

# Another Workplace Death at IIT Kanpur: Systemic Lack of Safety and Medical Protocols

Hamara Manch, November 2023

A cryptic communique from the Institute authorities on 23<sup>rd</sup> October 2023 informed the community that a construction worker named Mr. Shankar had died the day before. It had no other details about the cause of death or the deceased. And there is a serious reason to believe that the communique did not even get the day of the accident correct. We at Hamara Manch tried to collect some basic details about the accident, work conditions at the Hall 14 construction site, and the protocols followed in case a mishap occurs. But the complete lack of transparency as to who is the accountable authority and the extreme secrecy, which everyone is expected to maintain, makes it very difficult to get even the basic facts. We share here the facts which we were able to crosscheck from multiple sources. But this report is not merely to share the untimely and tragic loss of the life of a young person, as it is not an isolated incident. This is the ***third fatality*** of a worker in IIT Kanpur in the last 22 months that we at Hamara Manch are aware of. And there seems to be a pattern of serious lapses which should be of grave concern to all of us. Incidentally, the earlier two deaths did not even merit a communique from the Institute, and the only documentation is that which was done by Hamara Manch.

In this report we begin with a brief account of the accident at Hall 14 site. The systemic concerns which we identify in this case are similar for not only the earlier two deaths, but also for the 3000 odd contract workers providing their services to the Institute community. We conclude with a call for the community to raise collective voices to ensure safe work conditions for all workers in the Institute.

## Death at Hall 14 Construction Site: What we know so far

### Context

- The name of the worker who died was Shankar and he was resident of Ishwaripurwa, Chaubeypur block, Kanpur, a village around 25 to 30 kms from IIT Kanpur. He was around 27-28 years old and had three very young children, all below 6 years of age. He was a painter and used to commute 60 odd kilometers daily to earn his wages.
- The death occurred at the under construction building of Hall 14. The Hall is partially inhabited, but this part which is under construction, has been cordoned off from the present residents. So the site has to be approached from behind. The main construction was almost over in this block and finishing work was going on. The site has been shut down completely since 22<sup>nd</sup> October afternoon and has apparently restarted on the 30<sup>th</sup> of October. At the time of the accident there were about 200 workers working at the site.
- The main contractor is M/s Anurag, which is apparently a Ghaziabad based company. Late Mr. Shankar worked with a petty contractor entrusted to do painting work in the building.

## What happened?

- We do not have a firsthand account of the accident, but what we got to know from several sources is that he fell to the ground while painting on the fourth or the fifth floor of the under-construction building. Most significantly, as per multiple accounts, the accident occurred on the 21<sup>st</sup> of October, 2023.
- It is not clear whether he survived the fall, and what exactly the sequence of events was immediately after the accident.
- But what we have gathered is that he did not return home on 21<sup>st</sup> night. His concerned family tried their best to know his whereabouts including making several phone calls to the petty contractor and then coming to the worksite on the 22<sup>nd</sup>.
- Apparently independent of the enquiries by the family, his body was discovered by some workers working at the site in a shallow pit the next day and they alerted the others.
- What seems certain is that the accident occurred on the 21<sup>st</sup> and till the afternoon of 22<sup>nd</sup> October he received no medical help. Whether dead or alive Shankar or his body remained on the site for all those hours.
- Work commenced as usual at the site on the 22<sup>nd</sup> of October. Only after the alarm was raised by the workers and arrival of the family perhaps, the authorities got involved and a flurry of activities ensued. The SIS guards were ordered to clear off the construction site immediately and all the workers were herded out.
- The police, the Institute authorities, all converged at the site and the body was taken to the Hallett hospital where he was finally declared dead.
- The communique we mentioned earlier was issued on the 23<sup>rd</sup> of October, 2023, two days after the accident.

