



Those Who Take Their Lives

Suicide in the Indian Tradition

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In all cultures, suicide provokes deep anxieties, not only amongst those who witness it, but in the community at large about the very basis of its organization. For, no human community can live comfortably with its members, even if its incidence is not very high, committing suicide. Suicide, is a statement about negation of life, not only the life of the one who commits it, but also of others, and as such is perceived as a threat to the principles by which their lives are organized or lived.

Suicide is viewed in different moral and legal terms in different societies. The meaning of life and death, as also the view of the human body, are not the same in all cultures. It is in this perspective that I seek to examine how the act of suicide is viewed in the Indian tradition.

Interpreting all acts of self termination of life as 'suicide' is problematic even in today's India. There is severe dissonance between the legal and moral judgements of suicide in our society. The Indian Penal Code, relying mainly on the Christian ethics as the main source of law in India, naturally ignored the traditional classification of acts of self

On April 28, 1994, the Supreme Court delivered an important judgement in the case of Nagbhushan Patnaik and P. Rathinam vs. the Union of India striking down Section 309 of the Indian Penal Code, a hangover of our colonial laws, which treated attempted suicide as a crime. Earlier, Justice Rajinder Sachar of Delhi High Court had passed a landmark judgement in 1985 declaring Section 309 as "perverse". He had also quashed all the 120 cases of attempted suicide pending in the lower courts and forbade the police to prosecute anyone under this provision.

In the recent Supreme Court judgement, the judges cited several examples from Indian mythology and tradition to justify their stand on suicide. They recalled that Lord Ram and his brothers took jalasamadhi in river Saryu near Ayodhya. Likewise Mahatma Buddha and Mahavira achieved death by seeking it. In recent history there is the example Mahatma Gandhi who undertook various fasts unto death to win over his opponents to his point of view. His disciple Vinoba Bhave ended his life by voluntary withdrawal from food, not for any political reason but because he felt he had lived enough.

In recent years, we have witnessed self immolation being misused in irresponsible ways as happened during the anti-Mandal agitation whereby scores of students burnt themselves to death in order to force the government to withdraw job reservations for certain backward castes. How does one ensure that taking of one's own life does not become a weapon of blackmail—personal or political?

In this article, Surabhi Sheth explores the many complex responses to suicide in the Indian tradition.

termination of life. Accordingly, it views all acts of self-termination of life as suicide or self-murder, and brackets suicide with murder under the chapter Crime Against Body.



There is a general belief, prompted by the Christian missionaries who came to India in the 18th and the 19th centuries from different parts of Europe and by some orientalists that in ancient India suicide was a very common practice, sanctioned by religion. These observers failed to

differentiate between suicide and other forms of voluntary self-termination of life. In the Indian tradition, contrary to such a belief, the act of suicide is clearly and unequivocally condemned, and is considered illegal and sinful. The other acts, however, such as the ones based on the idea of self-sacrifice culminating in voluntary termination of one's bodily existence, are treated separately and are not viewed as suicides.

According to the Upanishads, life unfolded a way to light towards which one moves through self-

understanding and self-study. One only entered a tunnel of darkness by ending one's life voluntarily. Thus the Ishopanishada says, "those who take their lives, reach after death the sunless regions covered with impenetrable darkness." The Vajasaneyi Samhita (40.3) also states: "Whoever destroys one's self reaches after death *asura* (demonical) world that is shrouded in blinding darkness." A Dharmashastric view equates suicide with a mahapataka (great sin). This view is also supported by some Puranas. Thus the Brahma Purana states that "those who commit suicide by poison, fire, hanging, drowning or falling from a cliff or a tree, should be classed with those who commit cardinal sins. Such persons should not be cremated, nor funeral rites be performed for them." (cited by Nanda Pandit in Vidvanmanohara, p.133)

