

# The Intersections of Protest Suicides, Oppression and Social Justice

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## Abstract

This paper focuses on protest suicides that highlight oppression and influence collective action for social justice and change. A few cases and contexts of protest suicides from the 1960s onwards are used to demonstrate this intersectionality. I address two types of protest suicides: first, the protest public suicide that is predominantly enacted in the public space and draws attention to the suicide victim and the oppression that the suicide victim represents or is alleged to represent. Second, the cumulative suicide where individuals commit suicide privately but because of the sheer cumulative number of those who do so due to a shared grievance, society is obliged to take notice. I examine the cultural, social, economic and political underpinnings of a society in determining the propensity to commit such an act and also in shaping societies reaction. The paper concludes by indicating the need for further comparative research on these complex intersections.<sup>1</sup>

**Keywords:** Public protest suicide. Cumulative suicide. Self-immolation. Oppression. Social justice. Intersectionality.

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<sup>1</sup> This paper could not have been written without the invaluable contribution of Dr. Mathew John. Thanks also to my colleague Professor Gregory M. Maney, to the anonymous reviewers, and to the editorial team for their insightful comments. I am grateful to Hofstra University for providing institutional support. Any errors, omissions or other mistakes are solely mine.

Gajendra Singh, a 41-year-old Indian farmer, committed suicide on 22nd April, 2015 by hanging himself from a tree at a political rally in New Delhi in the full glare of the media. Singh's suicide note states that he has three children and was thrown out of his house by his father because his crops had failed. His note ends with the plea, "Give me a solution so that I can return home" (Times of India, 23 April 2015). Tragically, for Gajendra Singh there was no returning home, but his public suicide propelled the plight of Indian farmers' center stage and forcefully reminded the nation's power elite of the unremitting agrarian crisis that has led to at least 297,000 farmers committing suicide in the last two decades<sup>2</sup>. Singh's suicide became the "focusing event", to use Birkland's term (1998), to mobilize various interest groups, social activists, politicians and media to seek solutions to the long standing problems of farmers. Gajendra Singh's public suicide during the anti-Land Bill rally in New Delhi dominated debate in Parliament soon after and forced the government to delay the Land Acquisition Bill. Sadly, the Government, apart from expressions of concern for farmers, remains intent on passing the anti-farmer Land Acquisition Bill which will facilitate trouble-free acquisition of agricultural land for setting up industries and thereby compound the miseries of the Indian farmers.

The public suicide of Gajendra Singh and the magnitude of suicides (private and public) by Indian farmers highlight the need to further examine the dynamics of suicides that serve to draw attention to an existing problem, influence collective action, and lead (or not) to a search for solutions. In this paper, I aim to draw attention to the intersections of suicide(s), oppression and social justice. My focus is on protest suicides that highlight oppression and influence collective action for social justice and change. I examine the importance of the cultural, social, economic and political underpinnings of a society in determining the propensity to commit such an act and also in shaping societies reaction. I briefly touch

<sup>2</sup> National Crime Records Bureau. These official numbers are considered an underestimate.

upon how religion and media frame these suicides and influence societal response. Given the sheer complexity of the subject and the range of perspectives on suicide, my paper is limited to drawing upon a few cases and contexts of suicides from the 1960s onwards that help contextualize this intersectionality. Some of the distinctive features and outcomes of self-immolations – which means “self-sacrifice” – and covers all form of self-inflicted death – that draw attention to the problem of oppression and impact on the character and trajectory of the public responses are discussed. Rather than a comprehensive analysis, my hope is to indicate the need for further comparative research on these intersections at the local, national and global levels.

### **Types of suicides linked to oppression and justice**

Émile Durkheim’s classic study of suicide (1897) extensively explained the causal factors for suicide, locating them not in individual personalities but in social factors. While Durkheim’s typology of suicide is relevant to the analysis of protest suicides, his distinct classifications do not adequately account for the type of suicides that intersect or conflate these different categories due to overlapping causative factors. For example, the suicide that has causative triggers that intersect the egoistic and anomic. Hence, this requires us to consider expanding the repertoire of types of suicides, including protest suicides. In this paper, I focus on two types of protest suicides: first, the *protest public suicide* that is predominantly enacted in the public space and draws attention to the suicide victim and the oppression that the suicide victim represents or is alleged to represent; second, the *cumulative suicide* where individuals commit suicide privately, but because of the sheer cumulative number of those who do so due to a shared grievance, society is obliged to take notice. Both protest and cumulative suicides can bolster collective action for social justice and change. In this paper, I do not consider and include the category of protest suicides that are intended to inflict harm on others.

