

Protest Suicide in South Asia: Cases and Literature Review

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Background: The phenomenon of protest suicide has been poorly studied in South Asia. We aimed to report and analyse events of protest suicidality in South Asian countries. **Methods:** We searched for media reports and made personal communications to identify the protest suicide and noted cases in South Asia. **Results:** Our study identified 6 notable protest suicide events (Bangladesh and India two each; Nepal and Pakistan one each) through media reports and personal communications from 2012 to 2023. There were suicidal attempts in the group to protest the oppression. Self-immolation was the most common method in South Asia. Suicide attempts were made in highly important public places with media attention like the National Press Club, and previous low-intensity attempts/measures were performed before the final attempt. Media plays a fundamental role in preventing widespread copy-cat suicide, mental health professionals have roles in postvention as the persons may not have psychiatric disorders. **Conclusion:** Protest suicide indicates the role of a wide range of ecological factors like social justice and human rights in suicide prevention.

Keywords: Protest Suicide, Suicide in South Asia, Suicide in Bangladesh, Suicide Prevention, Social Justice

Introduction

What drags a person towards suicidal behavior? Researchers, professors, doctors, and other stakeholders are trying to solve this puzzle. Suicide is the result of intricate interactions between a number of variables, including ecological, social, psychological, spiritual, and biological ones (Zalsman et al., 2016; WHO, 2014). Other wide range of factors like social justice, human rights, and evolutionary changes have influencing roles on suicidal behavior (Soper, 2018; Canetto & Rezaeian, 2020; Marsh, 2019). Various explanatory models attempted to develop understanding about suicide attempt are: “psychache theory” by Shneidman (Cheng et al., 2021), “ideation to action” theory by (Klonsky and May, 2015), interpersonal theory of suicide (IPTS) by Joiner (Joiner, 2005), integrated-volitional model of suicide by O'Connor (O'Connor, 2011), fluid vulnerability theory by Rudd (2006). However, there is significant knowledge gap regarding the influence of wide societal variables like ecological systems (Bronfenbrenner, 1992), social integration (Durkheim, 1897/2002), political milieu, social injustice, and human rights violations (Canetto & Rezaeian, 2020; Marsh, 2019).

Protest suicide is defined as “purposive political act intended to change oppressive political policies or practices” (Spehr and Dixon, 2013, p. 368). It happens to protest institutionalized oppression (Canetto & Rezaeian, 2020). Suicide attempt can be considered as a “cry for help”, a mode of bargain, a desire to take revenge, and manipulate others behaviour (Soper, 2018, p. 11). Sometimes, it can be a “Machiavellian gamble” usually performed by powerless persons mostly by young poor uneducated females (Soper, 2018 p. 11; Canetto & Rezaeian, 2020). Protest suicide has been noted among Muslim females, socially deprived or oppressed persons (Canetto & Rezaeian, 2020).

South Asia is a suicide dense area contributing to about 30% of global suicides (Arafat and Kar, 2024). The region revealed differences in suicide characteristics from the Western countries like a lower prevalence of mental disorders, dearth of suicide research, unavailability of quality suicide data, a lower human rights index, and rampant social injustice. Suicide attempts have been noted to protest in response to various events. However, phenomenon is yet to get academic attention. Here we aimed to report protest suicidal behaviour in South Asia and discuss the characteristics of protest suicide in the region. This study hypothesizes that protest suicides in South Asia are influenced by socio-political factors rather than personal psychological issues. Our objectives are to document cases, analyse their characteristics, and suggest preventive measures.

Methods

We searched for media reports and made personal communications to identify the protest suicide and noted cases in four countries i.e. Bangladesh, India, Nepal, and Pakistan. We used protest “suicide in South Asia” and protest suicide in every specific country as search term. We made personal communications from South Asian colleagues having publications on suicide for events in a country and/or South Asia.

Results

Our study identified 6 notable protest suicide events (Bangladesh and India two each; Nepal and Pakistan one each) through media reports and personal communications from 2012 to 2023 (Table 1).

Bangladesh

In July 2022, a 50-years-old businessman hailing from Kushtia set fire on own self at National Press Club (NPC) to protest his failure of loan recovery from a company owner (Desk, 2022; Report, 2022). About 90% of his body surface area was burnt and he died in the next day in tertiary care burn hospital. He lent a company 1.26 million Bangladesh Taka for business. Previously, he tried several times to rescue the money and failed. Two months ago, of this event he arranged a human chain at NPC to protest the delay in loan recovery. After his death, the case was filed and the company managing directors were arrested (Desk, 2022).

In October 2022, a 35-year-old lady hailing from Narayanganj along with her son and daughter set fire on themselves in front of NPC, Dhaka to protest the grabbing of their dwelling house by a local politically influenced person (Kabir et al., 2023; Representatives, 2022). The family previously tried to resolve the issue by discussing with the local representatives and administration, however, failed. Then they moved for social events. They took sedatives and subsequently poured kerosene on their body to burn. After setting fire on their body, they were rescued and admitted in hospital. After the event the perpetrator (local political leader) was arrested by police and sent to jail against a case lodged by the lady. Two weeks ago, the lady attempted for self-burn in front of the Prime Minister’s office while she was rescued (Representatives, 2022).

India

In September 2022, six sanitation workers (male 3, female 3) made suicide attempt at Bhopal municipality office to demand for regularization of their job (TNN, 2022). Three of them drank poisons and the rest three poured petrol on them. The workers were protesting for few months in favour of their demand.

