered. Studies published within the last 10 years, till 24th November 2024, have been considered to ensure that recent literature is covered and outdated information is excluded to prevent inaccuracies in reporting. Qualitative and quantitative studies were both considered to be eligible to be included. Studies were included if they were examined to include student suicides, caste based suicides, and suicides in the context of Indian populations. Only papers published in English, or formally translated in English, were considered. The reason for choosing papers available in English was to ensure that the content was thoroughly understandable by the researchers. Peer reviewed articles were chosen to ensure that the authenticity and integrity of the research and analysis is maintained. In the initial screening of publications, articles related to suicidal attempts and deaths due to suicides were both included; in the later screening stages, the full text of these articles were examined to identify whether the data examined suicide attempts or suicide deaths. Those articles examining only suicide deaths were included in the final screening stages. For studies that only examined one variable of interest i.e. caste or student suicides, relevant information from the studies was extracted and the study was included.

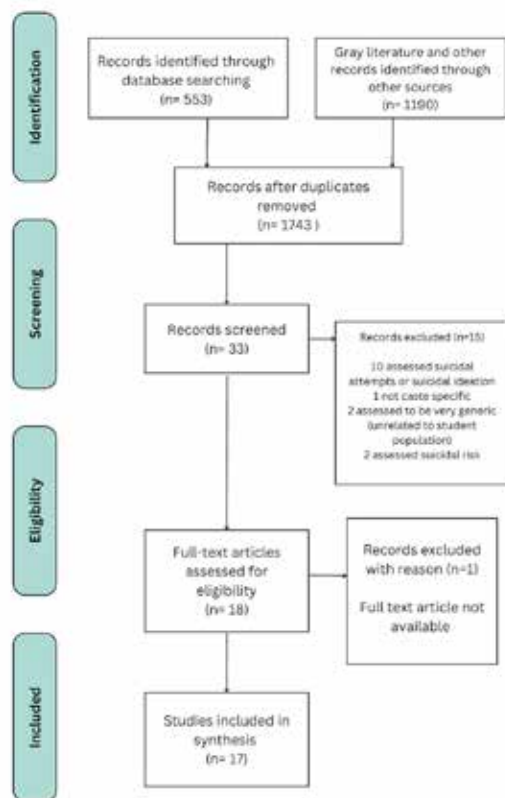
In this review, gray literature refers to newspaper articles and reports from the government bodies that have been considered. These materials allow for a deeper understanding of the topic and provide details regarding caste and student suicides in India that is not available elsewhere. The government report entails statistics from all over the country and draws upon these to report findings making it the best available source for statistics that are not readily available elsewhere. Newspaper articles were included to highlight verbatim statements from relevant government figures and first person perspectives of scheduled caste students which is not available in academic papers. Although gray literature does not undergo a meticulous process of peer-review that academic publications do, the insights provided by these reports are not available in formal research. This holds to be especially true when considering the nature of the topic which requires in depth insight into marginalised communities that have not yet been well-represented in academic literature. The drawbacks of the gray

literature, such as likely underreporting of cases and biases, were considered. In order to address these limitations, the gray literature sources were critically appraised and findings were triangulated with available data sources. The transparent approach aimed to mitigate the drawbacks of the data sources and attempted to incorporate a more holistic range of experiences, perspectives, and more concrete data related to the topic.

Results

The PRISMA study selection flowchart is provided in Figure 1. A total of 1,735 studies were retrieved from the database searches with 5 results from PubMed, 70 results from ScienceDirect, 470 results from Google Scholar, and 1,190 results from Google. In order to identify relevant sources, filters such as the year and advanced search tools such as language and terms appearing were used. The records after duplicates were removed were briefly evaluated based on the titles. From these, 33 records were further screened wherein the abstract was analysed to identify those pertinent to the topic of this review. Records that assessed suicidal attempts or ideation, but not recorded cases of suicide were excluded (10), and so

Figure 1



were those that assessed suicidal risk only (2). Further, literature not relevant to the chosen population of scheduled caste students were also excluded (3). After the screening process, the eligible full text articles were analysed thoroughly. One material was excluded after this stage as the full length text was not available any longer. The included material underwent the process of thematic analysis. Relevant themes, methodology, findings, and recommendations from the chosen literature were noted.

