

# Student Suicide and Urbanism: An Analytical Study

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**Abstract-** In 2021, %34.5 of the individuals committing suicide were aged 18-30. 13,039 of them were students. In 2021, Mumbai recorded the fourth largest number of deaths by suicide among cities in India. Extant literature is divided over place as a factor in student suicide. The construct of urbanism sees place as an ensemble of unique situations that shape behaviour of individuals within. Taking a phenomenological approach, this study identified and analyzed the unique situation/s in Mumbai that explains student suicide.

**Keywords:** Student; Suicide; Urbanism.

## INTRODUCTION

In 2010, the rate of suicide in India was 10.3 (per 1,00,000) (50A); in 2021, it was 12 (53). The percentage of suicide increased by 7.2 between 2021 and 2022. The male: female ratio of suicide was 72.5:27.4 in 2021, which is comparable with the ratio for 2020 70.9:29.1. . In 2021, over %66 of the persons committing suicide were between the age range of 18-45. Over half of them i.e. %34.5 of the individuals committing suicide were in the age range 18-30, and %31.7 persons were in the age range of 30-45. 13,039 students committed suicide in 2021. Although the fourth largest for recorded number of suicides in Indian cities in 2021, Mumbai recorded 1482 such deaths. Suicide in general and suicide of young persons is a significant social and economic burden. Extant literature is consistent about the vulnerability for suicide of gender [male] (3 (28 (40 (42); age range [below 30] (3 (9 (23 (24 (28 (40); studentship (28 (30 (37), because of exposure to risk factors including stress [life event] (13 (16 (20); troubled interpersonal relations / social cohesion (9 (10 (39 (42 (44); and, a sense of hopelessness (18 (29) that interactively explain suicide as behaviour/attempt. There is disagreement over level of education as a risk factor (44 (24 (28) and Place (44 (24). But place puts individuals in unique situation/s and can effectively be dealt-with only through appropriate strategy/s if seen through the construct of urbanism (9A). The current study focuses on circumstances that create the unique situation/s which lead persons to suicide as behaviour.

## LITERATURE REVIEW

### Suicide

Venkoba Rao [3] found that males pre-dominantly in the age-range of 15-25 tended to attempt/commit suicide. These researchers identified a lack of social cohesion as a significant risk factor. Extramarital affair was also identified as a risk factor for a spouse to attempt suicide by Venkoba Rao.[10]. Badrinarayana[9] also revealed that younger people (age range of 10 to 30 years) were more likely to attempt suicide. Disturbed interpersonal relationships was identified as a primary cause. Badrinarayana[20] found a positive and significant correlation between depressive illness, suicidal ideation with early parental deprivation, recent bereavement and positive family history of suicide.

Srivatsava *et al.* (13) identified unemployment, presence of a stressful life event in the last six months, suffering from physical disorders and having idiopathic pain as definite risk factors for attempting suicide. Khan, *et al.*[19] identified the presence of stressful life events as one of the two most important reasons for completing suicide.

Bagadia *et al.*[15] conducted a study on 521 patients admitted for suicidal behavior and reported that the degree of intent was low, duration of suicidal ideas ranged from more than 1 year (2%) to it being an impulsive act in 17% of them, 18% communicated about the attempt while the majority of women (76.1%) attempted suicide in the presence/proximity of others. Previous attempts were reported in 7% with 2.4% having more than one previous attempt.

Several studies have focused on vulnerable populations and high risk populations including students, the aged, women, armed forces, farmers, migrant populations and those with chronic physical and mental illness. Sharma, *et al.*[30] in their study on adolescent students found the prevalence of suicide risk behavior quite high with almost 16% having suicide ideation and 5% having attempted suicide. Females were seen as being more vulnerable. A study by Ponnudurai *et al.*[23] revealed that 23.25% of the subjects had contemplated suicide earlier and that 91.9% of them were aged 30 years or less. Suresh Kumar,[24] reported that those who completed suicide were significantly younger, than those who attempted suicide and that Other variables such as religion, domicile, marital status and education showed no difference. , Venkoba Rao,[28] in his article on attempted suicide among students, reported that during a 10-month period 35 students had attempted suicide, of which seven proved fatal. There were more male students (19) than female (16), most were between the ages of 16 to 30 and majority of them were students of Arts and Sciences. Eight of them had attempted suicide previously. No intellectual sub-normality was reported in the sample.

