

What Do We Call These Student Deaths? "Accident" Reeks of Both Shame and Sham

Editorial Analysis | Takshasheela School of Civil Services Based on a commentary in The Indian Express

The Immediate Context

The commentary is written against the backdrop of the 2026 Satya Niketan building collapse in Delhi, which exposed the unsafe living conditions many students face, and it deliberately recalls the 2024 Old Rajinder Nagar coaching-centre basement flooding, in which three UPSC aspirants lost their lives. The article's larger argument is that repeatedly labelling such deaths as "accidents" can obscure the institutional failures that actually made them possible.

This raises the article's central question: are these deaths genuinely accidents, or are they the predictable consequences of systemic negligence? An accident, by definition, implies an unforeseen event that could not reasonably have been prevented. But when a building is structurally unsafe, drainage is inadequate, fire exits are missing, safety regulations are ignored, or coaching centres operate without adequate safeguards, the resulting death cannot simply be reduced to bad luck. A natural hazard may genuinely be unavoidable; a disaster caused by administrative negligence usually is not. Once this distinction is drawn, the issue stops being one of misfortune and becomes one of accountability, regulation, and governance.

Two Sides of an Unequal System

The article frames this as a story with two sides. On one side are young people carrying enormous aspirations — students from small towns and ordinary families who migrate to cities like Delhi and Kota in search of educational and social mobility. On the other side is an ecosystem increasingly shaped by commercial coaching, expensive private accommodation, unregulated student housing, weak municipal enforcement, inadequate infrastructure, intense competition, and profit-driven educational services. The commentary's argument is that students who cannot afford safer alternatives are precisely the ones who become most vulnerable to this system — vulnerability, in other words, tracks financial capacity rather than merit or effort.

The Demographic Dividend at Risk

India's demographic dividend is not simply a function of having a large young population; it depends on that population having access to education, skills, employment, dignified living, and social mobility. If students are given education but denied safe accommodation, mental-health support, institutional protection, and employment opportunities, the same demographic dividend that is often celebrated as India's greatest asset can just as easily turn into a demographic challenge.

Beyond Physical Safety: The Mental-Health Crisis

The article insists that student deaths cannot be understood through physical safety alone. India is also facing a serious crisis of academic stress and student mental health. High-stakes examinations, limited seats, parental expectations, social comparison, financial investment, and fear of failure combine to create enormous psychological pressure — a problem that is especially visible in coaching hubs and elite institutions. Recent reporting citing NCRB data notes that student suicides reached 14,488 in 2024, up from 13,892 in 2023, a rise that underlines how urgent this dimension of the crisis has become.

Given this, the article argues that student safety has to be understood along two distinct dimensions. Physical safety covers safe buildings, fire safety, drainage, electrical safety, hostel and PG standards, disaster preparedness, and redressal mechanisms. Psychological safety covers counselling, anti-bullying mechanisms, anti-discrimination systems, and accessible grievance redressal. Treating either dimension as optional leaves students exposed in ways that eventually surface as tragedy.

The Cost of the Word "Accident"

One of the article's sharpest arguments concerns language itself. Calling every preventable tragedy an "accident" produces what might be called accountability dilution. Once something is labelled an accident, the cause gets blurred, responsibility gets diffused across too many actors to pin down, investigation becomes a procedural formality rather than a genuine inquiry, public memory fades quickly, and reform gets postponed indefinitely. The word "accident," in this sense, is not a neutral description — it actively shapes whether a tragedy leads to institutional change or simply disappears from public attention. The governance challenge, the article argues, is to move from post-disaster compensation toward pre-disaster prevention, so that safeguards exist before tragedy strikes rather than compensation being offered after it does.

Three Lenses: Ethics, Polity, and Governance

The recurring deaths of students, the article argues, should not be dismissed merely as unfortunate accidents; they raise fundamental questions across three distinct domains.

From an **ethics** perspective, these tragedies highlight values such as accountability, compassion, integrity, empathy, responsibility, and probity in governance — and in particular, the moral duty of public officials and institutions to prevent foreseeable harm rather than merely respond to it after the fact. From a **polity** perspective, they connect directly to the

right to life and dignity under Article 21, the rule of law, equality, and the state's constitutional responsibility to protect its most vulnerable citizens. From a **governance** perspective, they expose weaknesses in regulatory institutions, inspection mechanisms, the implementation of safety norms, grievance redressal systems, transparency, and institutional accountability more broadly.

The Real Question

The article's concluding argument reframes the entire debate. The real issue is not simply who caused any one individual death — it is whether the system had functioning safeguards that could have prevented it in the first place. Calling a preventable tragedy an accident dilutes responsibility; genuine good governance requires shifting from post-disaster compensation to preventive governance, in which institutions anticipate risk, enforce existing regulations, and place human dignity above procedural convenience or commercial interest.

The death of a student, the article insists, should never become merely a statistic, an FIR number, or a compensation cheque. Every such death must trigger a single, uncomfortable question: was it inevitable, or was it preventable? When negligence becomes predictable, calling its consequences an "accident" risks turning institutional failure into fate — and this, the article concludes, demands collective responsibility from every stakeholder in society, not just from the institution most directly implicated in any single tragedy.

Practice Questions

Prelims MCQ

Consider the following statements with reference to the recent commentary on student deaths in India:

1. An accident, as distinguished in the article, refers to an event that could not reasonably have been foreseen or prevented.
2. According to NCRB data cited in the article, student suicides declined from 2023 to 2024.
3. The article argues that labelling a preventable tragedy as an "accident" can dilute institutional accountability.
4. The article frames India's demographic dividend as dependent only on the size of its young population, regardless of education or living conditions.

Which of the statements given above are correct?

(a) 1 and 3 only (b) 2 and 4 only (c) 1, 2 and 3 only (d) 1, 3 and 4 only

Answer: (a) 1 and 3 only. Statement 2 is incorrect because the cited NCRB data shows an increase in student suicides, from 13,892 in 2023 to 14,488 in 2024. Statement 4 is incorrect because the article explicitly ties the demographic dividend to education, skills, employment, dignified living, and social mobility, not population size alone.

Mains Question

"Repeatedly describing preventable institutional failures as 'accidents' dilutes accountability and delays reform." Discuss this statement with reference to recent incidents involving student safety in India, and examine the ethical, constitutional, and governance dimensions involved. (GS-2/GS-4, 250 words)

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