

Elephants In the Room

A personal “general category” analysis of the recent suicide at IIT Bombay.

(Executive Summary appears at the end)

Milind Sohoni

Version 3, 30th September 2026

The Background.

Yet another student has died, presumably due to suicide. Hundreds die every year in this manner while preparing for NEET, JEE and other competitive exams or while in institutions such as the IITs. Yet this case has received more attention this year because the student was from IIT Bombay, the premier institution in India, and he belonged to the SC community.

The broad facts seem to be that (i) the student was found using unfair means - a smartphone - in an exam (ii) the instructor caught this act and engaged with the student, and (iii) the student was found dead a few hours later, in his hostel room.

Accusations by one segment of the student body are that SC/ST students face systematic discrimination and abuse, the latest incident being an example. They point to the transaction between the student and the instructor as possibly being casteist and leading to the suicide of the student. The institute, on the other hand, acknowledges that stress amongst students is indeed common. While steps have been taken to address it, they are proving inadequate. The student-instructor interaction is a matter under investigation. While that happens, it has put on hold the administrative role that the instructor held in the institute. The faculty forum, a faculty association, has thrown its weight behind the instructor claiming that he was fulfilling his duty in upholding the integrity of examinations in IIT Bombay.

The mainstream media sees it as a conflict between two opposing forces (i) the prestige of IIT Bombay especially in holding fair and rigorous exams - the meritocracy, and (ii) caste mobilization and its percolation into academia. The data does show that students from socially weaker backgrounds face higher stress - suicide rates and failures are higher. Besides of course, they do much worse on academic grades.

Let us assume for the moment that the case comes to some conclusion along the above lines. How do we go ahead from here?

The simple answer IIT Bombay offers is an increased focus on student “wellness” and more resources to identify and treat stressed individuals. The student articulation too is around such solutions. Simply put - academic life in the IITs is naturally stressful but they will deal with it with even more sensitivity and resources.

I would like to offer an alternative analysis with three broad reasons - the three elephants - for this and other failures connected with higher education. It is based on the author’s experience of teaching in IIT Bombay and conducting research, having worked with various government agencies and as a consultant to several private companies - both Indian and multinational, and finally, his research in the area of governance and higher education.

Elephant One: Cheating, unethical conduct and unfairness.

Cheating in exams is common in IIT Bombay. This is probably true in other IITs as well. The exact modus operandi depends on the course format, the invigilation procedure and the penalties for being found. One may estimate that about 100-200 undergraduate students copy in each semester exam and perhaps about 20-30 students are actually caught doing so. The penalties depend on the exact act and can set you back by about 2-5% of your overall grade point average (CPI), besides possibly, a loss of a semester. This is where caste and class matter. Students from weaker backgrounds have more stress to begin with. For them, these penalties may indeed be overwhelming.

Unethical conduct is rampant. These are of course, acts which are not punishable but corrode the institution. This includes marking attendance when not present, cheating in assignments and submission and plagiarism in UG research work. These practices are widespread and are uniformly accepted by students, when they are about academic work. On the other hand, making false claims in CVs, which is also rampant, is regulated by a student body who manages the process of finding internships and jobs.

Unfair systems are the source. Unfair systems breed unethical conduct. For the IITs, this begins with the JEE Advanced Exam. The format is multiple-choice questions - 360 marks in 360 minutes, organized into 20-25 sections, each of 4-6 questions. A question is to be answered in 1- 4 minutes. Each section comes with standard but complicated instructions on the marking scheme. Some sections have negative marks so attention is required. Most questions are numerical gadgets that can be solved quickly if you “know” the trick or have extensive practice in choosing the right questions to attempt. Thus, one is unlikely to be in the top 10% of the class that gets in - the top 4000 ranks - without intense coaching of over two years and the full-time support of at least one parent. The culture in the coaching classes themselves is far from “fair”. Although students pay the same fees, they are separated into batches after the first set of tests. Some are groomed to crack the main exam, while the others get the routine treatment. Cheating is common since it is all about getting ahead in this zero-sum game.

This is the “hard work” that IIT students claim to have done to get in. The data, whenever published, shows that even for “general category” students, the JEE exam is extremely unequal across gender, class, regions and school board. That an exam with such unequal outcomes continues without deeper scrutiny is a blot on our academia and civil society.

The JEE Advanced does not test, in any way, the student’s suitability to become an engineer, as the rest of the world would define it. One should compare this with the admission processes adopted by other universities. These are typically a combination of writing a biographical essay, having good grades in high school, performing well on standardised tests, and stating how their interests align with those of the institute. None of this happens here and the results are for all to see. The IITs underperform their international peers in most attributes.

Elephant Two: Packages and stress.

Packages, parents and the system. Placements, of course, are the first job that students get through a process mediated by IIT Bombay, and the package is the annual salary. Job security, prestige and the actual package, in that order, are now the main concerns of the parents who prepare their wards for JEE. Raging unemployment and under-employment for fresh graduates outside and the shortage of meaningful opportunities for youth in our economy is the primary reason. This anxiety of parents is utilized by the media and other agencies by highlighting extraordinary packages of *some* IIT graduates. This creates competition, which in turn, enhances the mystique of academics at the IITs and the prestige of their graduates.

Packages and CVs. The package is the central concern of the typical student and dominates the culture. Acculturation begins shortly after the first year and the first CV is created in the second year. Students quickly realize that the promised package is available only to the top 25% in a race which is best described as a game of signalling and credentialing. Thus the rat race continues as CVs get embellished.

