

Chapter 2

Suicide in Ancient Hindu Scriptures: Condemned or Glorified?

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Since the time of Alexander of Macedonia, the land east of the river Sindhu (the anglicized name of which is Indus) was referred to as Indika or India by later European invaders and as Hindustan by Muslim invaders. Consequently, the people living to the east of river Sindhu were known as Indians or Hindus. Invasions transformed into conquests and empire building. As victors forced people to convert into Islam at the point of sword, a need was experienced by these invaders to refer to those who refused to convert into Islam preferring death to conversion. The word Hindu now included all those who were not Muslims, and later on, those who were not Christians. All religious philosophy, scriptures and practices which were neither Muslim nor Christian, became Hindu, by default use of those in political power for centuries. Another group of people, who came here, arrived by sea: the Parsis. This name also has its roots in geography: they were refugees fleeing the persecution of forced conversions to Islam in Persia and hence, the name of the land and language they spoke, Parsi, became their name and of their religion, by common usage. The name by which India was and is referred to, by the original inhabitants, is Bharat. The scriptures which have their origin in Bharat, are many, as are the religions such as Buddhism, Jainism and Sikhism. This chapter deals with ancient texts that are not Buddhist, Jain, Sikh or Parsi, yet have their origins in Bharat. These hoary texts have the removal of human suffering as one of its primary goals. The other goals of these scriptures are to understand and reveal the nature of oneself, denoted by I: of and with others, denoted by you; and the experiences of change, essentially those from birth to death, denoted by the world. Due to being in immediate proximity I and you are also referred to as 'this'. All else, to which a finger may be pointed to due to distance or needing to be referred to, is said to be 'that'. The relationships between 'this' and 'that' are recurring themes in our ancient scriptures. In other words, these scriptures seek and present answers to questions such as (1) Who am I? (2) Who are you? (3) What is this world, how and

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why does it change? (4) Where did we come from? (5) Where are we going? (6) Why are we here? (7) What is real? (8) What is the cause of suffering and how to remove it? (9) What is life? (10) What is death? (11) Why are we mortal and not immortal? (12) What is the purpose of life? (13) What happens after death? Suicide is one of the themes that are intimately related to many of these questions, most importantly as one of methods of removal of suffering.

The authors of these ancient scriptures studied not only visible phenomena objectively, but also delved deep into subjective experiences, especially while in meditative states. The scriptures record the revelations of these meditators as seeing and hearing, within. Hence, the persons are referred to as seers or Rishis and the content as heard or *Shruti*. The content of the *Shruti* is essentially abstract and pertains to inner experiences as in the ten major Upanishads and are often presented in symbolic language as in the four Vedas. The objective recordings are found in the *Smriti*, or remembered texts which also uses symbolic language, as in the eighteen *Puranas*. The two epics are both objective and subjective, authored by great seers or Maharishis, hence, the Ramayana of Valmiki and the Mahabharata of Vyasa are positioned in between the *Shruti* and *Smriti*. If grouping is needed, they are referred to as *Smriti*, with some portions being accepted almost equal to *Shruti*, for example, the Srimad Bhagavad Gita of Mahabharata. This chapter only examines the Upanishad component of *Shruti*, which is changeless and relevant regardless of time, place and situation. The *Smriti*, on the other hand, has changed much in keeping with societal changes according to time, place and situation. In case of a contradiction of content, *Smriti* acknowledges the superiority of *Shruti*. Due to these reasons, *Smriti* texts are excluded from this chapter. As the seers were many, their understanding of the above questions and answers also varied, as do their presentations. Life and death are consistent themes in the *Shruti*, as is immortality. The various schools of thought, opinion and reasoning on the above questions (and others) in ancient Bharat developed into six broad streams of philosophy, called the *shad darshan*, the last of which is known is Vedanta, meaning the end of the Vedas. This chapter examines only the position of Vedanta on suicide, which has been considered as the only serious philosophical question in the Western world (Camus, 1975). The attitudes, opinions, positions or stands of ancient Hindu scriptures are not well-documented academically as suicide among the Hindus is usually studied for its cultural dimensions for inexplicable reasons.