## **What are the Issues of Concern?**

### Hall 14 Death

Late Mr. Shankar, who was only about 28 years of age, died at his worksite during work hours. The law is very clear about the compensation due to his family which is computed based on the productive years which have been cut short due to his mishap. The loss of the primary earner of the family is irreparable and one can appreciate the desperation of the family if Shankar commuted 60kms daily to earn a living. We hope that the Institute as the principal employer would ensure that his unfortunate family, including his wife and very young children, get their legal dues as soon as possible. According to HM's calculation the legal compensation for the family would be around Rs 20 lakhs<sup>1</sup>. But there are other very significant systemic issues of concern which emerge from this entire episode which has implications much beyond this specific death.

- Why did the accident happen?
- Was Shankar appropriately equipped with safety gear for the job? Was he trained in the proper safety protocol?

---

<sup>1</sup> This is based on the Workman's Compensation Act, 1923. We have assumed Rs 750 (daily wages as this is the minimum wages applicable to the Institute), or a monthly wage of Rs 19000 and given Shankar's age was 28 years the compensation formula applied comes to Rs 20 lakhs.

- Who is responsible for oversight of adherence to safety procedures and protocol in the Institute?
- Why was no immediate medical attention provided to Shankar after the accident?
- Why was Shankar or his body kept at the site till the next day?

As we mentioned earlier this is not an isolated incident, and there have been at least two more casualties since January 2022. Both of them raise similar concerns.

#### Death at under-construction site of Type III apartments<sup>2</sup>

On 28<sup>th</sup> November 2022 a fatal accident at the construction site of the Type-III apartments killed a worker named Mr. Hriday Narain. The worker was polishing aluminum frames for doors with a hand-held grinder on the ground floor. Apparently, the running grinder slipped out of his hand and cut through one of his legs near the thigh and hip joint. Co-workers tied a tourniquet with a piece of cloth to stop the bleeding in the severed thigh, while the supervisors present called for an ambulance from the health centre. He was first taken to the HC, from where he was referred to the Regency Hospital. He died due to excessive bleeding by the time/ or just after he reached Regency.

Questions raised by HM:

- Did Hriday Narain undergo any safety training for working with a hand-held grinder?
- What is the protocol regarding medical attention after such life-threatening accidents?

#### The death of a gardener Rakesh<sup>3</sup>

Mr. Rakesh, who worked in the horticulture department of the Institute, reported for work at 8am on 18<sup>th</sup> January 2022. Kanpur was going through one of the severest cold spells of the season and the temperatures were close to zero degree Celsius. His work site was the open green space near the Mechanical Engineering dept. Around 10.30 when some fellow gardeners went for a cup of tea to the CC canteen, they saw him sitting hunched over at his workplace. At around 11 am he felt so uneasy and unwell that he decided to go home in spite of the risk of losing his wages for the day. By 2.30 pm the same day Rakesh was dead. Apparently, he had had two massive heart attacks that morning and though his relatives tried to get medical attention, he did not survive.

Questions raised by HM:

- What safety protocols including provision of protective gear are in place for work in the open during extreme weather conditions?
- Why should a worker on duty have to seek medical attention on his own? Should there not be a clear protocol laid out in case of health contingency at work?

There are many more cases in the past or *waiting to happen*

---

<sup>2</sup> Report on the accident can be accessed in this link: <https://sites.google.com/site/iitkcfdevelopment/hamara-manch/hamara-manch-updates/2022-12-11-one-more-fatal-accident-at-a-construction-site-in-the-campus>

<sup>3</sup> Report on the death can be accessed in this link: <https://nirvaakiitk.wordpress.com/2022/01/25/the-death-and-life-of-gardener-rakesh-how-many-times-this-story-will-get-repeated/>

- In July 2021 a young female worker passed away at the temporary site in Nankari where the migrant construction workers of the Institute were being made to stay by the contractor<sup>4</sup>.
- In 2019 a wall collapsed at the under-construction site of the Earth Science building burying several workers under it; and three of them died.<sup>5</sup>
- From what is visible at the various high rise construction sites, there seems to be hardly any safety protocol in place to prevent accidental falls.
- Drastic and arbitrary reduction of workforce combined with inadequate equipment and accessories in several recent tenders may also lead to more serious accidents<sup>6</sup>.

