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Student Suicides: Whose Goals Are We Chasing?

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By Acharya Prashant



IIT Bombay has lost its third student to suicide this year, there are allegations of caste-based discrimination, and the matter is under investigation. I will not pre-empt what the investigation finds. But I have had a long-standing relationship with the campuses of the various IITs, and during my visits to over a dozen IIT campuses in the last year, students have recurrently spoken of a vicious pattern. Between 2014 and 2021, 34 IIT students died by suicide, roughly four a year. By the beginning of August 2025, ten IIT students had died by suicide, four of them at IIT Kharagpur alone. This year, at least eight IIT student suicides have been reported so far, with two more deaths being investigated as possible suicides.

Data compiled by an IIT alumnus from RTI replies and media reports counts at least 171 IIT student deaths by suicide or other unnatural causes between 2006 and September 2026, 120 of them since 2016. Between December 2024 and May 2026, seven suicides were reported in connection with BITS Pilani's Goa campus.

As per the NCRB, 14,488 students died by suicide in India in 2024, the highest ever

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recorded, up about 80 per cent from 8,068 in 2014. These numbers have only grown worse over the past decade. A national task force set up by the Supreme Court found that about 65 per cent of the institutions it surveyed had no access to mental health professionals. And each time a student dies, one reason is almost always cited: too much pressure. [📰 India news updates](#)

A student who also faces discrimination, or has no one to talk to, carries that pressure twice over. Of the 122 students at centrally funded institutions who died by suicide between 2014 and 2021, the [📰 government](#) told Parliament, 68 came from Scheduled Caste, Scheduled Tribe and OBC communities.

To say that kids are tragically ending their lives because of the high-pressure environment in IITs and other places is to see only half the picture. Somebody who clears the JEE or some other entrance examination is reasonably used to high pressure; otherwise, he would likely not have made it to the campus.

Pressure alone is not the problem; the deadly situation is one where the cacophony of external pressure meets the void of internal purposelessness.

The student is being forced to achieve targets he has little love for. If there is a purposeless life without pressure, one just hangs on and rolls on. With no purpose and no pressure, one is a rolling stone. At most, life will be wasted, but one lives on, as the bulk of humanity does. Now keep the purposelessness and add high pressure. This is where suicides happen.

Pressure alone doesn't kill: think of a youngster with great purpose and high pressure. Such a person will likely have a zest for life. There will be great pressure, but he will say, "I will live on, because I understand my purpose." Often, with the purpose, pressure is inevitable, and he will welcome that pressure. Whenever one accepts a great purpose, one takes on something extraordinary that society often does not approve of, let alone support, so there will be pressure. The very nature of a great purpose is that it brings pressure along with it, but such pressure is life-saving, even life-giving, because one knows there is something tremendous to live for.

The right purpose arises from one's own clarity. Its object could be raising a kid, or raising an institution. Raising either is tremendously difficult, but this pressure is worth it. Even if one wants to die, one will postpone death; in fact, one will want to keep oneself healthy, not just for one's own sake, but for the sake of the goal. High pressure is not a problem if there is a purpose deep enough. Great purpose with no pressure is actually impossible. If there is a great purpose, the purpose creates pressure of its own, and such pressure is auspicious.

The student on campus today is under high pressure but lacks a clear understanding of his purpose. Nobody has ever asked him why he is doing all this.

The pressure is not merely from the environment. Having been internalised, it arises from within as well. Others' expectations have been soaked in, so they look like his own, and they keep telling him: get this done, CGPA 9, best placement. Even before placements, there is the matter of internships; even before internships, there are courses to choose.

An Implanted Purpose

Does purposelessness start when the student enters the campus? No. The system itself robs him of any heartfelt purpose of his own.

And how is that done? By supplying him with external, artificial, fake purposes. Right from his birth, he is instructed what to do. The family says, "Now you are 15 and it's your boards, and this year your purpose must be to score 99." And so he becomes so used to having an appointed purpose, an implanted purpose, that the heart goes numb.

