Creating Suicide-Safe Campuses – Lessons from the IITs and the Road Ahead

Mains: *GS II – Health*

Why in News?

Recently the instances of suicide in India's leading IITs have raised the questions on the mental health of students.

What is the issue?

- **Suicide of students** – Entering the portals of India's premier institutions such as the Indian Institutes of Technology (IITs) is widely seen as the culmination of years of hard work, discipline, and sacrifice.
- However, this narrative of success is often disrupted by disturbing reports of student suicides on campuses that are otherwise symbols of academic excellence.
- **Data –** Between 2005 and 2024, at least 115 IIT students were reported to have died by suicide.
- These incidents point to a deeper structural and cultural problem within higher education.
- **Deep issues** – While IITs have begun to respond with counselling services, peer support, and wellness initiatives, the challenge lies in making such measures comprehensive, consistent, and embedded into institutional culture.
- The issue is not merely one of individual vulnerability, but of systemic failure that demands coordinated responses from institutions, families, communities, and the State.

What are the major reasons for increasing suicides?

- **Academic stress** – Competitive academic environments, fear of failure, rigid evaluation systems, and uncertain job prospects create sustained psychological pressure.
- Surveys reveal that more than 60% of students identify academic pressure as the primary source of stress.
- **Social alienation** – For many students, especially first-generation learners or those from marginalised backgrounds, the transition to elite institutions also brings cultural alienation and loneliness.
- **Other issues** – untreated mental health conditions, and exposure to peers in distress significantly increase suicide risk.
- Employment insecurity, family expectations, harassment, and social isolation.

- **Issues of stigma** – Importantly, stigma around mental health continues to deter students from seeking help.
- Thus, the crisis on campuses reflects both unmet mental health needs and an ecosystem that prioritises performance over well-being.

What are the institutional responses?

- **Interventions from IIT** – Recognising the gravity of the issue, several IITs have initiated proactive mental health interventions.
- These include:
  - **Strengthening counselling services** with professional psychologists and psychiatrists.
  - **Peer support networks**, where trained student volunteers act as first points of contact.
- **Faculty and staff sensitization –** Enabling teachers, wardens, and administrators to recognise early warning signs.
- **Structured mental health programmes** – Such as wellness weeks, orientation sessions, and stress-management workshops.
- **Question, Persuade, Refer (QPR) model** – Some IITs have also adopted internationally recognised methods like this which trains campus stakeholders to identify and respond to suicidal behaviour.
- These steps signal a shift from reactive to preventive approaches.
- **Academic Reforms to Reduce Stress –** Academic pressure remains a central trigger for distress.
- Acknowledging this, certain IITs have experimented with reforms to reduce cognitive overload.
  - **For instance**, IIT Bombay allows first-year students to drop one course per semester, providing flexibility and reducing the fear of irreversible failure.
- **Other interventions** – Other institutions have revised grading systems, introduced bridge courses, and encouraged collaborative learning over hyper-competition.
- Such reforms highlight an important insight tha,t mental health cannot be addressed solely through counselling, it must be integrated into academic design and evaluation frameworks.

What are the gaps and continuing challenges?

- **Low Counselling services** – They are often understaffed, with unfavourable counsellor-to-student ratios.
- **Lack of mandatory interventions** – Many interventions still depend on students voluntarily seeking help, which is unlikely in a culture where stigma remains strong.
- Moreover, peer supporters themselves may face emotional burnout if not adequately supervised.
- **Ineffective digital supports** – Digital tools such as anonymous check-ins and helplines offer promise, but their effectiveness depends on awareness, trust, and follow-up mechanisms.
- **Less frequency of campaigns** – Similarly, workshops and awareness campaigns often occur sporadically rather than as part of a sustained strategy.

What can be done?

- **The Role of Families –** Families play a crucial role in shaping students' emotional resilience.
- High parental expectations, limited understanding of mental health, and pressure to conform to predefined success paths can exacerbate distress.
- **Regular communication between institutions and parents** – The discussion about mental health, academic realities, and available support systems is therefore essential.
- **Policy measures** – At the policy level, government initiatives such as *Manodarpan*, aimed at providing psychosocial support to students, offer a broader safety net.
- However, their success depends on effective institutional implementation, coordination, and monitoring.
- **Towards a Culture Change on Campuses –** Creating suicide-safe campuses requires more than isolated programmes, it demands a fundamental shift in institutional culture.
- Mental health must be normalised as an integral part of campus life, not treated as an exception or crisis response.
- This includes:
    - Making mental health services easily accessible and confidential.
    - Embedding well-being into curricula and orientation programmes.
    - Training students, faculty, and staff to act as informed gatekeepers.
    - Encouraging open conversations that challenge stigma.
    - Institutions that prioritise empathy alongside excellence are better equipped to identify distress early and prevent crises from escalating.
- **The Importance of Monitoring and Data –** Sustainable reform requires evidence-based policymaking.
- Regular monitoring, data collection, and independent research are essential to evaluate whether interventions are effective.
- Transparency in reporting mental health outcomes, while respecting privacy, can help institutions learn from each other and refine best practices.

What lies ahead?

- Student suicides expose deep cultural and systemic flaws within India's higher-education ecosystem.
- While IITs have demonstrated that change is possible through counselling, peer support, academic reform, and awareness initiatives, the real challenge lies in ensuring consistency, scale, and long-term commitment.
- Suicide prevention is not a one-time intervention but a continuous process that requires collaboration among families, educational institutions, policymakers, and society at large.
- Ultimately, building suicide-safe campuses means redefining success—not merely as academic achievement, but as the holistic development and well-being of students.
- Mental health demands time, resources, and sustained attention, but investing in it is essential for the moral and social credibility of India's educational institutions.

Reference

The Hindu| IITs and Issues of Suicide