### **Systemic Issues Can only be Addressed by Systemic Measures**

There are around 3000 contingent workers in the campus who provide essential services to the 9000 strong student community, and staff, faculty members and their families. As the principal employer IIT Kanpur is liable and responsible for ensuring safe work conditions for these workers so that all preventable accidents leading to unnecessary loss of lives or limbs can be avoided. Further, should an accident happen in spite of all precautions, there should be appropriate protocol for medical attention which could minimize loss of life and limbs. There are very detailed and specific laid out protocol and procedures available, both for safety and health/medical aid<sup>7</sup>. Unfortunately, though they maybe there on paper such measures do not seem to be in place when it comes to implementation in the Institute.

Moreover, in the aftermath of an accident the predominant concern for all those responsible seems to be to cover-up the incident instead of ensuring immediate medical and other aid to minimize the loss of lives and limbs. Significantly, all the three cases listed above have been reported by HM, but the Institute issued a communique only in the latest one – Hall 14 death. This also leads us to believe that other such incidents, fatal or otherwise, could have taken place without our becoming aware of them. An accident is always an opportunity to correct systemic lapses so that it does not recur in the future. But this extreme secrecy and lack of transparency ensures that no corrective measures are put in place.

We at Hamara Manch believe that the Institute Community should come together and demand that the following systemic measures be put in place to make worksites safe on our campus.

1. Timely and transparent reporting of mishaps on worksites in the Institute.

---

<sup>4</sup><https://sites.google.com/site/iitkcfdevelopment/hamara-manch/hamara-manch-updates/2021-07-18-a-window-to-the-construction-workers-in-iitk-amidst-the-pandem?authuser=0>

<sup>5</sup><https://sites.google.com/site/iitkcfdevelopment/hamara-manch/hamara-manch-updates/2019-09-01-retaining-toe-wall-collapsed-at-earth-sciences-building-three-workers-died-one-critically-injured?authuser=0>

<sup>6</sup> An example is that of the latest water supply contract our report can be accessed at : <https://sites.google.com/site/iitkcfdevelopment/hamara-manch/hamara-manch-updates/2022-09-09-a-report-on-the-new-water-supply-and-wastewater-contract?authuser=0>

<sup>7</sup>On 16<sup>th</sup> September, 2007 the Director's office issued an office order laying down the guidelines regarding contractual labour based on the laws of the country. The OO can be accessed here :[https://docs.google.com/file/d/0Bxoi2voVZbTgeTBoM2ILQjICbzA/edit?resourcekey=0-LN\\_FignPvNR0OMFXRh2-2w](https://docs.google.com/file/d/0Bxoi2voVZbTgeTBoM2ILQjICbzA/edit?resourcekey=0-LN_FignPvNR0OMFXRh2-2w)

2. Appropriate and adequate safety measures and protocol including safety gears and equipment for all kinds of work undertaken in the Institute.
3. Proper training of workers
4. Clear responsibility of oversight for implementation of safety protocol.
5. There is no medical facility available within the Institute to handle any serious mishap at worksite. The wellbeing of every worker at his or her workplace is legally the responsibility of the employer and in case of contractual work the ultimate responsibility is that of the Principal Employer, or IITK in our case. There should be a clear and effective protocol laid out in case of any medical emergency and an appropriate authority to ensure it is followed.

Every life is precious and it is unacceptable that a worker employed to provide us service should lose his or her life because of lack of adequate preventive measures and timely medical attention. It is our collective responsibility to ensure it does not happen on our watch. To end with the immortal lines of Bob Dylan:

*And how many ears must one man have  
Before he can hear people cry?  
Yes, and how many deaths will it take 'til he knows  
That too many people have died?  
The answer, my friend, is blowin' in the wind  
The answer is blowin' in the wind*