Singh's suicide triggered a national debate on his motivations for taking the extreme step, with conflicting reports that it was unintended and a staged drama that went wrong, that it was provoked by the anti-Land Acquisition Bill protestors at the site, that it was deep personal angst and more. It is my contention that timing and locus of a suicide and the victim's background and association with the aggrieved group are reason enough for a suicide to attain the status of martyrdom. The act in itself, irrespective of personal motivation, becomes symbolic of the collective travails of the group, subsuming examination of other factors. I also argue that a suicide itself does not have to be "public" to resonate beyond the personal and draw attention to issues of social injustice and inequality. Here, I mean the complex phenomenon of suicides by Indian farmers whereby the sheer magnitude of these cumulative deaths brings into focus their persisting oppression and need for social justice and change.

### **The Role of Religion**

Religion has been identified as a critical ingredient in the matrix of motivations to self-immolate for a collective cause. The world's focus has been on "suicide terror", the dominant West-centric perception attributing suicide terrorism to Islamic fundamentalism. Although not the subject of this paper, the point needs to be made that such an asymmetrical view undermines issues of injustice and inequality that the beleaguered groups are fighting against, overlooks the role of non-religious denominations such as the Lanka Tamil Tigers Eelam (LTTE), and the fact that suicide terrorism is also considered a tactic of sacrifice for the cause (Capell; Sahliyah, 2007).

My focus here in the context of the role of religion is to note that the overwhelmingly large number of self-immolations for a cause occurred in countries that profess Buddhism and Hinduism. Significantly, Durkheim alludes to these two religions in his analysis of altruistic suicide associated with specific cultures. Biggs's systematic mapping of

countrywide data on self-immolations between 1963 and 2002 also shows a preponderance of cases in India, Vietnam, South Korea, with more than 80% of the 533 cases involving Hindus or Buddhists (Biggs, 2005). These statistics are not to suggest that Hinduism or Buddhism unambiguously endorse self-immolation but that religion influences the act.

In sharp contrast to Christianity avowed disapproval of suicide, Buddhism and Hinduism tend to be ambivalent on the issue. The scriptures of these religions have conflicting narratives regarding the ethical appropriateness of suicide. Harvey (2000) cites the Buddha's explicit warning to monks that assisting or even praising suicide would entail expulsion from the Sangha. However, another sacred Buddhist text records the Buddha stating that a true *Bodhisattva* –enlightened individual– would sacrifice his life for altruistic reasons such as for ending the suffering of others or for repaying a debt to parents (Shih, 1994).

In Hinduism, Lord Ram, one of the revered Gods of the Hindu pantheon is alleged to have committed suicide. According to the Balmiki Ramayana, a sacred text, Lord Ram was so shattered by his wife, Sita Devi's, death that he jumped into the Sarayu *river* and took *jalsamadhi* – a state of enlightened consciousness while taking leave of the body. The tacit acceptance of self-immolation, particularly by fire, in both Buddhism and Hinduism is also linked to their religious rites, otherworldly mysticism, and reverence for fire.

### **Self-immolations' Resonance in Post-Colonial Societies**

A suicide that, intentionally or unintentionally, bolsters a political or social cause only fleetingly attracts worldwide attention, but as “a tactic of persuasion” (Biggs, 2013), it has been successful in rallying support mainly across the global South. It is my contention that countries with a colonial past have what Edward Said (1994, p. 322) refers to as “a fertile culture of resistance whose core is energetic insurgency, a ‘technique

of trouble’”. The historical antagonisms produced by imperialism have transformed into a culture of dissent and deep suspicion of authority in these post-colonial societies. Glaring economic and social inequalities and, in some cases, political tyranny make these post-colonial societies extremely receptive to collective action as a response to social injustice. The environment of disquiet provides the context for self-immolations as a form of resistance and protest against entrenched power and inequalities. It can draw attention to injustice and rally support for the cause. On the other hand, Western societies, with a different imperial experience, and attitudes influenced by philosophical traditions that emphasize individualism and personal autonomy, tend to reductively view suicides as individual infirmity rather than acts having a larger socio-cultural significance.

