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## Academic Pressure, Competitive Culture, and Student Suicides in India: A Socio-Legal Analysis

Manaswi Gulati<sup>a</sup>

<sup>a</sup>Symbiosis Law School, Pune, India

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*This article presents a socio-legal analysis of India's growing competitive academic environment and its impact on the mental health of students and the rising suicide rate among them. In recent years, the increasing emphasis on outstanding academic achievements, co-curricular activities, performance-oriented education and expectations from parents, teachers and society has contributed significantly to psychological distress among the students. This article explores the multifaceted nature of academic pressure, its causes, and its far-reaching effects on students' physical and mental well-being, as well as their social connections. By examining the root causes and consequences of academic pressure, we can identify effective strategies to mitigate its impact and promote a healthier learning environment. The paper will also explore the legal and constitutional dimensions of student mental health and institutional responsibilities towards student well-being, which will also include Article 21 of the Constitution, the Mental Healthcare Act 2017 and more. The article argues that there is a need for more adequate measures to address the mental health crisis among the students of the country and emphasises policy reforms to create a more balanced and humane educational environment.*

**Keywords:** *academic pressure, rising suicides, socio-cultural factors, institutional responsibility, legal dimensions.*

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## INTRODUCTION

In India's competitive social environment, academic performance and excellence have become the ultimate benchmarks of success. Academic excellence is often perceived not merely as a measure of educational achievement but as a determinant of social status, career security, and personal worth. From an early age, students are subjected to immense pressure to perform exceptionally in examinations, secure admission into prestigious institutions, and maintain consistent academic records. The daily grind of attending schools and colleges, managing heavy bags filled with study materials, and juggling compulsory extra-curricular activities, along with extra coaching for competitive exams, takes a toll on their physical and mental energy.<sup>1</sup> As a result, education, which is intended to foster intellectual growth and personal development, has increasingly become associated with stress, comparison, and relentless performance-driven expectations.

The growing culture of academic competition in India is further intensified by the commercialisation of education and the expanding influence of coaching institutions. The dependence on coaching institutions has also imposed significant financial burdens on families, particularly those belonging to economically weaker sections of society. Competitive examinations such as JEE, NEET, CLAT, and UPSC have contributed to the highly pressurised educational environment where success is often narrowly defined through ranks, scores, and admissions into elite institutions. The pressure to succeed is relentless, with students expected to work tirelessly from dawn till dusk to achieve reasonable success. However, the reality is that not everyone can win, and failure to meet expectations can lead to burnout, depression, and even suicidal ideation. In a densely populated country like India, the cost of failure can be far higher than the potential benefits of success, and success rarely comes easily; hard work is often not enough.

In this context, it becomes necessary to examine the relationship between academic pressure, competitive educational culture, and student mental health from a socio-legal perspective while also evaluating the need for stronger institutional safeguards and policy reforms.

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<sup>1</sup> Dr N Vasudevan and Dr G Ramesh, 'Addressing the Mounting Academic Pressures of Indian Students: The Need of the Hour' (2025) 8(6) *Journal of Economics, Finance and Management Studies* <<https://ijefm.co.in/v8i6/Doc/7.pdf>> accessed 22 April 2026

## **SOCIO-CULTURAL FACTORS INTENSIFYING ACADEMIC PRESSURE**

**Parental and Societal Pressure:** In many Indian homes, parents hold their children to high standards because they believe that education is the key to a successful life. Feelings of inadequacy or pressure to follow particular career routes, like engineering, medicine, or law, may result from this. For example, students preparing for examinations such as NEET or JEE are frequently expected to prioritise academics above leisure, hobbies, or social interaction. The sensation of being stuck in predetermined roles can be exacerbated by the societal emphasis on academic performance as well as criticism from extended family and society.<sup>2</sup>

**Workload and Deadlines:** The demands of a packed curriculum, along with extracurricular commitments, can overwhelm students. Workload-related academic stress frequently results in procrastination, exhaustion, and trouble focusing. This problem is made worse by deadlines and the inability to keep up with the pace of classes or tasks, which makes students feel unprepared and incompetent.

