

Students oppose Indian government's new university entrance exam

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Tamil Nadu students are continuing to protest against the Indian government's so-called National Eligibility and Entrance Test (NEET), which is now the mandatory entrance qualification for admission to university medical science courses.

On October 2, police blocked a march from Tiruchi's main post office by students demanding the abolition of NEET. The students were wearing masks with a photo of Anitha Shanmugam, a 17-year-old student who committed suicide early last month after her hopes of entering medical college were dashed.

Shanmugam was from an impoverished family in the state's Ariyalur district. She was prevented from enrolling in a state medical college because she failed the NEET, despite scoring 1,176 out of 1,200 in the Tamil Nadu university entrance examination. The daughter of a daily wage labourer, she was the only student in Ariyalur district to score 100 percent in physics and mathematics in the state's 12th standard examination and prior to NEET would have been the first person in her village to become a medical student.

Shanmugam's suicide on September 1 triggered student protests throughout the state demanding NEET's withdrawal. College students demonstrated in marches and rallies in the state capital Chennai and other Tamil Nadu towns such as Coimbatore, Tiruvallore, Kanchipuram, Villupuram, Cuddalore, Tiruchi and Thanjavur, and were later joined by secondary school students. The protesters denounced the central government of Prime Minister Narendra Modi and the All India Dravida Munnetra Kazhagam (AIADMK)-led state government, blaming them for Shanmugam's tragic death.

The AIADMK state government responded to the protests by unleashing the police who arrested hundreds of students and detained them in community halls

before their eventual release. The demonstrations, however, continued to grow.

On September 8, a Supreme Court bench led by Chief Justice Dipak Misra banned the protests. It instructed the Tamil Nadu chief secretary to prosecute "anyone involved in any kind of 'bandh' [total shutdown of trade and industries] or activity that disrupts normal life and detrimentally affects law and order in the State of Tamil Nadu."

In line with the Supreme Court ban, the Tamil Nadu government stepped up its attacks on the anti-NEET demonstrations. On September 8, 81 students in Madurai were arrested and remanded to judicial custody.

Of those, 47 students were released on September 12. The rest were charged under the Indian penal code, including sections dealing with unlawful assembly, rioting, criminal conspiracy and assault or using criminal force to deter a public servant from discharging his or her duty.

NEET was first proposed in 2013 but went through several legal changes in response to objections raised by various state governments, including Tamil Nadu, Andhra Pradesh and Gujarat, as well as several colleges.

Last year the Supreme Court ordered the test to be mandatory for all medical courses. On July 2016, the Modi government passed the Indian Medical Council (Amendment) Bill, 2016, and the Dentists (Amendment) Bill, making NEET a compulsory national test for the selection of medical students. Under pressure from the AIADMK-led state government, Tamil Nadu was exempted from NEET, but for just one year.

Although Shanmugam's suicide became the trigger for an explosion of state-wide protests in Tamil Nadu,

opposition to NEET has rapidly developed among students across India.

The NEET examination is conducted by India's Central Board of Secondary Education (CBSE). Prior to its imposition, students who completed their higher secondary education could be selected for medical degrees on the basis of their performance at university entrance examinations conducted by the central government or respective state governments.

Indian schools have begun preparing their students for NEET but it is a tough examination and one that requires extra coaching and expensive private tuition. Children from impoverished working class and oppressed families cannot afford the fees and are therefore most affected.

The anti-NEET protests are another expression of growing anger and unrest among students and youth over unemployment and the lack of government funding for public education. Government spending on public education in India has declined from 4.4 percent of GDP in 1991 to 3.71 percent this year.

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