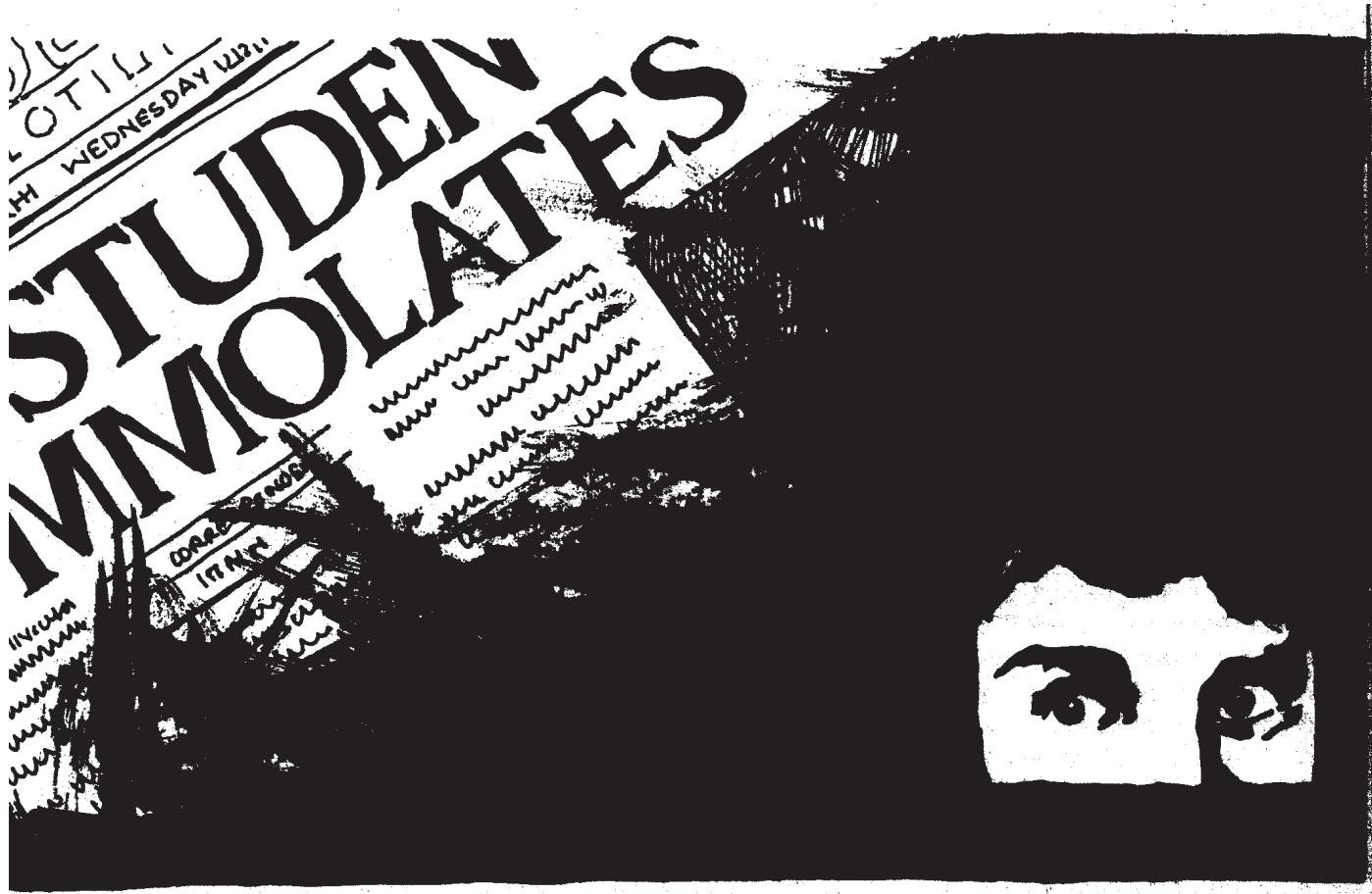


Many Unexplained Issues

The anti-Mandal 'Suicides' Spate

by
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Between September 19, 1990, when Rajiv Goswamy, a student of Deshbandhu College, Delhi University, set himself on fire, ostensibly as an act of public protest against the new government order partially implementing the recommendations of the Mandal Commission, and the end of that year, a little over 200 people attempted suicide in the country. Of these, 112 people died (detailed break-up by states is available on page 27 of the PUDR Report 'Disputed Passages', December, 1990). Over half (57%) attempted self-destruction by