**Financial Stress:** Students frequently worry about their financial status due to the rising cost of quality education, private tuition, and competitive examination coaching in India and their reliance on loans or scholarships. Parents belonging to the middle class and economically weaker sections often make substantial sacrifices, including exhausting savings, taking loans, or working additional hours, to support their children's education. In many instances, students become acutely aware of these sacrifices and begin perceiving academic success as an obligation rather than a personal aspiration. For example, a student preparing for competitive examinations may experience constant anxiety arising from the fear of wasting the family's financial resources if unable to secure admission into prestigious institutions. Their academic performance may suffer as a result of ongoing concern brought on by the worry that they won't be able to pay for books, tuition, or other necessities.

**Peer Competition:** Due to the country's competitive academic atmosphere, students in India often compare their accomplishments to those of their peers. It has significantly contributed to unhealthy competition among students. This continual comparison can result in unhealthy

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<sup>2</sup> Shohini Ghosh, 'Academic Stress Explained: Guide to Causes, Symptoms, and Solutions' (*Rocket Health*, 23 February 2025) <<https://www.rockethealth.app/blog/academic-stress-explained-guide-to-causes-symptoms-and-solutions/>> accessed 22 April 2026

rivalries, envy, and anxiety. For instance, students who fail to secure top ranks may experience feelings of inadequacy and social isolation despite performing reasonably well. Stress is increased by the competition for a few spots in elite universities, which makes students feel as though they must outperform one another to secure their future.<sup>3</sup>

**Commercialisation of Education:** Commercialisation is defined as the process by which a product is introduced into the general market. Educational institutions and coaching centres frequently market academic success as a product that can be achieved through expensive courses, intensive training programs, and specialised study materials. As a result, education thus moves towards being business-oriented. Rather than focus on the development of children, students are forced to focus solely on academics.<sup>4</sup> The aggressive promotion of “topper culture,” rank-based advertisements, and success-oriented branding by coaching institutions contributes to the belief that students must constantly outperform others to secure social and professional recognition. This environment encourages excessive academic pressure, thereby neglecting the importance of emotional well-being and holistic development among students.

**Coaching Institute Culture:** The rapid expansion of coaching institutions across cities such as Kota, Hyderabad, and Delhi has normalised highly competitive and performance-driven educational environments. Many coaching institutes operate on rigid schedules involving long study hours, frequent testing, ranking systems, and continuous academic evaluation. For example, students enrolled in residential coaching programs may spend most of their time attending classes, solving assignments, and preparing for examinations with limited emotional support or recreational opportunities. In a cross-sectional study including an equal number of coaching and non-coaching students, it was found that of all coaching students, 44.45% were suffering from high levels of academic stress. Likewise, among non-coaching students, 3.33% were suffering from high levels of academic stress.<sup>5</sup> This can contribute to burnout, emotional detachment, sleep deprivation, and severe psychological distress.

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<sup>3</sup> Cui Lui et al., ‘The Effects of Peer Competition-Induced Anxiety on Massive Open Online Course Learning: The Mediating Role of the Behavioral Inhibition System’ (2024) 14(4) Behavioural Sciences  
<<https://pmc.ncbi.nlm.nih.gov/articles/PMC11047602/>> accessed 22 April 2026

<sup>4</sup> Anusha Misra, ‘Commercialization of education in India’ (*iPleaders Blog*, 02 July 2021)  
<<https://blog.iplayers.in/commercialization-education-india>> accessed 22 April 2026

<sup>5</sup> B S Shekhawat et al., ‘Stress and coping strategy among coaching and non-coaching students in Kota: A comparative study’ (2023) 32 Industrial Psychiatry Journal  
<<https://pmc.ncbi.nlm.nih.gov/articles/PMC10871398/>> accessed 22 April 2026

