SUICIDE AND RELIGION A PERSPECTIVE FROM THE IDU MISHMI TRIBE OF NORTH EAST INDIA

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Abstract: Attention was first drawn to a relationship between suicide and religious affiliation in the classical sociological work on suicide by Durkheim. This idea, since Durkheim, has been subjected to rigorous empirical examination and theoretical scrutiny. Such observations of various scholars primarily focused on the association of religion and suicide which are largely employed in the context of greater religious groups such as Christian and its denominations, Jews, Islam, etc, and are largely cross-national studies. We do not come across single literature that has attempted to understand the association of suicide and tribal belief and practices or more precisely 'tribal religion' that are living, more or less, in a specific geographical location.

Based on primary and secondary sources of data, the study found that the Idu Mishmi religion fails to create a network structure that could have provided its members with integrative and regulative benefits and contain members in collective lives. Various factors have some way or otherwise, disrupted the mechanism of religion as a regulative and integrative force in the Idu Mishmi society. At the same time, alterations in the religious sphere have also added a confounding societal situation thereby breaking down the collective will of the members of the society. At this stage, we may equate the role of the Idu Mishmi religion with Durkheim's notion that religion as an agent of social control and social integration restrain one from self-destruction and the discussions provided evidence that it fails to operate and hold on its members in attaining collective lives and fails to regulate social life. This may be the reason that in times of extreme personal crisis people are more likely to act suicide.

Introduction

Attention was first drawn to a relationship between suicide and religious affiliation in the classical sociological work on suicide by Durkheim (1897/1952), who observed that

Protestant countries have higher suicide rates than Catholic countries. Noting that self-destruction was more or less equally condemned by all Christian denominations and that doctrinal statements about suicide are all negative, he explained the differences in suicide rates as due to aspects of social organization that differed between the two churches. In particular, he identified the stronger social control and higher levels of social integration that existed in Catholic societies. Protestant societies had lower levels of social integration, with the result that people were more likely to turn to suicide as a last resort in times of extreme personal crisis (Hills and Francis, 2005). In other words, Durkheim accepted the finding that more Protestants commit suicide than others, dismissing the influence of dogma and the greater morality of minority religions in favor of an explanation that contrasted Protestant free inquiry with Catholic emphasis on unquestioning acceptance of beliefs and rituals. He located the key to this difference in dramatic societal changes in the late 19th-century society. Protestantism developed as a religion that responded to "modern" society by loosening its hold on members' collective lives, thus forfeiting its ability to restrain self-destructive impulses. Durkheim's general proposition conceptualized extremes - very weak integration (egoism) or overly strong integration (altruism) produces suicide (Smelser and Warner, 1976).

Similarly, Giddens (1978: 43-44) summarized Durkheim's notion that "the most important difference between Catholicism and Protestantism is the spirit of free inquiry which the latter permits, and indeed enjoins upon those within the religious community. The protestant is alone before God; in Catholicism, on the other hand, the priesthood intervenes between the believer and the deity, according to a traditionally ordered system of beliefs and practices. The Catholic Church, in short, is a more strongly integrated social community than the protestant, and it is from this difference that the divergences in suicide rates derive." This idea, since Durkheim, has been subjected to rigorous empirical examination and theoretical scrutiny.[1] Some studies have focused, unlike Durkheim, on the functions of religion in suicide which basically stressed the role of beliefs and dogmas (e.g. Whale 1964) and yet others examined the church participation and membership as an indicator of religion associated with suicide rate (e.g. Hills and Francis 2005). The studies that took a more multivariate approach to the definition and identification of religious groups and religious commitment have concluded that variations in suicide are generally unrelated to the proportion of Catholics and Protestants in a population, especially after controlling for socio-economic differences and indicators of modernization (e.g. Simpson and Conklin, 1989). Some studies have also found that certain religious denominations appear to be more protective against suicide than others. The US studies suggested that so-called 'mainstream' or 'liberal' Protestant denominations are most strongly associated with high suicide rates, whereas fundamentalist or evangelical Protestant denominations

are associated with comparatively low suicide rates (e.g. Pescosolido and Georgianna, 1989). To these authors, religion's role in suicide, operating through a network mechanism, is more complex than Durkheimian theory or contemporary typologies of religion would suggest. Network structures create the potential to provide members with 'integrative' and 'regulative' benefits. These functions can exist together or out of balance, affecting the ability of individuals to face personal, religious community, or larger cultural crises (ibid: 45). It has been suggested that certain religions are more effective than others at promoting social integration and subordination of the individual to the group. Islam, for example, emphasises the daily ritual of prayer, 'submersion of the self to the collective will', and a strict code of conduct (Simpson and Conklin, 1989: 961).

