

Solidarity Committee of University Students

Fact Finding Report of the investigation of the suicide of P.

Raju, a student.

University of Hyderabad

19th March 2013

Introduction

There has recently been a surge in the number of suicides in higher educational institutions in Hyderabad. At the time the current study was undertaken the number stood at 24 (including the then recent one at the English and Foreign Languages University). Since then two more suicides have occurred, one of – a student of Urdu at EFL U, and the second of – a student of – at Osmania University.

The Acting Chief Justice of the AP High Court also initiated a suo motu petition in May 2013, summoning all the universities of Hyderabad to show what they were doing to alleviate this critical problem. The petition led to a series of measures that included a conclave of Vice Chancellors, but ultimately had a disappointing emphasis on somewhat short term solutions. A group has also been constituted by the High Court to come up with proposals in a period of two months.

What remains unemphasised in all this activity is that many of not most of the students who succumb to suicide come from SC/ST and OBC backgrounds. It is our considered opinion that the suicides are a symptom of a larger crisis in education. This report is an attempt to unravel this larger crisis around the case of one suicide in the University of Hyderabad.

Raju's suicide

On the evening of 19th March, 2013, P. Raju, a student of the Integrated Master of Arts (IMA) programme, University of Hyderabad, committed suicide. Known to be a jovial, yet reserved and moody boy, Raju had done quite well in the first three years of the IMA programme, but had slipped in his grades in the seventh semester, once he joined M.A in Linguistics (as mandated for all IMA students), failing in four courses according to the head of department of Linguistics. He was an office bearer in the Dalit

SCUS Fact Finding Report on P. Raju's Suicide at UoH

Students Federation. According to the university rules, unless he cleared 50% of his papers, he would not be allowed to write his eighth semester examinations. He wrote the exams in January 2013 and was waiting for the results. All his friends and many of the faculty who taught him knew of his unsuccessful love affair with a girl, in the semester preceding his death. It was also known that he was almost daily making visits to the administrative office to get his semester registration, and to find out his grades in the supplementary examination. The last visit was on the day of his death.

When he died, there was dismay, anger and grief among the students who knew him. Many charges of administrative callousness, academic disinterest, upper-caste bias and persecution were leveled against the university officials on a You Tube post of 'Dalit Camera' that day. The general mood of the administration and faculty on the other hand, was that the suicide was a response to the love affair and nothing much could be done.

The Solidarity Committee for University Students

The Solidarity Committee for University Students was requested by students that a fact finding committee investigate the circumstances of Raju's death. The committee visited the campus on Friday, 22nd March 2013 and spoke to three groups of students, some members of the general faculty, faculty from the department of linguistics in which the boy studied, and a week later to the vice chancellor of the university. This is a report of that visit.

The Solidarity Committee (SCUS) was formed by several academics and activists in education as a natural follow through of their participation in the UGC Committee's hearings on sexual harassment and security for women students in early March 2013. There was a shared understanding that sustained intervention and engagement with higher education, keeping in view the students' perspective, was necessary in the current historical circumstances.

SCUS Fact Finding Report on P. Raju's Suicide at UoH

The committee met and spoke at length to some faculty members and several students during the course of the day.

The committee also met the Vice Chancellor on Saturday 30th March 2013 to take his views on the matter and apprise him of the findings. In the hour long meeting, the Vice Chancellor expressed his anguish regarding the suicide and welcomed constructive suggestions to deal with the situation. The committee raised several issues of concern with him in the discussion.

Report of the SCUS fact finding visit

Introduction

The interviews and discussions have led to the solidarity committee to the conviction that Raju's suicide needs to be seen in the wider context of the university's urban environment and the concomitant problems of uncertainty, chaotic functioning, lack of hospitality, loss of self esteem and the consequent failing self-confidence felt by students coming from rural backgrounds. It is a well accepted sociological fact about the statistics of suicide that the immediate precipitating factor is not usually a good indicator in explaining rising rates of suicide. On the other hand, the general pace of life, disorientation, individualization and lack of recognition are of higher explanatory value in accounting for rising suicide statistics.

The intention of this report is not to assign blame to one or the other party. It is rather to point to the experience narrated by the students we spoke to in the context of the suicide. The point here is not whether these experiences represented objectively accurate facts (though it is essential to see what caused these experiences and deal with these causes seriously) – suicides are caused by perception and experience, not by facts.

In order to address these perceptions and thus mitigate their effects, the committee feels that several improvements in the functioning of the university are necessary. These improvements *and their visibility* are of primary importance given that the university's essential and most challenging task at this point in

history is to do all it can to help students (especially vulnerable ones) succeed in their journey to a secure future in modern India. In absence of this effort, it is likely that the University of Hyderabad, and other universities too, will see more such suicides due to different precipitating factors in the future.