The differing responses connected to the Vietnam upheavals of the 1960s reflect the sharply contrasting perceptions on self-immolations in different societies. In 1963, the Buddhist monk, Thich Quang Duc’s planned public suicide to protest the religious discrimination perpetrated by Catholic President Diem’s government against Buddhists had the world transfixed in horror. It led to a spate of self-immolations and resulted in the ouster of Diem (Joiner, 1964, p. 918).

On the other side of the world, for the first time Americans were self-immolating in protest against their Government’s policies in Vietnam. The most publicized was the self-immolation of Norman Morrison in November 1965. With his infant daughter in tow, he set himself alight outside the Pentagon office of the Secretary of State, Robert McNamara. It made the headlines but achieved little in galvanizing anti-war sentiment. Instead much of the public debate centered on Morrison’s possible intentions in taking his infant daughter with him, thereby endangering her life. In the West, public suicides including self-immolation by fire tend to be viewed through the same lens as other forms of suicide attributed to factors such as psychiatric disorder (Andreasen; Noyes, 1975). However, Morrison’s act was valorized by the

Vietnamese who named a street in Hanoi after him and issued a stamp in his honor.

More recently, the self-immolation of Mohamed Bouazizi, of Tunisia, in 2010 created transnational upheavals for social justice and change. A vegetable vendor, Bouazizi set himself alight after the confiscation of his wares and humiliation by public officials. Bouazizi's suicide instigated protests that forced President Ben Ali to resign and also spurred protests against the ruling regimes in Egypt, Algeria, Yemen and Jordan classified under the rubric of 'the Arab Spring'. Bouazizi's self-immolation is credited with changing the course of Arab political history in the fight for social justice and democratization.

A related issue is the type of ruling power and how it impacts the propensity for self-immolations. One hypothesis is that democratic countries are largely associated with self-immolations and that individuals are less likely to commit such acts in autocracies (Biggs, 2005). However, Tibet repudiates this view with its wave of self-immolations in defiance of one of the most powerful totalitarian States, China. Since 2009, there have been 120 self-immolations by Tibetans in protest against Chinese occupation of their land including threatening their culture, language, religion and nationhood. Irrespective of the personal motivations, fear of the State apparatus does not appear to have deterred these individuals from suicide to protest oppression by the Chinese Government and to express their commitment to justice and change. Bouazizi's self-immolation was also an insurgent act against a tyrannical government and his suicide evoked a response for justice and provoked a spate of suicides in other autocracies in the Middle East. Let me now turn to the role of media in influencing society's response to self-immolations.

### **The Role of the Media Coverage**

Jim Morrison, rock legend, poet and social commentator, succinctly described the omnipotence of the media: "*Whoever controls the media controls the mind*". The media played an important role in the public

suicide of Quang Duc and the ouster of President Diem. With the media alerted by Thich Duc Nghiep, a leading activist in the campaign against the government, the gruesomely spectacular image of Quang Duc wreathed in flames, accompanied by his final message “Before closing my eyes to go to Buddha, I have the honor to present my words to President Diem, asking him to be kind and tolerant toward his people and enforce a policy of religious equality” was flashed across the world. Media coverage of Quang Duc’s public suicide drew attention to religious oppression and need for equality and justice.

Empirical evidence during the “Arab Spring” suggests that the media constructions, both fact and fiction, did much to bolster the pro-democracy movements. The construction of Bouazizi as a kind, family oriented, educated young man, reduced to street vending and facing humiliation at the hands of law enforcement was symbolic of the oppression of the ordinary individual struggling against the corrupt, inefficient and oppressive Tunisian government. It swayed public opinion and galvanized the people’s movement across the Middle East<sup>3</sup>. Despite censorship by the State, so powerful was the publicity through social media and other news outlets that Bouazizi became the inspiration that fuelled the protests for equality, dignity and human rights.