Figure 3. PRISMA flow diagram of selected studies

| Author | Methodology | Findings |
|--|--|--|
| Maji et al. (2019-2023) - Student Suicide in India: An Analysis of Newspaper Articles | Analysis of newspaper reports published between 2019 and 2023 | Academic dissatisfaction, bullying, mental health issues, and financial crises are major reasons for student suicides. |
| Komanapalli & Rao (2020) - The Mental Health Impact of Caste and Structural Inequalities | Close readings of Dalit biographies and ethnographic research | Dalit students face personal problems and depression, leading to institutional neglect regarding caste discrimination. |
| Pandey (2017) - Students Suicides in Institutions of Higher Education in India | Scoping review analyzing risk factors and interventions | Highlights caste dynamics, academic pressures, and the need for psychological support to mitigate suicide risks. |
| Mittal (2023) - Stress, Dropouts, Suicides: Unravelling IIT's Casteism Problem | Investigative journalism collecting narratives from students | Caste-based discrimination significantly affects mental health, contributing to dropouts and suicides among marginalized students. |
| The Telegraph - Beyond Labels: Editorial on Suicides of Students from Marginalised Community | Opinion-based analysis using secondary sources | Emphasizes the need for systemic change in institutions to address caste-based discrimination and improve mental health support. |
| Singh (2023) - Incidents of Suicide by Students from Marginalized Communities | Narrative-based approach based on a public speech | Identifies caste-based segregation and institutional gaps contributing to suicides among marginalized students. |
| Gupta & Basera (2021) - Youth Suicide in India: A Critical Review | Literature search in PubMed and Google Scholar | Youth suicide is a public health issue influenced by complex factors; early identification and intervention are crucial. |
| Sarkar (2023) - Caste Discrimination Against SC/ST Students in Higher Education | Rajya Sabha report based on interviews | Reports multiple suicide cases linked to academic stress and mental health issues among SC/ST students. |
| IC3 Institute (2024) - Student Suicides: An Epidemic Sweeping India | Quantitative report | Over 13,000 student suicides annually; significant data discrepancies exist; mental health support is critically needed. |
| Poongodhai & Nagaraj (2016) - A Study on the Crucial Suicides of Dalit Scholars | Review paper | Highlights the plight of Dalit scholars facing caste discrimination, impacting their mental health and academic success. |
| Mondal, D. (2021) - Is the Education System of India Forcing Students to Die? | Review paper analyzing existing literature on student suicides in India. | Academic stress is a primary cause of mental health issues, exacerbated by caste discrimination. Approximately 1 student attempts suicide every hour in India. |

| | | |
|--|---|--|
| Kewlani, J. (2023) - Exploring the Epidemiology of Suicide in Youth | Review paper using exploratory research and analysis of current data on youth suicides. | Identifies lack of job opportunities, pressure from entrance exams, financial burdens, and social conflicts as key factors contributing to youth suicides. |
| Kalyani, S. (2017) - Dalit Students Suicide in India: Discrimination, Exclusion and Denial of Equality | Review paper documenting case studies of discrimination faced by Dalit students in educational institutions. | Highlights severe discrimination faced by Dalit students, leading to increased suicide rates; calls for government action to prevent such occurrences. |
| Bandewar, S. (2021) - Ending Caste-Based Oppression of Students | Commentary paper discussing caste discrimination within educational institutions and its implications. | Emphasizes the need for recognizing caste-based discrimination as a violation of constitutional rights; advocates for reforms in educational policies. |
| Poongavanam, S. (2022) - Casteism in Higher Education | Review paper analyzing the impact of casteism on students in higher education contexts. | Discusses how caste discrimination leads to mental health issues among students; highlights cases of suicides linked to caste-based violence and academic pressure. |
| Dutta, C. (2020) - What Leads to the Ultimate Decision? | Secondary analysis examining sociological factors influencing children's suicides using Durkheimian theory. | Identifies academic failure and family problems as significant triggers for suicides; suggests decriminalization of suicide may improve mental health practices. |
| Singh, V. (2022) - Caste Discrimination and Its Effect on Mental Health | Thematic analysis reviewing literature, interviews, and surveys related to caste discrimination in education. | Finds that caste discrimination significantly impacts lower-caste students' mental health, leading to anxiety and depression; emphasizes need for supportive policies. |

