

Imitative Suicides ?

by

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Most persons that one has talked to have expressed horror at the spate of self-immolations that rocked the country following the announcement last August of the government's plan to implement some of the recommendations of the Mandal Commission. Observers have been hard put to explain why over 200 young men and women tried to commit suicide, including many who chose the extreme form of burning themselves. While many theories have been advanced as an explanation of this phenomenon, it is indeed surprising that almost none of our 'learned commentators' have used the extensive literature on suicides.(Ed.)

It is by now well known that once a dramatic suicide is publicised, other vulnerable individuals in the community are likely to indulge in *imitative* suicides which spread by *contagion*. Suicide *contagion* is the process by which one suicide facilitates the occurrence of a subsequent suicide. *Contagion* assumes either direct or indirect awareness of the prior suicide. *Imitation*, the process by which one suicide becomes a compelling model for successive suicides, is one underlying theory to explain the occurrence of contagion. Examples can be cited to show how difficult it is to control imitative suicides even under the best of circumstances. (Gould, 1990.)

The press and the social science community in India are either ignorant of these commonly observed patterns or they have chosen to ignore them. In an amazing show of ignorance, callousness and even political opportunism, the press gave maximum publicity to the



suicides following anti-Mandal agitations and glorified these acts. The community and political leaders behaved similarly; they either publicised the 'suicides' to score points against the leadership of the ruling party, or they made appeals to young people to use means other than suicide to fight for their "just cause", while directly or indirectly portraying the victims as martyrs. This is precisely what should *not* have been done.

Though there are contending theories regarding the details of factors

involved in imitation suicides some general points can be made based on empirical research listed at the end of this article:

Media Influences

- 1) Television or news stories about suicide trigger additional suicides by teenagers.
- 2) The more highly publicised the suicide the greater the number of imitative suicides.
- 3) Prominent newspaper coverage of a suicide has the effect of increasing suicide behaviour within the readership area of the newspaper.
- 4) The magnitude of increase in suicides after media publicity is also related to the "attractiveness" of the individual whose death is being reported.

5) Wide publicity of suicides may produce a familiarity and acceptance of the *idea* of suicide by removing the "taboo" of suicide, lower the threshold at which point the behaviour is manifested, and introduce suicide as an acceptable alternative response or option to life stresses.

Characteristics of Imitation Suicides

- 1) Imitation suicides and clustering seem to be concentrated among teenagers.
- 2) Models who possess engaging qualities, who have high status or are depicted as martyrs are more likely to prompt imitation. Behaviour depicted as resulting in gains, including notoriety, are more likely to cause imitation.
- 3) Imitation suicides also related to: knowledge of how to perform the suicide, preexisting mental health problems, family history of suicidal

behaviour, “pathological” identification with the victim.

4) Persons whose social support is weak may be specially vulnerable: students who have joined their schools recently, students who come from a troubled family, persons who have recently experienced the death of someone close to them or who have recently lost their jobs.

Health officials in the U.S. (Parrel *et al*, 1988) have evolved a set of guidelines on the phenomenon of contagion and the reporting of suicide. These are outlined below:

Things to Encourage

Encourage explanation by health officials to news professionals of the nature of and the scientific basis for concern about contagion.

Encourage coverage which describes available helping resources.

Encourage coverage which explains how to identify persons at high risk of suicide.

Encourage coverage which presents factual information about risk factors for suicide.

Encourage news interviews with local experts, whenever possible.

Encourage ongoing, open dialogue between *local* health officials and news media representatives.

Things to Avoid

- Avoid presenting a simplistic explanation for suicide, e.g., “he committed suicide because he received low grades in school”.

- Avoid repetitive, ongoing, or excessive coverage of suicide.

- Avoid sensational coverage of suicide. Sensational news coverage represents an effort to whip up public

interest in the story via lurid headlines and sometimes grotesque details about the suicide. (Example of former: “Romeo and Juliet Commit Suicide” headline). Sensationalism can be minimised by avoiding such lurid headlines, by decreasing the prominence of the news article (e.g., by placing it further back in the newspaper), by

avoiding dramatic photographs of funerals, the victim’s bedroom, the site of the suicide, etc.

- Avoid coverage that amounts to a “how-to” manual for those who might wish to imitate the suicide.

- Avoid coverage that legitimizes suicide as a reasonable alternative among a range of reasonable alternatives, rather than a rare act of a troubled or severely depressed individual.

- Avoid news coverage that glorified the victim or glamorises suicide. Examples would include headlines such as “Hundreds Mourn Teenager’s Untimely Suicide.”

