



IIT-Madras's Mitr counsels students in the age group of 17-60

PICS: MARTIN LOUIS, A RAJA CHIDAMBARAM

Dip in marks, relationships gone sour and inability to cope with peer pressure are becoming reasons for some students to take the extreme step. College managements are becoming sensitive to the problems and are reaching out to help students

# Pulling back from the ledge

SHILPA KAPPUR VASUDEVAN | CHENNAI

**B**oga Shraavan, an MTech student of IIT-Kharagpur hanged himself on March 17 making it the 21st suicide on campus in the last six years. Barely a fortnight later, Lokesh Kumar Goyel, a final-year chemical engineering student of the institute, took the extreme step. Down south, in November last year, Akshay Kumar Meena, a first-year chemical engineering undergrad student of IIT-Madras was found hanging in his hostel room, making it the third suicide in the institute in the past two years. These suicides aren't limited to IITs alone — almost every major university in the country reports a suicide now and then, several of them related to the pressure of the programme and students' inability to fit in, as experts say. Apart from this, during the Telangana crisis, a number of students resorted to suicides and self immolation bids. Not able to bear the delay in the formation of a separate state for Telangana, Bandaru Srinivas, an engineering student of Osmania University, Hyderabad, decided to show his dissent by hanging himself from a tree opposite the university library in June last year.

With Class XII examinations over, high-school students all over the country are gearing up for their college admissions. Think college and the typical visuals that come to our minds are a single notebook, doing away with the uniform, spending endless hours with friends and so on. Why do the dreams of students turn awry and result in suicides?

## FROM DREAMS TO DESPAIR

It is not just academic pressures but life's struggles in general that could be one of the reasons, says LS Ganesh, Dean of students, IIT-Madras. "It is wrong to assume that students take the extreme step only due to academic pressure. Of late, from what I have observed, it is less due to academic pressure and more because youngsters are not able to manage their relationships well," he says, adding that it could be a combination of reasons.

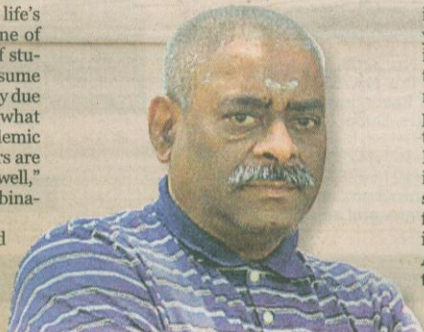
"It is very important to understand what is the trigger. Not all, but some, youth have weak defence mechanisms and they want everything to happen here and now," he says. From what

the professor has tried to understand, he says in some cases, "When I dig deep, I find that some students come from unhappy families, are introverts, don't know how to socialise or fit into a community. In rarest of rare cases, we have even seen people committing suicide just for the heck of it!"

Asked about the possibility of rural students not finding acceptance or feeling left out, he shoots down the idea. "I can't speak of colleges where a majority of the students are day scholars, but in residential campuses like IITs or IIMs, there aren't any fundamental differences between the two sets (rural and urban students) that are identifiable. While we can't rule out the possibility of rural students being a misfit in city campuses, it is not a significant factor to lose sleep over and I don't think it can be termed as a cause."

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tion. "Students come here cracking competitive exams like the Joint Entrance Exam. They are academically adept and know what they are in for. Of course, the syllabus is rigorous, but you are also left with time for your personal and social needs," clarifies Ganesh.

Says Shyam\*, an MTech in Computer Science Engineering graduate of the institute (2011). "Even during my time at the institute, I can recall two suicides that happened on campus — one was because the guy couldn't complete the degree even after four years," he says, adding that such news would reach students late, mostly after it appears in the media. Shyam says that it was possibly due to academic pressure and that it affected those from reserved communities more. Without commenting on the merits or demerits of the system, he states merely that as the reserved quota students acquire admissions into the technical institutes on a lower rank, some of them are unable to cope with the work load later."

That does not in any way reflect on the faculty, however, as he vouches for their friendly demeanor. "We used to constantly update them on the progress of our assignments and projects. Two days before the submission date, if you inform saying you can't finish the project, anyone would be cross. But if the reason was genuine, none of the faculty members had any qualms extending the deadline. As much as failure is not a good thing, it was never looked down upon and it was okay to have arrears as long as you cleared them ultimately."

Being on IIT-M campus, Arun\*, a BTech third-year Computer Science Engineering student has seen three suicides in the years he has spent there. He feels that these incidents garnered attention only because they took place on an IIT campus. "Suicides, murders, rapes or other social crimes are part of our lives and it is unfair to sensationalise the ones that happen in a campus. It happens everywhere, but with the 'IIT' tag it gets more attention. I remember two instances — one was because the student was from a rural background. In addition to having some family issues, he was homesick. Another girl also took the extreme step due to some family problems," he says, pointing out that academic pressure was not the cause. That said, he agrees that it is



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indeed true that in a place like IIT, where students come from different backgrounds, the ones from rural surroundings "have their own demons to tackle".

Stressing on the importance of counselling systems in colleges is Sheila Singh, involved in the administration of the counselling services at Stella Maris College, Chennai. "Any institution has the onus of imparting holistic education to its students. We can't just be concerned with the academic part; we also need to take care of the physical and mental wellbeing of the students. Likewise, a student-professor relationship should be like a two-sided coin; you can't be too permissive or too strict." She finds that material wants are a major cause of discord between peers.

## WHAT THE COLLEGES ARE DOING

IIT-M has an in-house counselling centre, Mitr, meaning 'friend' in Hindi, which is short for Mentoring for Individual Transformation. Mitr is handled by faculty and professionals; Prof Ganesh is also one of the counsellors. "Most of the time, at least for minor disturbances, you give the student a patient hearing and that is all it takes to

sort things out," he says. Of course, if the problem is severe, the case is transferred to a professional psychiatrist and the student is prescribed medication if deemed necessary. "Even if there is an iota of doubt that this is a more serious case, we ensure that students get professional counselling and we follow up on their progress," he adds.

Mitr is one of the key wings of the institution, and handles the age group of 17 to 60 right from undergraduate and postgraduate to research students, one or two who are sexagenarians. Other things they do include imparting life skills as part of the curriculum and taking out students in small groups for outdoor activities. Ganesh admits that suicides lower the morale on campus and advises students to not get disheartened by 'silly' things like arrears and heartbreaks. He advises students to "be cheerful, have a good sense of humour and move on when a relationship has run its phase. It's foolish to think that one person can define your life. When your relationship ends, be happy about it as it has reminded you that the focus of your life is you."

Giving further information on Mitr is Prof MS Sivakumar who mans the centre: "Counselling has been part of IIT-M for many years. Two-and-a-half-years ago, we decided to get into a more reactive mode of guidance and counselling to solve problems of students and hence renamed the same. Mitr owes a lot to student volunteers who undergo training in counselling. We also use the services of two psychiatrists employed at the institute's hospital, which runs 24x7. I second Prof Ganesh's opinion that most of the suicides are due to mismanagement of relationships and it helps to have student volunteers on board as students will share their intimate problems with friends as opposed to their professors or even an outsider."

In order to involve students more in counselling, it was the brainwave of Prof Sivakumar to convert the same into credits. He also conducts workshops on personality development and how to deal with failure, what excellence means and so on.

A counselling centre staffed with three psychologists and analysts ensure that things don't get out of hand at IIT-Kharagpur. As on March, 200 students of the institute were reported to be using the services.



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