



Indian Institute of Management Rohtak

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The Loss of Life: The Dilemma at IAL

On 10th January 2018, Ankur Bhatnagar, 25 years old a final year MBA student of the Institute of Advanced Learning (IAL), talked to some of his friends while having breakfast in the hostel mess and went to his room, saying that he would skip today's morning classes as he was not feeling well. Later, on the same day (i.e., 10th January 2018), when his friends were searching for him during lunch, he was found hanging in his hostel room. Mourn prevailed all over the campus, and all scheduled events and activities were put on hold except for classes. People on campus thought that stress might be the likely reason behind this incident. The annual student festival was coming up in the next two days. However, unlike previous years, no one was taking a keen interest and showing exuberance towards the fest. The police investigation is currently in place.

Ankur Bhatnagar was a bright student in his career, as well as the chief coordinator of the prestigious annual student fest, which was about to begin on 12th January 2018 popularly known as 'Bizz Niti'. Everyone on the campus is in shock with this incident, as nobody can think of him as a recluse or a loner. Rather, he was a very jubilant and go-getter type of person. His friends and faculty members on campus never suspected him of having a mental health issue at all, nor did they observe any abnormal behavior on his part. The fact that he was coordinating 'Bizz Niti' shows that he was not a socially awkward person but would connect to people easily, one faculty member said. Whether he was under stress, went through depression, or experienced relationship conflict, a detailed investigation by the police and other authorities would uncover the mysteries as time progresses. However, a few questions are haunting the minds of his parents, relatives, and close friends. Since he was not a mentally weak person, what might have led to this irreparable loss at such an esteemed institute of the country? The unfortunate death of Ankur Bhatnagar has also posed several issues for IAL Management to ponder over—how can a prestigious academic institution like IAL reconcile academic rigor, demands for extra and co-curricular student activities, and growing mental health cases of the students while preserving its reputation, legal compliance, and camaraderie in the campus ecosystem? What could the institution do to prevent such a mishap? What should be done now? How well large-scale institutions like IAL are prepared to handle such crises? Do renowned institutions like IAL should protect their organisation or ensure transparency towards Bhatnagar more because it is the fight of what is right versus what is suitable?

Bizz Niti Festival

IAL has been ranked as the top advanced-level higher educational institution in the country by ranking agencies for decades. It was founded in 1980 as a unique association between a few industrialists of the country, the Global Research Foundation (GRF), and a top-tier international Business School. Over the decades, IAL has emerged as a world-class institute for advanced management training. The institute offers several full-time residential programs and numerous executive education programs.

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The institute hosts a large business competition cum summit every year. It was started in early 2000 and since then has been known as one of the country's largest business summits, attracting hundreds of participants every year.

The summit offers several competitive activities aimed at encouraging incubation, business plan development, venture finding, and thinking outside the box solutions. It combines the words 'Bizz' (business) and 'Niti' (policy) and connects both parts together.

The Bizz Niti team conducts a series of workshops that began in 2010, during which they typically invite renowned industry leaders. A wide range of interesting topics is covered in each workshop. This is deliberately strategized to maximize the interaction between the presenter and attendees. In 2018, it was scheduled to take place on January 12th-13th. However, due to this unfortunate incident, it was called off by the institute. The team of Ankur had been working hard for this Business summit, and many external participants and organizations had confirmed their participation, as they do every year. As part of their effort, a new design was created for the summit by incorporating the old institute logo. The event schedule, activities, and the logo were already finalised by the summit committee. However, a recent policy of the institute has been issued regarding the use of the new logo, which not only disappointed Ankur but also his team. Gradually, a conflict emerged between Ankur's team and the administrative officer of the institute, who strictly insisted on using the old logo and threatened Ankur with disciplinary action in case of the event's mismanagement. Somehow, after several rounds of meetings with the related official, the external organizations agreed to remove the logo and delete event promotion videos from all social media pages.

