

Why Children missing and student suicides are not a National Concern?

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Do you know one child every eight minutes is missing in India according to a BBC investigation. The Ministry of Women and Child Development has put this number of missing as one child every ten minutes. In 2020, in the national capital, 12 children missed daily according to police reports. But, according to Delhi Commission on Child Rights, 20 children were missing daily of which only 6 were being traced. According to latest NCRB (National Crime Records Bureau) report available for 2016, over 1.11 lac children were missing for more than a year, but only half of them were found. Social media has propelled the number of children missing further recently is obvious. That many missing children are not being reported, or not recorded, especially in rural India is also known.

Last month Delhi Police claimed tracing 1440 missing children during the quarter of August – October 2020. The number missing from the capital must be more than 3000 during that quarter. All this despite a law on child trafficking is as old as 1956 and in 2013 the Supreme Court called for serious view by police registering and follow up of missing children. Even earlier, Justice Verma Committee too called for such serious view. And yet where are we today? As if we have not been bothering so much. There is hardly any coverage in news media and whatever is there is more about the numbers. And public outrage is too little and isolated. So also a political will. Political campaigns are on everything else about not about our children. Not one political leader ever showed or took up the cause of more than 40 percent of population. Is it because they are not voters?

The phenomena of youth unrest in the country, particularly among students, making them take to suicides, as in the case of missing, has been on increase. This is no longer an allegation. The NCRB itself has been giving figures annually. It is evident from these trends that age group 15-30 are taking to suicides and this trend has been on increase for a decade. Yet, we do not seem to be concerned about. It took more than a decade for the nation to acknowledge farmer's suicides. Can we afford to wait that long in the case of suicides of students or their neglect?

Going by the national media we still remain preoccupied for weeks with suicide of one or other innocuous or a celebrity, taking us nowhere for insights or initiatives going beyond the hype of isolated ones and ignoring larger societal malice. My own insights based on 50 years of behavioural research among youngsters, is more the portrayal of VIP suicides in public media, the more the spread of the phenomena at other levels as well. The way these are covered is more as numbers and events.

Has the new education policy of 2020 taken cognizance of this national trend? Can it be holistic without considering this trend into consideration? Should we continue with orientation for jobs and high paid ones, instead of empowering children for a knowledge society where wisdom is the concern more, preached by many of our wise men centuries ago.

That stress, anxiety, disorder, depression prompts students towards suicides is known. Academic stress, fear of failure, breakdown in relationships and loneliness are the result of that trend is also known. As early as in 2012, for example, Lancet brought out that suicide rate in India was highest in the age group of 15-29. A 2017 nationwide survey by CSDS showed that four out of ten students suffer from depression. A feeling of worthlessness was another cause for such tendency. Are these trends serious enough to concern the country? What have we done to address? Covid-19 has added “uncertainty” as a mega concern.

According to a headline in The Hindu of January 29, 2020, based on NCRB data, 28 lives of students were lost every day in 2018. Over 10,000 students lost their lives by suicide in 2018, an increase from about 9900 in 2017. Even more alarming was suicides of students from schools of higher learning. For example, 27 students from ten Indian Institute of Technologies (IITs) killed themselves between 2015 and 2019, according to the Ministry of HRD's own source. Kota town, well known as coaching hub in the country, sees a series of suicides every year. Between 2013 and 2017, for example, 58 students died by suicide. Imagine the pain and loss for each one of these deaths and related social, mental and economic loss to the family and community. No data is yet available of student suicides for 2019 and 2020. There are no signals of a decline in this trend. Nor any news of any new measures taken at any level.

With the COVID 19 pandemic, the extra ordinary stress on students, this anxiety and mental tension is bound to increase. Also because of frequent change in exam schedules or frequent leak of papers? Every year, in the wake of announcement of Board examination results, we hear of about such suicides. In one week in April 2019, for example, 19 students in Telangana killed themselves after the State Intermediate results. Earlier, in Madhya Pradesh on a single day 12 students including 6 girls, died by suicide after the release of the board examination results. These are not isolated instances. In 2018 according NCRB, 46,000 died in the country by suicide in the age group 18 and 30 years. Nearly ten per cent of total suicides of all ages in the country are from this age group. In 2019 more than 1,30,000 people in India suicided according to WHO. What specific initiatives have we taken? Should a national policy take serious note of the implications of these two phenomena? Neither free breakfast for children nor a dole to mothers is a solution. Is education not the best bet for bringing a holistic idea of life and living? Even more is counselling and parental care and attention. Covid time is a better time to think about these critical trends by parents, teachers and educationalists. And by our political leaders as importantly. Should we miss take note yet again? Or mess up as in the case of farmers distress and suicides?

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