## STUDENT SUICIDES AND THE MENTAL HEALTH CRISIS

Suicide is a complex interplay of personal and social factors, which is rarely caused by a single circumstance or event. It has an impact on the family, school and community at large. The academic reasons (academic dissatisfaction, academic stress and academic failure), institutional reasons (bullying, caste discrimination, ragging, harassment and toxic institutional culture), mental health issues (depression, psychological stress and anxiety), financial crisis and online gaming are the most commonly reported reasons behind student suicides. In recent years, the surge in suicide cases has further worried mental health professionals and policymakers. In India, student suicides have reached an alarming scale, with students making up 7.6% of the country's total suicide deaths, according to a recently released report by the National Crime Records Bureau.<sup>6</sup> The majority of suicide victims were within the age range of 16-21 years. The highest number of suicide cases is reported from Kota, a city often referred to as the coaching capital of India.<sup>7</sup>

**IC3 Reports - Student Suicides: An Epidemic Sweeping India:** This report includes the latest NCRB Data available for the latest reporting year, 2022. In 2022, there were 13,044 reported student suicides compared to 13,089 in 2021, representing an insignificant decrease. In comparison, total suicides (students and other people) increased 4.2%, from 164,033 in 2021 to 170,924 in 2022. Over the last 10 and 20 years, total suicides increased 2% annually on average, while student suicides increased 4% — i.e. 2X that of total suicides. Gender-wise, male student suicides are higher than female student suicide counts. Male student suicides increased 50% while female student suicides increased by 61% over the last 10 years. Both male and female students increased 5% annually on average over the last five years.<sup>8</sup>

**Stigma Surrounding Mental Health and Help-Seeking:** Stigma is prejudice or negative judgment directed toward individuals or groups based on certain characteristics they possess. Mental health stigma refers to negative judgment toward people with mental health issues. Despite the increasing prevalence of psychological distress among students, mental health

<sup>6</sup> Murali Krishanan, 'India: What is behind the rise in student suicides?' (*DW*, 27 July 2025) <<https://www.dw.com/en/india-what-is-behind-the-rise-in-student-suicides/a-73383151>> accessed 22 April 2026

<sup>7</sup> Sucharita Maji et al., 'Student Suicide in India: An Analysis of Newspaper Articles (2019-2023)' (2025) 19(1) *Early Intervention in Psychiatry* <<https://pubmed.ncbi.nlm.nih.gov/39380363/>> accessed 22 April 2026

<sup>8</sup> *Student Suicides: An Epidemic Sweeping India, Volume 2* (IC3 Institute 2023)

continues to remain a highly stigmatised subject within Indian society. It is deeply rooted in cultural shame and concerns about family honour. There is also a widespread lack of awareness. Misinformation about therapy, psychiatric treatment, and even emotional well-being adds to the fear. Some believe mental health issues only happen to others or are caused by supernatural forces. Others fear being labelled as unstable or unfit for marriage or employment. The shame attached to these assumptions keeps many people suffering in silence, unsure of where to turn or whether they deserve support at all.

Emotional struggles such as anxiety, burnout, depression, and academic stress are frequently dismissed as temporary weaknesses rather than serious concerns requiring attention and support. In many educational and familial environments, students are often encouraged to tolerate stress silently and continue performing academically without openly expressing emotional difficulties. As a result, seeking professional psychological assistance is commonly associated with social judgment, personal inadequacy, or lack of resilience. This stigma discourages students from discussing their mental health concerns openly, thereby intensifying feelings of emotional isolation and helplessness.

In highly competitive educational environments, emotional vulnerability is frequently perceived as a distraction from academic success, causing students to suppress stress and anxiety instead of seeking timely support. Additionally, many educational institutions continue to lack accessible counselling services, trained mental health professionals, and awareness programs capable of addressing students' psychological needs effectively. Therefore, addressing student suicides and mental health concerns requires not only legal and institutional reforms but also broader societal changes aimed at promoting emotional awareness, open communication, and acceptance of mental healthcare among students and families.