Figure 4. Summary of the selected materials

Study Characteristics

A total of 17 articles and papers have been chosen for the purpose of this review. The research papers largely utilise a qualitative methodology. One paper took a mixed methodology approach to emphasis on the need for stringent anti-ragging laws to be put in place and for mental health support for students

impacted¹⁶. The rest of the selected materials are primarily review papers or commentaries that have been published in journals. These papers utilise scoping review tools, thematic analysis, and secondary resources such as case reports of recorded suicides, papers, articles, interviews, and surveys. The selected papers have all been published between September 2016 and 8th October 2024. All the selected papers and reports look at the sample of Indian students. The resources primarily make use of available data from the NCRB and government statistics. These statistics do not account for suicides that are not reported to the police personnel due to several sociocultural reasons such as the stigma attached. In order to gain a deeper insight into the lived experiences, one paper took up an anthropological methodology wherein ethnographic research was reviewed along with biographies of scheduled caste members and online documentaries on experiences¹⁷.

From the 17 chosen materials, 3 are newspaper articles that draw upon primary sources, such as first person accounts, and secondary sources such as public records, official reports and studies. One news article focuses on a qualitative wherein narratives of affected students and experts have been analysed along with references to secondary sources¹⁸. Another news article is from an editorial perspective, critically analysing empirical evidence from news reports and incidents¹⁹. This article provides an analysis of caste based discrimination in institutes on a macro level. In addition to these, the third news report covers the speech given by the Chief Justice of India through an analytical lens, referencing to public cases of suicides²⁰. One of the reports included is the official report that was published by the Rajya Sabha in conversation with the Minister of State in the

16 Vinita Pandey, "Students Suicides in Institutions of Higher Education in India," *International Journal of Social Work and Human Services Practice*, March 2017, https://www.researchgate.net/publication/346216240_Students_Suicides_in_Institutions_of_Higher_Education_in_India_Risk_Factors_and_Interventions.

17 Vignapana Komanapalli and Deepa Rao, "The Mental Health Impact of Caste and Structural Inequalities in Higher Education in India," *Transcultural Psychiatry* 58, no. 3 (November 2, 2020): 392–403, <https://doi.org/10.1177/1363461520963862>.

18 Sumedha Mittal, "Stress, Dropouts, Suicides: Unravelling IIT's Casteism Problem," *NewsLaundry*, March 28, 2023.

19 "Beyond Labels: Editorial on Suicide of Students from Marginalised Community," *The Telegraph*, March 1, 2023, <https://www.telegraphindia.com/opinion/beyond-labels-editorial-on-suicides-of-students-from-marginalised-community/cid/1919613>.

20 Subhas Sarkar (2023), <https://sansad.in/getFile/annex/259/AU3240.pdf?source=pqars>.

Ministry of Education²¹. One paper is an analysis of newspaper articles published in the years 2019 to 2023²². A report by IC3 based solely on student suicides in India which also discusses caste related factors and predictors has been included.

Reasons for suicide

Academic reasons

Academic pressure is recorded to be a significant factor that contributes to the rate of student suicides in India. Maji et al., (2024) noted that the high levels of academic dissatisfaction, failure to perform as per a fixed standard, and the academic stress is reported to be prevalent as per the analysis of media reports. Perceived academic failure, wherein students think they have not done as well as is expected of them, is a significant suicide trigger²³. This pressure increases tenfold when it comes to competitive environments such as Kota, where coaching institutes for competitive exams like JEE and NEET are present in abundance. These environments have witnessed a high rate of suicides especially among students between the ages of 16 to 21 years. Further, the education system places a lot of emphasis on examinations. The expectations and burdens placed on students from parents and rest of the society members are often unrealistic but do lead to high levels of anxiety and depression in the students. The paper by Komanapalli and Rao (2020) elaborates on the effect of academic pressure on students and explains how caste dynamics intersect with this pressure. It is noted that students from marginalized backgrounds experience even more stress and have less social support due to the alienation and discrimination they face in the educational institutions²⁴. This combination can prove to be extremely toxic for their mental health, resulting in adverse outcomes. In addition, the lack of employment opportunities intensifies academic stress. The paper by Kewlani

21 Subhas Sarkar (2023), <https://sansad.in/getFile/annex/259/AU3240.pdf?source=pqars>.

22 Sucharita Maji et al., "Student Suicide in India: An Analysis of Newspaper Articles (2019–2023)," *Early intervention in psychiatry*, October 8, 2024, <https://pubmed.ncbi.nlm.nih.gov/39380363>.