Other theories proposed that religion is protective against suicide because belief in an all-knowing God and an after-life makes worldly suffering more endurable and less life-threatening (Stack, 2000). Stark et al. (1983: 123) also observed that the belief that earthly suffering is but the prelude to immortality has sustained many who might otherwise have lost heart. The traditional religious values and expectations concerning marriage and the family are also argued to have an indirect effect on suicide in that they minimize the divorce rate, which in turn lowers suicide risk (Burr, et al. 1994, Stack, 2000).

The observations of the above scholars primarily focused on the association of religion and suicide which are largely employed in the context of greater religious groups such as Christian and its denominations, Jews, Islam, etc, and are largely cross-national studies. We do not come across pieces of literature that have attempted to understand the association of suicide and tribal belief and practices or more precisely 'tribal religion' that are living, more or less, in a specific geographical location. If the indicators such as the role of beliefs and dogmas, the role of church participation and membership, the Protestants' free inquiry and Catholic emphasis on unquestioning acceptance of beliefs and rituals, or otherwise the deterioration of traditional forms of social organization have any influence on the rate of suicide then is there any possible linkages and explanation of the animist form of the Idu Mishmi religion and their rate of suicide? What about the role of religious worldview in connection with their larger social cohesiveness? Based on the primary sources of data, the present paper has tried to look at the possible linkage between the role and functions of religion and the existing rate of suicide among the Idu Mishmi tribe of Arunachal Pradesh.

Objectives

1. The study tried to examine the role of the Idu Mishmi religion in their day to day life (i.e. basically on rituals and associational)
2. Its implication on the larger network of social life in understanding the phenomena of suicide.

3. To examines whether Idu Mishmi religion helps to promote support mechanisms for collective consciousness and social integration and its linkages with the phenomena of suicide.

Material and Method

The study is exploratory and descriptive in nature. Primary source data were obtained after conducting extensive fieldwork during 2007-2010, with a total sample of 218 cases of suicide in the study area. Household enumeration was carried out following interview method with structured schedule. Secondary sources of data were collected from various sources such as the National Crime Records Bureau, Ministry of Home Affairs, Government of India, etc.

Religion and Suicide: The Idu Mishmi Case

The suicide statistics reveal that more than 200 cases of suicide occurred among the Idu Mishmis during the decade 1980-2010 and out of these only two cases, which was a suicide pact, were found registered in the police report. The rate of suicide for the Idu Mishmi community is estimated at 58.2 per 100,000 population, who inhabits Dibang and Lower Dibang Valley districts of Arunachal Pradesh, India. The rate of suicide, thus established, is perhaps highest for any tribal community in India. The data were analyzed on a number of socio-cultural, demographic, and psychological variables. Religion as one of the variables, the study found that all the sample of study (218) were the follower and believers of the indigenous Idu Mishmi religion (Mene, 2012/2013). This opens the basic premise of the present paper and keeping aside the theoretical interpretation of the Idu Mishmis' belief and dogmas (i.e. intellectual and ideological), the author has tried to examine the role of the Idu Mishmi religion in their day to day life (i.e. basically on rituals and associational) and its implication on the larger network of social life in understanding the phenomena of suicide. The paper examines whether the Idu Mishmi religion helps to promote support mechanisms for collective consciousness and social integration and its linkages with the phenomena of suicide.

As an important aspect of culture, religion in any society is indispensably associated with the social life of the people. It not only defines the problems of the man with the universe but also develops some sort of adjustment of the man with the universe. In the operational definition of religion, religious ideas and practices, including magic or occultism may provide a feeling of security in crises against the more powerful forces than human beings. In the context of the man and his society, the study of religion also includes its role in the field of social control by maintaining a moral order as well as peaceful coexistence which, on the other hand, add to the cohesiveness or group solidarity (Chaudhuri, 1990:3).

'Religion' or 'Tribal religion' is to scholars like Bhagabati, (1998:1-2) the beliefs and practices, i.e., rites and rituals, which primarily relates to supernatural powers and that may be defined as any set of attitudes, beliefs, and practices about supernatural powers, whether that power is forces, gods, spirits, ghosts, or demons. To some others, religion is the belief in an attempt to relate favourably to values thought to have transcendental importance and ultimate power or powers thought responsible for all, or some significant aspect of, the fundamental order of the universe. Religion is that aspect of culture which is concerned with the sanctifications of particular beliefs and behaviour patterns…. When religion is thus defined, it is clear that it is vitally necessary for a stable social organization within a given group (Chaudhuri, 1990: 1).