Kumar, Sudhir *et al.*[29] compared potential risk factors between adolescent and adult suicide attempters and found that the adolescents had significantly higher levels of depression, hopelessness, lethality of event, and stressful life events. Jain, *et al.*[18] also found that 16% of those committing suicide had a high score on the hopelessness variable. Rao Venkoba,[31] reported that lack of social integration rather than social isolation per se was the factor causing depression in the aged. Srivastava and Kumar[37] in their study on patients with major depressive disorder reported that the 17% in patients with suicidal ideation attempted suicide. This study identified being below 30 years of age, having higher education, being a single male or a married woman or a student as the risk factors. Similarly, Chakraborty[39] reported that Isolation and inability to form relationships were important factors in

suicidal attempts of persons in the armed forces. The need to focus on migrants as a specifically vulnerable group was brought out by the study of Chavan, *et al.*[40], who used psychological autopsies of persons attempting/committing suicide and revealed that almost 58% were migrants from other parts of India, were frequently male and young (age 20 to 28 years).

Sethi, *et al.*[42] studied 75 patients admitted for self-destructive behavior and found that majority of them belonged to unitary family set up, were unmarried males and almost 15% of them had history of previous suicidal attempts. Financial stress, rejection in love and strained familial relationships were the most common causes. Das, *et al.*[44] in their study on subjects with intentional self-harm attempts reported that the majority of the subjects were married, educated beyond matriculation, were employed or retired, belonged to a nuclear family, were of a middle socio economic status, and came from an urban background. The most common reasons for the attempt were interpersonal problems with family members and spouse.

### Urbanism

The scene and an expressive behaviour are Properties of a cultural world. The scene is a context or a site for activities, and these activities entail highly particularized modes of interaction (9A). A pub is a scene because it represents not just physical context but also human activity, human conduct, and specific mode of interaction. This mode of interaction includes human conduct i.e. action of the actor, and the specialized utterances that cumulatively help him navigate the situation (9A). Such a mode of interaction is called emergent behaviour. Activities recur, and members share these recurring experiences with one another through expressive behaviour. Expressive behaviour describes the specific situation confronted by self/other and narrates the behaviour/s undertaken for managing the situation. An expressive behaviour can be replicated by other individuals and this is how expressive behaviour becomes instrumental in realizing customary patterns of behaviour in response to recurring situations that come to characterize scenes in a cultural world.

A principle of folklore research is that folk is expressive behaviour for defining and managing everyday life (9A). Because activities recur in a cultural world; because the purpose of interaction is the description and management of these activities; and because these interactions recur, interactions become folk and the description and management of recurring events becomes the expressive behaviour. Expressive behaviors of members in face-to-face settings are relevant for folklore research.

Folklorists tend to study elements of rural folklore in urban contexts (9A). Laba (1979) argues that research needs to move away from generalized structural qualities of social-relations that are held constant, toward looking at social-relations as dynamic social-networks so that a more genuine as well as a more humane image of the city can emerge. This implies a break from viewing urban people relations through the classical sociological characteristics -- tradition, social conformity and continuity, and stability in human roles and relationships as depicted in/by rural life Vs. urban life which is marked by heterogeneity, social-change, complex division of labour, and by tenuous (fragile, unsubstantiated, questionable) and ephemeral human relations (9A). Also, this characterization of the city has to be done by the urban dweller because social density i.e. frequency of contact and interchange are important to communication.