The following sections of the report describe some of the issues that emerged in the discussion as relevant context for Raju's suicide. These are related to marginalization, structural problems and an experience of discrimination in their lives as members of the academic community.

Rural Urban Divide

The rural and mofussil background of many of the students who come to the university are a clear disadvantage in dealing with the mainstream metropolitan and cosmopolitan culture of the university.

1. Many of the students (including five of the seven suicides mentioned) are first generation learners. It is increasingly evident that there is an immense effort needed to traverse generations of schooling in one life time. There is academic loneliness and handicap in the families' incapability to provide adequate educational guidance due to their own lack of experience. It is a marathon effort for these students to reach the level of a postgraduate degree. It is our assessment that this journey causes immense distress and existential fatigue in the marginalized student's mind.
2. Coupled with this, is the lack of these students' competence in English, which is a passport to recognition and respect both culturally and in official matters. We heard several reports from our student respondents that explicit and subtle insults by teachers were not uncommon experiences in relation to English proficiency in classrooms.
3. Life styles, peer pressure and the need to conform make it difficult for mofussil students to succeed in a heady and seemingly liberated environment. These pressures effectively convert the freedom of university life into a trap that demands incessant cultural performance from the student to demonstrate his 'cool'.

4. Underlining and worsening all these problems with deep rooted traditional disapproval are the questions of caste, community and class. Many of the students have benefited from the new initiatives of the university system to increase higher education access to wider sections of society. Most of these students belong to marginalized classes and communities: i.e., SC, ST, OBC and Muslims. The presence of this factor in the perception of mainstream culture is an unmitigated disadvantage to these students, who are seen as an 'atrocious presence', 'irritants' and as undeserved beneficiaries of state generosity. There is no scope in such an environment to appreciate the exceptional caliber, total commitment and value of these students to the new India that emerges in the 21st Century.

Course difficulty and other academic issues

Students and teachers said that one of the difficulties a new student faces in the university is the complete lack of time available for acclimatization, orientation and getting used to the university system. They are thrown directly into situations that demand performance, 'merit' according to grading systems, and hard effort from literally from the first day onward. This headlong rush results in very little time for the students to come to grips with the university as an institution, and leads to a piecemeal and irrational understanding of its function and demands on them. This lack of accommodation and cushion is felt more acutely by mofussil students throughout their time at the university, though most of them learn to cope with increasing skill as time goes by.

One of the concerns expressed by many of the students and some of the faculty is about the difficulty of the course at the post-graduate level. They said that while the course is in itself difficult, students who come in from the Integrated Masters undergraduate level (more in a separate section later) find the post-graduate level exceptionally tough. The teachers are reportedly less than willing to walk that extra distance to help students understand. Lack of English skills is an additional handicap. One instance was reported where the marginalized student was described by a teacher as 'a disaster to academics'. There

SCUS Fact Finding Report on P. Raju's Suicide at UoH

seems to be very little sustained handholding and mentorship that teach students how to approach the issue of difficulty. Efforts to provide such measures seem to have failed.

If the social science disciplines have very few instances of overt bias, the difficulty is reported to be greater in the pure and natural science disciplines, where the teachers expect far more from the students. It was reported that one of the students in a science discipline was discouraged from applying for the Rajiv Gandhi National Fellowship and 'wasting the nation's money'. In another department, 8 dalit students were apparently failed by an external examiner, while their marks in internal grades were as good as any. It is perhaps worst of all in Mathematics, where the difficulty of the Masters level has caused an overwhelming number of students from marginalized backgrounds described above, to drop out.

As deduced from students' responses, this is compounded by the attitude of science teachers, who reproduce their unexamined prejudices in class. One of the students at the masters level reported that a teacher, obviously frustrated in his being reduced to teach marginalized students, threw a whiteboard marker at a student in a class. This action which once was an innocent class control action, is now frowned upon even in primary school classrooms. It was reported that one of the teachers at the masters level said in the class room that the presence of SC and Telangana students in his/her class was 'atrocious'.

Some of the faculty members we spoke to were also clearly struggling to understand the wider significance of Raju's catastrophic decision, and what was needed of them to provide the necessary foundation for a stable educational process.

What is important in understanding this student perspective is the perception of the academic environment as indifferent, if not actively hostile to their presence. Thus, there seems to be thus a lack of direction and orientation of the departments and schools leading to the student experience of being abandoned to one's resources.