23 Chandrabali Dutta, "What Leads to the Ultimate Decision? A Sociological Analysis of Escalating Rates of Suicides among Children in India," *International Journal of Humanities and Social Science Invention (IJHSSI)*, 1, 9, no. 9 (September 2020), [https://www.ijhssi.org/papers/vol9\(9\)/Ser-1/F0909013842.pdf](https://www.ijhssi.org/papers/vol9(9)/Ser-1/F0909013842.pdf).

24 Vignapana Komanapalli and Deepa Rao, "The Mental Health Impact of Caste and Structural Inequalities in Higher Education in India," *Transcultural Psychiatry* 58, no. 3 (November 2, 2020): 392–403, <https://doi.org/10.1177/1363461520963862>.

emphasizes the lack of job opportunities available for students in the present job market. This adds on to the pressure of trying to excel in academic settings in order to be in the top percentage of the class to secure a job in the future considering how competitive placements can become.

Financial pressure

Another contributory factor recorded was financial constraints. These constraints were reported to significantly impact students' mental health and were also noted to contribute to suicidal tendencies and suicides. The report by the Rajya Sabha noted that several students coming from the SC, ST, and OBC backgrounds face a lot of hardship owing to economic situations. These factors limit their ability to avail educational resources and materials. Furthermore, it can also pose a limiting factor when it comes to building support systems. The financial pressure leads to added stress and feelings of hopelessness, making students more vulnerable to mental health issues. In Komanapalli and Rao's paper, they also discuss how due to the financial pressures, students feel compelled to make certain choices in terms of their careers which do not align with their aims and interests. This can then worsen their emotional state by adding to their distress. The analysis of newspaper articles also supported the fact that financial crises is often reported to be a prominent reason behind student suicides. The paper by Pandey goes on to explain how students face financial pressure to not only support their families but to also fund their education.

Role of Parents

Pandey (2017) talks about the emotional neglect students feel. In a period where they are confused about their identities and often feel isolated, certain signs of suicide get overlooked by parents. This can add on to the emotional turmoil, making them feel neglected and consequently lead to suicidal ideation and tendencies. The role played by parents in mitigating and helping students during these periods is often not delved into²⁵. Parents lack the awareness of the state of their child's mental health and also of the tools that can be utilised to help

25 Dipendu Mondal, "IS THE EDUCATION SYSTEM OF INDIA FORCING STUDENTS TO DIE ?," International Journal of Creative Research Thoughts 9, no. 5 (May 2021), <https://ijcrt.org/papers/IJCRT2105134.pdf>.

them navigate through these stressful times. To add on, there is also evidence to suggest that conflicts in a child's social environment and homes can act as a contributory factor leading to suicide²⁶. The paper by Dutta (2020) also discusses the impact of family problems on a child's mental health which can add on to the stress they face in academic settings resulting in the child being overwhelmed and feeling isolated.

Caste-based discrimination

One of the recorded reasons for ragging is claimed to be the perception that students from scheduled castes are allowed admissions to the institute simply due to the reservations, and not due to their own merit²⁷. Scheduled caste students have repeatedly reported facing casteist slurs and taunts from classmates simply due to their caste. In terms of academic institutions, scheduled caste students face discrimination in the form of not only verbal abuse, but also humiliation in front of other students and classmates, and obvious segregation²⁸. Authorities at these institutions often outright deny any discrimination happening and attribute the mental and physical health issues to personal factors. They do not take on any accountability which contributes to the maintenance of systematic discrimination. Due to the constant picking upon and relentless ragging, students often develop mental health issues like depression and anxiety, and a tendency to devalue themselves; this may present in the form of hampered communication skills and reportedly low levels of self esteem. The impact on communication skills can be seen in the reported anxiousness and fear that students feel when it comes to interacting with peers who belong to upper castes. The discriminatory practices are more evident in higher education institutes due to the number of public suicide cases of students from those institutes, but reports have found

26 Jasleen Kewlani, "Exploring the Epidemiology of Suicide in Youth and the Potential of Higher Education Institutions," *Journal for Re Attach Therapy and Developmental Diversities*, September 2023, <https://jrtdd.com/index.php/journal/article/download/2531/1793/3720>.