These beliefs and practices that form the Idu Mishmi religion seem the best fitting with the typology framed by Tylor called "Animism."[2] To substantiate, Bhattacharjee (1983: 117) remarked that "an Idu is constantly hunted by the spirits (*Khinu*) who abound in jungles, hills, shadowy recesses, rivers, gorges, cliffs as well as in the house and village. They are dreaded as no one knows when or where one may fall into the trap. The spirits are the real masters of their fate. Any calamity-befalling them is attributed to spirits…" These faiths and beliefs are nothing but are manifested in their rituals and practices. Any kind of sickness befallen on an Idu Mishmi it is attributed to *Khinu*, the spirits, as a causative factor and as curative measure spirits are propitiated with offerings, by conducting rites and rituals, magico-religious acts through the institution of the shaman. These spirits are thought to be omnipresent, omnipotent, and omniscient. A belief exists that almost all diseases and living creatures have their own supreme/master spirits such as for *Sa (Boasfrontalis)* is *Mitu-Anjome*, and for the dog is *Mitu-Kubu*, etc, which are propitiated by the IduMishmis while conducting various rituals. *Golo* (spirit of mountains and hills), *Ashan* (spirit of forest and burial ground), *Apimishu* (spirit of the land), *Initohro* (spirit of forest and burial ground), *Khepa* (spirit of the forest), *Browo* (spirit of the river), *Epasara* (spirit of the forest), *Andro Zenu, A-li Zenu, EruZenu* (spirits of the house), etc, are some of the most commonly known spirits. Any misconduct, breach of prescribed taboos, or accidental incident may evoke these spirits which in turn cause serious illness upon the person and he could be cured only after engaging a shaman as a mediator or negotiator between the patient and spirits. Rituals related to birth like *Aa-taye,* curative rituals like *Ano-go, Machi-uhi,* festival related rituals like *Ayu-nah, Apesha*, death rituals like *Yah, Brocha,* etc, are observed with the involvement of the shaman meant to propitiate and pacify spirits and dead souls (in case of dead rituals), involving offerings and animals and birds sacrifices. The ritual may last for few hours to days which basically depends on the nature of the ritual and sometimes as per the requirement of situations and circumstances. Its related taboos may restrict one from various activities like attending funeral ceremonies, eating wild meat, and

avoidance of particular vegetable items, varieties of spices, mushrooms, etc., for days, months, or even more than a year.

The nature and characteristics of the Idu Mishmi religion reflect the multiplicity of belief in numerous benevolent and malevolent spirits. Though belief in supreme Goddess *Innitaya* or *Inni Maselo Zinu* does exist the direct practice of propitiation by an individual is absent. It is only through the institution of the shaman that the central Goddess is approached.

The notion that Catholic emphasis on unquestioning acceptance of beliefs and rituals and Protestants' free inquiry, the overall Idu Mishmi religious or belief system seems closer to the first proposition, for the Idu Mishmis shows an unquestioning acceptance to the beliefs towards spirits and any inquiry and question to unseen forces is rather a taboo for them. For appeasing and to seek blessings from the spirits, direct mode of propitiation by a common Idu Mishmi individuals do not exist rather a shaman is engaged and in this process, one has to act following the instructions of the shaman. The beliefs do remain in unseen forces but the mechanism of propitiation is indirect, thus making the institution of shamanism a fundament constituent of the Idu Mishmi religion.

However, in operational terms, the effectualness of the institution of the shaman in creating a socio-religious network is rather limited for various reasons. For example, the participation of shaman in religious activities primarily depends on the common Idu Mishmi man. In other words, in most of his daily life, a shaman remains free from religious activity until and unless his role is asked for. For example, in crises, such as severe illness, an Idu Mishmi would call upon a shaman for ritual performance to ascertain the cause of his illness and to cure the patient. While performing the ritual, the environment so created provides a feeling of security to the patient and the entire family against powerful forces but in the overall process, the participation is limited to family members, accompanied by few clansmen, neighbours, and to a certain extent, some villagers. Most of the ritual performances are meant for appeasing the spirits which are basically conducted at individual or household and occasionally at village level but not at the community level. Thus, as a result of this, the social networking process through the institution of shaman remains to limited individuals.