- Avoid coverage that presents suicide as a tool by which things are accomplished. If suicide is seen as accomplishing specific ends, it may seem a more attractive alternative to a disturbed, potentially suicidal person. Public eulogising can promote suicide as an effective tool, if the suicidal act is seen as the first or only effective thing the victim did which attracted positive public attention. Reporting that the victim committed suicide to “get even with his parents,” or to “end his suffering” might also do this.

Response to “Mandal”

Related Suicides

If one goes by the details of self-immolations and other suicides which were attempted in the wake of anti-Mandal agitations we find that they fit in neatly with the characteristics outlined in the earlier section.

- Most suicides involved teenagers.

- Details of how to perform suicides were publicised in the press reports.

- A large number of those who committed suicide had weak social support mechanisms, some came from troubled families. Some had lost their jobs or not been able to obtain any.

- Suicides were given prominent coverage.

- Victims were portrayed as martyrs.

- It was widely reported that the agitation could bring about the fall of

the ruling party.

- Suicides were clustered in those cities and states where national dailies published from Delhi are prominent and where student agitations gave a great deal of publicity to suicide victims as martyrs.

This clearly shows that these suicides do fit the model of imitation suicides and formed a cluster after the first attempted suicide was given a great deal of prominence and importance. Like any epidemic it grew in size once the virus (information in the press) was let loose in the atmosphere reached a peak and then declined once the population developed greater immunity to it.

It is somewhat frightening that on media and social scientists handled the whole issue the way they did. Though discussion of imitation suicides is now included in textbooks on suicides, none of our so-called experts actually gave out these details in any public form soon after the first immolation. Either these social scientists were ignorant these commonly observed patterns or they chose to suppress them. If they were ignorant it shows how low we have sunk in academic standards.

Quite obviously, the suicides were used to promote the anti-Mandal agitation by the politicians, the press an the upper classes in general. Instead of behaving responsibly and trying to help save the lives of as many endangered people as possible it is clear they made things much worse.

None of the activities mentioned under “Things to Encourage” were undertaken by our leaders and policy makers. On the other hand the media and the politicians went to town doing all the things which are specifically mentioned as things to avoid. The following examples show how our media violated each and every recommendation.

Avoid presenting a simplistic explanation : ‘The government is responsible for these deaths.’ Arun Shourie, Indian Express.

Avoid repetitive, ongoing or

excessive coverage of suicide

All newspapers and magazines carried the news prominently everyday TV newsmagazines like *Newstrack* gave it prominent coverage.

Avoid sensational coverage of suicide

All newspapers published pictures of suicide victims including pictures of victims on fire. Pictures of a self-immolator on fire were published on covers by national magazines including *India Today* and *Illustrated Weekly*. Headlines were no less sensational: "Mass Immolation Threat in Rajasthan" *Times of India*, page 1, 21 September 1990.

"...Eye witness said, while ablaze, Akhilesh was shouting anti-reservation slogans," *Times of India*, page 1, 24 September 1990. *Avoid coverage that amounts to a "how to" manual*

Most media reports gave details of how and where the suicide was committed, e.g. "Savita Gupta (18) of the Guru Nanak Higher Secondary School, sneaked out of the prayer hall and poured kerosene over her body and set herself ablaze," *Hindu*, 28 November, 1990.

Avoid news coverage that glorifies the victim

"... the most of seriously injured among the three, Akhilesh Pande, was flown to Bombay for treatment in the Chief Minister, Mr. Sunderlal Patwa's plane," Editorial, *Indian Express*, 25 September, 1990.

"... the blend of intense idealism and fury which seems to have motivated large sections of youth and which, along with an intense feeling of desperation, have led to suicide attempts". Editorial, *Indian Express*, 29 September, 1990.

"The cause the students have taken up is the country's cause," Arun Shourie, *Indian Express*.

Glorification was further encouraged by politicians making statements on behalf of the students, publicised visits to victims in hospitals, erecting memorials for those committing suicide.

Avoid coverage that presents suicide

as a tool by which things are accomplished

"Students are using their own bodies as the ultimate weapon against the state," *Ananta Giri, Indian Express*, 10 October 1990.

"The task of protecting Indian identity has now fallen substantially on the student," Girilal Jain, *Sunday Mail*, 30 September, 1990.

"Backlash! Can the government survive the Mandal Commission?" Cover page with photograph of student in flames, *Illustrated Weekly*, 1-13 October, 1990.

I have used examples from only a few newspapers. However, most other publications behaved similarly.

It is quite clear that the blame for the wave of student suicides spreading over large parts of north India and continuing for a long time must be shared among the press, the social scientists and politicians of India. If they had behaved more responsibly many of these young people might not have lost their lives. In an era when knowledge and information are supposedly easy to obtain, they can't be allowed to pretend ignorance of well known patterns. In retrospect it appears likely that most editorial writers, reporters and politicians were more interested in using the suicides as a tool to score points against the politicians in power than in actually limiting damage. In this process they actually aided and abetted the spread of the imitation suicide virus. We promoted a tragedy where most of those who killed themselves did not even know what they were dying for.

