

A DOCUMENTARY NOTE ON SUICIDE IN ANCIENT INDIAN LITERATURE

Every society has to take note of the phenomenon of suicide and so it assumes significance in law and social philosophy. It will be interesting to see the form it took in history particularly in ancient India. This may throw light on the concept in its development and the present form that it has assumed, and may help clarify issues which are socially, legally and morally of consequence. An attempt is made in this paper to give a documentary note on suicide in ancient India.

The word suicide has its origin in the word *suicidium*. It means the act of self-destruction. Its determining factor is the intention of the agent; if he willfully brings about his own death, he commits suicide, irrespective of the method he chooses for this purpose, or the motive underlying his self-destructive action. Depending on the intention for ending one's life different words are used for denoting the act of suicide. *Samādhi*, *Nirvāna*, *Ātmaghāta* are some of the words found in the philosophic literature of India for denoting the act, which is committed through different intentions of the actor. The end result, that is, self-destruction however is common of all these varieties. From this point of view *samādhi* of Ramachandra in the water of the sacred *Śarayu* or the *samadhi* of *Jnaneshvara*, or *Johar* or *Sati*, would become suicide.

Ancient Indian literature has discussed the different philosophical aspects of suicide as well the sanctions to follow if 'suicide' is to be committed for example, suicide committed at certain places and under special circumstances had some religious significance and there was certain philosophy behind it. Thus Stietenron distinguishes suicides committed in ancient India into two types : ordinary suicide and religious suicide.¹ He considers suicide, committed by whatever method, which has no other object than to abandon this life, as an ordinary suicide. Religious suicide, according to him, is one which is considered and committed as an act which is meritorious in itself and for which a certain reward is expected and which is prescribed by

religion for the very sake of this reward. He cites wilful self-immolation of a faithful wife or sati as an example of this type, because it is by this death alone that the wife would reach *Patiloka*, the world where the deceased husband is waiting for her.² Thus, in ancient India we come across two lines of thoughts on suicide. One, strongly condemning the suicidal behaviour; and the other, advocating suicide under special circumstances or at certain places.

Īśāvasya Upaniṣad declares that those who take their lives reach after death the sunless region, covered by impenetrable darkness.³

The Vājasaneyī saṁhitā states that whoever destroy their selves reach, after death, Asura world that is shrouded in blinding darkness⁴.

Vasiṣṭha Dharmasūtra denies any death rites to him who kills himself by whatever means he chooses to use, and prescribes certain penances if somebody disregards this rule and performs the last rites out of affection.⁵ It further adds that even the mere thought of suicide is to be attoned for by *prāyaścitta*. The Viṣṇu smṛti treats persons committing suicide in the same way as degraded ones (*patita*): both cannot receive the purifying water.⁶

Parāśara strongly condemns suicide and maintains that if a man or woman commits suicide by hanging through extreme pride, or extreme rage or through affliction or fear, he or she "is consigned to the darkness of a hell for sixty thousand years, which is full of blood and fetid pus".⁷ He further ordains that "no period of uncleanness should be observed in respect of such a violent death". The rite of cremation is denied to the corpse of a suicide, no tears should be shed for, nor any libation of water should be offered unto (the spirit of) a suicide. If people cremate the corpse of a suicide they would regain their personal cleanliness by practising a *tapta kṛccha Vratam* (penance observed in order to purify one's body in accordance with Śāstric injunctions). If they happen to be Brāhmaṇas they should feed Brāhmaṇas and make the gift of a cow to regain their cleanliness.⁸

Manu says that no oblations are to be offered for the benefit of the souls of those who kill themselves.⁹

Yama Smṛiti, besides condemning the act of suicide, lays down the punishment for such persons and their relatives. It orda-

ins that when a person tries to do away with 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 two hundred paṇas; his friends and sons should each be fined one paṇa and then they should undergo the penance laid down in the śāstra.¹⁰

The Ādiparva of the Mahābharata states that one who commits suicide does not reach blissful worlds.¹¹

Kautilya strongly condemns the suicide and declares a severe punishment for such persons. He states, if a person, under the influence of passion or anger, or a woman infatuated by sin, were to kill himself (or herself) by means of a rope, a weapon or poison, he should cause them to be dragged with a rope on the royal highway by a candāla. There is to be no cremation for them nor oblations by kinsmen. If however, some kinsmen were to perform for them the rites in connection with the dead, he should meet with the same fate afterwards, or should be abandoned by his relatives.¹²

Now we consider the view as given in ancient Indian literature where the suicide has been permitted under certain circumstances or recommended on certain places. These are the exceptions to the general rule of reprehension of suicide.

Jābāla and Kathaśruti Upanisads state, "a sannyāsin, 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."¹³

Manu and Yājñavalkya opined that a man, guilty of Brāhmaṇa murder, be allowed to meet death at the hands of archers in a battle who knows that the sinner wants to be killed that way as a penance. The other method for him is that he may throw himself head downwards in fire.¹⁴ Aparārka quotes texts of Brahma-agarbha, Vivasvat and Gārgya about an householder (he) who is suffering from serious illness cannot live, or who is very old, who has no desire left for the pleasure of any of the senses and who has carried out his tasks may bring about his death at his pleasure by resorting to mahāprasthāna, by entering fire or water or by falling from a precipice. By so doing he incurs no sin and his death is far better than living, and one should not desire to live vainly (without being able to perform the duties laid down by the śāstra).¹⁵

The Brahma-purāṇa advocates suicide by fire, or falling from

the top of a mountain by the ardent devotees of śiva for obtaining successful post-mortuary existence.¹⁶

Atri declared, "if one be old (beyond 70), if one cannot observe the rule of bodily purification (owing to extreme weakness), if one is so ill that all medical help is discarded, and if one in these circumstances kills oneself by throwing himself from a precipice or into fire or water or by fasting, mourning should be observed for him for three days and śrāddhā may be performed for him."¹⁷

At extremely holey places like Prayāga, Benaras, Kurukṣetra and Amarakāntaka, persons were allowed to end there lives.