The three texts which together form the ultimate authority in Vedanta are the Upanishads (*Shruti*), the Bhagavad Gita (*Smriti*) and the Brahma Sutras, also known as the Vedanta Sutras. The last text aims to clear misconceptions of the philosophical systems and logically arrive at the clear message of the *Shruti*. Any school of thought must have a commentary on the Brahma Sutras in order to be accepted as an entity. Hence, there are several commentaries on these aphorisms of the Brahma Sutras. However, this chapter will only examine the commentary of Adi Shankaracharya, the greatest of all teachers, mystic and commentator par excellence, whom no one has managed to excel in any manner. Similarly, this chapter will limit itself to the earliest extant commentaries on the ten major Upanishads and the Bhagavad Gita, also by Adi Shankaracharya. The Yoga Sutras of Patanjali is a

practical manual accepted by Vedanta, and its earliest extant commentary by Vyasa will be used in this chapter to examine its position on suicidal behaviour.

The suicidal process includes a spectrum of human phenomena such as suicidal thoughts, suicidal acts and completed suicide. The World Health Organisation (WHO) defines suicide as the act of deliberately killing oneself (WHO, 2016). The Centres for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC) of the USA defines suicide as death caused by self-directed injurious behaviour with intent to die as a result of the behaviour (CDC, 2015). They define a suicide attempt as a non-fatal, self-directed, potentially injurious behaviour with intent to die as a result of the behaviour but which might not result in injury and suicidal ideation as either thinking about, considering, or planning a suicidal act. The Merriam-Webster Dictionary (2016) defines suicide as the act or an instance of taking one's own life voluntarily and intentionally. Shneidman (1973), the father of suicidology, wrote about suicide in the Encyclopaedia Britannica:

Suicide is not a disease (although there are those who think so); it is not, in the view of the most detached observers, an immorality (although, as noted below, it has often been so treated in Western and other cultures); and, finally, it is unlikely that any one theory will ever explain phenomena as varied and as complicated as human self-destructive behaviours. In general, it is probably accurate to say that suicide always involves an individual's tortured and tunnelled logic in a state of inner-felt, intolerable emotion. In addition, this mixture of constricted thinking and unbearable anguish is infused with that individual's conscious and unconscious psychodynamics (of hate, dependency, hope, etc.), playing themselves out within a social and cultural context, which itself imposes various degrees of restraint on, or facilitations of, the suicidal act. (pp. 383–385)

The first methodological study of suicide as a social phenomenon was by Durkheim (1951), in which he identified four types of suicide depending on the strengths of and balances between the values placed on oneself as an individual and on others in the society in which one lives. *Egoistic* suicide is about low social integration and high individualism. *Altruistic* suicide is about high social integration existing simultaneously with low individualism. *Anomic* suicide is about both low social integration and low individualism. *Fatalistic* suicide occurs when high individualism and social integration are present together. As suicide was still within the realm of religion only at that time and psychiatry was in its infancy, he used the term moral regulation instead of individualism. However, psychiatry and psychology grew fast after the world wars, and as a result, the definitions of mental health and suicide, changed in the Western world. Shneidman has documented these changes over a period of more than two centuries of notes on suicide in the Encyclopaedia Britannica (Leenars, 2010). Suicide has moved from being a moral sin and religious crime to becoming the latest area of specialization in mental health, in most parts of the world. That suicide had a mental distress component to it provoking and sustaining the intent to stop the life of the body, alleviate pain and remove distress, is being increasingly recognized, despite several modern definitions excluding the mental distress part. If the mental distress constituent is absent or irrelevant, suicide prevention would not be a part of health ministries, the WHO would have nothing to do with it, and neither psychiatry nor psychology would have any role in the life of a suicidal person or in suicide prevention programs.

Today, in the Western world, a suicidal person would be immediately referred to the emergency departments of mental health clinics, not a priest or the police. This major change about the shifting of the location of the system that has to do with the suicidal person is the most important indicator of the acceptance of the mental distress component in the current understanding of suicidal behaviour, despite efforts to formulate definitions without it.

Leenars (2010) states that Shneidman, the founder of the American Association of Suicidology and its pioneering journal, *Suicide and Life Threatening Behaviour*, culled out the following ten commonalities on suicide:

- I. The common purpose of suicide is to seek a solution.
- II. The common goal of suicide is cessation of consciousness.
- III. The common stimulus in suicide is intolerable psychological pain.
- IV. The common stressor in suicide is frustrated psychological needs.
- V. The common emotion in suicide is hopelessness–helplessness.
- VI. The common cognitive state in suicide is ambivalence.
- VII. The common perceptual state in suicide is constriction.
- VIII. The common action in suicide is egression.
- IX. The common interpersonal act in suicide is communication of intention.
- X. The common consistency in suicide is with lifelong coping patterns.