The censorship of news regarding self-immolations is not only a feature of dictatorships like China in the context of the Tibetan crisis, but is used as a deliberate strategy even in democracies. A perspective among psychoanalysts is that media coverage of public suicides has the propensity to trigger imitative suicides. Even the World Health Organization (WHO) issued an advisory to the media to tone down reports regarding public suicides (Schmidtke; Schaller, 2000). However, compliance has been selective and dictated by the politics of nations. Gregory Levey’s self-immolation in 1991 against the Iraq war was played down by the media in USA not out of social concern but that it

<sup>3</sup> *The Guardian* 28/12/2010, *The Telegraph* 13/06/2011, *Time* 21/01/2011.

would possibly intensify opposition to the war. In January 1991, some alternative news outlets sued the Pentagon, charging that the media restrictions were unconstitutional (Goodman; Goodman, 2004).

There is another form of censorship that the Indian media has practiced in relation to the largest wave of suicides by any one group of workers anywhere in the world. Although P. Sainath and a small group of sociologists, social scientists, activists, and journalists have worked tirelessly to draw attention to farmer suicides and the dismal agrarian conditions, there has been relative silence in reporting the unrelenting epidemic of suicides by Indian farmers in the last two decades<sup>4</sup>. This cataclysmic social devastation has been largely ignored by the Indian mainstream media, obsessed with primarily metropolitan concerns. However, Gajendra Singh's recent public suicide at a political rally finally drew substantial media attention to the unremitting agrarian distress in the country. An analysis of suicides would be incomplete without discussing this in the context of India, which has both genres – the spectacular public suicide and the cumulative suicide.

### **India: The Self Immolation Storm Centre**

India provides the case for both the protest suicide and the cumulative suicide. As an extreme form of protest, self-immolation is usually the desperate recourse of the subaltern against the power elite and the might of the State. In India, self-immolation has for long been integral to the lexicon of protest. The earliest public suicides in the modern era occurred in Madras on January 26th, 1965, India's Republic day. In protest against the imposition of Hindi as the official language of the Union, two men set themselves alight. Their deaths triggered off a spate of strikes and further self-immolations. The twelve self-immolations aimed to protect the language and culture of the Tamil people. These suicides pressured the Prime Minister to issue a statement retaining

<sup>4</sup> P. Sainath has played a pivotal role in reporting on the agrarian crisis and farmer suicides.

English as the official language between the Centre and the provincial States (Guha, 2007).

So strong is the commitment to the Tamil identity and causes that Tamils have sacrificed their lives for the Tamil diaspora. In 2009, a Tamil journalist, K Muthukumar, burnt himself to death in Chennai to protest the treatment of Tamils by the Sri Lankan Government. This was followed by other suicides for the Tamil cause, including Murgathasan Varnakulasingam in Geneva and two others in Malaysia. These suicides drew international attention to the violation of human rights of Tamils in Sri Lanka.

The anti-reservation stir of 1990 in India, which resulted in 112 suicides, was not the typical protest movement aimed at fighting injustices against the vulnerable segments of society (PUDR, 1993, p. 41). The anti-reservation agitation represented a protest by the privileged upper castes against the Government's proposal of affirmative action for the "backward classes", with 27% reservation in Government jobs and educational institutions, as recommended by the Mandal Commission<sup>5</sup>. Rajiv Goswami, the leader of the dissenters, set himself aflame in September 1990 and sparked off a spate of imitative self-immolations across the country. The much publicized attempted suicide of Goswami, a Delhi University student, was actually unintended (Mayer, 2010). However, this case further reinforces the view that the act of self-immolation *per se* stirs the passions of the sympathizers who invariably attach the noblest motives to this ultimate sacrifice. Significantly, despite the widespread protests and large number of suicides for the cause, the reservation for the backward classes was ratified in 1992.

The public suicide by Gajendra Singh in the heart of India's capital city provoked extensive media coverage and political debate. Singh's self-immolation came at a time when the politicians and big corporates were

<sup>5</sup> "Other Backward Classes" is an official category under the Indian Constitution. [http://www.anagrasarkalyan.gov.in/compendium/part-7\\_page274-282.pdf](http://www.anagrasarkalyan.gov.in/compendium/part-7_page274-282.pdf)

debating the contentious Land Acquisition Bill, which the Government was determined to make into a law as it would facilitate the acquisition of agricultural land for setting up industries. The Bill proposes to dispense with the existing stipulation requiring consent of 70% of land owners before acquiring their land for five categories of land use, including industrial corridors. The Government justified the decision noting that farmers would be highly compensated and that the new projects will also lead to new jobs that benefit the farming community.