Ironically, one of the few persons who acted according to the suggested guidelines for controlling imitation suicides, knowingly, unknowingly or for selfish motives, was the then Prime Minister Mr. V. P. Singh. He didn't give simplistic explanations, didn't dwell on them day after day, didn't glamorise the victims and didn't present the suicides as a tool by which things would eventually get accomplished.

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The Listing of Backward Classes and Mandal Recommendations

There are broadly three groups among the various states in so far as reservations for Backward Classes are concerned. In the eastern states practically no reservations exist and in the peninsular states they have been long entrenched. In between are the northern and western states where wide differences inform, with Jammu and Kashmir at one end and Rajasthan at the other. The Backward Classes include not only the Hindu castes but also similar groups of practically all religions. Regional, linguistic, ethnic, economic, occupation and gender based classifications are also included. In addition special groups like ex-army personnel, denotified tribes, handicapped people and others are also included. Within the Backward Castes, subdivisions are made and in some states a roster system operates. In some cases economic criteria— income or property—is used. There is no uniformity in either the criteria used to identify BCs or in the quota prescribed. Years of tortuous interaction between commissions, government orders and courts have resulted in the existing position. (See table p.30). Any attempt at the central level is destined to run into this myriad complexity.

The first known central list of BCs was drawn immediately after Independence when the government extended for BCs, the existing postmatric scholarship for SCs. Drawn in an ad hoc manner by the Department of Education, the list of BCs covered similar groups in all religious communities. In the 1951 census, figures were collected about some of these BCs but the government decided not to process and publish them. The Central Government also extended some centrally funded welfare schemes under the aegis of the Planning Commission. Thus in some form or the other the category called the BCs existed at the central level under the Census Directorate, the Department of Education, and the Planning Commission. All three of them however do not seem to have identified the same groups and hence arrived at varying estimates of the number and proportion of BCs. The most

inexplicable of all these estimates were those of the Planning Commission. In its *First Five Year Plan: A Draft Outline*, (1951) the Commission estimated the BCs to be about 72.22 million. But the people's edition of the same plan (1953) gives the figures at 54.60 million.

In 1953 the First Backward Classes Commission under Article 340 of the Constitution was appointed, headed by Kaka Kalelkar. It submitted its report in 1955. The Commission did not follow any noticeably rational method in its identification and estimation of BCs or in its recommendations. About 2399 castes/groups were identified as BCs. They included such disparate groups as betel leaf growers of eastern India, Eurasians of Travancore and Sindhi refugees of North India. In the end five out of eleven members, including the member secretary, wrote their minutes of dissent. One of them even 'regretted' that the Commission, including the Chairman, was not free from casteism. Finally in a last-minute volte-face, the Chairman himself repudiated the entire report in his covering letter to the President of India. The government rejected its recommendations. In fact, the Parliament did not even discuss the report. But unusually it discussed it a decade later in 1965.

After the rejection of the Commission's recommendations the Central Government passed the buck onto the state governments and asked their suggestions both regarding the groups to be included in the category and the forms of preferential treatment to be accorded to them. In a few years the buck came back to the Central Government which asked the Registrar General of Census to undertake the job of identifying the BCs who after two years of listless efforts abandoned the attempt. In the meantime, the Centre issued a GO requesting state governments to fill up the unfulfilled quota of SCs and STs in the educational sector with BCs. This is the first time (and so far the last) that the Centre displayed some initiatives towards reservations for BCs. But this order was withdrawn five years later. Finally in May

1961 the cabinet officially decided that no national list of BCs should be drawn up. It suggested that caste based criteria should not be used but, however, left the choice to state governments. In the Third Five Year Plan the existing scholarships and welfare programmes for the BCs were quietly dropped. BCs or SEBCs as a category ceased to exist at the central level.

Almost two decades later the Janata government appointed the Second Backward Classes Commission in December 1978, headed by Bindhyeshwari Prasad Mandal....

The Commission estimated, on the basis of replies to a questionnaire, that BCs constitute 12.55 percent of Central Services, 14.4 percent of autonomous bodies and 10.60 percent of central public sector undertakings. Such an estimate is necessary for the Commission since the Constitution makes provisions for reservations to Backward Classes only when they are 'not adequately represented in the services' under Article [A. 16(4)]. But the criteria adopted to identify BCs is somewhat strange. It includes all castes other than Brahmins, Kshatriyas and Vaisyas thus including Kammas, Reddies, Jats, Marathas and other such groups otherwise not included in the category of BCs. The consequent over estimation of the figures would perhaps be offset by other overwhelming considerations. The second criteria specifies that both the father and grandfather of such a BC civil servant should not have an educational level beyond the primary stage. In case of non-Hindus there is an additional criteria that the income level of the parents should be about Rs. 71 per month, approximately equivalent to the poverty line. How anyone can expect the progenies of people below poverty line to become civil servants in the Central Government at any level is beyond comprehension. In any case it does not appear to us that all the departments, autonomous bodies and public sector undertakings replied to the questionnaire. Among the missing departments was the Department of Personnel !