He has not been left free to ask himself, "Who am I, and what am I here for?" Parents and educators seldom address this question, let alone answer it satisfactorily. Instead, they supply him with a ready-made, junk answer. They say, "You exist to achieve." Achieve what? "Stuff that we tell you to achieve." Who told him that working for some MNC and earning a fat package is the purpose of life? Left to himself, would he ever have bothered to appear for the JEE? Yet everybody is telling him the same thing: achieve.

And even that would have been all right, had he been helped to awaken his own capacity to inquire and know. If that capacity is awakened, then it does not matter what the entire world is telling him. Then he can keep everybody's opinion aside and say, "I know on my own. I do not need to believe, because I know." But he is told what things are all about, and he is actively discouraged from knowing on his own.

On campus, one often hears students saying, "But I don't even know what I'm supposed to do." That is because the capacity within them that can see and choose and decide has become paralysed. If one doesn't use a muscle for decades, what happens to that muscle? Gone. Atrophy. A muscle that is not allowed to function gets paralysed, atrophied. It shrinks. It loses power. Now, even when there is a need, a genuine one, to use it, one finds it failing.

That's where our purposelessness comes from. That's why people look so lost. And when a person is lost, anybody can elbow him in any direction. "I don't know what to do. Let me follow the crowd." It becomes second nature to just look to others for guidance, as if the others know, as if anybody in the crowd knows where to go. And if one doesn't look to others for guidance, one is punished in ways subtle and gross. "Too smart for her own good." "This chap is acting too rebellious. Let's put him in his place."

The student says, "If living means toiling for some faceless master, what an indignity. The goal imposed on me is not my own. So, like a slave, I am being told to slog for something I don't really care for. I don't love mechanical engineering. Full stop. But I'm being told to get a 9 CGPA." One can see where that is coming from. The process starts right from the moment of birth.

A kid is a very dependent being, and so the kid is easily exploited. We tell the kid, "Your life is worthless if you do not attain such-and-such goals." And then we keep the goals so unrealistic and make the competition so severe, by telling the same thing to every kid, that practically only 1 per cent can attain them. What will happen to the remaining 99 per cent?

So now the student comes to campus, having been given impossible targets and told that if he doesn't achieve them, life is meaningless. Some students, very sadly, buckle. If one pulls too hard on the ends of a chain, some link will break.

The fault does not belong to the link; one must question those who are pulling.

The Flip Side of Hope

There is great talent in the top institutions, but what is that talent being told to do? Somebody is selling shoes after doing a B.Tech in computer science. What success is there in this? It's just that the company is an MNC footwear giant, and so he takes pride in it. In fact, he doesn't take pride; his parents take pride, and the entire society takes pride. We talk of that as gainful employment. We even gloat over it. We say, "My Johnny has landed a three-crore package," and that sometimes makes the newspapers as well.

That should indeed make the newspapers, as a tragedy, not as a celebration.

A B.Tech or an M.Tech lasts only a few years. The bigger tragedy is when we allow this to become our whole life, not knowing why we go to the office and work for four decades. We wait for salary day. We justify it by saying there are mouths to feed and food to keep on the table. Is this what the student is setting himself up for?

Pressure, by itself, is not necessarily a bad thing, but pressure for such nonsense? From all directions, the message is that there is one particular definition of success, and if one cannot measure up to it, then life is not worth living. And some, unfortunately, are crushed by it. All those who have been continuously teaching the young that life exists just for the sake of material gratification are the culprits.

This is not about any one family; it is about what all of us, together, teach our children. On the one hand, I commiserate with the parents. On the other hand, I need to have a straight word with them. What exactly are they raising their kids on? This is symptomatic of a society where inner education is considered dispensable, where we say that if we teach the student history, geography, maths, science and the languages, that is sufficient, and that the student does not need to be given education in life, education of the self. If we treat that as unnecessary, this will be the outcome, and sadly, this outcome might keep repeating itself. And that inner education, mind you, cannot come naturally from the family alone. Just as one requires experts to teach maths and physics, one requires experts to deliver life education. The IITs do the first superbly; the second is where the whole chain, from home to campus, has fallen short.

