Impact of Education on Suicides in India

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Abstract

Aim. The paper examines the impact of education on the rate of suicides in India and takes a global outlook on how prevalent is suicide among countries with high education indicators.

Methodology. The paper is based on secondary research with data collected from National Databases like NCRB and International databases of WHO and OECD. Data analysis has been performed in MS Excel using statistical techniques such as correlation.

Results. The study reveals that in India, the increase in the education levels of people has had a negligible impact on the number of suicides in the country. Across states, the suicide rates and literacy rates have a positive correlation of .35; while correlation does not mean causation and the two are mildly correlated, it does establish the fact that education does not have a direct impact on the suicide rate. The analysis indicates that even though the education levels in the country have risen, subsequently, the educational level among people who committed suicide also increased. Also, it is found that the countries that are ranked higher on PISA ranking and tertiary education attainment have mostly higher rates of suicide.

Conclusion. As shown throughout the study, education has not been an effective instrument in equipping people with survival skills. It is as if education is happening in vacuum with no impact on the people committing suicides. Thus, it is important that we question our educational practices, and re-align our goals of education so that they lead to the overall development of an individual.

Key words: suicide rate, education, NCRB Data, literacy rate, OECD, WHO, PISA Ranking, Tertiary Education Attainment

Introduction

Suicide is a global phenomenon. According to World Health Organization (WHO) Mortality database, every year about 800,000 people die

because of suicide; that is one death every 40 seconds. In one of its reports titled *Depression and Other Common Mental disorders*, it is estimated that 4.4% of the world population deals with depression. In India, 15 suicides took place every one hour during the year 2015 (National Crime Records Bureau [NCRB], 2015). These are staggering numbers; a world which seeks sustainability of the planet should plausibly also focus on survival of human lives. According to NCRB, around 20 students commit suicide every day because of exam stress.

According to UNESCO education is an important instrument for changing lives. It is assumed that one of the primary development factors is education; moreover, it is considered as an important tool for creating a sustainable planet but somewhere when we strive for an education system for economic and material benefits there are opportunity costs involved here too. They are in the form of the disappearance of creativity, individuality and death of people who could not cope, who were different. This paper examines the role education plays in the prevalent suicides across the globe. The paper attempts to test the hypothesis that an increase in the level of education shall lead to a reduction in suicide rates.

Objectives of the Study

The following objectives are proposed under the research:
- to analyse the relationship between education and suicide;
- to explore the situation of examinations and suicides happening in India;
- to discuss the goals of education in light of the increase in suicides.

Database

National Crime Records Bureau (NCRB), data on suicides from 1967 to 2014. NCRB is a national repository of information on crime and criminals set up by the government of India in 1986 based on the recommendation of Tandon Committee, National Policy Commission (1977-1981).

The Census of India is the total enumeration of economic, social and demographic data pertaining to a particular country at a specific time.

World Health Organisation (WHO) Data. WHO is an agency of the United Nations responsible for international public health; it produces data related to deaths and disability.

Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development (OECD) Data. OECD is an international organisation that works with governments to find solutions to economic, environmental and social challenges. It provides data for selected indicators like education, employment, GDP, etc.

World Bank Data. The World Bank is an international financial institution that provides data on poverty, gender, education, MDIs etc.

METHODOLOGY

The study is based on secondary research. The paper is based on secondary research with data collected from National Databases like NCRB and the International databases of WHO and the Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development (OECD). Data analysis is performed in Microsoft Excel using statistical techniques such correlation.

The study analyses the trend of suicide rates (number of suicides per 100,000 population) and the literacy rates (the percentage of population aged 7 years and above of a given area who can read and write with understanding in any language) in India from 1967 to 2014 in order to determine whether significant literacy levels deter suicides. The study also attempts to analyse the level of educational attainment among people who committed suicide in order to understand the impact and effectiveness of education. Further, the study draws a correlation between the suicide rate (NCRB, 2015) of the Indian states and the literacy rate of 2011 to understand the link between literacy rates and suicides, though not establishing a causal relationship. It also attempts to look at the prevalent suicides due to examination; and assert how education, through its assessment component, is exacerbating the situation of suicides.

In order to get a global outlook, the study examines the suicide rates among countries which have high education standards: parameters being the Programme for International Student Assessment (PISA) ranking and Tertiary educational attainment.