27 S. Poongavanam, "CASTEISM IN HIGHER EDUCATION," *International Journal of Early Childhood Special Education (INT-JECSE)* 14, no. 01 (2022), <https://doi.org/10.9756/INT-JECSE/V14I1.298>.

28 Vaishnavi Raj Lakshmi Singh10.46609/IJSSER.2022.v07i08.010, "CASTE DISCRIMINATION AND ITS EFFECT ON THE MENTAL HEALTH OF LOWER CASTE STUDENTS IN INDIA," *International Journal of Social Science and Economic Research* 07, no. 08 (August 30, 2022), <https://doi.org/10.46609/IJSSER.2022.v07i08.010>.

that the practices are prevalent even in schools and colleges²⁹. Some reported ways in which they are discriminated against include being marginalized and segregated when it comes to classroom allocation, scholarships awarded are delayed or not allocated, and students are intentionally held back by teachers despite good academic performance.

In 2019, 26 year old medical student Payal Tadvi, who belonged to the Tadvi-Bhil caste, committed suicide in Mumbai³⁰. In her three page suicide note, she wrote 'I step into this college hoping I will get to learn under such good institute. But people started showing their colours. Initially me and Snehal didn't come forward and said anything to anyone. The torture continued to the level that I could not bear. I complain against them but it showed no result.' The note further goes on to describe how she was not allowed the opportunity to work in the medical departments in the hospital and was forced to do clerical work instead. Despite being a bright student and putting in hard work, she was denied the opportunity to truly learn only due to her caste.

Institutional policies

Caste based discrimination is currently considered under the broad term of ragging³¹. The legal definition of ragging was amended to include discrimination only in 2016. Despite the change brought in the definition 8 years ago, there is no implementation of any intervention in any of the institutes. This is attributed to the lack of requirements of representations on committees which allows institutions to get away with not following any given guideline to reduce discrimination. The unwillingness of legal authorities to recognise discriminatory practices in higher education institutes (HEI) highlights the failure to design interventions that can

29 S. Kalyani, "DALIT STUDENTS SUICIDE IN INDIA: DISCRIMINATION, EXCLUSION AND DENIAL OF EQUALITY IN ACCESS TO EDUCATION," INTERNATIONAL JOURNAL OF LAW, EDUCATION, SOCIAL AND SPORTS STUDIES (IJLESS) 4, no. 2 (2017), <http://ijless.kypublications.com/4.2.17/125-129%20Dr.S.KALYANI.pdf>.

30 Charul Shah, "The Torture Continued: Mumbai Doctor's Chilling Suicide Note Released," Hindustan Times, July 26, 2019, <https://www.hindustantimes.com/india-news/mumbai-doctor-s-chilling-suicide-note-released/story-F6FeUIRGIOClr6G56GZgCO.html>.

31 SUNITA BANDEWAR, "Ending Caste-Based Oppression of Students in Educational Institutions: An Unfinished Agenda," Indian Journal of Medical Ethics 6, no. 1 (2021), https://ijme.in/wp-content/uploads/2021/01/Ending-caste-based_Sunita6-9.pdf.

be executed at operational levels. This also brings the exclusionary environment at HEIs into the foreground.

Certain professors at the highly ranked institutes in India such as Indian Institutes of Technology (IITs) and Indian Institutes of Management (IIM) show clear discrimination in the lectures they hold. In April of 2021, a video had gone viral on the internet where a professor from IIT Kharagpur was openly making casteist comments in an online lecture of over 100 students³². The professor openly claimed that nothing would happen to her even if the students complained about her verbal harassment to higher authorities.