Unlike Hindu, Christian, or Islamic religion, in the Idu Mishmi religion, there is no common religious platform, such as a church, temple, or mosque to conduct public religious ceremonies. The system of daily or weekly prayers is absent among them. There is no sacred text or teaching of the religious code of conduct and the religious chanting and hymns do not convey the direct message as such sacred hymns used by the shaman are not easily understandable to common Idu Mishmis. Most importantly, the Idu Mishmi religion does not prescribe any religious sanctions on the suicidal act as do by Christian, Islam, and

others. These are factors associated with the Idu Mishmi religion that fails to provide religious solace and psychological satisfaction to the common Idu Mishmi man. Lack of religious commitment by the present Idu generation is simply an outcome of these factors.

On the other hand, changing social aspects or changes in social organization, in various ways, have altered the basis of network formation. In the sphere of religion, the process of religious conversion has already been noticed in the study area and as a result, the ongoing movement of institutionalization of the Idu Mishmi religion is noticed. At the societal level, there is the strife of ideas, values, and respect amongst Idu Mishmis, basically between the religious coverts and those who adhere to the indigenous Idu Mishmi religion. For instance, discordance is noticed amongst religious convert and non-convert members of a family or a clan and is well expressed in the funeral ceremony. In various instances of the dead funeral, it is noticed that death rituals and rites and burial of the dead are observed following two different religious doctrines. The death-related rituals and rites are performed following the Idu Mishmi religion, and on the other hand, the dead body is buried following Christian practice. These exhibit a state of transition in religious beliefs and practices exhibiting a chaotic social condition.

At the same time, other agents of social change such as modern education, health, electronic media, and communication, etc. to a greater extent, have eroded the traditional religious belief systems. The resultant outcome is observed in lack of commitment in religious practices, non-performances of the rituals, such as *Aluthru*,[3] non-observance of taboos and rituals, etc, especially by the younger Idu Mishmi generation which reflects a lack of religious conviction and maybe for the reason, they are at risk factor for suicide.

Discussion and Conclusions

It appears that the Idu Mishmi religion fails to create a network structure that could have provided its members with integrative and regulative benefits and contain its members in collective lives. Factors, such as lack of direct communication with the supreme goddess, absence of public religious worshipping, the non-existence of religious platform and sacred text or teaching of the religious code of conduct, cryptic nature of sacred hymns of the shaman, and lack of religious authority on the suicidal act, have some way or otherwise, disrupted the mechanism of religion as a regulative and integrative force in the Idu Mishmi society.

Unlike the Idu Mishmi, there are tribal societies in Arunachal Pradesh where the members of the society maintain a strong negative attitude towards suicide. For example, among the Galo tribe[4] suicidal death is very rare. One of the reasons is that they generally denounce suicide and a person who commits suicide is devoid of mass and elaborate religious funeral. Such a funeral is attended by fewer individuals, mostly family relatives.

The family where suicide has occurred is socially isolated and their members undergo strict taboos in attaining any public religious ceremony and people, in general, avoid eating and drinking in such a family at least for a year. Such negative attitudes and customs and practices towards suicide by the society and supported by religious belief system override the individual choice over collective lives and thus forbid its members from the suicidal act.[5]

At the same time, alterations in Idu Mishmi religion by various external forces have also added a confounding societal situation thereby breaking down the collective will of the members of the society. At this stage, we may equate the role of the Idu Mishmi religion with Durkheim's notion that religion as an agent of social control and social integration restrain one from self-destruction as found in the Catholic societies. As discussed above, the Idu Mishmi religion provided evidence that it fails to operate and hold on to its members in attaining collective lives and fails to regulate social life. This may be the reason that in times of extreme personal crisis people are more likely to act suicide.

Notes

1. For example, Stark, Doyle, and Rushing (1983); Whalen (1964); Simpson and Conklin (1989); Hilton, Fellingham, and Lyon (2002); Pescosolido and Georgianna (1989); Simpson, George (1950); etc.

2. The belief that natural phenomena, animate and inanimate alike, are endowed with spirits or souls which affect consequences in society (Gordon Marshall: A Dictionary of Sociology, Oxford University Press 2004, Indian edition). In other words, a belief in individual spiritual beings and a future state (Dictionary of Anthropology by E.B. Tylor, 1999, R. Goyal Publisher, New Delhi).

3. Cleansing or purification ritual is observed and done during funeral ceremony basically to cast off the evils and supernatural consequences.

4. Galo tribes are concentrated in districts like West Siang, East Siang, Upper Subansiri who profess Doni-Polo (Sun and Moon) cult.

5. Lester's (2006) reviewed paper provides a good number of literature concerning suicide among different indigenous communities, such as Mohave of United States, Bunyoro, Busoga, and Gisu of Uganda, Joluo of Kenya, etc where similar customs and practices are noticed.

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