## **LEGAL AND CONSTITUTIONAL FRAMEWORK**

**Right to Life and Mental Well-being Under Article 21:** Article 21 of the Indian Constitution is a fundamental right which ensures that each and every citizen of India has the right to Life and Personal Liberty. This article encompasses many things that contribute to a person living his/her life with dignity. Right to Mental Well-Being was declared as an inseparable part of Article 21 by the Supreme Court in *Sukdeb Saha v The State of Andhra Pradesh* in 2025. This development signifies that mental health is now a central component of educational policy.

The Supreme Court has established a legal and ethical obligation for institutions to protect students from excessive academic and social pressures and to ensure the availability of support systems.<sup>9</sup> The SC gave some directives to ensure the mental well-being of children is protected. These are –

**Mandatory Mental Health Policies:** Every institution must adopt a standard policy aligned with national initiatives like UMMEED and MANODARPAN, reviewed annually, and made public.

**Access to Counsellors:** Institutions with more than 100 students must appoint a trained counsellor, psychologist, or social worker. Smaller institutions must create referral linkages.

**Ending Harmful Practices:** Segregating students by performance, public shaming, or pushing disproportionate academic targets is prohibited.

**Visible Helplines:** Suicide prevention helplines, including Tele-MANAS, must be prominently displayed in hostels, classrooms, and websites.

**Training for Staff:** Teachers and non-teaching staff will undergo bi-annual training in psychological first aid, spotting warning signs, and making referrals.

**Safe Campuses:** Confidential grievance redressal systems must address harassment, ragging, and discrimination. Hostels are expected to implement safety measures like tamper-proof fans and restricted access to high-risk areas.

**Parental Sensitisation:** Institutions must engage parents to reduce academic pressure and recognise signs of psychological distress.

**Focus on Coaching Hubs:** Cities like Kota, Hyderabad, Chennai, and Delhi NCR, which report high numbers of student suicides, require heightened regulation and continuous mental health support.

**The Mental Healthcare Act 2017:** An Act to provide for mental healthcare and services for persons with mental illness and to protect, promote and fulfil the rights of such persons during

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<sup>9</sup> 'A Landmark Ruling for Student Mental Health in India' (*cmhlp*, 23 September 2025)  
<<https://cmhlp.org/blogs/a-landmark-ruling-for-student-mental-health-in-india/>> accessed 22 April 2026

delivery of mental healthcare and services and for matters connected therewith or incidental thereto. The Mental Health Care Act 2017 aims to safeguard the rights of people with mental illness, along with access to healthcare and treatment without discrimination from the government. The act aims at decriminalising the attempt to die by suicide by seeking to ensure that the individuals who have attempted suicide are offered opportunities for rehabilitation from the government, as opposed to being tried or punished for the attempt. This principle of the act remains highly relevant in the context of increasing psychological distress among students. The Act imposes responsibilities upon the government to promote mental health awareness, establish mental healthcare services, and ensure access to treatment and counselling facilities.<sup>10</sup>

However, despite the existence of such legal protections, mental health support systems within educational institutions often remain inadequate and inaccessible. The lack of trained counsellors, limited awareness regarding psychological well-being, and social stigma surrounding mental health continue to prevent students from seeking timely assistance, thereby weakening the effective implementation of the objectives envisioned under the Act.

**Manodarpan Scheme, 2020:** The Manodarpan Scheme was launched by the Ministry of Education in 2020. It aims to provide psychosocial support for the mental health and well-being of students during the COVID-19 outbreak and beyond. A webpage has been created on the website of the MoE (<https://manodarpan.education.gov.in/>). These challenging times brought situations such as a sense of isolation, no social / play time, leading to a stressful time for all. The initiative intends to bridge the gap between home and school by building an understanding of the new “normal” and facilitating peer support, being positive, encouraging online learning, life skills to become resilient, etc.

National Toll-free Helpline (8448440632) has been set up to provide tele-counselling to students across schools, colleges and universities and their parents and teachers to address their mental health and psychosocial issues.