Administrative problems

The faculty members we met made some references to what seemed like administrative indifference towards the students. This may not be the general case, but there was certainly more than a trace of this if the narrative of the students is anything to go by. There seems to be a lack of clarity regarding guidelines to be followed (though they do exist) in case of failure in a subject, for registration of students in each semester, for whom to approach for action and when. The students also feel that there is lack of sympathy if not explicit hostility and that the administration treated the former's presence as an interruption in their otherwise important activity. Responses to visits ranged from 'come later', 'don't you see I am busy now?' 'Your presence is an irritation to me' (this last in an air-conditioned room). The students wondered what the work of the administration was if not to deal with their problems as students.

Again, what is significant is not so much the objective accuracy of the occurrence as the experience reflected in the students' accounts.

Policy effects

The committee felt based on the many interviews that many policy decisions taken in accordance with criteria of uniformity and lack of bias lead to differential effects among the students, sometimes catastrophic ones. Even though these effects may not be directed at existing students but at future entrants, they were clearly experienced as destabilizing their sense of orientation and security.

1. The university (like other central universities in the city such as MANUU and EFL-U) had instituted a fellowship of Rs 500 per month at the bachelor's level and Rs 1000 per month at the master's level when the Integrated Master of Arts (IMA) programme began (see penultimate section of this report for a broader analysis of the IMA programme). This had, according to many respondents, enabled the rural and marginal students to sustain their education in Hyderabad. However, recently this was stopped by the university on account of a paucity of funds. This has had a differential impact on the students: the fellowship amount, which may not be significant in comparison with a well-funded

SCUS Fact Finding Report on P. Raju's Suicide at UoH

student's mobile phone bill, would make a significant difference to the life of an economically marginalized student who is also trying to support a family which has pushed him to this stage. Even though this was in fact (as the vice chancellor pointed out) a restriction of eligible cases made for new entrants to ensure that it was a 'merit-cum-means' scholarship, there is no doubt that it promoted a sense of instability and anxiety among students who expected it to continue.

2. The advancing of admission test dates with little notice, and making the admission tests online has caused many rural and mofussil students to fail, due to a lack of comprehension, absence of mediation and advice by senior students, and most of all, internet failure and frustration. While this innovation is not directed at current students, seeing this change and its catastrophic effects destabilizes their confidence.
3. A similar difficulty arises with the introduction of cut off marks in the entrance test for all courses. Students who are eligible to enter the course are first selected based on the cut off marks of their qualifying examination (i.e., 55% open category and 50% for the reserved category). Once they are selected, they are once again eliminated if they scored less than a cut off mark in the entrance test. The introduction of the second cut off where none existed (and is not mandated by the university entrance system) is read as another warning sign, leading to anxiety. We feel there is no reason for introducing a second cut off mark in the entrance test – the university should simply proceed to accept students according to the course capacity once the candidates have the mandatory mark in their qualifying examination.

Our argument here is that the above policy decisions were not intentionally unjust – they were not examined carefully enough for the implications they had on marginalized students. The unfortunate effect has been the nullification of the progressive agenda of education in an elite institution. The point is that the current moment is a complex one which results in unexpected effects with diverse and unpredictable implications. It is suggested that far more thought and assessment of effects on different

SCUS Fact Finding Report on P. Raju's Suicide at UoH

categories of marginalized students are necessary before taking policy decisions with wide ranging consequences.

What is important to note here is that the marginalized students from rural areas are deeply committed to the transformation wrought by higher education. Metropolitan students who don't succeed simply find another job, start a business, or recuperate and start again somewhere else. For these marginalized students, this opportunity at UoH is the only one, and the expected disgrace of having to live a life in the town or village in minor occupations closes off any return options. Many students felt that this loss of status and face was simply not a viable option, and it is likely the students who committed suicide chose death as the only remaining alternative. The tragedy is that the system exerts this enormous pressure on those most fully committed to the educational transformation.

Grievance Committee

None of the staff or students interviewed knew of any operational grievance or advisory committee where they could articulate their academic problems and seek guidance.

The Integrated Masters Programme – an extreme case

Integrated MA and MSC - of five years started in 2006-2007, is a clear example of all the problems stated above. It was started as a good idea of 'integrated' studies, offering students the possibility of taking up subjects across social sciences, humanities and sciences at the level of graduation. This option is not available to them in traditional degree colleges. But it was introduced without much planning, thought and time for proper implementation. It was also introduced in the face of opposition from the main departments who said they were under-equipped to teach them. No thought was also given to the teaching methods for these the students who arrived fresh after Intermediate education. Sometimes, course outline was provided without a full plan of the semester. In some classes teachers did not give the references either. The students were expected to go to the library and find their way. There is no substantial orientation programme to guide the students through the courses.