Later in his life, Shneidman (1993) identified the primary motivation for suicide as psychache which he defined as intense, intolerable, emotional and psychological pain which cannot be decreased or removed by means that were previously successful.

Laws have changed in most Western countries, slowly but steadily de-criminalizing suicide. In the UK, this happened in 1961. However, The Indian Penal Code, which was brought into force in 1862 by the British rulers of India, positions suicide as a crime to date¹. Section 309 of this Code places the punishment for the criminal offence of an unsuccessful suicide attempt at simple imprisonment for 1 year or with fine or both. It is useful to state here that Section 308 of this Code is about the criminal offence of attempt to commit culpable homicide. Indian thought on suicide was immaterial, then and now. This can be changed if Indian thought on suicide is at least presented systematically and examined for its attitudes towards suicide, the purpose of this chapter.

¹In early 2017, the Parliament of India passed the Mental Health Care Bill, decriminalising suicide and making provisions, instead, for mental health care for suicidal behaviour.

Ancient Scriptures of Bharat Examined for Position on Suicide

Prasthanatrayi

Upanishads. The ten major Upanishads are not shy about death. The first on this list in all collections and listings is the Isha Upanishad (Gambhirananda, 2006a). Verse 3 of this Upanishad states:

Those worlds of devils are covered by blinding darkness. Those people that kill the Self go to them after giving up this body.

This verse has been quoted as condemning suicide harshly (Battin, 2015). However, Adi Shankaracharya holds otherwise (Gambhirananda, 2006a). He starts his comments on this verse by stating: *Now begins this verse for decrying the man who is devoid of knowledge. He explains asuryah; as compared with the non-dual state of the supreme Self, even gods are asuras, devils; and the worlds belonging to them are asuryah. He explains tamasa as darkness in the form of ignorance and pretyaas after departing, giving up this body. Immediately after explaining aatmahanah as those that kill the Self, he asks, who are they? The answer is the next word of the verse, janah, which he explains as the common people, those that are ignorant. Therefore, he asks the question: How do they kill the eternal Self? He himself explains: By keeping concealed through the fault of ignorance the Self which exists. The experience of the Self as free from decrepitude, death, etc. (present in the realization, 'I am free from decrepitude and death'), that comes as a result of the existence of the Self, remains concealed, as is the consciousness of a person who is killed. So the ordinary ignorant persons are called the killers of the Self. Because of that very fault of slaying the Self, they are subject to birth and death. Logically, he asks now: What is the nature of the Self by slaying which the ignorant people transmigrate, and contrariwise, the men of knowledge, the non-killers of the Self, become freed? He informs us that this is being answered in the next verses, verse 4 of Isha Upanishad:*

It is unmoving, one, and faster than the mind. The senses could not overtake It, since It had run ahead. Remaining stationary, It outruns all other runners. It being there, Matarisva allots (or supports) all activities.

Verse 5 of Isha Upanishad:

That moves, That does not move; That is far off, That is very near; That is inside all this, and That is also outside all this.

Verse 6 of Isha Upanishad:

He who sees all beings in the Self itself, and the Self in all beings, feels no hatred by virtue of that (realization).

Verse 7 of Isha Upanishad:

When to the man of realization all beings become the very Self, then what delusion and what sorrow can there be for that seer of oneness? (Or – In the Self, of the man of realization, in which all beings become the Self, what delusion and what sorrow can remain for that seer of oneness?)

Verse 8 of Isha Upanishad:

He is all-pervasive, pure, bodiless, without wound, without sinews, taintless, untouched by sin, omniscient, ruler of mind, transcendent, and self-existent; he has duly allotted the (respective) duties to the eternal years (i.e. to the eternal creators called by that name).

He comments here: *This verse indicates what the Self that was spoken of in the previous verse really is in Its own nature.*

Thus, it is very clear that the Self mentioned in verse 3 of Isha Upanishad is not the human personality with a name, relationships, likes and dislikes, experiencing joy and sorrow alternatively, and birth and death in cyclic succession.

Verse 2 of this Upanishad advises:

By doing karma, indeed, should one wish to live here for a hundred years. For a man, such as you (who wants to live thus), there is no way other than this, whereby karma may not cling to you.