FINDINGS OF THE STUDY

Literacy Rate Against Suicide Rate

NCRB has been publishing reports on suicides in India since 1967. Even though there has been a constant increase in the literacy rate in India, there has not been much effect on the suicide rates. The following graph shows the decadal change in the literacy rate and suicide rate over 40 years.

As shown in Figure 1, there has been a significant increase in literacy levels, and concomitantly, suicide rates have also increased barring a single exception of 1981 when the suicide rate came down to 5.9 per 100,000 population. In fact, according to the NCRB data, the net change in suicide rate over the last year 15 years is zero. In 2001, the suicide rate was 10.6 per 100,000 population, and it remained the same in 2015 as well. Therefore, even though the literacy level has increased from 64.8% in 2001 to 74.04% in 2011, it has had no effect on the prevalent number of suicides.
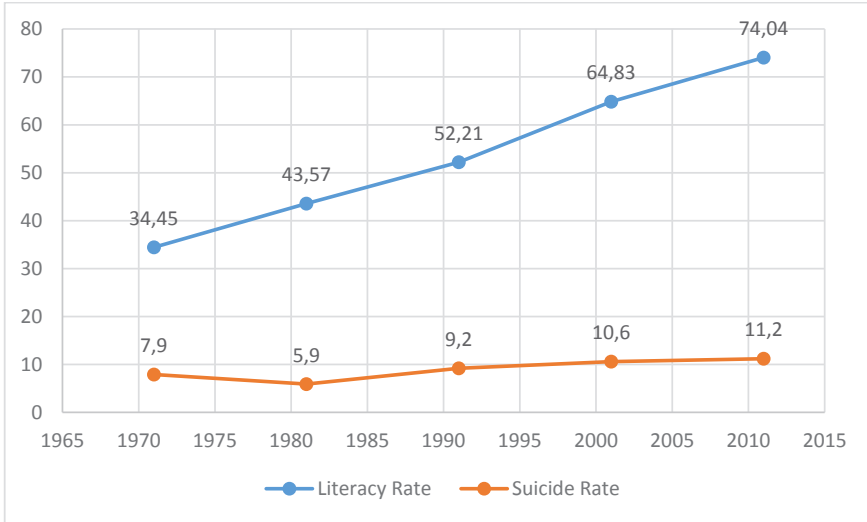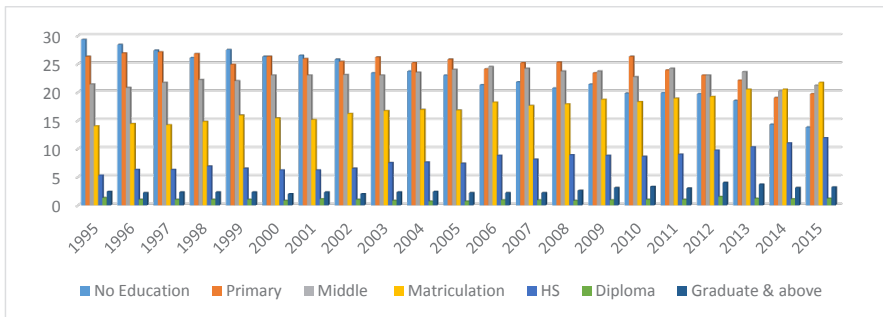
Figure 1
Literacy Rate vs. Suicide Rate
Source: Literacy Rate taken from Census of India (1971-2011); Suicide Rate taken from National Crime Records Bureau (1971-2011).

Education Level of People Who Commit Suicide

An interesting way to test our hypothesis would be to see the educational level of people who commit suicide. NCRB has produced data on the educational status of people who commit suicide since 1995.

Figure 2
Educational Status of People Who Commit Suicide
Source: NCRB Data (1995-2015).

Figure 2 has some interesting data points. It can be seen that in 1995, out of all the people who committed suicide, most of them belonged to the "No Education" category. However, slowly and steadily as the educa-

tional attainment of people increased (as shown previously), educational status dynamics of people who commit suicide also changed. By the year 2003, most suicides started happening in the "Primary education" (1st to 5th grade) category, which got changed by 2011, when most suicides happened in the "Middle education" (6th to 8th grade) category. The latest reports of 2014 and 2015 show that out of people who committed suicides, most belonged to the "Matriculation" (8th to 10th) category.

