

The IIT Bombay suicide and the crisis facing India's youth

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The death by suicide of Sahil Wakode, a second-year BTech student at the Indian Institute of Technology (IIT) Bombay, on September 18, has exposed the brutal reality behind the carefully cultivated image of India's elite technical institutes. Wakode took his own life hours after he was allegedly caught using his phone during an examination. He was the third student to die by suicide at IIT Bombay this year, and the tenth across the IIT system in 2026.

The circumstances of Wakode's death reveal an institution that has abandoned even the pretence of due process, let alone empathy towards these young students. IIT Bombay's own published rules for academic malpractice separate detection from adjudication: an invigilator who discovers misconduct is required to confiscate the material, issue a fresh answer book, allow the student to continue writing, and prepare a report for a disciplinary committee, which must then give the student the evidence and two working days to respond. None of this appears to have happened.

Instead, Professor Suryanarayana Doolla reportedly seized Wakode's paper, escorted him from the examination hall, and summoned security personnel. The institute then issued a public statement claiming Wakode had uploaded the question paper to ChatGPT—a statement it was forced to retract and apologise for three days later.

The institute's conduct is an expression of a broader transformation. IIT Bombay reportedly changed its disciplinary regime during the recent mid-semester examinations, so that the mere possession of a phone during an exam could attract a failing grade and a full semester's suspension, even for a first offence, without proof the device was used. Students and even most faculty were apparently never informed. The shift from academic invigilation to security-driven surveillance—metal detectors, security personnel, the contemplation of assigning invigilation duties to guards—reflects the dictatorial method that characterises the Modi government's approach to every social problem.

The students at IIT Bombay have responded with solidarity and militancy, having themselves witnessed the harsh academic environment that prevails at the IITs. A protest at the institute's main gate in Powai—dubbed "Justice Corner"—began in the days following Wakode's suicide and continued throughout last week. Students have presented an 18-point charter of demands. These include calls for an independent, transparent investigation, the resignation of IIT Bombay Director Shireesh Kedare, and the suspension of Professor Doolla. Students allege that security

personnel attempted to clear the protest site and threatened one protester.

Wakode's distraught parents, who are staging a hunger strike at Azad Maidan, a historic 25-acre triangular public sports ground located in the Fort district of South Mumbai, are demanding the immediate arrest of Professor Suryanarayana Doolla and IIT Bombay Director Shireesh Kedare, alongside an independent probe by the CBI (Central Bureau of Investigation) amid allegations of institutional caste discrimination.

The caste dimension of the case—Wakode was a Dalit (formerly known as "untouchables")—has been cynically proclaimed by the corporate media and certain "left" and lower-caste rights groups as the central issue.

There is indeed caste discrimination, at least in subtle form, even in India's elite institutions. For example, IIT Bombay's own SC/ST Students' Cell survey of nearly 400 students in 2022 found that roughly a quarter had been asked their surname to ascertain their caste, and more than a third had been asked their entrance-exam score once their caste identity became known.

Yet the fixation on the caste allegation deflects attention from the core issue: the fact that all educational institutions cater to the needs of the profit system, in which everything must be done rapidly by workers, since under capitalism "time is money". Thus, the students at the IITs have to learn and absorb complex subjects rapidly and perform well in exams that are frequently made difficult, while competing with their classmates.

The "elite" and the poor

The IITs are routinely described as elite institutions, and their students as a privileged layer. There is a superficial truth to this. Admission is extraordinarily difficult, and the families that can afford the years of private coaching required to compete are disproportionately drawn from the upper-middle class. But this framing obscures more than it reveals. The students who enter the IITs are not the ruling class; they are, overwhelmingly, the children of salaried professionals, small businesspeople and aspirational middle-class families who have poured their savings into a single, desperate gamble on their children's future. The pressure they endure is not the pressure of privilege but the

pressure of a system in which a single examination is made to determine an entire life.

And if this is the fate of those who have “made it”—who have secured admission to the country’s most prestigious institutes—what is the fate of the millions who have not? For every student who enters an IIT, more than 80 sit for the entrance examination. The overwhelming majority are rejected; their years of preparation for the test are rendered worthless, and they are then cast into a labour market that offers most degree-holders gig work, unemployment or underemployment. The Indian government’s own Labour Force Survey has found unemployment at its highest level in 45 years. Of the more than 10 million young people entering the labour market each year, only a tiny fraction secure formal employment.