Even the person who performs last rites for the 'sinner' who has committed suicide has to undergo expiation. The Vasishtha Dharma-Sutra (23.14-16) ordains: "Whoever kills himself becomes *abhishasta* (guilty of mortal sin) and his *sapindas* (kinsmen) are prohibited to perform death rites for him." Accordingly, "a man becomes a killer of the self when he destroys himself by wood (i.e. by fire) water, clods and stones (i.e. by striking his head against a stone), weapons, poison, or ropes (i.e. by hanging)." A *dvija* (twice born) who through affection performs the last rites for one who has committed suicide, must undergo the penance of *candrayana* (a fast regulated by moon) with *taptakrcchra*. (penance observed in order to purify one's body in accordance with Shastric injunctions). It also prescribes a *prayascitta* (expiation) for anyone making a resolve to kill oneself but not succeeding. Thus contemplating suicide was also subjected to expiation (Vas.Dh.S. 23.18). The Vishnu Samhita (XIX. 6.9) adds that

one who cuts the rope by which a person has hung himself has to expiate himself by performing the *taptakrcchra*; so does he who sheds tears for the suicide (Vishnu Samhita XX.6-7, XXXIII. 12). According to the *Adiparva* of the Mahabharata, blissful worlds are denied to him who commits suicide (179.20). A person who survived an attempt to commit suicide also did not go unpunished. Yama Smriti (20-21), pronounced:

tears for such a death is forbidden (Manu V.89).

Kautilya condemns suicide in unambiguous terms. According to him all those men and women who contemplate, commit or cause to commit suicide are subject to severe punishments. He defines suicide as an act motivated by such emotions as infatuation, love, anger or other strong passions and committed by such means as rope, weapon or



"when a person tries to kill himself by such methods as hanging, if he dies, his body should be smeared with impure things and if he lives, he should be fined 200 *panas* (weight of copper used as coins), his friends and sons should each be fined one *pana* and then they should all undergo penance laid down in the Shastras." Parashara (IV. 1-2) states that if a man or a woman commits suicide driven by such emotions as extreme pride or rage, affection or fear, he or she is consigned to the darkness of hell for 60,000 years. Further, no period of mourning is to be observed for one who has chosen to die such a violent death. The rite of cremation is denied to the corpse, as well as libation of water. Shedding of

poison, etc. He prescribes extreme humiliation in death for those committing suicide. He states that for the body of such a person neither cremation rites, nor any obsequies, usually performed by relatives, should be observed. If anyone performs them, he recommends social boycott as a penalty and adds that whoever associates with such a boycotted person will have to forfeit, for a year, the privileges of conducting or superintending a sacrifice, of teaching and of giving and receiving gifts. The penalty prescribed by Kautilya is quite severe, for he brackets suicide with murder. He suggests that in cases of murder as well as of suicide—the *kantakashodhana*, (an investigating commissioner) should take hold of the

dead body, examine it, ascertain the circumstances of death, and then try to find out the real cause of such a death. If it is a case of suicide, the dead man's body should be exposed in the public thoroughfare and should be subjected to insults and indignities. Even women were not spared and were similarly treated. (Arthashastra IV.7)

Gautama (14.11/12) disfavors the idea of mourning for those who wilfully meet death by fasting or by cutting themselves off with weapon or by fire, poison or water or by hanging themselves, or by jumping from a precipice. Atri, however, is softer on the suicide and declares that mourning should be allowed for the one who has committed suicide but only for three days. The collection of bones should be done on the second day, and the offering of water be given on the third day. The whole affair should be concluded on the fourth day with *shraddha* (a ceremony observed in honor of and for benefit of dead relatives) in being performed (Arti 218-219, quoted by Medhatithi on Manu V.89, Mitakshara on Yajnyavalkya III.6).

This account, even if sketchy, shows that suicide was censured and condemned when committed as a personal act motivated by such emotions as pride, frustration, anger, infatuation, hatred, etcetera.



Certain other forms of voluntary self-termination of life were not considered as suicide in the Indian tradition. These included an act of self-deliverance not motivated by passions, an act inspired by an idea of self-sacrifice for the general good or such an act committed to expiate great sins. Such acts are ascribed a ritual meaning and are preceded by a

series of ceremonies. Thus the Jabalopanishad says that the *sannyasin* (ascetic), who has acquired full insight, may enter upon the great journey, or choose death by voluntary starvation, by drowning, by fire or by a hero's fate." Such acts committed deliberately but 'without any passion' were not condemned. After one is rendered unable to live a religious life of performing one's role



and functions and hence feels the futility of life, inviting death was treated as a matter of individual choice and freedom. For example *mahaprasthana* (great journey), which involved continuous walk after giving up all attachments and merely subsisting on air and water till the body falls, was considered a meritorious death for a person at the end of the *vanaprastha* (life of detachment to be lived after absolving one of domestic responsibilities) stage.

The Himalayas were considered especially holy for this purpose. The Pandavas and Draupadi had opted for this mode of self-termination of life.