The neglect of rural areas, where 68% of the country's 1.25 billion population still live, is one of the tragic realities of 21st century India (Census, 2011). Sociological studies and research on farmers' suicides attribute indebtedness as one of the primary causes for farmers killing themselves (Mohanty; Shroff, 2004; TISS, 2005; Misra, 2006; Deshpande; Arora, 2010; Srivastava, 2010; CHRJ, 2011; Padhi, 2012; Sainath, 2014). Farmer suicides are linked to the economics of agriculture and rural deprivation – adverse rainfall, unviable small holdings, crop failure, high input costs, poor inputs, indiscriminate use of pesticides, fluctuating prices, inadequate irrigation facilities, heavy dependence on moneylenders, inability to meet family commitments, and the overwhelming burden of debt. Today, the village has become inhospitable to the small and marginal farmers from the backward classes who constitute the overwhelming majority of those committing suicide (Parthasarathy; Shameem, 1998).

At the heart of the phenomenon of farmers' suicides is the systematic exploitation of the poor farmer. An indelible feature of village life is the caste system that has formalized and ritualized inequality. The village structure continues to revolve around caste, with the dominant caste or castes enforcing their will. The solidarity among the dominant caste, the moneylenders, the commission agents, and the traders –often one coalescing into the other– ensures their hegemony in all village matters. This village elite exercise paramount control over the lives of the poor villagers, manipulating and even terrorizing them into submission.

Dipankar Gupta refers to this oppressive environment when he states: “it is in the nature of social relations in rural India that drive many poorer castes and classes out of the village” (Gupta, 2005, p. 754).

Exploitation comes in different guises. Traders in seeds, fertilizers and pesticides provide credit to farmers to purchase inputs and in return the farmers are obliged to purchase their requirements from their creditors who then pass on substandard products to their debtors (Deshpande, 2002). Many farmers are unable to get loans from the banks, driving them to moneylenders at financially ruinous interest rates of 36% to 60% annually (Parthasarathy; Shameem, 1998). A primary survey conducted in Andhra Pradesh shows that “a high proportion of credit (80 to 90%) is sourced from non-institutional sources” (Revaathi; Galab, 2010). More recently, the Reserve Bank of India Governor acknowledged that farmer suicides could be due to lack of formal finance (Times of India, 25 April, 2015).

Neoliberalism accompanied by free trade, privatization, and corporate globalization has contributed to the devastation of the rural areas. In this era of global integration, of reduced tariffs, liberalized import duties, and the absence of a proper regulatory mechanism, the vulnerabilities of the farmers have increased. Multi-national corporations, instead of rejecting the exploitative commercial structure in the village, have been taking advantage of the iniquities in the system. The seed companies select seed distributors from the village itself. These chosen distributors are the large farmers who have a say in decision making for the village (Shiva, Emani; Jafri, 1999). These factors contribute to the extreme rural distress and resultant farmer suicides.

The reduced role of the State and its support of corporations have exacerbated the miseries of rural India. Neoliberal reforms have resulted in a decline in the public investment on infrastructure, particularly irrigation (Revathi; Galab, 2010). The Government’s standard response to the agrarian distress and the unending epidemic of farmer suicides is periodic debt waiver which essentially helps only the better off farmers

who are able to access credit from institutional sources. The governing class, as evident from the anti-farmer Land Acquisition debate, is not addressing the issues that directly concern the farmers i.e. irrigation, accessible institutional credit facilities for the marginal farmer, a non-exploitative village ethos. The corruption and exploitation that continue in rural India make a mockery of most Government schemes. Unless the exploitative structures engendered by neoliberal free trade (mal) practices, caste based profiteering and State apathy are dismantled, the poor and marginal farmers will continue to be oppressed. The less resilient among them will commit suicide.

## Conclusion

The protest suicide and the cumulative suicide cases and contexts discussed indicate the need to further examine the intersections of suicide, oppression, and social justice. So uneven has been the impact of suicides on collective action that it is difficult to pass any absolute judgment on its contribution to remedying injustice. The asymmetric reaction of societies reinforces the view that a self-immolation is effective when other factors converge for the igniting fuel that such an act provides. What is unquestionable is that public suicides, especially explicit acts of resistance, can trigger public debate and pose questions that can pressure the governing class to reassess policies and priorities and pave the way for a more just world.

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Received: October 03, 2014.

Accepted: November 24, 2014.