Ankur Bhatnagar's Journey

Ankur Bhatnagar did his B.Sc. in Data Science & AI from one of the private universities in Northern India in 2016. Before joining IAL, he had completed a one-year research internship at a university abroad. He was enrolled in IAL's 2018-2020 batch for the Master's Programme in Business Management (MBM). He was the event coordinator for 'Bizz Niti' Business Summit. Ankur, a resident of the national capital of India, was good at studies since childhood. It was his ambition to complete a master's degree from a top institution like IAL. In the 12th standard, he was among the top five scorers from his school and received a special award in recognition of his achievement. He then pursued his bachelor's degree in data science. Ankur's father said that his dream was to become a businessman after completing his degree from IAL. But with this mishap, not only Ankur's aspiration but also his family's dream has been completely shattered. His friends on campus confirm that he was a prominent participant in campus life and frequently helped others in need of support. Sources indicate that he was recognized by his classmates as a diligent and entrepreneurial student. His leadership character made him the president of the summit. He was an active and motivated individual. During his years in university, he had no issues communicating with people. He was yet to find a better profile that would suit his experience and background despite having recently attended a couple of college interviews. His father had served in the state government in his retirement and was now doing his business. His mother also taught in a government school in their home state. Ankur has an older sister who had been married and working in a reputable Biotech company after her master degree. Ankur had been the last born in the family. His good nature, energy and enthusiasm led to him making friends with a lot of individuals at IAL. He was popular both in his own batch and among those who were immediate juniors to him. Although he had many good friends while on campus, he developed a close relationship with one of his batchmates, Ananya. She completed her graduation in economics from the University of Delhi before taking admission to IAL. She was a fresh, talented graduate who was within the top ten from her batch based on academic performance in the programme. Recently, she has received an offer from a strategy consultancy multinational firm. Ankur congratulated her on the offer, though he believed that, as a potential candidate, he was better than many others in his batch. Ankur also appeared in the selection process of this firm, as he had taken a few industry-specific consultancy courses during his second year of coursework. Unfortunately, he didn't receive any offer.

The Incident

In the serene environment of IAL, when everyone in the committee was busy preparing for the upcoming 'Bizz Niti', Ankur talked to some of his friends while having breakfast in the hostel mess

and went to his room, saying that he was planning to skip today's morning classes as he was not feeling well. Later, around 1:30 pm on the same day (i.e., January 10th, 2018), when his friends called him to have lunch, he did not answer multiple phone calls. They reached his hostel room. As the room was locked from the inside, they called him many times, shouting his name. The hostel security guard, along with the security officer, was informed, and they reached there. The lock was broken from the outside. They entered the room only to find out that Ankur was hanging from the ceiling. The Doctor had his body lowered and examined, when he declared him dead. His parents learnt about what had happened and they came to the campus. The IAL called off the business summit at once and the police group arrived at the location. The institute was represented by the Director of IAL who sent a message of condolence. His family was given the body after the autopsy was performed. The initial report established that it was a suicide case. But nothing was found in his room in the hostel as a suicide note. The college towered upon the emotions of mourning, grief, anxiety, and anguish. The student council and some of the faculty members responded loudly against the institute administration requesting an inquiry by an independent committee to establish the truth in a transparent manner. They also said that the institute did not pay adequate attention to the mental health and psychological well-being of the students. As a result, such a mishap occurred on campus, resulting in the loss of a student's life. Ankur's parents were devastated and seeking justice for the loss of their brilliant child. They accused the institute administration of having put their son under pressure and threatened to initiate disciplinary action against him regarding the inappropriate use of the institute's logo. Ankur was already under stress as he was yet to secure a placement from campus, while the last academic term was coming to an end.

