

Indian Mythological Views on Suicide

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Abstract

Suicide is a universal phenomenon. In Indian mythology one finds numerous cases of suicide committed either for relief from all kinds of misery or to procure martyrdom, or to avoid apostasy or to retain the crown of virginity.

In the present paper such mythological cases will be presented to show as to:

- (1) how the immortality attached to 'Self' in Indian culture approved the destruction of mortal body for upholding the existing value? Certain characters even preferred to experience agony or self-mutation for such values rather than merely death which was an easy way out and
- (2) how the act of self destruction is glorified if it is done for the sake of family, caste, duty (dharma), lineage and goal (when the aim or purpose of life is reached).

These points will be interpreted psychologically.

Key words -

**Suicide,
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Suicide or the act of self killing is generally considered a new phenomenon arisen out of higher civilization when new patterns of behaviour i.e., social, political and economic have brought about some newer conflicts and generated stress leading to mental alienation, delirium, drunkenness and physical diseases, ultimately resulting in an act of self-destruction. Many theories put forth by several disciplines such as Psychology, Anthropology, Sociology and Psychiatry have explained suicide in great detail. Over the last few decades, a new thinking is emerging that there was a greater propensity to suicide among the "early man" than in modern man.

Consequently, efforts have been made to review all ancient literature of the world. In India too, few researchers including Upendra [1], Lal [2], and Rao [3] have published on 'Suicide in Ancient India'. But in all these studies no direct reference to causes - excepting the religious ones - leading to suicide are made.

An attempt is made here to show other types of cases of suicides committed either for relief from all kinds of misery or to produce martyrdom or to avoid apostasy or to retain the crown of chastity (sati) found in Indian Mythological works. A psychological explanation will be presented as and when needed.

Indian Mythology: An Entire Spectrum of Human Psychology

Mythology as defined by Ruth Benedict is a branch of knowledge constituted by myths or tales of supernatural world which shares the characteristics of the religious complex [4]. Its types of plot and even its specific incidents are those of current folk tales. Indian Mythology is no exception to it. It is the keystone of Hindu-religious complex, and religious practices in India are un-intelligible except by way of their mythology. It is also an articulate vehicle of India's thinking. All Hindu myths are woven around the playful actions (lila) of Hindu Gods, Supermen and Superwomen who are worshipped and considered as the ideals to follow. Therefore, the imagery of Hindu mythology, like any other mythology - though spoke of mysterious world or the world beyond the existing one, its mystic phenomenon generated its own momentum and created an expanding horizon covering the whole range of human psychology [5]. In Indian mythological works viz. Vedic, Puranic and Dharmashastric texts, there are many references/stories of persons who committed suicide which can throw light on the 'Indian Psyche'. In the present paper, the author points out the Indian views on suicide in a different age and tries to offer psychological explanations of such views.

Vedic Views on Suicide

The Vedic age of Hindu mythology can be dated back to 3000-1500 [6] BC. The Vedas are the earliest documents of the human race. They show the religious and social life of the early man. Interestingly, the content of this early work is full of human imagination and dominated by the elements of man's sense of self-preservation, self defense and self assertion. No suicide case is found in Vedic literature except some passing references in Atharvaveda [7]. But in Rigveda - which is the earliest one - this act of immolation was just referred as a mimetic ceremony in which the widow is told to climb on the funeral pyre of her husband, lay beside his dead body and then she was led away by her relative after which the pyre was set alight [8]. Vedic society was thus, free of suicide. But as time passed, a new trend in Hindu thought started in which Vedic rites and rituals were replaced by intellectual enquiries. At the outset, the whole transitory pleasure of the world was viewed as mere illusion (Maya). Self or Soul -- a new dimension in human existence was found and considered as eternal of which life and death are merely two steps in a long series. This concept of life influenced the Indian thinking and as a result, references in Upanishads are available allowing a person to end his life by starvation or drowning if he had attained the highest level of maturity/maximum age and wants to get rid of this old body in order to avail a new one [9]. Committing suicide out of desperation, however, was not sanctioned and warned that such person would go to the sunless region covered by darkness. In other words, his soul was supposed not to find peace in next birth [10].

Puranic and Dharmashastric Views on Suicide

The second phase of Indian Mythology, have numerous direct references on suicide. This was the age when Hinduism was re-interpreted for common man and thus, new codes of conduct were established. Cast system was in its full form and many religious and social laws were introduced which are still the cook-books of India's religious and social behaviour, Ramayana and Mahabharata the two great epics are full of suicide cases.

In Ramayana, it is clearly mentioned that Rama, Bharata, Lakshmana and Shatrughna along with many persons of Ayodhya drowned themselves by voluntary "Jalasadhi" in the river 'Sarayu' and left their mortal frames floating on water [11]. Rama's devotee Shabhangha entered into fire in Rama's presence [12]. Rama's grandfather Aja was reported to drown himself at the confluence of the holy rivers [13]. Likewise, there are many more instances of suicide available in Ramayana. All of them can not be accommodated in this short presentation.