Discussion

There is clearly an urgency for putting into place proposed measures against suicide among students. The urgency cannot be overstated, given the rising trends among marginalized groups in India. The unattended loss of young lives necessitates urgent action from policymakers and educationists and community stakeholders to create supportive environments to mental well-being. The relationship between student suicides and caste discrimination in the Indian context is applicable on a much wider scale. The risk of mental health crises is higher for members of marginalised groups over the world as evidenced by studies conducted. The Indigenous populations in Australia, specifically members of the Aboriginal tribes and Torres Strait islander people, were shown to have negative mental and physical health outcomes which were related to racism they faced³³. In the United States, Black students (between the ages of 10 and 19) had a suicide rate that was 54% higher than that recorded for them in 2018, with a 144% increase in the 13 years between 2007 and 2020.³⁴ Further, the issue is also reflective of broader parallels concerning the marginalisation faced by

32 Priyanka Sahoo, "IIT Suspends Professor for Remarks on SC, St Students," Hindustan Times, May 13, 2021, <https://www.hindustantimes.com/india-news/iit-suspends-professor-for-remarks-on-sc-st-students-101620866328960.html>.

33 Camila A. Kairuz et al., "Impact of Racism and Discrimination on Physical and Mental Health among Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Peoples Living in Australia: A Systematic Scoping Review," BMC Public Health 21, no. 1 (July 3, 2021), <https://doi.org/10.1186/s12889-021-11363-x>.

34 Farzana Akkas and Allison Corr, "Black Adolescent Suicide Rate Reveals Urgent Need to Address Mental Health Care Barriers," The Pew Charitable Trusts, April 22, 2024, <https://www.pewtrusts.org/en/research-and-analysis/articles/2024/04/22/black-adolescent-suicide-rate-reveals-urgent-need-to-address-mental-health-care-barriers#:~:text=New%20federal%20data%20shows%20that,other%20racial%20and%20ethnic%20groups>.

members of the LGBTQ+ community worldwide. With young adults who identify as LGBTQ members, the risk for suicide attempts has been researched to be 4 times more when compared to their peers³⁵. Reasons for the increased suicidal ideation in these populations include factors such as lack of social support, academic pressure and barriers to help seeking.

Based on the findings from the review, the need for a policy reform is eminent. Each of the papers selected call for a comprehensive policy that is focused on addressing the issue of the systematic caste based discrimination ingrained in educational institutes. Based on all the factors mentioned above, the need of the hour is to explore possible reforms that can improve the physical and mental wellbeing of students in educational settings. This includes dealing with caste discrimination along with academic and financial pressures due to the interconnected nature of these issues. It is high time for the establishment of wellbeing centers and enforcement of guidelines to navigate through the issue of student suicides. The intersectionality of these systemic issues creates a need for a collective, global approach to produce advocacy policies that are relevant to different local contexts and use evidence from interventions that have been successful worldwide. Engaging with international research on marginalized communities enhances the understanding of what effective suicide prevention and mental health support entails. Some of the interventions proposed by the authors of the previously cited papers include mental health support programs and grievance redressal mechanisms.

Establishment of mental health programs in educational institutions is pertinent for both access and relevance, as these programs are meant to be embraced by students, marginalized or not. Some of the mental health program activities for students include counseling, peer support groups, health workshops on mental wellness, among others. Providing such safe spaces makes it easier for institutions to reduce stigmatization of people with mental health problems and encourage students to seek assistance when required. Implementing specific, culturally appropriate, outreach strategies can help in creating a more appropriate academic environment. Hiring teachers and staff from a range of backgrounds

35 "Facts about Suicide among LGBTQ+ Young People," The Trevor Project, November 11, 2024, <https://www.thetrevorproject.org/resources/article/facts-about-lgbtq-youth-suicide/>.

and ensuring they are trained to be competent in dealing with students from different backgrounds can help students build a network for social support.