Ṛgveda maintains that they reach heaven, who take bath in the confluence of two rivers—white and black (that is, Ganga and Yamuna); and they, attain immortality. who, the wise people, abandon their body there.¹⁸ The Vanaparva of the Mahābhārata extols such deaths at prayaga.¹⁹ The Śalyaparva states, "who ever abandons his body at Prthūdaka on the northern bank of the Sarasvati after repeating Vedic prayers would not be troubled by death thereafter."²⁰ The Anuśāsanaparva states that if a man knowing Vedānta and understanding the ephemeral nature of life abandons life in the holy Himalayas by fasting, he would reach the world of Brahma.²¹ Whoever dies in the Ganga, whether willfully or unintentionally, goes after death to heaven and does not see hell.²² A man who, knowingly or unknowingly, willfully, or unintentionally dies in the Ganges, secures on death heaven and mokṣa.²³ He who abandons his life in this tīrtha (kāśī) in some way or other does not incur the sin of suicide but secures his desired objects.²⁴

The Liṅga Purāṇa recommends suicide at Kurukṣetra. The Matsyapurāṇa eulogises the peak of Amarakāntaka by stating "whoever dies at Amarakāntaka by fire, poison, water, or by fasting enjoys the pleasures."²⁵ Moreover, he who throws himself down (from the peaks of Amarakāntaka) never returns (to saṁsāra).²⁶

We come across several methods for committing suicide. The most common were exhaustion, fasting, falling, burning, drowning, and cutting one's limbs.

Suicide by exhaustion is mahāpatha or prasthanyatra and is known to us through mahāprasthanikaparva of the Mahābhārata. Five Pāṇḍavas and Draupadi had adopted this method. Throwing

oneself from the mountains like Himalayas or Amarkantaka was common. Padma Purāna states that a person who dies by hanging head downwards over a fire and drinks its flames, gets a reward of stay of heaven for 100,000 years and afterwards a rebirth as agnihotrīn. Drowning oneself at the confluence of Ganga and Yamuna or in any holy river was also followed. Cutting one's throat at the confluence of Ganga and Yamuna was certainly meritorious.²⁷

Thus we see that suicide was approved in ancient India under specific circumstances and at certain holy places. The philosophy behind such approval was the attainment either of Mokṣha or heaven.

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NOTES

1. H. von Stietencron : "Suicide as a Religious Institution", pp. 7-8, Bharatiya Vidya, Vol. XXVII, Nos. 1 to 4, 1 to 7.
2. Ibid, 1, p. 8.
In ancient Indian literature the words used for suicide were ātmahatyā, ātmatyāga, tanutyāga, and dehatyāga. Out of these expressions some acquired a differentiated meaning from the early centuries of the christian era onwards. Atmahatyā and ātmatyāga, the original words for suicide, continued to be used, when suicide was disapproved of, when it was considered as a sin. But tanutyāga and dehatyāga, two euphemistic words meaning to abandon the body, which could be applied to natural death also, gradually came to be used in connection with suicide only when the writer approved of it, when it was considered meritorious, when no sin was thought to be involved.
3. Isha Upaniṣad, III.
4. Vāj. Saṁ. 40. 3.
5. Vās Dh. Ś. 23, 14, 16.
6. Vismṛ. 22. 56.
7. Paraṣara, IV, 1. 2.
8. Ibid, 8.
9. Manu, V, 89.

10. Yama Smṛiti, 20-21, translation by P. V. Kane, History of Dharmasastra, Vol. II, Part II, p. 924.
11. Mahābhārata, Adiparva, 179-20.
12. The Kautilya Arthasastra, 4-7-25-27, translation by Kangle, K. P., published by University of Bombay, p. 316-17, 1963.
13. Schrader, F. O., The Minor Upaniṣads, i, pp. 39, 390 ff, Madras, 1912.
14. Manu, XI, 73; Yāj, 248.
15. Vide P. V. Kane, History of Dharmasastra, p. 926, Vol. II, Part II, B. O. R. I., Poona, 1941.
16. Brahmapurāṇa, 262-63.
17. Atri, 218-219, translation by P. V. Kane, History of Dharmasastra, p. 959, Vol. III, BORI, Poona, 1946.
18. Ṛgveda, Khil Sukta, 10.75.5.
19. Mbh. 85.83.
20. Mbh. 39.33-24, translation by P. V. Kane, History of Dharmasastra, p. 925, Vol. II, Part II, BORI, Pune.
21. Mbh. — 25.62-64.
22. Kurma Purāṇa, I. 37-39; Padma Purāṇa, I. 44.4.
23. Padma Purāṇa, V. 6055.
24. Skanda Purāṇa, Kāśīkhanda, 22.76.
25. Matsya-purāṇa, 186.28-33, translation by P. V. Kane.
26. Matsya purāṇa, 186.34-35, translation by P. V. Kane.
27. Vide Stietenron, suicide as a religious institution, p. 19, Bharatiya Vidya Vol. XXVII, Nos. 1 to 4, 1967.