The brutal entrance examination system is the funnel through which this social catastrophe is administered. More than 1.5 million students appeared for the JEE (Main) in 2026, of whom around 250,000 qualified for the JEE (Advanced), competing for barely 18,000 BTech degree seats. Behind these numbers lies a vast coaching industry—the “Kota factories”—in which children as young as 14 are separated from their families and subjected to years of relentless drilling, rote memorisation and mock examinations. The system is rotten with corruption, as the recent NEET scandal demonstrated, when examination questions were leaked by politically connected coaching businesses, and at least 12 young people took their own lives after the exam was cancelled.

IIT as a pressure cooker

The IITs themselves are, as one recent graduate put it, a pressure cooker. The academic environment is widely known for being extremely intense, highly competitive, and mentally exhausting. Professors grade students based on how others perform, which turns every exam into a fierce competition. Students who have spent years as the “toppers” in their schools are suddenly surrounded by competitive peers, and comparison becomes constant. Failure, often experienced for the first time, feels devastating.

The campuses are vast and isolating; hostel cultures are fragmented; and the institutional response to mental distress remains bureaucratic. Counselling centres exist on paper, but students perceive them as extensions of the administration and do not trust them. As many as 73 IIT students died by suicide or unnatural death between September 2021 and August 2026, according to the Global IIT Alumni Support Group—13 at IIT Kharagpur alone, and nine each at IIT Kanpur and IIT Delhi. There have been 65 student suicides across the IITs between 2021 and 2025. IIT Kanpur’s estimated suicide death rate of 19.8 per 100,000 students is higher even than Japan’s, the highest among college students in the world.

These deaths are not a problem of individual psychology. They are the product of a social system that has made the lives of an

entire generation disposable. The suicides at the IITs are part of a larger phenomenon of youth despair across India. According to the National Crime Records Bureau (NCRB), student suicides have risen faster than the overall national suicide rate, climbing from 13,892 in 2023 to 14,488 in 2024. In 2018, four college-educated youths in Rajasthan, aged 17 to 24, threw themselves in front of a train because they saw no escape from joblessness and poverty.

This despair has begun to find an initial political expression. In July, tens of thousands of students, unemployed youth and young professionals poured into the streets of Delhi in a protest movement that shook the Modi government. The immediate trigger was the corruption surrounding the entrance examinations, but the movement, initiated by the ad hoc Cockroach Janata Party, became a flashpoint for far broader anger over the lack of jobs, endemic poverty and the chasm between the mass of the population and a tiny layer of billionaires. The government responded with tear gas, baton charges, mass detentions and the deployment of paramilitary forces, and invoked the draconian National Security Act against protesters. The contempt of the ruling class was summed up by Chief Justice Surya Kant, who denounced the unemployed youth as “parasites” and “cockroaches.”

The youth of India confront a stark choice. The bourgeois parties—the BJP and the Congress Party alike—offer nothing but the continuation of the profit system that has produced this catastrophe and a deepening of the Indian bourgeoisie’s reactionary anti-China alliance with US imperialism. The Stalinist “left” led by the Communist Party of India (Marxist) (CPM) and their national trade unions has spent decades suppressing the class struggle and channeling workers behind the Congress and other right-wing capitalist parties in the name of opposing the BJP. The Stalinists have been quick to hail the leaders of the so-called Cockroach Janata Party, who are entirely oriented to pressuring the political establishment and have raised no demands that challenge the subordination of society to the accumulation of ever greater wealth by the financial oligarchy.

Suicides at the IITs, the corruption of the examination system, the mass unemployment—all are rooted in the crisis of capitalism, and none can be resolved within its framework. Students must turn to the working class—the social force with the power to challenge capitalism and communalist reaction—beginning with the workers of Noida and the Gurgaon-Manesar industrial belt, who were criminalised and imprisoned in April merely for demanding a living wage. Only through the political mobilisation of the working class, on a socialist and internationalist programme, can the social conditions that are driving a generation to despair be abolished.



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