When an urban dweller seeks to express his assessment of a novel experience and/or the management of discordant information, he must use a rhetorical device that can become a vehicle for communication. Jokes, analogy etc. are all rhetorical devices in which the dweller symbolically represents this novelty, and these symbolic representations become public property i.e. members of a sub-culture come to a shared knowledge/understanding of what the symbolic representation seeks to describe, and themselves use this symbolic representation For expressing the object/idea. For this reason, urban folklore has to be studied within the theoretical framework of rhetorical resources used by urban dwellers. A collection of such shared and situated symbolic representations become folklore. Classical sociology sees urban dwellers' use of these symbolic representations in expressive behaviour for managing everyday life as the mode of life called urbanism.

Laba (1979) defines urbanism as a behavioural mode of life which is a consequence of the city environment. The actor goes about performing activities in This environment. His performance of The activity can be beset with challenges as he confronts situations that are unique to the city. These situations must activate emergent behaviors that combine conduct and specialized utterances for managing the effects of the situation for the actor. Appropriate actions become strategies that help him navigate the situation. This factor i.e. situations specific to city life, and appropriate strategies for navigating these situations connote a mode of life called urbanism. The need to be street smart and to cut competition and not just work hard for a living is an instance of urbanism. Individual actors may have different strategies for dealing with the same unique situation, and expressing these strategy/s is how they go about creating a personal identity or for expressing their belief system etc. Actors may share these scenes through Personal Experience Narratives (PE Narrative) as expressive behaviour. But if the exchange is an interaction i.e. a live encounter where actors are in transaction, the exchange qualifies as emergent behaviour. As expressive behaviour, the PEN seeks to help the actor create an image of the activity/ actors/ personal identity etc. These expressive behaviors can vary in detail, and may be about different situations and strategies, but all versions are pieces of a larger picture of the activities of an occupation. Multiple members of a sub-culture must encounter some/all of these situations even as the strategies may be shared or individualized. Urbanism is an assortment of such situations and strategies. Whereas the classical folklorist definition of urbanism is an expressive behaviour about a novelty that is taken-up by the sub-culture, Laba's definition of urbanism is expressive behaviour about the individual's strategic management of a unique situation.

Tradition is another issue to be addressed because folklore studies look for subjectmatter that can be classified as tradition. When Urbanism is repeatedly narrated, these become recurrent performances of beliefs, self-image, and strategies for living, which lend to texts a folkloric character (9A). So selection of texts for folkloric analysis must fulfil the criterion of repeat performance. This way of looking at the city gives it a human outlook because it deals with city life and not the city as a physique.

### Research Aim

The act of Suicide implies that the actor is unable to deal with a unique situation. Repeat occurrence makes for a tradition i.e.

a folklore. This yields the research aim -- Analysis of the unique situation/s that explains suicide as behaviour.

**Research Design**

The current study seeks to identify and analyze circumstances in the urban environment that cumulatively create the unique situation/s which prompts an individual to commit suicide. For it to qualify as folklore, this unique situation must recur. The Urban itself is an ensemble of sub-cultures, each of which tends to have its own unique situations. As stated earlier, young persons (18-30) made-up over %51 of those committing suicide in 2021. Over 13,000 persons among them were students. About 1400 students committed suicide in Mumbai, alone. These facts bring the research focus on the unique situation in Mumbai that a student fails to deal with.

Hermeneutic phenomenology states that conditions in an environment direct and explain behaviour of the actor situated within this environment. Hermeneutic phenomenological analysis focuses on explaining behaviour i.e. identifying experiences, traditions, and culture of a people/place at a point of time that shape individuals' behaviour. This is consistent with the construct of urbanism which results from a situation that is unique to life in the city, and an appropriate strategy that the individual uses for dealing with the situation (9A). Oerther provides a lucid detailing of research methods and analyses that hermeneutic phenomenological studies can employ for looking at the interaction of environmental circumstances and behaviour of the actor (11A).