Laxmidhara, Viramitro-daya, Narayanabhatta and Mitramisra devote full chapters to the subject of *mahaprasthana*—the great or the final journey. Similarly, for those who decided to end their lives for spiritual and not personal reasons, drowning in holy waters—(Mahabharata, Shalya Parva, 39. 33-34) *jalasamadhi* or *jalanima-jjana*—at the holy spots such as confluence of rivers, especially at Prayaga, or in the holy waters of the rivers Ganga and Yamuna, or retiring in Kasi with a view to end one's life there, or falling in fire, or jumping from a cliff of the mountain Amarakantaka, or falling in a river from a *vata* (banyan) tree at Prayaga were recommended as right means and places to end one's life for attaining salvation. (Matsya Purana, 5. 34-35) For a person suffering from an incurable disease, or for people too old to perform their religious duties, inviting death by abstaining from food was recommended. Apararka even enjoins such a death for the *vanprasthas*. While quoting from the texts of

Brahmagarbha, Vivasvat and Gargya who hold the same view, Apararka (on Yajnyavaikyasmiti, Vanaprastha Dharma Prakarana, 55) adds that to end one's life when one is unable to perform the duties prescribed by the *Shastras* is no sin; one should not desire to live in vain; death in such cases is better than to continuing to live. In modern times, Sane Guruji, Veer Savarkar and Vinoba Bhave are some well-known examples of people choosing to end their lives by refusing

all nutrition. This *icchamarana* (ending life according to one's will) is permitted only in certain circumstances.

For the ascetics who have lived their life by denying all material comforts, voluntary termination of life was considered an act of ultimate self-denial. The Apastamba Dharma Sutra (II, DC. 22. 2-4) states that the ideal for an ascetic is to first live on fruits, roots, grass and leaves, then on those things only which become spontaneously available and then on water, then on air and finally on ether alone.

Another form of self-termination of life sanctioned by the tradition is self-sacrifice for the larger good of the society, which also included keeping one's promise or a vow made to oneself or publicly. The famous example is of the sage Dadhichi who offered his body to Indra for creating a weapon called Vajra out of his bones to subdue the *rakshasas*. Other examples are of King Shibi who sacrificed himself to save the life of a pigeon, or of King Balli who invited death to keep his vow, or of Kama who gave away his lifesaving ornaments to Indra to keep his promise. All these acts of self-termination of life or of deliberately exposing oneself to death are, in fact, eulogized and celebrated.

Self-termination of life was particularly recommended for retiring kings. Thus we find several examples of kings embracing death after retirement King Aja after living a full life resented to fasting and drowned himself at the confluence of the holy rivers Ganga and Sarayu (Raghuvamsha VIII. 94). The Mrcchakatika speaks of King Sudraka as having entered fire. Kumara Gupta, the Gupta emperor, is also stated to have entered the fire of dried cow dung cakes. This mode of ending life by a king is considered most meritorious in the Puranas. Manu, who condemns ordinary suicides, recommends

voluntary termination of life for old kings. He states that a *kshatriya* king, after placing his son on the throne, should give up his body on the battlefield. A commentator on Manu (IX. 223) adds that if death on the battlefield is not possible for him, he should end his life by abstaining from food. The Smritis recommend suicide as a means of expiation for one who committed a sin and is tormented by guilt. Such an act is, however, not accorded any spiritual virtue. There is, in fact, a thin line dividing such an act of 'voluntariness' and a punishment dispensed for a cardinal sin. Suicides recommended for salvation are thus different from those ordained for expiation. The former are for those who have attained a certain standard of spiritual integration to leave the world with a sense of detachment and equanimity; then alone can they attain peace by their ultimate surrender. The latter are for those who need to cleanse themselves of the taint caused by the guilt for having committed sinful actions. Thus when a man was guilty of having committed the great sin called '*brahmahatya*' (murder of a *brahmin*) he was allowed to meet death at the hands of archers in a battle, who knew that the sinner wanted to be killed in that way, as a penance. Similarly, such a sinner may throw himself downwards in fire. Also, the drinker of spirituous liquor could expiate his sin by taking boiling wine, water, ghee, cow's milk or urine and dying thereby. Similar penances are prescribed for incest, and theft. It should be noted that such severe penances resulting in the death of the sinner were not approved by some. Thus the Apastamba Dharma Sutra (1.10.28.15-17) quotes Harita who condemns such penances involving death.