The actual identification of BCs was based on four sources: Personal knowledge gained through tours and public evidence, list of BCs notified by various state governments, census of 1961 for identification of certain special groups and its own socio-educational field survey. For the non-Hindu BCs two criteria were used: (i) all untouchables convened into any non-Hindu religion; and (ii) such occupational communities which are known by the name of their traditional occupations and whose counter-parts have been included in the list of Hindu BCs....

Ideally and logically, the Commission should have given an exhaustive list of castes/groups which it identified on the basis of the four sources for its identification. Instead it only presented a long list of 3743 castes/groups for all the 31 states and UTs in a combined manner without indicating which group was identified on the basis of which source. In other words the relationship between the Commission's labour and elaborate surveys and the final list was nowhere explained.

The Commission made a variety of recommendations. It recommended 27 percent reservations for the identified BCs in Central Government services, autonomous bodies, public sector undertakings including nationalised banks, universities and colleges and those private undertakings that receive financial assistance from the state. In the educational sector it recommended programmes for adult education, special schools and financial assistance to the BCs. It also recommended schemes to foster business and industrial enterprise among BCs. It suggested that radical land reforms should be given highest priority. Finally it recommended a review of the entire scheme after 20 years.

Eventually three extensions and two years later, the Commission submitted its report. A further two years elapsed before the government placed it before Parliament in April, 1982. Two discussions in the two Houses of Parliament took place

for two days. The report was neither rejected nor categorically accepted but the buck was passed on to a team of anonymous civil servants. A further two years later the government published the report for the benefit of the public who have no access to their Parliament. The matter rested with civil servants, save some demands by some political parties when elections were round the corner.

Finally, in January 1990, the Central Government initiated measures to implement the' recommendations of the Commission. It asked all state governments to give their views. Despite repeated reminders, not all of them responded. In early July, it informed them of its intention to go ahead. On 7 August V.P. Singh made his announcement and on the 13th the formal GO was issued. The expression Mandal Commission instead of the usual staid Second Backward Classes Commission also received official sanction. In the process the Mandal Commission almost became a symbol in the agitation that followed against the Government Order.

During the course of the agitation the symbol acquired many characteristics and attributes that have very little to do with the content of the seven-volume report. The symbolic status it acquired became so powerful that the Haryana governor Dhaniklal Mandal faced the wrath of some of the agitating students who were under the mistaken notion that he was the author of the report. And in Hyderabad students put up posters like 'Mandal Commission go back', presuming that like Simon in the colonial period, the Mandal Commission was visiting them long after Mr. B.P. Mandal had died.

As a matter of fact the official GO, in effect, took only one of the many recommendations of the Commission that relates to job reservations to the extent of 27 percent. This quantum has no direct relation to the Commission's laboured exercise but with the presumed limit of 50 percent, set by the Supreme Court. Even in the matter of castes/groups, the GO did not follow the list of the Commission but

[confined itself] only to those common to both the Commission's list and that of the states, thus excluding at least 16 states and union territories where there are no such lists. The possibility of some castes figuring in the states' list but not in the Commission's list are slim since the Commission explicitly took the former into its consideration while preparing its own list. Hence the public debate should have focused on the criteria, method and the list of the various state governments. No one seriously made such an attempt....

Article 340 of the Constitution nowhere makes it clear that the Commission appointed under it to 'investigate the conditions of socially and educationally backward classes' should prepare a list of SEBCs. However, unless such a list is prepared, Article 338(3) of the Constitution which presumes such a list to be made by the Commission appointed under A 340, for the purpose of appointing a special officer, makes no sense. Even if any commission prepared a list it is not binding on the government. In fact the Constituent Assembly rejected an amendment to that effect. Hence in terms of constitutionality, the case of SEBCs or BCs is different from those identified under the schedules of the Constitution identifying SCs and STs. It should also be noted that for the purpose of job reservation, [A. 16(4)], unlike for other special provisions under [A. 15(4)], the category is Backward Class of Citizens and not Socially and Educationally Backward Classes of Citizens. And SCs and STs, for the purpose of job reservations are part of 'Backward Class of Citizens' [A. 16(4)]. Any discussion on any reservations made for any people covered by a list prepared by any commission must face these confusing clauses which, as pointed out earlier, were anticipated by some members of the Constituent Assembly. They pinned their hope on the Supreme Court. Some hopes!

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