Consistent with hermeneutics, I employ interview as tool for collection of data i.e. narratives of experiences of survivors (family, friends, peers, teachers) of the deceased individuals. Snow-balling technique is employed for recruiting subjects for the study. Data collection was made possible by students at the institute for undergraduate studies, where I (the researcher) am a teacher. In 2017, a group of 05 students volunteered to find-out what made persons known to them (directly/indirectly) commit suicide. At the time, they were working on a college assignment. The raw data i.e. the text of interviews conducted by these students has been used for the current study in 2023 by the researcher for her study. In 2017, the 05 students provided consent for academic and non-commercial use of their interviews. The interviewees – persons variously related to the deceased persons (cases) had at the time provided consent for academic non-commercial use of their narratives on condition of confidentiality of identity of self and the case. Accordingly, the cases (deceased individuals) have been anonymized, and respondents have been identified only by the nature of their relation to the cases. The academic institutes that the cases were a part of have been anonymized. A total of 15 respondents participated in the study. Interviews were conducted with 03 persons related to each case. These persons included 01 member of the family (parent/sibling), a friend, and 01 person from the academic institute (e.g. peer/ teacher). These interviews were audio recorded with prior consent of the interviewees, transcribed and anonymized for use, and the audio evidence subsequently destroyed. For purposes of data analysis for the current study in 2023, the text of the interviews (15) is broken down into self-contained segments. These segments are assigned labels that relate to the constituent phases of Thomas Joiner's Interpersonal Psychological Theory of Suicide (2005). Joiner's model has been presented in the section on discussion. These themes are then classified and/or categorized for urbanism. In the next stage, segments are isolated from the source, and clustered based on similarity. The categories and associated themes are listed below. In the following stage, relations within and across categories are drawn. The interpretation of these relations is presented in the section on discussion and future research. Confidentiality prohibits sharing of the raw data (transcript of interviews). Only a brief factual summary of the circumstances of each case is appended.

**Data Analysis and Interpretation**

The labeling of themes is based on Thomas Joiner's

1.

[Redacted]

[Redacted]

Joiner's theory sees circumstances conducive for suicide to result from the interaction of the social and the psychological components. But, urbanism sees the social and physical/material conditions to create the unique situation which is conducive for suicide as behaviour. The current study's focus on the role of circumstances in the urban environment explains the omission of analysis and interpretation of themes that fall outside the realm of situational circumstances. Analysis of interviews of all the 15 persons related to the five individuals throws-up striking similarities. These themes and categories are listed and subsequently interpreted below.

1. Competition
  - A. Performance comparison
  - B. Personal exertion
2. Social-relations
  - A. Interaction network
  - B. Structured interaction

Competition is one aspect of the unique situation that All the 5 individuals had to deal with. Competition is made-up of Performance comparison (1A), and Personal exertion (1B).

1A. Academic Excellence is concrete and relative, which for a student translates into the marks scored [#4, #5, #6, #7, #8]. This has implications for the streams of further education that become accessible/not to him [#4, #5, #6]. His marks entitle him to seek admission to some and not some other institutes, and make him attractive/not for employment with corporations [#7]. Both his performance score, and the institute a student is admitted to become a statement of his ability. The relative rank of students admitted by an institute decides its own position vis-à-vis peer institutes. This is how individuals become part of circles. Now, students have to compete to be the better among equals, which is to say that competition stiffens [#5, #8]. The pressure to catch-up introduces personal exertion [#4, #6, #8], which is the second constituent of competition.

1B. A student must stretch his abilities to the maximum for being among the better or the best [#4, #6]. He must then stretch his abilities to be the better among equals [#7, #8]. This is how forerunners and laggards constitute separate niche circles within the larger circle [#6, #7, #8].

The second aspect of the unique situation is Social-relations, which is made-up of Interaction networks (2A), and Structured interaction (2B).

2A. Inhabiting a circle progressively reduces frequency and depth of interaction with individuals within other circles [#4, #6, #7, #8]. An interaction network is here defined as persons in a web with whom an individual can exchange information and/or resources. This probability varies in direct proportion to competitiveness of self and the target individual/s, because every higher level of sophisticated information/knowledge/ability presumes possession/mastery of lower level/s of sophistication. An individual with a level of information may not be ready to grasp the information at the next level of sophistication, which his peer has to offer/share [#4, #6]. Bringing the individual up to the level of readiness for grasping the more sophisticated information entails investment of personal time and effort which otherwise can be invested in staying at-par with one's current competitors. Thin(ing) interaction networks of individuals in this study testify to the reasoning that competition makes individuals base the use of time and effort on the probability of effectiveness [#4, #6, #7, #8].