A series of Webinars and discussion sessions, ‘Paricharcha’, are held under the Manodarpan initiative to reach out to students and all stakeholders with the aim of creating awareness about mental health and well-being concerns and ways of dealing/coping with them.

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<sup>10</sup> Mental Healthcare Act 2017

‘Sahyog’ live interactive sessions are held every day for students (classes VI-XII) from 5-5:30 pm on the PM e-vidya channel with the focus on providing guidance for promoting mental well-being among students.<sup>11</sup>

**UMMEED Guidelines 2023:** The UMMEED (Understand, Motivate, Manage, Empathise, Empower, Develop) Guidelines were unveiled by the Ministry of Education in 2023 in order to address the rising concern of self-harm and suicide among students. These are aimed at enhancing sensitivity, understanding and support for the students. These guidelines, based on the principle of ‘Every Child Matters,’ are currently open for public feedback and provide clear directions for schools to improve their handling of self-harm cases.

The proposed measures include the establishment of a School Wellness Team (SWT) responsible for identifying students displaying warning signs and those at risk of self-harm, responding to their needs, and providing support.<sup>12</sup> The draft guidelines advocate for the elimination of harmful concepts, such as comparing students with their peers, perceiving failure as permanent, and solely equating success with academic performance, as it can reduce the risk of isolation, despair, discrimination and the occurrence of suicide. They also recommend practical steps like securing empty classrooms, improving lighting in dark corridors, and maintaining well-kept gardens and outdoor areas.

## **COMPARATIVE AND INTERNATIONAL PERSPECTIVE**

The growing concerns surrounding academic pressure, student mental health, and student suicides are not limited to India alone but have increasingly become matters of global concern. Various countries have also recognised the psychological impact of highly competitive educational environments and have adopted institutional and policy-based measures aimed at promoting student well-being and reducing excessive academic stress.

**Mental Health Support in Educational Institutions:** Several countries have integrated mental health support systems within educational institutions as an essential component of

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<sup>11</sup> ‘MANODARPAN’ (NCERT) <<https://ncert.nic.in/manodarpan.php>> accessed 22 April 2026

<sup>12</sup> ‘UMMEED’: Here is how govt plans to reduce stress and suicides among students’ *The Economic Times* (05 October 2023) <<https://economictimes.indiatimes.com/industry/services/education/ummeed-here-is-how-govt-plans-to-reduce-stress-and-suicides-among-students/articleshow/104185700.cms?from=mdr>> accessed 22 April 2026

student welfare. For instance, schools and universities in countries such as Canada, Australia, and the United Kingdom increasingly provide accessible counselling services, mental health awareness programs, and psychological support mechanisms designed specifically for students experiencing academic stress and emotional difficulties.

**Australia:** Australia makes mental health coverage mandatory. Every international student must buy Overseas Student Health Cover before arriving. Insurance providers like CBHS and Medibank include mental health coaching and counselling. Universities then add their own campus services and peer support.

**Canada:** The University of Toronto's My SSP Programme exemplifies Canada's approach, offering free counselling in 146 languages and immediate crisis support.

**UK:** The University of Edinburgh provides free short-term counselling plus workshops and online support platforms.

**Germany:** Germany requires all international students to have health insurance covering mental health services, including counselling, therapy, and psychiatric care.<sup>13</sup>

**Holistic Educational Approaches:** Certain educational systems across the world have also emphasised holistic learning approaches aimed at reducing excessive academic pressure and unhealthy competition among students.

Countries such as Finland have frequently been recognised for educational models that prioritise conceptual understanding, creativity, emotional well-being, and balanced learning over constant examinations and rank-oriented evaluation systems.<sup>14</sup>

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<sup>13</sup> Sivanesan Krish, '5 countries with the best mental health support for students' (*Study International*, 20 February 2026) <<https://studyinternational.com/news/5-countries-best-mental-health-support-for-students/>> accessed 22 April 2026

<sup>14</sup> '10 reasons why Finland's education system is the best in the world' (*The World Economic Forum*, 10 September 2018) <<https://www.weforum.org/stories/2018/09/10-reasons-why-finlands-education-system-is-the-best-in-the-world/>> accessed 22 April 2026

## **RECOMMENDATIONS AND REFORMS**

The growing mental health crisis among students and the increasing incidence of student suicides highlight the urgent need for effective institutional, social, and legal reforms within India's education system.