Mahabharata - another great epic of Hindus - cited hundreds of cases of suicide of different forms including that of 'Sati'. Yudhishtira with his four brothers Bhima, Arjuna, Nakula and Sahadeva and queen Draupadi died (committed suicide) when all other people were killed in battle [14]. Madri the wife of Pandu [15], Sairandhree and four wives of Vasudeva viz. Devaki, Bhadra, Rohini and Madira [16] burnt themselves along with their deceased husbands. Mahabharata even recommended suicide at pilgrimage places for securing heaven and salvation. River pools, mountains, shrines and holy places especially Kashi and Prayag are recommended to commit suicide and social obligations [17], [18], [19]. Bhishma, for example, allowed himself to die for sake of society's welfare and Dadhichi had offered his bones to Indra for making 'Vajra' - a deadly weapon out of it to kill enemies. However, there are statements against committing suicide also in Mahabharat saying that anybody committing suicide does not reach blissful world [20].

Dharmashastras and Smritikaras dwell on this problem exhaustively and prescribe penance and punishments in terms of killing oneself if one acts contrary to the shastric injunctions but suicide committed to get rid of misery is listed among 'Mahapataks' or great sins. Suicide is permitted in case

- (a) one suffers from incurable disease,
- (b) one has killed a Brahman or a cow and
- (c) one is too old to perform his appointed religious duties [21].

The great authority of Hindu dharmashastra - Manu, allows suicide to those people who are enlightened and have fulfilled all their moral, social and religious obligations. They may go full determined to north-eastern direction, live on water and air till the body sinks to rest [22]. Other types of suicide are however, condemned by him. He said that no ritual should be done for such people [23]. Interestingly, Manu is entirely silent about Sati. In fact, none of the Dharmasutras except Vishnudharmasutra contains any reference to Sati [24].

Parashara joins with other Dharmashastrakarars in condemning suicide. He says anybody who hangs himself/herself through extreme pride or rage or affliction or fear falls into hell for sixty thousand years [25]. Vashishtha Dharmasutra speaks of suicide as a mortal sin [26]. Kautilya - the socio-political reformer, however, later, condemned all types of suicide [27].

Discussion and Conclusion

The present paper gives merely the facts stated in ancient Hindu literature about suicide without any reference to any theory.

As is apparent from the cited cases of suicide available in the ancient literature, the causes for suicidal behavior seems difficult to analyse and difficulty lies basically in understanding the 'human psyche' which is complex one. However, four psychological factors have emerged from these findings. They are : sin, guilt, value and glory. The psychological implication of these factors has always been

employed in metaphysical obscurity, because suicide appears less susceptible of positive appreciation than all other expressions of human behaviour. While screening the texts, one finds that vedic literature does not give the reference of suicide.

In the second phase viz., Puranic and Dharmashastric phase, the number of suicide is increased and the reason behind this may be:

- (1) the deep rooted religious thoughts;
- (2) fast steeped social tradition and
- (3) long cherished superstition prevailing in that period.

This period shows the contradictions as the same author sanctions and rejects the act of suicide. To kill oneself is allowed if the life is miserable or meaning of life is lost and for that reason, committing suicide in religious places is allowed. The psychological background behind this type of suicide is not difficult to understand. It is Hindu's views on life that is responsible for undertaking such an act. There are two main ways of thinking prevailing in Indian Society on life and its purposes. First one is action oriented way or life within "Varna-Asrama dharma". To elaborate; each man living in a particular place and stage of life is expected to perform his assigned/fixed duties; failing which makes him unworthy of living. Learning and acquiring knowledge at childhood (Brahmacharya), enjoying sensual gratification within the limit of social and moral obligations at youth stage (Grahastha), to live a calm, tranquil and detached old age (Vanaprastha) and finally die through yogic exercises is an ideal view of life that every Indian should follow. The second line of thought is a philosophical one. Life, according to Indian philosophy and especially 'Vedanta' is a process. Birth and death are two phases of life behind which looms large the element of absolute immortality (Atman). Death is not a terror. It is always followed by a renewal of life. This notion is expressed through the concept of 'Punarjanma' or rebirth, which is kept in a continuous process by Karma - Papa/Punya (or merit and demerit) actions. Therefore, if everything is achieved or nothing can be achieved, there is no point in lingering life. This understanding about the concept of life might have been behind the cases of mass-suicide and 'Sati' custom. In a monograph on Heinrich Von Kleist, Sadger has given a number of such cases and illustrated Freud's concept of masochistic fantasies. Psychoanalytically speaking, to die together is the same as the wish to sleep together and lie together (cited, from Jone's work) [29].

So, these mythological cases of suicide have influenced the Indian Psyche and many theories about the causes of suicide proposed by Western sociologists including Durkheim [30] were not applicable to Indian social system for a long time. But now, when Indian life began to follow Western urban based and industrialized society along with its evil components, i.e., competitive urges, frustration, alcoholism etc. suicide causes in India too may be the same as in the west and these myths appear to be things of mere historical interest.

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