2B. The second constituent of social-relations is structured interaction. Structured interactions are those that occur within a community e.g. members of a hobby/interest group, and are not contingent on competition. A common observation of respondents is that the cases (#4 #5 #6) weren't very sociable. and/or over time had reduced their participation/interactions (#4 #7 #8). which weakened their interaction networks (#4 #6 , #7, #8). Their pro-active withdrawing from structured interactions is a logical deduction, on the part of the cases (individuals). These individuals realized that the gap between their own current level of information/competitiveness and that of peers was wide. In extending assistance to them (case-individuals), They (peers) would have to compromise/risk their own competitiveness vis-à-vis their competitors particularly if they (case-individuals) saw themselves and/or were seen by peers as unable to take advantage of the opportunity/assistance extended (#4 #6 #7). The performance gap had to be bridged, nonetheless, and personal exertion becomes the only alternative. This requires additional time, which can be created from reducing time invested in other activities [#7, #8]. An unintended but inevitable consequence of this reduction of structured interaction is the weakening of interaction networks [#4, #5, #6, #7, #8].

### Discussion and Future Research

The current study focused on identifying and analysing the circumstances in the urban environment that collectively make-up the unique situation in which students tend to commit suicide. A unique situation prompts the actor to undertake appropriate behaviour/s for dealing with this situation. Personal exertion , proves to be a necessary but not a sufficient condition for effectively dealing with the unique situation.

Anand, *et al.*[22] in their study on suicidal intent identified three distinct groups of persons comprising of non communicators (31.9%), partial communicators (32.6%) and definite communicators (35.5%). Future research must investigate the nature of communication, which supports personal exertion in dealing with the unique situation and thereby mitigates students' likelihood of contemplating/committing suicide.

All the 05 cases in the current study had been going through a phase of negative events for a reasonably extended period of time. All these 05 cases experienced a cumulative stressor i.e. an uncontrollable external event that triggered the final act of committing suicide. Only 01 [#7] of these 05 individuals sought counselling for dealing with the problem at-hand, but it did not dull the effect of the uncontrollable external event which came later. These facts from the study merit further reflection and research.

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## Appendices

### Case #4

#4 (age-21) was a student of engineering at the \*\*\* in Vile Parle. She killed herself by hanging, in her bedroom. #4 was reported to be under pressure for academic performance, had fallen-out with her best friend (had very few friends), and was a victim of hate messages on the web.

### Case #5

A 20-year-old BMS student committed suicide after she was caught cheating by the invigilation squad on Monday night. Her father has accused the college principal and the squad of abetment to murder. #5, a resident of Mumbai, was studying in BMS second year at \*\*\* college in Vile Parle. After appearing in exams, she returned home and locked herself in her study room. When her daughter didn't open the door after repeated knocks, her father, peeped through the window and found his daughter hanging from the ceiling. Her classmate said, "The exams for Marketing Management was on Monday. The squad officials seized her wooden writing board. #5 refused that she was copying, but the squad took her to the principal's office and made out a cheating case against her."

### Case #6

#6 had jumped off his building in Andheri Complex 2 days after his NEET Result, which he was unable to clear.

### Case #7

#7, a third year chemical engineering student of\*\*\*, was found dead on the terrace of a hostel on the campus on an evening. He was suffering from depression for six months and had also undergone counselling for the same. Investigations revealed that the victim had consumed some poisonous chemical to kill himself.

### Case #8

In June 2014, #8, son of Mr. and Mrs. \*\*\*, committed suicide at the age of 20 by jumping from his flat on the 7<sup>th</sup> floor, and succumbed to his injuries a day later. He was a 2<sup>nd</sup> year Computer Engineering student at \*\*\* in Bandra West.