And verse 1 of Isha Upanishad states:

Aum. All this – whatsoever moves on earth – should be covered by the Lord. Protect (your Self) through that detachment. Do not covet anybody's wealth. (Or – Do not covet, for whose is wealth?)

The invocation verse of Isha Upanishad declares:

Aum. That (supreme Brahman) is infinite, and this (conditioned Brahman) is infinite. The infinite (conditioned Brahman) proceeds from the infinite (supreme Brahman). (Then through knowledge), realizing the infinitude of the infinite (conditioned Brahman), it remains as the infinite (unconditioned Brahman) alone.

In the Introduction itself of his commentary on the Isha Upanishad, Adi Shankaracharya mentions that the verses of this Upanishad serve to reveal the true nature of the Self and have not been utilized in *karma* (rituals etc.) and that all the Upanishads exhaust themselves simply by determining the true nature of the Self, and the Gita and the scriptures dealing with *moksha* (the emancipation of the soul) have only this end in view. He also states that it is that person who intensely desires emancipation who is the competent student for the study of these verses, not one who hankers after results of actions or identifies with the physical body or the social personality (Gambhirananda, 2006a).

This short Upanishad of 18 verses is at the top position among the Upanishads and hence, if the third verse had suicide as understood by IPC Section 309 as its content, ripples of such a harsh condemnation would have been found in other texts, as internal content consistency of the Upanishads with each other is important.

Kena Upanishad does not contain a word about suicide (Gambhirananda, 2006b). Katha Upanishad, in which Death is the teacher, answers the adolescent

Nachiketa's questions about existence after death (Gambhirananda, 2006b). In case the Isha Upanishad verse 3 was about suicide as we understand as a mental health issue, a corroboration of this verse should have been present in the Katha Upanishad. This is not the case. However, the Katha Upanishad does make a reference to joyless worlds in verse 1.3, not in any manner connected to suicide.

Prashna Upanishad, despite seeking answers to questions on death like the other Upanishads, does not mention suicide and neither does the Mandukya or Svetasvatara Upanishad or the Aitareya or Taittiriya or Chandogya Upanishads (Gambhirananda 2006b, c, 2003). Chapter 4 of the Fourth Brahmana of the Brihadaranyaka Upanishad is titled 'The Soul of the Unrealized after Death'. The Brihadaranyaka is the most voluminous of all the Upanishads and is said to contain all the concepts of Upanishads, in summary and detail. This is so much taken for granted that if one is unsure of specifically which Upanishad one needs to refer to regarding a concept from the Upanishad, one may safely say that it is in the Brihadaranyaka Upanishad. The same is said about Adi Shankaracharya's commentary on this Upanishad. Hence, whether the 3rd verse of Isha Upanishad is about suicide as defined by the WHO or not, a reference, a reflection or a ripple of such an understanding should be in this section. Verses 10, 11 and 12 of the fourth chapter of the fourth section of the Brihadaranyaka Upanishad are closely related to verses 9, 3 and 7 of the Isha Upanishad (Madhavananda, 2004). Of relevance for this chapter are verses 11 and 12 of Brihadaranyaka Upanishad.

Verse 11 of Brihadaranyaka Upanishad concurs with verse 3 of Isha Upanishad:

Miserable are those worlds enveloped by (that) blinding darkness (ignorance). To them, after death, go those people who are ignorant and unwise.

Verse 12 of Brihadaranyaka Upanishad which is closely related to verse 7 of Isha Upanishad:

If a man knows the Self as 'I am this,' then desiring what and for whose sake will he suffer in the wake of the body?

The words of verse 11 of the Brihadaranyaka Upanishad and verse 3 of the Isha Upanishad are almost the same. Only the first word and the last two words are different. In the Brihadaranyaka Upanishad, it is clarified beyond doubt as to who are they who 'kill' the Self: the ignorant and the unwise, just as explained by Adi Shankaracharya in his comments on verse 3 of Isha Upanishad. Verse 12 of the Brihadaranyaka Upanishad is brought into this chapter just to emphasize the internal consistencies of the Upanishads with each other, about the Self being the universal and supreme Self, not the human personality connected to a name and relationships with the world of a particular nature, limited to like and dislikes and who having been born, will also die.