Institutions and the [Indian government](#) have begun to respond. Acting on its task force's report, the Supreme Court has made institutions responsible for preventing suicides; the Centre runs a national helpline; IIT Kharagpur has launched a student wellness initiative; and IIT Bombay has now set up a committee, with equal student representation, to rethink how suspected misconduct in examinations is handled. These are welcome. But a counsellor's room cannot carry this alone. A student who has erred still has to be met as a student first. The way a campus grades, the way it handles a student who has stumbled and whether it treats the question of life as worth teaching shape the student as much as any lecture.

I was a student at IIT Delhi myself for four years, and I owe a great deal to the rigour of that education. It may be that students who were struggling like this simply weren't in my circle, but I don't remember anyone from my batch, or from the batches senior or junior to mine, dying by suicide. One reason could be that our longings had not been stoked that high. Nobody felt the fear that if we didn't act immediately, we would miss the train and our lives would be ruined.

Today, after every such tragedy, the term that comes to the fore is "mental health". Why does the stress on the ordinary student keep rising?

The term "mental health" literally means the health of the mind. But the mind is only what is kept in the house, and can the things kept in a house have health? No; only the one who owns the house, who has brought all those things into it, can have health.

What we call mental health is actually the health of the ego, the health of the self.

And the self is born sick. It is born with the feeling that there is some defect in it, something missing in it. This whole organism keeps looking outward through the senses to fill that lack, thinking: if I take this from outside, add it to myself, give it a seat within me, then through it I will find some kind of completeness. The very name of that which is born is incompleteness. The incompleteness itself is born. And all its life it keeps adding things to itself, so that somehow it may feel complete.

Who is made to feel this incompleteness the most? The young. Right from the time a kid can speak, he is told what he must add to himself to become somebody. And the parents, teachers, society and market that put the pressure on him, in fact, all of us, carry the same incomplete ego, only now it runs as a system.

Now, our capacity to bring things into our lives has grown enormously over the last hundred years because of mass industrial production. A person today can bring into his life far more than a human being ever could before. And once we have brought it all in, we discover that we have gained nothing from it. Depression is the flip side of hope. In the past, hopes remained unfulfilled. Today, hopes are fulfilled, but their fulfilment does not make us complete, and that is what becomes depression. Two or three hundred years ago, one could live one's whole life on hope, and hope means that which has not yet been fulfilled. Today, far more of one's hopes get fulfilled.

While a student is preparing for an entrance exam, he at least has hope: if I get selected, who knows what I will get. Then he is selected, and what he was hoping for does not come.

He got the seat, but not what he thought the seat would give him.

Now what will he live on? Not even hope is left. Placement is the same. Until he is placed, he thinks the job will give him something; after placement, he finds it has given him nothing. Then comes the career ladder, and after ten or twenty years, that too gives him nothing. At every step, he is told only that there is more to be done.

It isn't enough that he cleared the JEE; he must improve his rank. A better rank isn't enough either; the departmental rank must be good too. The departmental rank came through. So what? Where's the job? He asks, "But what happened to what I was supposed to get from everything I did before?" Someone smiles and says, "That's a

sunk cost now. Don't ask what your earlier effort got you. Understand that all of it will go to waste unless you now do twice as much."

It's like a falling stock. We invested, and it fell, and the broker says, "Don't cry. Invest more." And so it keeps falling, and we cannot find the courage to exit. In fact, the more it sinks, the deeper we sink with it. When it stood at Rs 100, we held one share; now it stands at Rs 5, and we hold 500.

We all stand deeply invested in a falling stock called our way of life, and that is depression.

Only one thing used to keep reminding human beings that by adding things to themselves, they would never find completeness. That was wisdom literature. We have gradually drifted away from it, and we have been driven away from it, and the reason for that too lies in industrial production. If one has acquired an unlimited capacity to produce, one also needs a buyer with an unlimited demand to consume. The bombardment that creates such a buyer hands him a whole philosophy, one with no place for wisdom: that he is born to consume, that consumption will give him happiness and that happiness is the goal of life. The producer does not want the buyer to be wise; he wants him to stay hungry and thirsty. Very few of us realise that we have all been turned into philosophers, simply by being handed a shoddy philosophy.