immolation. Even in a country where violent protest or public frenzy is not unknown, this spate of suicides, particularly through self-immolation, was completely unprecedented, in fact, bizarre. Prior to this there are reports of five persons dying through self-immolation during the anti-Hindi protests in Tamilnadu. In 1982, when Karunanidhi was arrested, another five committed self-immolation. MGR's illness in 1984 resulted in 12 self-immolations; his death in 1987 in 26 suicides. (PUDR report, op.cit). But such a large number of 'suicides', in less

than 4 months, requires that we examine the available data and hypotheses critically to come up with a better understanding of this social pathology. This brief note attempts an examination of the different 'explanations' that have been put forth in our media.

The first question that needs to be looked at relates to the extent, spatial spread, socio-economic and demo-graphic characteristics of this phenomenon. Available data seems to indicate that between Sept. 19, 1990, and the end of the year, 202 'suicide attempts'

took place of which 112 were successful. Of these, the five North Indian states of Uttar Pradesh, Punjab, Haryana, Chandigarh and Delhi account for 140 attempts. Madhya Pradesh leads the tally with 44 attempts (Report in *Prabhat*, compiled in 'Atmadah Sanskriti, Udbhav Aur Vikas', *Lokayan*, 1991), though the PUDR Report referred to earlier gives a figure of 29. What is significant is that only five such attempts are recorded for the peninsular states of Andhra Pradesh, Tamilnadu, Karnataka, Kerala and Maharashtra. No attempts have been recorded for the eastern states of Orissa, West Bengal, Assam and the North-East.

The PUDR Report also states that, "Many of the people who attempted suicide, as it appears from available case studies, are from poor or lower middle class families, including women (30 percent of the total attempts) and many of them are young. 57 percent were in the age group of 18 or below and another 24 percent in the age group of 19 to 25. While 57 percent of the total attempted self-immolation, others used modes like poison and hanging."

While these figures are indeed shocking, some attempt needs to be made to check their authenticity. In particular, we need to know their relation to the anti-Mandal protest or sentiments. For instance, enough stories have come out that suggest that even Rajiv Goswamy, the student who sparked it all off, had not really expected to be badly burnt. He only wanted to 'give fire' to the flagging anti-Mandal agitation. Similarly there are accounts of 'normal suicides' being passed off as anti-Mandal suicides. This possible fudging of data is not altogether unknown either in our media or in agitations. For instance, forces interested in projecting a terrorist stricken Punjab have often been known to attribute murders due to 'normal civil society disputes' to terrorist killings. And if someone wants to project the situation as more normal the figures are adjusted to show increases in 'normal' murders.

What however is more ghastly is that different stories (c.f. *Lokayan* compilation) hint at individuals being murdered, and the deaths passed off as anti-Mandal suicides.

Death by burning in such cases may well be a useful way of destroying evidence.

Thus what we need is a careful disaggregated analysis that can classify the 112 suicides within the categories of protest suicides, induced suicides, and suicides/accidents/murders passed off as Mandal victims. This is not to argue that the likely reduced figures for protest and induced suicides imply that the phenomenon is not to be taken seriously. Even one death should force us to think. Just that the numbers in such cases do make a significant difference, at least to the public reaction.

Let us now attempt to examine the socio-economic and demographic data relating to the victims. Even though detailed case studies on suicide victims are but available partially, it can be broadly argued that the archetypical victim is either a young student, or a semi-educated, semi-skilled unemployed or inefficiently employed youth. There is some evidence to suggest that many of the victims were not just relatively poor and harassed, they suffered from a troubled background and could count on low family/social support. In short, many of them would well fit the textbook category of potential suicide victims.

Given the overall state of unemployment in the country and the general state of cynicism and despair that affects the populace, more so the young, even a marginal restriction in prospective employment can be passed off or seen as a major social disaster. In particular, to a young person without the needed attributes to get into organised sector private employment (education, skills, contacts), self-employment (access to capital resources) or higher level public sector/government jobs, it is the Class III & IV jobs which appear as the safest route

to security. It just so happens that these precisely are the categories of government jobs where previous quota fulfilment has been the highest.