The Bhagavad Gita does not mention suicide in any of its 700 verses, despite having a full chapter related to death, and nor does Adi Shankaracharya's commentary on it (Gambhirananda, 2006a). None of the 555 aphorisms of the Brahma Sutras mention suicide either (Gambhirananda, 2011). However, while commenting on sutras 41 and 43 of part four of Chap. 3, *Sadhana adhyaya*, Adi Shankaracharya refers to a *Smriti* verse: *For one who after being established in the norm of the*

lifelong celibate (Naisthika) falls from it, we cannot imagine any expiation by which that self-immolating man can be purified. Here, leaving celibacy after being established in it for pursuit of a spiritual goal is considered the same as setting oneself on fire, aimed at a painful, slow and publicly dramatic death.

The Yoga Sutras of Patanjali contain 196 aphorisms for practice grouped into four chapters on *yoga*, which is defined in the 2nd aphorism itself as being the restraint of the changes or movements or modifications of the mind (Prasada, 2005). Sutra 29 of the second chapter, *Sadhana adhyaya* informs about the eight accessories of *yoga*, beginning with restraint and ending with *Samadhi* (stable meditative state of union with the universe). The next *sutra*, 30, states that the first restraint, *yama*, is that of *Ahimsa*, non-violence. Maharishi Vyasa (Prasada, 2005) comments on *Ahimsa*: *Of these, abstinence from injury is the not causing of pain to any living creature in any way at any time. The restraints and observances that follow have their origin in it. They are meant to achieve it. They are taught with the object of teaching it. They are taken up with the object of rendering the light of its appearance purer.*

By requiring *ahimsa* as the first step on the path of *yoga*, and by Maharishi Vyasa's comments on *ahimsa*, it is clear that the suicidal process is to be abstained from. No exceptions are provided, hence the expectation is to restrain from self-harm and suicidal behaviour too.

Discussion

Suicide does not merit mention in the Upanishads or the Bhagavad Gita or the Brahma Sutras as a matter of philosophical discussion or contemplation although death has been deeply studied and human distress well examined. The Yoga Sutras do not mention suicide directly either, but Maharishi Vyasa's clear comments include the restraint on self-injurious behaviour by default. All these texts are to be taught by a Self-Realized teacher to a student who is eager to remove own suffering permanently by choosing to work for own liberation, *moksha*. Hence a mere reading of them or even excellent self-study is not enough to understand the contents and the linkages between the various concepts. Swami Krishnananda (2000), of our times at the Divine Life Society, Rishikesh, explains that suicide is an even stronger affirmation of the personality in death than in life, not its death. He also explains that progress on the spiritual path is not possible without annihilation of the individual's ego, an almost impossible achievement. This freeing of oneself from the grip of one's individual limitations and moving into cosmic or universal oneness is the permanent liberation from suffering. *Moksha* is one of four goals of life, according to these very scriptures, by going through the four phases of life within the four divisions of work according to one's qualities and aspirations:

Four Goals of Human Life

Dharma, in this context, resembles the ability to know the difference between right and wrong, and to know how to stay away from the wrong and be right or righteousness;

Artha is material prosperity which includes all that leads to and from economic improvement, to be pursued by those who have understood *dharma* and practice it accordingly;

Kama is the fulfilment of worldly (perishable and subject to change) desires by those who practice *dharma* properly and have acquired *artha* according to *dharma*; and

Moksha is liberation, the only spiritual goal to be pursued, by those who, having tried to reach the goal of *kama* have realized it to be a futile exercise because of the inner purification which follows when *dharma* is used to reach *artha* and *kama*.

Four Phases of Human Life

Learning about life. In order to know what is *dharma* and what is not *dharma*, male children were sent to *gurukuls* (the clan/family of the guru) to live with the *guru* (spiritual guide) along with other students of that particular *guru*. Such *gurukuls* were usually on the outskirts of a city/cluster of villages. This period was termed as '*brahmaacharya ashram*' (*brahman* = the in-dwelling, omnipotent, omnipresent and omniscient Lord; *acharya* = one who leads by own conduct, *achar* = righteous conduct as given in the scriptures, *ashram* = period/shelter): one who is making oneself qualified to know about *brahman*. Female children were taught the same at home, by their parents or an assigned *guru*.