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Despite there being a sanction for the above discussed forms of self-termination of life, (not regarded as suicides) a controversy has persisted whether an abrupt, violent act to end one's life was proper or not, even if the objective was self-deliverance or salvation. The Shruti clearly states that 'one who is desirous of heaven should not seek to die before the given span of life runs out by itself—*"Na Purayushah Svahkami Preyat..."*' But Manu (VI.31) states that a *vanaprastha yati* (ascetic), if he suffers from an incurable disease, should subsist on mere air and water and continue to walk in the southern direction till he gives up his body (Manu VI. 31). Kulluka, while commenting on Manu (VI. 31), stretches this further and explains that this sanction accorded by Manu to a person inviting death for self-deliverance does not contradict the aforesaid Vedic injunction and by focusing on the word '*svah kami*' in the shruti stresses that the prohibition for a motivated termination of existence and not for the kind for which sanction is accorded in the Shastras. Medhatithi, another commentator of Manu (VI.32), supports this view and states that if the Shruti intended to lay down an absolute prohibition against any form of self-termination of life, it should have simply said: "one who desired heaven should not seek to die." This was not the case, because the Shruti talked further about the "given life span". For, after all, how does one decide what is the appointed time for one's death?

Thus, it is clear that while a distinction was made in the tradition, between '*avaidha*' (unlawful) and '*sastravivita*' (sanctioned by law) forms of self termination of life, differences prevailed with regard to the modes of ending one's life. On the whole, it seems, exposing oneself to

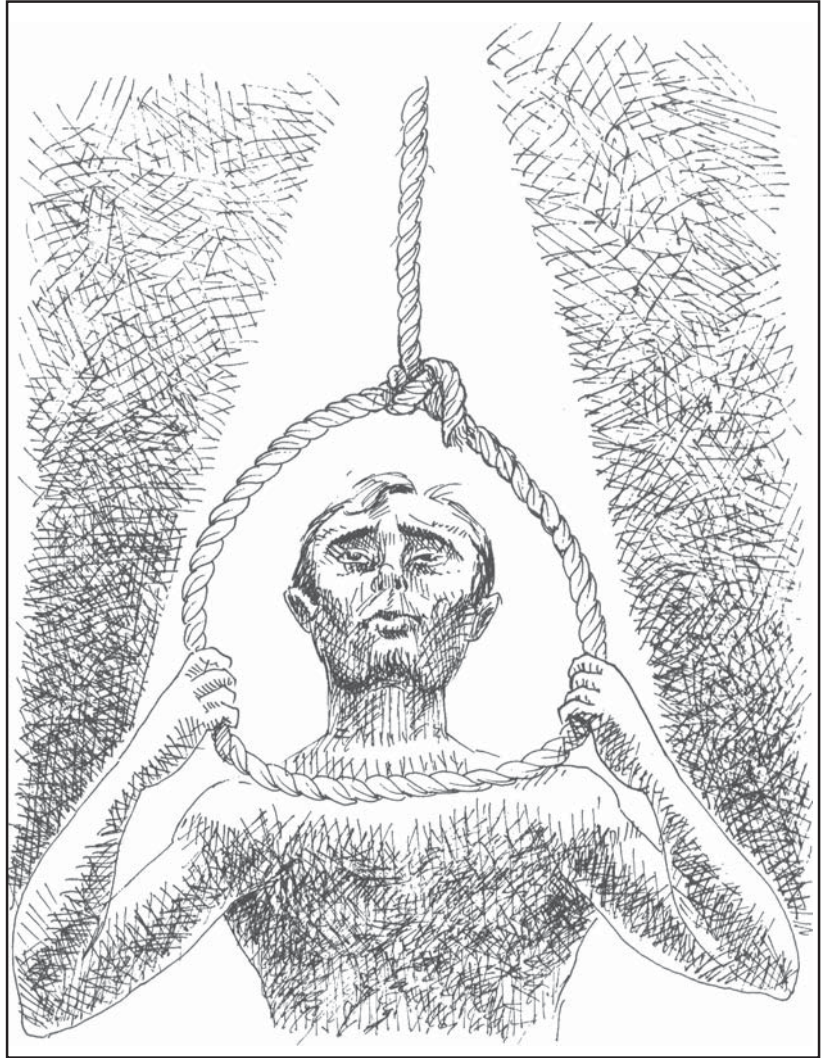
death (what is today called withdrawal of life-supports) was a preferred mode over ending one's life abruptly and violently. But there always remained a grey area in which it became difficult to judge whether a particular act of self-termination of one's life was *avaidha* or *shastravihita*. As we have seen, in the Shastras an abrupt and violent act of self-termination of life, i.e. one which the Shruti injunction had prohibited by declaring that no one should end life before the appointed span of life was over, has been variously interpreted. On the whole a sanction was accorded by the Smritis and the Puranas to certain acts of self-termination of life committed for self-deliverance, even if brought about abruptly. These were separated from ordinary suicides. Thus the terms used for ordinary suicides are *atmahanana* (self-killing) and *atmaghata* (self-murder) etc. whereas those sanctioned by Shastras are termed *sariranipata* (collapse of the body), *mahaprasthan* (setting out on a great journey) *prayopavesa* (abstaining from food and awaiting death), *samadhi* (eighth and last stage of yoga) etc. Despite all this, however, the criterion to judge a particular act of suicide as '*avaidha*', as against the one sanctioned by Shastras, remained dubious.