Thus for the lower middle-class, semi-skilled/educated, upper caste youth the decision to implement the Mandal Commission was conceivably seen as a major restriction of employment opportunities. More so if self-employment or entrepreneurship has so far not been a normally exercised option. Existing cynicism and despair, fears about lower employment possibilities, when combined with continuous negative reinforcement by parents, teachers, social leaders and the media, may well have tipped the marginal cases over the edge.

What however must be given the greatest credit in fuelling the agitation and the despair is the practice of the media. First the Mandal Policy was attacked as retrogressive, pushing the country back and ruining the future of the youth. Secondly, a frenzy was whipped up, in particular by targeting the V.P. Singh led regime as the embodiment of all that is evil. The argument was that any mode of opposition was justified, such that the usual negative comments on road-blocks, destruction of public property, etc., which these days seem to be part of any agitation were missing. The anti-Mandal Commission Forum, led principally by 'elite' students of 'elite' colleges and universities, with 'help' from the youth and student wings of the Congress (I) and the BJP, further contributed. Even when the spate of self-immolations and suicides started rocking the country, instead of advising restraint or condemning them as anti-democratic acts, the general refrain was one of glorifying them as acts of self-sacrifice and martyrdom in the national interest. The October issue of the video magazine *Newstrack* is an excellent example of this media policy. More than anything else, it is this combination of despair and glory that kept the agitation alive, pushed marginal cases of depressed youth into

seeking their brief moment of fame, and helped obliterate any serious discussion of either the policy of reservations, affirmative action or even the anti-Mandal agitation itself.

What would generally be true of the youth belonging to this social strata would apply even more to the girls amongst them. Unlike a few decades earlier, many more lower middle-class girls now enter the job market, both as an act of emancipation from the house-hold and because it is a necessity. Often, they even have to generate a part of the expenses required for their wedding. Any restrictions on their opportunity would thus constitute a grievous blow. It is also likely that the negative reinforcements against those who failed to get a job by elders in the family would be much stronger in the case of girls. It is thus not a surprise that nearly a third of the victims were women.

As a general statement, the above comments probably hold. What is intriguing is that at least a few of the victims themselves belong to the OBC strata, the group that stood to gain from the Mandal policy. Even Rajiv Goswamy was not an 'upper caste' youth. Thus we have to argue that the non-upper caste victims were either 'normal' suicides sought to be passed off as Mandal suicides, or else our explanation of who chose to or were pushed into seeking an extreme form of self-destruction as protest will have to go beyond a simplistic materialist explanation.

Even more intriguing is the data related to the spatial distribution of attempts/suicides. It has been postulated that the lower incidence in the southern states is due to the already high reservation quotas which have existed there for a long time. It is therefore likely that in states where the social balance of forces had already altered in favour of the non-upper castes; where the upper castes either migrate else-where for jobs or specialise in private sector employment; where the government and media are not

very sympathetic to the anti-reservationists, et cetera, the additional quotas due to the Mandal pronouncements were unlikely to have caused any deep consternation. These states consequently saw a weak agitation, if at all. And the question of suicide hardly arose.

A second partial explanation rests on the importance of state-provided employment in the overall employment market. It may be hypothesised that states/regions where the reliance on state provided employment is low (because of either a vibrant private sector, or the absence of an educated strata seeking formal jobs), the agitation about



restrictions caused by the Mandal recommendations would be low. This may explain why there were only 6 'suicide' attempts between Maharashtra and Gujarat.

Another hypothesis rests on the reaction of the respective state governments. Since the state quotas are quantitatively far more important than the central quotas, if the state government is hostile to the Mandal recommendations, the impact on the job market will be lower. This when combined with a clear upper caste dominance in the power structure, as in Orissa, may explain why the 'affected populace' felt less pushed to agitate. Similarly, in West Bengal, though urban unemployment is high, the Left Front regime never let the Mandal Report become a public issue. The intriguing case is that of Bihar. Earlier in the 70's, when