Police Investigation

The findings of the initial police investigation confirmed that Ankur Bhatnagar died of suicide. Prima facie, the police officials did not suspect any foul play in the incident. DCP had told the media that a team was formed to investigate the incident and said that they are committed to exploring every possible way to find the truth behind his suicide. He further mentioned that there was no suicide note recovered from his hostel room. They have contacted his family and friends to ascertain whether the deceased had communicated to his parents regarding any form of anxiety, pressure, or coercion from anyone. Later, the mobile phone of the deceased was sent for forensic examination. The preliminary police investigation suggested that Ankur Bhatnagar may have been under stress for any reason, perhaps one that was best known to him. However, they clearly stated that whether he was under depression or any other issue, only further investigation can tell us. Ankur's parents were informed about the incident on the same day, and they were expected to reach the institute late that evening. Besides, police had registered a case of accidental death, and the body was sent to the nearby Hospital for a post-mortem. The police recorded the statements from Ankur's parents, sister, faculty members, and friends in the institute. His father revealed that his son was under immense stress regarding the use of the institute's logo for the upcoming business summit. His father informed the investigating police officials that a dispute over the usage of the old or new IAL logo for Bizz Niti allegedly led Ankur to end his life. After a day, his body was handed over to the family and cremated. The deceased's father reported to the police, urging them to examine claims that the student had been coerced and threatened by a senior administrative staff member of the institute regarding the incident. The officials revisited the site after three days of the incident and had finished recording the statements of students, faculty members, and administrative staff. The chief investigation officer stated that the students involved in the summit have refuted the claim made by Ankur's father, although they admitted that Ankur had several meetings with the administrative officer of the institute. They, however, added that some of their key sponsors pulled out their sponsorship of the summit because of the logo problem and the videos that had been made in their promotion were later removed on all the social media pages and sites. Nevertheless, his family still maintained that when printing materials that were to be used in the summit, Ankur wanted them to use the new logo whereas the supposed officer wanted them to use the old logo which made them quarrel a lot. At some point the officer threatened Ankur sternly, according to him, on behalf of the institute. Two weeks after the death of Ankur, his father wrote a letter to the press, copy of which was sent to the police, claiming that the Administrative Officer was harassing Ankur and that the investigation was not being carried out in a proper manner. The bereaved father further made his concern on the perceived lack of transparency of the investigation and asked a number of questions, including whether IAL management is determined to discover the truth. He inquired why the administrative officer had not

been placed on leave by the institution while the inquiry was still pending. The father also raised doubts about whether the institute is trying to shield someone.

Actions at IAL

The management resolved to take immediate action by convening a faculty council meeting in response to concerns expressed by students and associates of Ankur Bhatnagar about a senior administrative officer who threatened to withhold his degree if there was mismanagement of the event. Consequently, the institute placed the administrative officer on long leave pending inquiry. Two senior faculty members were brought in to fill key roles like the senior administrative officer and the chairperson of student affairs. The institute also decided to form a panel to conduct a comprehensive review of corrective measures, which include reviewing student welfare processes and establishing a mechanism for students to reach out to responsible individuals on campus during times of distress. Some new faces were visible in student affairs. A relatively young faculty member had previously managed the portfolio of student affairs. Following his resignation, a senior faculty member with good rapport and popularity among students would take over his place. Along with her, another faculty member specialised in economics took over the charge of student affairs with immediate effect. The institute already had a counsellor on campus, along with other support measures such as a 24/7 helpline and a web portal for students. One more counsellor was appointed by the institute to deal with these student-related issues. The Student Council had made a representation to the Director requesting him to investigate the role of the Administrative Officer in this incident, who was previously accused of high-handedness in relation to the suicide. Following all the scenarios, when the institute was under scrutiny, the management stated that they were fully cooperative with the police investigation. The institute also assured that it would provide support to his family that they might have required from the institute now.

IAL Community Speaks

Discussions had been ongoing on social media among many IAL alumni. The alumni association wrote to the Director of IAL, pointing out several gaps and questions related to the procedures in place to prevent such incidents from happening again. They also stated that such incidences cause significant embarrassment to the stakeholders of such a prestigious institution as IAL. Meanwhile, several of the faculty have addressed the Chairman of the Board of Governors to have an independent committee to investigate the case. Nonetheless, they did not have any answer to it yet. The institute then declared a four-member external committee, two of them alumnus, one member of the Board of Governors and one retired IPS officer. The committee consulted and invited faculty members in relation to the case to give their contributions and ideas. The committee also engaged a cross cut of students and faculty members and was supposed to report in a month. A few faculty members mentioned that, despite the police investigation, it cannot sufficiently address the broader institutional shortcomings that may have contributed to the immense stress Ankur Bhatnagar experienced. They articulated in their correspondence that increasing apprehensions within the IAL community and the public domain indicate that Ankur Bhatnagar may have endured significant pressure intensified by erratic administrative decisions and ambiguous communication. An Alumnus wrote to the committee that the voices of old students needed to be heard. When asked, one of the alumni shared that the institution should take two initiatives. First, employ a dormitory student leader trained to assist students in distress. Second, identifying indicators of mental anguish may be beneficial, and assigning mentors who may guide students to deal with difficult situations. Other alumni suggested that the institution should take accountability and prioritise student wellbeing. Further, it has been suggested that administrative bodies must be transparent and proactive in addressing the pressures that the students face from time to time. A few others suggested that the curriculum should be redesigned to reduce the extra burden. These concerns have not only been expressed in private conversations but have also been raised in the media, prompting questions about whether this heartbreaking tragedy might have been prevented with more thoughtful institutional responses. It is not solely about mending the injuries caused by Ankur Bhatnagar's demise but about reinstating trust in IAL as a supportive and responsible institution. Social media continues to highlight concerns about governance challenges at the institution, as well as the ongoing inquiry and awareness of mental health issues on campus. After Ankur's suicide, a LinkedIn post highlighted IAL's mental health assistance gaps. The

