

4. Mental Health as Constitutional Right – Polity

In a landmark ruling, the Supreme Court of India has recognized mental health as a fundamental right under Article 21 (Right to Life), making it a constitutional guarantee. Triggered by a student suicide case, the court issued mandatory "Saha Guidelines" for all educational institutions, but implementation faces challenges like low funding and a shortage of professionals.

Supreme Court Elevates Mental Health to a Constitutional Right

The Landmark Ruling – In a significant judgment, the Supreme Court of India has recognized mental health as an integral part of the Right to Life under Article 21 of the Constitution.

Shift in Status – This elevates mental health from being merely a statutory right (protected under the Mental Healthcare Act, 2017) to a guaranteed constitutional right, making it non-negotiable and enforceable against the state.

Context of the Ruling

Triggering Event – The ruling was prompted by a tragic case involving the suicide of a NEET aspirant, where serious allegations of institutional neglect by a coaching center were raised.

The Larger Problem – The case highlights the alarming and escalating crisis of student suicides across India.

Key Statistic – According to the National Crime Records Bureau (NCRB), India reported over 13,000 student suicides in 2022, which translates to an average of roughly 36 deaths every day.

Key Directives and Significance of the Judgment

Immediate Actions by the Supreme Court – The investigation into the specific student suicide case was transferred to the Central Bureau of Investigation (CBI) to ensure an impartial probe. The Court issued a set of binding interim orders, now known as the "Saha Guidelines," making mental health safeguards mandatory for all schools, colleges, hostels, and coaching institutes. It directed all states and Union Territories to notify relevant rules within two months and establish district-level monitoring committees to oversee compliance.

Significance of the Ruling

Legal Milestone – It firmly establishes mental health as a fundamental right, giving it the highest legal protection.

Governance Accountability – The Court recognized that institutional neglect contributing to mental distress is a form of "structural violence," making institutions accountable.

Public Health Imperative – The judgment is a crucial step in formally addressing India's severe youth mental health crisis.

A Multi-Dimensional Overview

Polity and Legal Aspects – The interpretation of Article 21 is now explicitly expanded, with the term "life" encompassing not just physical existence but also mental well-being. This judicial precedent strengthens the enforceability of Directive Principles of State Policy, particularly Article 47 (duty of the State to improve public health). Crucially, it extends accountability to private institutions as well, including hostels and coaching centers, which were previously in a regulatory grey area.

Governance and Administrative Impact – The ruling necessitates the creation of new monitoring bodies at the district level to ensure compliance with the guidelines. The "Saha Guidelines" compel institutions to establish robust counselling systems, effective grievance redressal mechanisms, and proactive preventive protocols for mental health.

Economic Implications – The judgment acknowledges the severe socio-economic costs of student suicides, including lost human capital and increased public health expenditure. It implicitly argues that investing in mental health infrastructure (counsellors, helplines) will yield long-term productivity gains for the nation.

Societal Change – This high-profile ruling plays a vital role in breaking the stigma associated with mental health issues. It reframes students as active rights holders who are entitled to a safe and supportive educational environment, rather than being seen as passive victims. It empowers parents

and civil society organizations to demand greater accountability from educational institutions.

International Alignment – The ruling aligns India's legal framework with the WHO's Mental Health Action Plan (2013–2030). It directly supports India's commitment to SDG 3 (Good Health and Well-being), SDG 4 (Quality Education), and SDG 16 (Peace, Justice, and Strong Institutions). With this judgment, India joins a progressive group of nations like Finland and Canada that explicitly integrate mental health rights into their national education policies.

Challenges to Implementation

Severe Infrastructure Gap – India has a dire shortage of mental health professionals, with a ratio of only approximately 1 psychiatrist for every 1.25 lakh people.

Low Budgetary Allocation – The country currently spends less than 1% of its total health budget on mental health, which is grossly inadequate.

Stigma and Lack of Resources – Persistent social stigma prevents many from seeking help, and there is a critical shortage of trained counsellors in schools and colleges.

Institutional Resistance – Coaching centers and universities may resist implementing the guidelines due to the associated compliance costs.

Risk of Judicial Overreach – Without strong legislative action to back them up, the court-mandated guidelines may remain poorly enforced.

The Way Forward – Recommendations

Legislative Backing – The Parliament should enact a dedicated "Mental Health in Education Act" to give statutory force to the Supreme Court's "Saha Guidelines."

Institutional Reform – The National Tele-Mental Health Programme (Tele-MANAS) should be expanded to ensure outreach to students in rural and remote areas.

Capacity Building – Teachers should be trained as the first responders for students in mental distress, a recommendation also made by the Kothari Commission and the National Education Policy (NEP) 2020.

Increased Funding – The mental health allocation must be increased to at least 5% of the total health budget, as recommended by NITI Aayog.

Adopting Best Practices – India should study and adapt successful international models like the UK's "Whole School Approach" to mental well-being and Japan's national suicide prevention curriculum.

Conclusion

The Supreme Court's ruling is a watershed moment in Indian rights jurisprudence, fundamentally recognizing that a dignified life requires mental well-being. However, its on-ground success will critically depend on three factors – robust legislative follow-through, a significant increase in budgetary commitment, and a deep-rooted cultural change within India's high-pressure education system.

Source – <https://www.thehindu.com/opinion/op-ed/courts-nod-to-mental-health-as-right/article70052792.ece#~:text=The%20Supreme%20Court's%20judgment%20in,of%20the%20right%20to%20life&text=In%20July%202025%2C%20the%20Supreme,been%20called%20a%20constitutional%20landmark.>

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