Presently, students do not have a space to safely report caste based discrimination, and there is no systematic procedure to address the same as well. Implementing grievance redressal mechanisms include the creation of clear channels of access and openness to students. This should be utilized in setting up confidential mechanisms to complain against any and all forms of discrimination without the risk of retribution. Training faculty and other institutional staff members to identify and respond to caste discrimination would also be necessary to attain an inclusive environment. Several training workshops may give staff the skills to handle complaints sensitively and effectively, thus ensuring both concern and support for students. This can be complemented by the establishment of wellbeing centers in higher education institutes. At these centers, the professional employees must be mandated to undergo training to develop cultural competence. This will ensure that those employed there are well equipped and knowledgeable to be able to navigate sensitive subjects with utmost professionalism and care.

Future research studies, at this point, should aim at longitudinal studies that seek to determine the effectiveness of anti-discrimination policies in schools. These studies would yield critical information on sustained interventions and their influence on mental health over time by students, especially for those belonging to SC/ST categories, who face compounded issues. Furthermore, exploring how technology brings mental health resources-like mobile apps with counseling services and peer support networks-could be pivotal in answering the call for the present crisis. Prioritizing this research informs our evidence-based practices and policies to ensure timely but deep responses to the complicated levels of caste discrimination and student suicides in India.

Conclusion

In a country with millions of students, the alarming rates of student suicide and the effect of caste based discrimination on students cannot be ignored. The interconnectedness of factors such as caste, academic stress, financial

stress, and social influence indicates a problem at the grassroot level which needs to be resolved urgently. The role of any educational system is to foster growth in an individual, be it in terms of knowledge or life skills. Creating a supportive and safe educational environment that is inclusive is necessary to ensure the wellbeing of all students in the country. Implementing mental health support systems, grievance redressal mechanisms and increasing awareness in teachers and students is a small step towards fostering the creation of an inclusive environment. However, due to the nature of the issues considered, and how deeply ingrained the discrimination in educational setting currently is, the involvement and support of government bodies is necessary. The reinforcement of policies that have been created to ensure a fair and just environment for all students, irrespective of their backgrounds, must be done. There needs to be stricter guidelines and regulations in place. These regulations must be rigidly enforced and heavy fines and penalties must be imposed if any policy is found to not be followed. Recognising the depth of the problems and the severe toll it is taking on students is crucial and calls for educational leaders to take immediate actions.

In India, the government plays an extremely significant role in the process of addressing the issue of student suicides due to caste discrimination. There are provisions created in the constitution to theoretically abolish caste discrimination, but these have not translated to yield any effective results in real life. The Thorat Committee Report in 2007 brought to light the discrimination faced by marginalised students, post which the Indian government implemented policies such as the reservation of 15% seats for SC/ST students³⁶. However, the actual rate of admission falls largely short of the intended target with marginalised students being admitted at the rate of 9.07% in institutes like IIT and IIM³⁷. Despite further such initiatives, including fee reductions, scholarships and even claiming to enact a 'Vemula Act' triggered by the death of the Dalit student Rohith Vemula in 2016, the increasingly alarming statistics evidence there is a serious lack of commitment to enforcing the acts effectively and erasing caste based

36 Sukhadeo Thorat, Shyamprasad K. M., and Srivastava R. K., rep., REPORT OF THE COMMITTEE TO ENQUIRE INTO THE ALLEGATION OF DIFFERENTIAL TREATMENT OF SC/ST STUDENTS IN (Delhi, Delhi, 2007), <https://www.nihmb.in/Reports%20AIIMS.pdf>.

37 Drishti IAS, "Falling Numbers of SC & St Students in Iits," Drishti IAS, February 15, 2021, <https://www.drishtiias.com/daily-news-analysis/falling-numbers-of-sc-st-students-in-iits>.

discrimination in educational institutes³⁸. There is now an increased urgency calling for the government to not only create legislations to aid the students, but to effectively enforce the same and better the life of every student in India.

By taking steps at this point in time, not only will the benefits to students be remarkable, but the carry over effect on the entire academic community in India will be visible. Any and all meaningful steps taken to address these factors and the critical issue of student suicides due to caste based discrimination will pave the way to build an egalitarian future- a future where each and every student is given the chance to flourish and reach their full potential.

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38 "Committed to Secularism, Will Enact 'rohith Vemula Act' If Voted: Congress," Business Standard, February 26, 2023, https://www.business-standard.com/article/current-affairs/committed-to-secularism-will-enact-rohith-vemula-act-if-voted-congress-123022600892_1.html.

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