post received hundreds of likes about the pressure faced by the students in an elite academic environment.

The campus was enveloped in silence again– not alone in mourning, but in contemplation. This remains unresolved as a life extinguished and a lead gone cold. Lacking definitive evidence, a suicide note, and merely shards of conjecture, the truth remains obscured in silence. Some attribute it to bereavement, while others suggest academic pressure or institutional rigidity. Some hint that some of his close friends secured placements, but he did not. It may have been everything or nothing at all. In the absence of clarity, a singular question reverberates through the corridors of India's premier institution: When a student falters, who bears the genuine responsibility and consequences? Is IAL thinking whether it should reassess high-pressure student-led events like Bizz Niti? Should such events be maintained and enhanced, with the belief that, with adequate assistance, students might flourish rather than falter under pressure? What might be a psychological tipping point for a student? How can an institution provide better mental health support to students under the pressure of performance? How should IAL have handled post-incident communication with its stakeholders in such a crisis? What steps should have been taken to rebuild the trust of the stakeholders? Should external organisations/agencies lead such events on behalf of the institutions, or should they remain completely led and managed by students? Does the whole incident reflect individual fragility or a system failure?

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Table 1: Timelines of events

Dates of incidents	Incidents/Developments
10/01/2018	Ankur Bhatnagar, 23/24, second-year PGP student, talked with his friend and went to his room after having breakfast
10/01/2018	He was found hanging in his hostel when his friends visited him for lunch.
10/01/2018	Following his death, IAL authorities declared Bizz Niti Business Summit (BNBS) cancelled which was scheduled on 12/01/2018
10/01/2018	No suicide note was found
10/01/2018	Police investigations so far indicated that Bhatnagar was possibly under stress due to BIZZ NITI which was scheduled on 12/01/2018, police said, it is just a preliminary detail whether he was under depression or any other issue
10/01/2018	Bhatnagar's parents were informed about the incident and were expected to reach soon as per local police
10/01/2018	Police had registered a case of accidental death and the body was sent to nearby hospital for post-mortem
11/01/2018	The police recorded the statements from Bhatnagar's father, brother, faculty members, and friends at IAL
14/01/2018	His father revealed that his son was under immense stress regarding the challenges of securing sponsorship and the placement of the sponsor logos for BIZZ NITI
18/01/2018	The police said they found no evidence that supported the allegation that Bhatnagar took the extreme step following pressure from the administration
20/01/2018	Senior faculty members were brought in to fill two key roles (i) to replace the senior administrative officer and (ii) to handle student affairs.
20/01/2018	IAL also decided to form a panel to conduct a comprehensive review of corrective measures which include reviewing student processes and establishing a mechanism for students to reach out to responsible individuals on campus during times of distress
20/01/2018	The institute already had counsellors on campus along with other support measures like a 24*7 helpline and web portal for students
22/01/2018	The father criticized the investigation and the role of the institute and called for a fair investigation
23/01/2018	Discussions on social media by alumni of IAL
23/01/2018	IAL faculty demand 'independent inquiry' into student's suicide
22/01/2018	No response from BoG
26/01/2018	IAL indicated the formation of a (four-member) external committee, consisting of alumni and a BoG member.