Pursuing worldly goals. The next period in life was termed as '*grihastha ashram*' (*grh* = house/home, *stha* = situation/situated in): the householder's life, during which the person gets married and settles down to a householder's life. It is during this period that the person may, guided by the principles of *dharma* as learnt, pursue economic and social goals. Having reached the goal of *artha* according to *dharma*, individuals may, pursue the goal of *kama*, also according to *dharma*. A ceremony for any possible goal: *artha* or *kama* must have the presence of husband and wife together, as two individuals strengthening each other within one unit. The wife is known as *ardhangani* (*ardha* = half, *anga* = body, *ani* = indicative of female): she who is half the body of the husband, that is, the husband becomes completed only by his wife.

Withdrawal from worldly life to pursue spiritual goals. When the couple eventually find out that real satisfaction was not to be found in pursuing *artha* or *kama*, they could choose a *guru* and seek to pursue the goal of *moksha*, under that *guru*. This stage or period of life was termed '*vanaprastha ashram*' (*vana* = forest, *prasthan* = departure) as the couple would depart from city/village life, leaving behind all acquisitions and relationships, and enter the forest to live a life of

mediation and austerity in solitude. During this period, their sole social contact was with the *guru*, apart from each other. If the wife died during this period, the husband was free to accept the last stage of a man's life: *sannyasa ashram* (*sat* = true, *nyasa* = complete dedication to and identification with the Lord, leading to Unity by renunciation of all else). *Sannyasa* begins with civil death, the candidate being required to perform the death rituals of his earlier personhood.

Complete withdrawal from worldly life to pursue spiritual goals. The formal acceptance of *sannyasa* (monkhood) is equal to civil death of the man: he has no further relationship with the world. All that he encountered was a reflection of the Lord, in his vision. If the husband desired to enter *sannyasa* while his wife was alive, he could do so, with her free consent. A man could enter *sannyasa* directly after *brahmaacharya*, with the free consent of the mother. However, this kind of entry was not recommended but discouraged as it could be a short period with doubtful goals and returning from *sannyasa* to pursue *artha* and *kama* was not encouraged, as it was the going against the natural order of life stages. The goal of *sannyas* is moving up the different stages of *samadhi* (union with the Lord) through any *yoga* (union with the Lord) discipline into a steady state of universal consciousness wherein death and individual consciousness are transcended and eternal life is attained without having to be reborn. Fear of death being absent in such a one, he could choose to live or leave, both of which was for universal welfare as he no longer had individual interests, being without individual consciousness. This is also known as liberation or *moksha*.

Given this kind of community organization as described just now, it is perhaps possible to understand the absence of a condemning or glorifying position on suicidal phenomena in the *Shruti* and the *Prasthanatrayi*. Another reason could be the acceptance of monkhood as a stage of life and renunciation as a quality to be nourished and nurtured. The former provides freedom from societal structures while the latter provides freedom from mental knots. However, due to the rigours of monkhood, *sannyas*, it was not usual for women to adopt that path. A *sannyasin* (a man who had been given *sannyas* by his *guru*) was to give up fires, external (for use such as cooking, heating and light) and internal (such as hunger, desires, intellectual passions and emotions), not to spend time under the same tree for more than three days, not to ask for alms more than thrice from the same house, not to seek alms from more than seven houses in a day, not go to beg for alms more than once a day, have no possessions except the clothes he wore, a stick, a begging bowl and a water-pot. Such a one had no enemies, no expectations from or duties to anyone except the Lord and used his feet to carry himself. In return for the alms he received, he could impart spiritual knowledge in the way he deemed fit. In this manner, spiritual knowledge was made available to everyone at their doorstep, either as an individual at home or in groups in the evening, after the day's work was done and people could gather. *Sannyasa* in this form was meant only for males as a female's entry into marriage was considered akin to a male's entry into *sannyasa*. The husband was to function as her *guru* and facilitate her spiritual development.

It was considered wiser to make a no-holds-barred effort to pursue all of one's desires openly and according to *dharma* rather than enter *sannyasa* and re-track

back to pursue *artha* and *kama*. A person who came back thus was treated as one without a firm resolve and not respected. However, it was possible to live in the *brahmaacharya ashram* as a *brahmachari*, under a *guru*, without getting married and entering *grihastha ashram* or accepting renunciation and entering *sannyas*. While living in society and pursuing the goals of *artha* and *kama*, one could belong to any of the four groups: *brahmin*, *kshatriya*, *vaishya* or *shudra*. This grouping is known as the caste system. This grouping is not as per birth.