SCUS Fact Finding Report on P. Raju's Suicide at UoH

Rural students and students from marginalized backgrounds (above 45% of student intake with combined reservations of OBC/SC/ST) face huge difficulties of language, culture and integration into the university. Bridge courses were run half-heartedly but were stigmatized so students did not attend. Except in the first two semesters, English is not taught as a language. There was an idea of mentorship which was implemented—four students were assigned one teacher/mentor—but it never worked as no systems were put in place to implement the mentorship programme. There was also no obvious attempt to discuss the complex notion of mentorship and explore how it could be made to apply to the current situation. As a result the programme itself has turned out to be of a poor quality and the students have tended to fare worse than the regular masters students once they reach MA or MSc.

In addition, the South Campus on which they have been allotted classrooms and hostels is at a distance from the main campus, hindering interaction, mentorship and friendship—all of which are crucial imperceptible elements in a college education. The students also said that transport to reach the library after 6PM is poor. At the public forum held by the UGC task force, students complained of lack of security and bad food. Even though a few research scholars have joined the hostels, the students reported that they feel isolated and abandoned.

The semester registration also poses a lot of problems to these students who have to take 'no dues' certificates from six different minor authorities, including the library. Anyone who delays this procedure by a few days has to pay a penalty for identity cards and other administrative essentials. The Centre for Integrated Studies which runs the programme and the main Departments in Social Sciences, Humanities and other Sciences at the post-graduate level do not have much coordination; nor do the academic and examination branches, which results in confusion regarding backlogs, supplementary exams and eligibility of students for appearing in semester exams. None of the faculty who we spoke to seemed sure about the rules and regulations regarding these.

SCUS Fact Finding Report on P. Raju's Suicide at UoH

A major problem with the IMA Programme is the lack of an interim exit policy. The students are not given an option of taking a bachelor's degree and quitting after three years. So, students coming into post-graduation programme, when they get detained and do not get promoted, face the prospect of losing four years of academic life without a formal qualification. Considering that 40% of them come from marginalized background they are in no condition to go back without a degree. It would mean a huge loss for them personally and for the family.

The administration's indifference to their plight and treating them as 'routine' issues are major problems for the students. It is important to understand the relative difference in the criticality of an issue from the student's perspective – a 'minor problem' from an administrative perspective may mean a loss of a semester or hostel accommodation, causing immense hardship to the student.

Conclusions

The fact finding committee sent by the SCUS has come to the following conclusions.

1. Suicides in the universities, as exemplified by P Raju, are complex responses to the general disorientation of university life. It is therefore unwise to treat explain these as cases of 'failed love affairs' or other immediate precipitating factors.
2. Pressures faced by students are expressed in interviews the committee had with various respondents. These are many – rural urban divide, academic issues, administrative problems, policy effects, lack of properly functioning grievance and advisory committees, planning flaws, and a general lack of sympathy with students and insight into their difficulties.
3. While it is clear that the task of setting these issues in order demand exceptional foresight and wisdom, it is equally clear that they are essential if the university is to perform its key role properly
4. Interpreting these suicides as the expression of individual difficulties which need no systematic response is likely to have no mitigating effect on such suicides in the future.

SCUS Fact Finding Report on P. Raju's Suicide at UoH

5. The challenge is to respond to these symptoms and make the necessary improvements to orient the universities as hospitable and friendly to all its students, and being especially inclusive to those that come from marginalized backgrounds. It is important to realize that universities are not only laboratories that churn out knowledge. The ideal role of the university as *an institution of universality* is that of providing a positive institutional space and learning environment for marginalized students. This positive space is essential if they are to succeed in transforming themselves into fully connected and engaged members of the India that is coming into being today. Our investigations suggest that this positive role is not being played by the institution. Unfortunately it seems as if the university (and this is a problem not only with the University of Hyderabad) has not been able to get over its old mental block against some of the most promising candidates of marginalized communities. This excludes them from the more hospitable spaces of modernity many of us are members of. Suicide is an ultimate response of disappointment, distress and perhaps disgust taken to an extreme.

The SCUS team which visited the UoH campus (on 22nd March) consisted of: Ms. K. Sajaya (Director for Concerned Citizen's Committee), Dr. R. Srivatsan (senior fellow, Anveshi Research Centre for Women's Studies), Ms. Gogu Shyamala (author, political activist and researcher), Dr. Veena Shatrugna (formerly deputy director National Institute of Nutrition), Dr. Mithun Som (independent health researcher), Ms. Ekta Singla (independent researcher in education), Dr. A. Suneetha (Coordinator Anveshi Research Centre for Women's Studies), Ms. Satyamma (independent researcher).