Wisdom was the one thing that told human beings that running here and there and stuffing things into the mind would never bring them peace and joy. We have moved very far from that wisdom. In a bookshop today, even under the name of wisdom literature, one finds self-help. Consumption may or may not be wrong in itself, but there is certainly a deception in it. Consumption promises happiness. It does not deliver it. The completeness we hope consumption will bring never comes, and when hope keeps breaking, again and again, a person is bound to lose his balance. And one cannot explain it to anyone, because there is no single moment to point to; it happens slowly, silently, within.

What we call depression is the direct result of a flawed philosophy of life. Anyone who does not have the right philosophy to live by will certainly arrive at this result. And the fundamentals of life are taught to us neither by our education nor by our homes. So where do we get them? From whom do we absorb them? From the people around us.

Who are we, what is life and, if one is to live, what is one to live for? These questions never even come up for discussion.

Struggle in Place of Grief

"No" must be the first word in one's dictionary. There has to be a resounding no to all those who attempt to impose themselves on one's life. The default is no. "Now convince me enough to extract a yes."

The student may say, "Saying no to my parents, to everybody around me, is so difficult. It takes so much effort." But aren't difficult and easy relative terms? Difficulty arises only when one wants to preserve one's position. "I don't want to leave who I am, where I am, and yet I want to attempt something beautiful, something necessary." And then it indeed turns difficult.

And if you are a student going through this right now, I am not going to tell you it is nothing. The sorrow is real, and it is not new. But your life is bigger than any grade, rank, placement, or expectation. Please do not end it.

All the great philosophies of India begin with one problem, and its name is sorrow. When we talk of suicide, sorrow lies at its root too. Whether one turns to Samkhya, Vedanta or Yoga, what is the root problem? Sorrow. When one recites the Upanishadic Shanti Paath, one ends with "Om Shantih Shantih Shantih." The word is said three times to quell three kinds of sorrow. So anyone who has kept even a little awareness knows this simple thing: life itself carries sorrow. The day one is born, it is settled that one is in bondage, which is sorrow. Now, my personal sorrow is one thing; sorrow itself, the universal problem of sorrow, is another and much bigger one. So, dear youngster, why not attempt to step away from one's personal sorrow and invest one's life fighting the greater problem of sorrow itself?

That can happen only when one sets oneself a goal beyond oneself. When the anguish feels like one's own alone, it can seem unbearable, as if there is no way out. But what, at most, does something like suicide achieve? Even after one is gone, the general problem of sorrow remains exactly where it was. The sorrow one experiences is merely an instance of that general problem. What one is experiencing, everyone is experiencing; some feel it openly, others don't realise it as clearly. The very engine of much of human activity seems to be sorrow. Whatever we do, whatever we want to reach or get, at the centre sits our restlessness.

Why not go straight to the root of one's trouble and attack it? One is not alone in being troubled by it; who knows how many people, in how many homes, it has filled with sorrow. And we are not assuming we will win. Win or lose, this enemy that has made everyone's life hell has to be fought. All the restlessness within a person is energy coming out as grief. It must be channelled. The problem of sorrow must be fought in whatever way one can. The sorrow within must be turned into a worthy struggle. But struggle holds up, and lasts, only when it is not waged for oneself alone.

Acharya Prashant is a philosopher and author whose work centres on self-inquiry and its application to contemporary life; Views presented are personal.

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Prerna Purushottam

Sep 26, 2026

As a student who came through this country's educational institutions, I often wished my parents and teachers had shown more empathy, both for themselves and for the children they were raising and teaching. The lack of emotional intelligence and the general apathy isn't just saddening; it's deeply harmful. It's the blind leading the blind. The student is turned into a functional cog in the system but knows little to nothing about themselves, or why they chose to do anything in the first place. A script is forced on them, a role assigned "perform well, or you'll fail." The curriculum has nothing to do with the human being passing through years and years of education. The result is in front of us. Acharya Prashant is offering a guiding light. Clearly, the way we've been living hasn't worked out well for us. We now desperately need to look at the one place we haven't: the mirror.

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Saurabh Kumar

Sep 26, 2026

Self knowledge is compulsory.

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