In October 2023, a contractor and his family member (wife and two children) allegedly took poison to die in front of the administrative office to protest delay in a bill payment (Samuel, 2023). A case was lodged against this family for conducting the protest without permission and suicide attempt even though suicide attempt has been decriminalized in India considering the mental health grounds. The person previously gave suicide threat to the authority and after repeated efforts, he was unable to receive his bill. There were some discrepancies between the statements of the contractor and the officials.

Nepal

A 37-year-old businessman poured diesel on his body and set fire on himself in front of the Parliament of Nepal protesting the corruption persisted in Nepal. The video of his self-immolation was extensively

circulated on social media. About 80% of his body surface was burnt and he died on the next day (Team, 2023). He had history of multiple past suicidal attempts, business failure, and financial loss. The Home minister of Nepal asked for investigation to the issues and a compensation to the family.

Pakistan

In 2012, a group of five persons (male 2, female 3) poured petrol on their cloths and attempted to set fire on themselves in front of the NPC that was restricted by police to protest alleged grabbing of their land (Reporter, 2012). Previously the landowner complained to the local police which was futile. One of these five persons made previous similar attempt for the same reason which was stopped by the police, and they were staging protest for the last seven months.

Table 1. Protest suicide events in South Asia

Year	Country	Persons involved	Methods	Conflict	Place of attempt	Previous threat
2022	Bangladesh	1	Fire setting	Loan payment	National Press Club	Yes
2022	Bangladesh	3	Fire setting, overdose	Forceful displacement from home	National Press Club	Yes
2022	India	6	Poisoning and fire setting	Job regularization	municipality office	Yes
2023	India	4	Poisoning	Bill payment	administrative office	Yes
2023	Nepal	1	Fire setting	National corruption	Parliament	Yes
2012	Pakistan	5	Fire setting	Land grabbing	National Press Club	Yes

Discussion

The mentioned cases from Bangladesh, India, Nepal, and Pakistan have occurred where the victims were the prey of social injustice and suicidality was as a method of protest. It indicates the role of social justice and human rights in suicide prevention (Canetto & Rezaeian, 2020). There are some similarities among the cases across the countries such as the method of attempt (self-immolation), previous signals before final attempt, attempts were made in place with potentiality of media coverage (NPC), legal actions were taken after the attempts (either perpetrators or victims), and there was social oppression. Protest suicide in groups was noted in India, Bangladesh, and Pakistan while the group members have common interest to the point of bargain. Our findings align with global patterns where self-immolation is prevalent in protest suicides. However, the socio-political context in South Asia, characterized by high levels of social injustice and political corruption, appears to be a significant driver of these acts. One study found that self-burning is an important mode of political protest since the early days (Crosby et al., 1977; Biggs, 2013). However, it is more common in low- and middle-income countries (Nooraeen & Croarkin, 2023; Lahiri, 2014). Spehr and Dixon, (2013) also explained protest suicide as political protest. In December 2022, a 38-year-old student from Iran who was living in France died by drowning protesting against the Iranian regime (Nooraeen & Croarkin, 2023). The student posted a video in social media. However, all mentioned cases were not linked to political motives instead all the cases cover social justice and human rights domain (Nooraeen & Croarkin, 2023; Canetto &

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Rezaeian, 2020; Marsh, 2019). For prevention of protest suicide social justice and human rights are fundamental strategies (Canetto & Rezaeian, 2020).

Implications

Protest suicide could be attributed to social concerns such as political unrest, social justice, and human rights violations rather than personal problems such as mental illness, depression, interpersonal problems, and negative thoughts. There might, of course, be interactions among multiple factors affecting suicidality. The broader elements should be taken into consideration when focusing on protest suicide prevention. It could be difficult because these sporadic occurrences involving few people and occasionally are connected to far-off concerns to get political attention. Simultaneously, we discovered that prior to attempting a final effort, the individuals typically give signals or perform comparable tasks at low intensity or in less conspicuous locations, or low-intention activities. These might serve as effective protest suicide prevention strategies. Prevention strategies should include strengthening social justice mechanisms, ensuring human rights, and improving mental health services. Media guidelines should be established to responsibly report such incidents to prevent copycat behaviour.

Challenges for mental health

As we clearly found that the Iranian student did not have any psychiatric morbidity (Nooraeen & Croarkin, 2023) and also, we did not find any clue from the mentioned cases about the psychiatric morbidity except the case from Nepal. The risk factors of our mentioned cases seemed to be linked with external environment related to social justice and human rights. However, further studies are warranted to reveal it more precisely and psychiatrist have roles in managing the attempts as suicide attempt is a psychiatric emergency. Postvention initiatives could be the major area. Special attention is warranted in preventing further attempts which may be challenging without satisfying the primary gain.

Challenges for media reporting

Protest suicide attempts get public attention, and they are performed at important places like NPC, Parliament. Additionally, it gets circulations in social media. Therefore, media has fundamental role while reporting the cases to prevent further “copy-cat” suicidal behaviour in the community.

Limitations

Here we highlight the phenomenon of protest suicide in South Asia. However, there are some important limitations to consider. Firstly, we collected data from available media reports without any interview of the persons or family members. Therefore, a cautious interpretation is warranted as there may have multiple confounders. Secondly, we were unable to assess other factors like psychiatric disorders, past suicide attempts, and personality issues. Thirdly, suicide is an extremely complex interaction of multiple factors. Therefore, a cautious interpretation is warranted to define any one-way association.

Conclusion

Suicidal behaviour in protest of social injustice has a long history, however, has been under-addressed in South Asia. This phenomenon indicates the role of wide range of ecological factors like social justice and human rights in suicide prevention.

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