the then Chief Minister attempted to extend the reservation quotas to include the OBCs, the ensuing agitation claimed 118 lives, though none of them were through committing suicides. This time too, the Mandal Report led to violent agitations in the state, such that 38 persons died in the caste clashes and 3 in police firings. More than anywhere else, it was in Bihar that the 'backwards' were also strongly organised, and the Janata Dal led government was strongly pro-Mandal. Possibly because of the intensity of the agitation itself, the anti-reservationists may not have felt that the issue had been foreclosed, and thus may not have felt compelled to resort to self-destruction as part of their agitation strategy. What is equally likely is that in Bihar, the focus shifted from a contestation over jobs to who would exercise political power. And thus the bleak future scenario painted by the media, particularly the English press, did not affect the public imagination significantly. Of greater significance than their relative importance of central and state quotas in government employment is the fact that the 'Mandal jobs' were not to be distributed by quotas amongst different states. Thus, particularly in regions where the education and skill levels amongst OBCs, the intended beneficiaries of Mandal, is low, there was a fleeting realisation that the new provisions were unlikely to be very helpful. As a 'potential beneficiary' of Bihar remarked in a private conversation, "Arre Bhai! All these jobs will go to people from the South. They are far more qualified than we are." What we are therefore left with when analysing the 'future employment' related impact of the Mandal recommendations is a mixed bag of different factors pulling in different directions. The initial euphoria amongst the OBCs slowly tapered off given the more detailed analysis of the overall employment market, the share of government jobs, and within this, the relative share of central and state jobs and

their expected regional distribution. A similar analysis can be made about the strata not covered by any reservation quota.

The spatial concentration of attempts and suicides in the North Indian states, particularly those clustered around Delhi, is probably due to a combination of all the above factors. This belt has seen a stagnant formal employment; the reliance on state-provided employment is high; given the proximity to Delhi the chances of getting central government employment is rated as high; the media influences are likely to have had the greatest impact; and finally, in the absence of a backward-forward clash as in Bihar, the focus of the agitation got centered on the state. Painting the government as unresponsive and uncaring would thus have had a greater social appeal in the agitated sections. Given the success of Goswamy's attempt at self-immolation in energising the flagging agitation, pushing the media into a more virulent anti-Mandal position, and an intense glorification of the victims as martyrs is thus likely to have induced others in the vulnerable groups into imitation suicides.

A final issue that needs discussion relates to the relative 'popularity' of self-immolation as the favoured mode of 'protest/imitation' suicide. Normally suicides are not looked upon with any favour. Agitators, in the past, even when they turned frenzied or violent, rarely turned upon themselves. It was the destruction of public property, sometimes even the killing of targeted enemies that marked the course of these agitations. Why then self-destruction, and through immolation?

It is evident that for a suicide to have an impact it must be both dramatic and public. Dying peacefully through an ingestion of sleeping pills or poison does not make for good copy. Self-immolation does not suffer from all these limitations. Inflammable materials are easily available; the suicide attempt can be carried out

publicly ; even if the attempt is unsuccessful the half burnt body can be employed as a powerful symbolic weapon. But, more importantly, ritual suicide, to the extent that the anti-Mandal suicides can be so classified, needs to be located in the cultural repertoire of inwardly directed protest in our society: Fasting to death or self-immolation probably fit better into this frame-work, more so since they also carry an association of purification. Since fasting has been 'overused' as a political weapon in recent decades, its appeal has somewhat declined. In self-immolation, undoubtedly an extremely painful way to court death, the symbolic protest probably gains in strength.

One is not trying to suggest that all the nearly 120 cases of immolation were highly premeditated. In fact it is likely that most, if not nearly all of them, were decisions taken in the heat of the moment. But it is likely that, given our cultural background, the 'victims' may have instinctively gone for this mode and the event was more easily appropriable for sensationalising by the media. But without detailed case material on each of the attempts/victims, it would be difficult to put forward a stronger hypothesis.

Overall, this brief and somewhat cursory analysis of the anti-Mandal

suicides leaves behind many unexplained issues. We have little idea of the actual extent of protest and induced suicides, can provide only a very partial explanation of why these individuals felt compelled to resort to this extreme step, explain the spatial distribution, and the preference for fire. What we are relatively more certain about is that both the agitation and the acts of self-destruction were strongly assisted by the unthinking, sensationalised, ideologically oriented opinions manufactured by our intelligentsi - particularly the teaching community and the media. While one does not want to argue out a conspiracy thesis where emotionally unstable, younger persons from the poorer strata were used as cannon fodder in an anti-regime agitation, the handling of the situation by the state and the intelligentsi is deeply troubling. Little effort was made to temper down passions. Instead we witnessed a cynical manipulation of public hopes and fears, without due consideration of the cost to the young who were 'persuaded' to agitate or even destroy themselves. What is more distressing is that even months after the agitation died out, there has been no attempt at a deep and comprehensive analysis of this dark chapter of our public life.