The key attributes are (i) a high CPI cut-off (ii) the student's department (iii) club membership and leadership (iv) internships and projects. For example, Mechanical Engineering graduates with CPIs above 8.5, and an internship in a multinational company, can appear for the entrance test for the job of an IT specialist in a multinational bank, with a package of Rs. 30L p. a. Only CSE graduates with CPIs above 9.5 and internship projects in AI, can appear for interviews with a Quantitative Finance company based out of Europe. In general, such packages attract students in droves and it is a "buyer's market". Since time spent in interviewing is critical, and since the skills required are general enough - speed in adapting company tools, working long hours, skills of summarising and presentation - such cut-offs are used to limit the number of applicants they need to interview.

Disconnect. These attributes have no connection with the actual academic work of the student. A high CPI is a mark, not of competence but of personality. Faculty members' opinions are rarely solicited. Indeed, student attendance in core courses is low, when not mandatory. Copying in assignments and submissions is common.

Student Culture. Thus, the required skills for a good package are still to be socially acquired within the student body. These are most developed in IIT Bombay and IIT Delhi, where the premier multinational job market meets. This explains why about 90 of the top 100 JEE Advanced ranks prefer these two IITs. The overall impact of placements on student culture is enormous. The student focus is on acquiring internships abroad or with multinational companies, membership and leadership in "technical" clubs, and of course, the do-or-die CPI. This is at the expense of their overall development.

The fact is that other than the CPI, most skills are socially learnt, and available in some social or regional peer groups and absent in others. Managing the CPI too, needs many skills - sophistication in articulation and organization of thoughts, using computer tools, teamwork, etc. - which reflect the social and economic background of the student. None of these are indicated or tested in the JEE Advanced but they are essential nonetheless. The mismatch between skills that students and their peer groups possess and what the high-package market requires, the hard-wiring of social expectations, and the absence of other meaningful narratives and creative opportunities creates enormous stress.

Elephant Three - Academic Failures.

The failure of core jobs. But what about “core” jobs which arise out of doing well in your discipline? Sadly, when last analysed by this author in 2013 (see reference below), only 35% students took these. Moreover, the core job in Indian companies for Indian customers was the lowest-paying, and by a wide margin! The obvious question - If Deutsche Bank can afford to pay Rs. 30L p.a. to a mechanical engineer and McKinsey Consulting, Rs. 50L p.a. to an electrical engineer, then why cannot the Railways, Niti Aayog, L&T or Adani Power?

The diagnosis by experts is that leading Indian companies continue with outdated or borrowed work-flows and invest little in R&D and yet remain profitable. The government agencies are loath to modernize. This has led to monopolies and rents in the Indian economy and the excessive use of credentials to obtain jobs. This has had a deleterious impact on youth careers and scientific innovation.

But what has prevented the IIT faculty body from using their prestige and expertise to pry open these agencies? Why have they not engaged with them over the decades and created new high-tech. well-paying jobs? Was that not their mission?

Inadequate R&D. One must then admit that the faculty body has largely failed to engage with real-world problems, find solutions and seed new companies and professionals. Huge engineering challenges loom before us - climate change, pollution, transport, to name a few. Elite institutions need to step up, grapple with them and build the scientific ecosystem to solve these problems. Yet that too is missing. In other words, the multinational package - working for the global customer - remains the most attractive job that IIT-ians see.

Deficient Curriculum. The faculty body has also failed to inculcate an atmosphere of collegiality and develop a curriculum of engagement and inquiry. The “transformative education” stated in IIT Bombay’s mission requires the student and faculty body to come together to explore the outside world as the source of problems to be solved. The interdisciplinarity and engagement that such a curriculum requires would have helped students understand and appreciate the diversity without and within - the vast differences in individual journeys and the social and material inequalities that exist today. Such an understanding would have reduced the internal contradictions and stresses. It would have inculcated a culture of honest hard work and a belief in the scientific and technological development of our society as the abiding purpose. Again, such interdisciplinary curricula are common in international peer institutions.

Internet, AI and the new teacher. The use of the internet and AI has changed the dynamics of knowledge. Whole courses by eminent professors are available on the internet while most assignments are easily solved by cleverly prompting AI tools. But these advances have not improved public transport or reduced pollution in our cities. We still import silicon wafers and stepper motors. Droughts pauperize farmers and sanitary workers continue to die. Thus, the gap between knowledge on paper and knowledge in use has widened. But this gap has not been utilized by professors, for they themselves have neither the experience, nor the agency to bridge it.

Executive summary

The latest incident is an inevitable outcome of the cross-purposes that exist between social expectations, student culture and the institute's academic conduct. The "eliteness" of the institute has been utilized and co-opted, with or without its acquiescence, into the broader race for credentials imposed on our youth. The stress in the student body is a consequence, and psychological trauma and extreme steps are merely statistical outcomes.

What is to be done? Acknowledge that there is a broader "general category" failure.

The analysis may differ from the one presented here. But the data behind these assertions is available or easily gathered. This is the first step.

The situation will not change with more student counselors or by making the curricula lighter or the exams "easier". What do the IITs stand for - this is the question that needs to be answered. This can only be done if the institute comes forward and acknowledges the three elephants - the failure of the selection mechanism to find the right students and the unfairness inherent in it, the increasing irrelevance of the way academics are conducted in the institute and finally, a student culture arising purely due to the IIT degree being reduced to credentials to be obtained to get ahead in a narrow job market.

Reference:

The AICTE Review: An opportunity for engineering education reform. Current Science, vol. 110, 25th Jan 2016. Link: [aictcCS.pdf](#)