Four Divisions of Work

According to the Bhagavad Gita, this grouping is according to one's inherent qualities: one who was a pure intellectual would be considered a *brahmin* (one who has reached the state of unity with *brahman* or is on the way there, excluding all other goals), if such an intellectual had acquired knowledge of *brahman* (the Lord) and spent life in imparting that knowledge. As spiritual knowledge was considered superior to worldly knowledge, the impartor of spiritual knowledge was given the highest status, capable of guiding anyone, regardless of social status, on worldly and spiritual life. A *brahmin* would not pursue a worldly vocation to maintain the body or any other worldly interest towards acquisition, possession or maintenance, as the *brahmin's* individual goals were spiritual, not worldly. The *brahmin* was, therefore, under the protection of the other three groups, even as their *guru*, and dependent on their goodwill for daily existence, apparently. A *guru* who did not lead the disciples to *brahman*, could not, therefore, be a *brahmin*, even if respected as teacher.

One who had a combination of intellectualism, fondness for power and physical strength, shaped by training and exercises of the mind and body was considered best suited to rule persons or govern, administer and protect the land, under the guidance of a *guru*. Such persons were called *kshatriya* (those who protect from decay). Others who had a flair for trade, a fondness for wealth and considered themselves suitable for any kind of trading or to cultivate land were called *vaishyas* (those who trade). The *vaishya* was the main taxpayer and therefore had all worldly assets protected by the *kshatriya*, while the spiritual content of the *vaishya's* life was under the guidance of the *brahmin*.

The rest of society, which could not shape itself into any of the three groups, would, necessarily, be serving these three groups physically, in some manner or the other. They were called *shudras* (those who are weak-willed and therefore, only serve). As the resolve to shape oneself to pursue a goal was lacking in these persons, spiritual knowledge was not meant for them: the potential for misunderstanding and misusing the content was greater than the potential for correct understanding and application, even if guided. *Shudras* had no individual spiritual goals and merely lived, unlike the other three groups, who had a purpose greater than mere existence and experience.

Service to others in society was unavoidable as *brahmins*, *kshatriyas* and *vaishyas* also clearly serve others in society. Group qualities could inhere in one by birth

(accepted as the result of cultivation in earlier lifetimes) or by cultivation in the present lifetime, even if difficult. Without *brahmin* qualities such as subtleness of intellect, non-covetousness, fearlessness and forgiveness or *kshatriya* qualities such as suppleness of intellect, willingness to risk one's life in all ways for the protection of others, courage and excellent physical health, even birth into a *brahmin* or *kshatriya* family respectively, was not of much use to the individual or society. It is the *brahmin* with the best of *brahmin* qualities who is most likely to seek and be given *sannyas*, after which he was considered above all the four groupings.

The mind is another subject of the scriptures which inform us that although difficult, controlling the mind is possible through dispassion and practice. The first chapter of the Bhagavad Gita is titled Arjuna's Distress. Modern mental health professionals will easily recognize the description of Arjuna's state as being a combination of severe depression and anxiety. Arjuna is not suicidal, but he does mention preferring the life of a begging mendicant rather than a warrior or a prince, just in order to escape mental distress. The mind and its connections with the body and life are explained in the Taittiriya Upanishad, which explains the five sheaths of human personality. The first one is the gross physical body, consisting of food and hence called the *Annamaya kosha*, or the food sheath. This most external sheath is pervaded by *prana*, the life force within the breath, is subtler, more powerful and called the *Pranamaya kosha* or the life-breath sheath. Pervading this second sheath is the mind, *manas*, a bundle of thoughts and feelings, doubts and memories, more subtle and powerful than the *Pranamaya kosha* and is called the *Manomaya kosha*. Pervading this third sheath is the intellect, the discriminative faculty with decision-making abilities, more subtle and powerful than the *Manomaya kosha* and is called the *Vijnanamaya kosha*. This fourth sheath is pervaded by the bliss sheath, called the *Anandamaya kosha*, subtlest among these five and most powerful, but ignorant. The Self, the *aatma* is within these five sheaths of a human personality. All the Upanishads examined above tirelessly proclaim the oneness of the individual Self with the universal Self. Hence, if under the duress of mental agony due to one or many situations, a person killing oneself is disconnecting the *pranamaya kosha* from the *annamaya kosha*, by damaging the latter, the physical body. The rest of the personality continues to exist and move along the paths determined by own actions and desires, for example, into a more suitable new body. The linkages between action, *karma* and reincarnation or the repetition of the carnal body are explained in the Brihadaranyaka Upanishad, Katha Upanishad and the Bhagavad Gita. Just because reincarnation is expected, the human body is not devalued. Many works composed by Adi Shankaracharya and other great teachers begin by stating the extremely difficult to obtain: a human birth, and its purpose: pursuit of moksha or liberation or Self-Realization, that is knowing by one's own stable experience that one is neither the body nor the mind, but the Self, the Supreme Universal Self. Their position is that using the human life for any other purpose is the real suicide, as seen in the unusual repetition of a clearly condemning Smriti verse (given above) in the comments on two almost sequential aphorisms of the Brahma Sutras.