It is this grey area, marked by differences and disputations which, in practice, allowed ordinary suicides — detached from any notion of general good—to pass as sublime acts of self-sacrifice. It encouraged, even induced and forced such acts as of the *sati*. It promoted abrupt and violent acts of self-termination of life at holy places, thus catering to a craze among ordinary people for instant salvation. It also provided a cover for them to commit suicides not sanctioned by the Shastras.

It was during the neo-Puranic period, between the 17th and the 19th century, that such practices had

acquired almost epidemic proportions. A form of suicide which achieved great notoriety was the rite performed at Puri during the procession of the chariot of the Lord Jagannatha. The devout pilgrims used to throw themselves under the giant wheels and were crushed to death. The

The finer distinctions made by the ancient seers, social thinkers and lawgivers thus got all mixed up. A moral judgement was suspended in favor of a growing practice marked by religious fraud and self-deception. It not only condoned ordinary suicides, but promoted their abetment by the



general belief was that those who perished in this manner ascended straight to the heavenly realms. The Shaiva Puranas advocated suicide by fire, or falling from the mountain-cliff by the ardent devotees of Shiva and further declared that this was a means of salvation open to all irrespective of caste and status — a gateway to heaven.

community. "Men used to hurl themselves annually from a precipice of the mountains, south of Narmada, sacred to Kalabhairava, in fulfilment of vows undertaken at an earlier period. Great concourses gathered at the place on new moon of Phalguna, the day appointed for the ceremony, and it is significant of the passion for public recognition as part of the

motive of such suicides that the man meditating this fate was want to proclaim his intention publicly, and attended by a band of musicians to promenade in the neighboring towns collecting alms.” Such spectacles of self-destruction were a matter of rejoicing to the perpetrators as well as to spectators. All this resulted in pushing people, especially women, into an act of self-murder. Often it even allowed a plain act of murder to pass as a religious rite — as was the case with many of the incidents of *sati* in the 19th century. It was probably because of such perversion of the idea of *sastravihita* acts of self-termination of life that took place in the late Puranic period that even *mahaprasthanas*, when sought through an abrupt, violent end of one’s life, ceased to be promoted by pious men of religion. Thus, entering fire or falling from a cliff etc. were forbidden, even if the purpose was self-deliverance. Accordingly, these acts were included in the list of things considered *kalivarjya*—not meant to be performed in the *kaliyuga*. (Brihanaradiya Purana, Purnaradha, 24.16).

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In the Jain tradition, suicides are unambiguously forbidden, but mortification of the flesh is promoted as an ideal. *Sallekhana*, (planned scheme of fasting and mortification) is an approved form of self termination of life in Jainism. It is described as an act of abandoning one’s bodily existence for accumulation of merit in times of collective calamities like famines or in a personal situation like facing extreme old age or an incurable disease and is recommended for monks (Ratnakarandashravakachara, Ch. V). It is explicitly prohibited to one who has many years of saintly life before him, who has no fear of starvation from a great famine, who is not affected by incurable disease, and who is not faced by any sudden cause of death. Whoever desires to put an

end to his life, while still able with his body to observe the rules of *Dharma* and of the order properly, falls from the true path. When a man takes *sallekhanavrata*, the fellow monks and the Acharya should carefully see that the concerned monk is not led to consider the *sallekhanavrata* as a burden on him, he is to be carefully looked after and should be kept firm

life, nor does one pray for death.