**Strengthening Mental Health Support Systems in Educational Institutions:** One of the most essential reforms required to address the growing mental health crisis among students is the establishment of effective and accessible mental health support systems within educational institutions. Schools, colleges, universities, and coaching centres must recognise psychological well-being as an integral component of education rather than treating it as a secondary concern. Successful mental health programs require dedicated infrastructure, trained professionals working in collaboration with educational staff, and systematic screening mechanisms linked to referral pathways. Without these elements, guidelines remain performative rather than transformative. For Example, Kerala's Unarv Program, which embedded mental health promotion into school education and showed measurable improvements in student well-being.

**Promoting Mental Health Awareness Among Society:** Addressing the growing mental health crisis among students requires greater awareness and sensitisation not only among students themselves but also among parents, teachers, and educational institutions that significantly influence students' emotional environments. In many instances, psychological distress among students remains unnoticed because symptoms such as anxiety, emotional withdrawal, irritability, exhaustion, declining academic performance, or social isolation are frequently misunderstood as indiscipline, lack of focus, or temporary mood changes.

Educational institutions and policymakers must therefore promote mental health sensitisation programs aimed specifically at parents, teachers, and academic staff. Workshops, counselling awareness sessions, and mental health training initiatives can help adults identify early signs of psychological distress and respond to students with empathy and understanding rather than criticism or excessive pressure. Sensitising parents and teachers regarding the realities of

student mental health can play a crucial role in early intervention, emotional support, and prevention of severe psychological crises among students.<sup>15</sup>

**Strengthening Governmental and Institutional Policies:** Although various legal frameworks, educational guidelines, and mental health initiatives have been introduced in recent years, their implementation often remains inconsistent and inadequate within educational institutions. Policies aimed at protecting student wellbeing must move beyond formal recognition and focus on practical enforcement, accessibility, and accountability. Existing initiatives such as Manodarpan and UMMEED represent important steps toward promoting psychological well-being among students; however, many institutions continue to lack trained counsellors, awareness programs, and accessible support systems necessary for effective implementation. Furthermore, stronger coordination between educational institutions, mental health professionals, policymakers, and families is necessary to create sustainable and student-centric support systems.

## CONCLUSION

The increasing prevalence of academic pressure, psychological distress, and student suicides in India reflects a deeply concerning socio-legal issue requiring urgent attention from society, educational institutions, and policymakers alike. While academic achievement continues to be widely associated with social recognition and future security, the excessive pressure attached to educational success has contributed to emotional exhaustion, fear of failure, anxiety, and severe psychological distress among students. The alarming rise in student suicides, therefore, cannot be viewed merely as isolated personal tragedies but must be recognised as indicators of broader systemic and institutional shortcomings within India's educational framework.

The existing legal and constitutional framework and government initiatives represent important efforts toward promoting student mental health awareness and emotional support. However, the practical implementation of mental health support systems, counselling infrastructure, and preventive institutional mechanisms continues to remain inadequate across many educational settings. The persistence of stigma surrounding mental health, lack of awareness among parents

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<sup>15</sup> 'Are Indian Schools & Colleges Ready to Prioritize Students Mental Health and Wellness?' (*Mental Health First Aid India*, 12 January 2026) <<https://www.mhfaindia.com/blog/indian-schools-colleges-prioritize-student-mental-health-wellness>> accessed 22 April 2026

and educators, and insufficient regulation of highly competitive educational environments further intensify the challenges faced by students.

By acknowledging the importance of overall development and well-being, we can work towards creating a more supportive and nurturing environment for students to thrive. Ultimately, life is about living, learning, and growing, not just competing and being ranked. By shifting our focus towards a more holistic approach, we can benefit students and help them lead more fulfilling lives.