Self-Realization, the becoming real of the true Self, requires the seeker of the Self, to transcend all other selves or sheaths. This very process can at times lead to

death, as the consciousness of identity travels deep into progressively subtler and more powerful areas within. This death is not suicide, due to the absence of mental distress, the presence of deep oneness with the universe and the absence of damage to the human body. This is the death that is aimed for in the ancient scriptures of Bharat, the letting go of the body instead of clinging on to it, which the Yoga Sutras state is an affliction called *abhinivesha*. This process of leaving the body is referred to as departure or passing away, not merely dying, and is described in the eighth chapter of the Bhagavad Gita and also at other places in it and the Upanishads, the Brahma Sutras. This conscious process is known as moving from mortality to immortality, finishing the cycle of births and deaths.

The manner in which the goals of life are accepted and pursued, in Bharat, means that for those who choose to follow the spiritual path, aid and support are available. The goal of life not being mere world dominion for a period of time or exclusive mastery over inexhaustible riches or never-ending fame or such, but a task more difficult, can create its own share of mental distress. However, accepting the knowledge about the world as being a place of constant change and therefore as unreliable decreases the tendency to seek or expect comfort and reassurance from it, resulting in fewer disappointments and frustrations.

On the other hand, forgetting the invaluable content of these ancient texts or not even knowing them, due to changes in community organization brought about by continuous invasions and alien victors, may result in the same suicidal processes in India today as described by Durkheim and Shneidman after studying suicides for decades in the Western world.

It is pertinent to note that it was in the Middle Ages that suicide began to be considered a criminal offence in Europe. These were tough times with frequent wars, epidemics and poverty there, leading to all European countries who could manage the resources making organized efforts to reach India, known for her fabulous wealth and wisdom for thousands of years across the world. During such trying times, the suicide of an adult meant both decrease in labour and taxes. Therefore, punishments were harsh, such as public and formal stigma, denial of burial places and confiscation of personal property by the government. The person who had chosen suicide was seen as one who had criminally offended his fellows in the community by not being willing to share the common burden of trying to make life better together and for all. The punishments were severe enough to have a deterring effect. Now that economies have changed in the European world, their attitudes towards suicide have also changed. Suicide now is a theme of the mental health profession, not the clergy or the police. The New Testament does not condemn suicide, neither does the Old Testament, except for the commandment brought down by Moses: Thou shalt not kill, which includes suicide by default just like *Ahimsa* in the Yoga Sutras does. Jesus did not retract his statement that he and his father were one to try to save his life. Incurable disease, intolerable pain, loss of honour, escape from shame and humiliation were seen as adequate reasons for suicide in ancient Europe and Asian countries, when their economies were doing well. The movement of suicide as a theme from the religious and penal arenas into mental health is also related to the well-being of the economies in which these

moves take place, not just changes in collective attitudes. Today, there are legal cases discussing the right to die and withdrawal of medical life-support systems, in several of these countries, including India.

Conclusion

Now that it is known that suicide is neither condemned nor glorified, and not considered as a crime in our most authoritative scriptures, now that more than 50 years have passed since the UK de-criminalized suicide, what reason does India have to keep Section 309 in its penal code? It certainly does not serve as a deterrent as one who completes suicide is not available for criminal or civil punishment. The Government of India should de-criminalize suicide and instead form a National Policy for Suicide Prevention, leading from a public debate on the topic and to national programmes implemented with vigour so that there is no doubt left in the collective Indian mind that suicidal behaviour has complex roots, is not a penal crime and precisely because mental distress is one of its main components, it can be addressed effectively. The suicidal person in India needs help and support, not criminal punishment. Suicidal behaviour should be prevented, with humanity and compassion, not the rod of criminal punishment.

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