As the main emphasis of Jain tradition is on *ahimsa* (nonviolence), there is a clear prohibition against ending one’s life abruptly and violently. It, therefore, prescribes specific sanctions and allows only certain forms of self-termination of life in specific circumstances and only to those who have understood the



on the right path by means of constant inspiration from religious discourses.

Similarly death by fasting is given a high place in the Jain canon. But it clearly forbids such an act if it is motivated by attachment, fear or greed. Protecting one’s body, it asserts, is one’s duty. Only when one’s spiritual merit is at stake and can be saved only by sacrificing one’s body, *dehanasa* (destroying one’s body) or *samadhimarana* (ending one’s life through intense contemplation) is permitted. The objective of long spells of fasting is not for attaining death but for conquering it, just as performing surgery on a boil is not to cut the skin but to cure it. The pure life which stabilized in one’s essence is called *santhara*. Through it one does desire

meaning of life and death. Accordingly, the *Acaranga* prescribes for such people the following four modes of self-termination of life.⁶ (i) *Bhaktapratyakhyana*: This means total abstinence from food and drink. The monk lies on a bed of straw and waits for death even without moving his limbs (*Acarangasutra* 1.7.8.7-10). (ii) *Ingitamarana*: The monk lies on a bare piece of ground and abstains from food and drinks, although he can move according to the rules of *gupti* and *samiti* (council) (*ibid.* pp. 76-77), (iii) *Padapagamana*: The monk stands motionless like a tree till death comes (*ibid.* 1.7.8-19-28) (iv) *Sallekhana*: This means a planned scheme of fasting and mortification, the maximum period of mortification

being twelve years and the minimum six months. Pujiyapada (On Tatvarthasutra 7.22) states that the feeling of attachment is absent in *sallekhana*. Ashadhara approves it as a means of serving *Dharma*, for what a man does at the last moment of his life is very important (Sagaradharmamrta, 8:8).

The underlying spirit of Buddhism treats life and death with equanimity. Thus it objects to both thirst for existence - *bhavatrishna*, and thirst for nonexistence - *vibhavatriashna*. A monk is explicitly told not to commit suicide in order to reach *nirvana* (absolute extinction or annihilation of individual existence). Still, a number of cases of suicide through self-immolation or by use of weapon are recorded in the Buddhist lore. In later periods, some Buddhist texts even advocated 'abandoning one's existence' as the best sacrifice, for "to burn ones body as an offering is certainly more meritorious than to kindle lamps at a shrine." Even Indian Islam, in which the Hanafi School is quite prominent, permits purging oneself at an old age so that one directly goes to God after death.



The continuity of the traditional discourse on suicide is maintained in today's India, manifesting both its positive as well as negative aspects. The negative aspects were illustrated by those who sought to justify *sati*, in the controversy following the murder of Roop Kanvar in the name of *sati*. Similarly acts of self-immolation which almost spread like an epidemic during the anti-Mandal agitations, were also applauded as heroic acts by sections of the Indian press. But there are also positive aspects, as illustrated in the debate on euthanasia and the right to a dignified death. Among modern Indians all acts of self-termination of life, whichever way one looks at the

issue, in the legal, political and moral discussions are not viewed unequivocally as unlawful or sinful. Despite the penal code being there for over a century, crucial distinctions continue to be made in the public mind with regard to different forms of self-termination of life.

The language of self-sacrifice—*atmabalidana*—finds great resonance in India's public life. The manner in which a declaration by a political protester to go on fast unto death is received by the public is indicative of the fact that the traditional discourse is relevant even today; such a declaration is seldom perceived as declaration of suicide. In fact, such an act is 'abetted' by public approval, especially by the supporters of the cause for which one has made such a declaration.

Thus viewed, there exists in India today a wide gap in perceptions between the legal, unidimensional view of suicide and the public view which differentiates between suicide as a private act attracting penal provisions and other forms of self-termination of one's life which are viewed as public acts eliciting social, political and moral approval, approbation and even acclaim. Such public perceptions on the issue, as we saw, have roots in tradition. It is a tradition which views death not as the

end of being, life not as an end in itself, and the body as a physical, gross, perishable means to achieve the higher goal of self emancipation — transcending the bodily existence. It is this view of human body, life and death which made it possible, even necessary, in the past to distinguish between acts of suicide or self-murder and other forms of voluntary termination of one's life. And, it is this view which informs even today the public attitude, by which some acts of self-termination of life are not considered suicide.

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