This clearly indicates that even though the education levels in the country have risen, subsequently, the educational level among people who committed suicide also increased. Thus, education has not had any significant contribution in helping people deal with suicidal thoughts or providing appropriate skills except only for economic returns which again is limited and highly competitive.

Relation Between Suicide Rate and Literacy Rate Among Indian States

We have also tried to investigate the rate of suicide against the literacy rate in every state in India. The literacy rate is taken from the 2011 Census and the Suicide Rate from the NCRB Data 2015 (Table 1).

Table 1

Suicide Rate Against Literacy Rate in Various States of India

States	Suicide Rate 2015	Literacy Rate 2011 (%)
Bihar	0.7	63.82
Arunachal Pradesh	12.1	66.95
Rajasthan	6.3	67.06
Jharkhand	4.0	67.63
Andhra Pradesh	12	67.66
Jammu & Kashmir	2.1	68.74
Uttar Pradesh	1.7	69.72
Madhya Pradesh	11.9	70.63
Chhattisgarh	22.4	71.04
Assam	11.1	73.18
Orissa	9.9	73.45
India	**10.6**	**74.04**
Meghalaya	3.6	75.48
Karnataka	17.8	75.60
Haryana	11.9	76.64
Punjab	3.3	76.68
West Bengal	15.5	77.08
Dadra & Nagar Haveli #	18.7	77.65

States	Suicide Rate 2015	Literacy Rate 2011 (%)
Gujarat	11.7	79.31
Uttarakhand	2.0	79.63
Manipur	2.0	79.85
Nagaland	0.6	80.11
Tamil Nadu	23.4	80.33
Sikkim	38.4	82.20
Maharashtra	13.9	82.91
Himachal Pradesh	9.2	83.78
A & N Islands [#]	28.9	86.27
NCT Of Delhi [#]	10.3	86.34
Chandigarh [#]	6.3	86.43
Puducherry [#]	40.4	86.55
Daman & Diu [#]	8.7	87.07
Goa	15.1	87.40
Tripura	20.3	87.75
Mizoram	11.1	91.58
Lakshadweep [#]	3.8	92.28
Kerala	23.9	93.91

Source: *Retrieved from* # denotes Union Territories; Suicide Rate data from NCRB 2015; Literacy Rate data from Census 2011.

Pearson Correlation test was applied. It was found that the suicide rate and literacy rate have a positive correlation (r=.35, p=.04). This shows that with the increase in literacy rate, suicide rates have also increased. Though we cannot establish a causal relationship between education and suicides, it can be safely interpreted that education has not been effective in curbing suicide rates.

Student Suicides Due to Failure in Examination

Competition is considered an important tool of innovation and growth in the market economy. In one way, it helps avoid monopolisation of the market. "Failure in Examination" was the second leading cause of suicide among children below 18 years of age (NCRB, 2015). According to the report, "Failure in Examination" contributed 2% of the total suicides in India. While, on the one hand, education is viewed as a significant tool for the development of a child; on the other hand, assessment practices take lives.

Since the 90s, the rate of suicides among young adults (15-24) has increased 3 times and is the second most common death cause currently among

college-going students. The rate of suicides for boys 15 to 19 grew by 30% from 2007 to 2016 (NCRB, 2016).
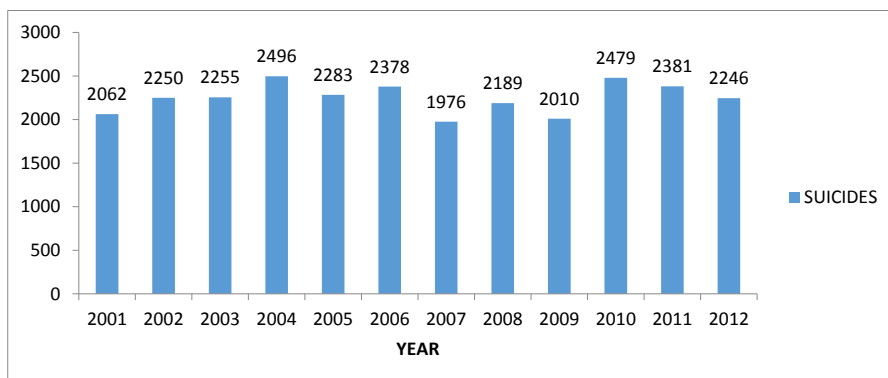
Figure 3
Suicides Due to Failure in Exams
Source: NCRB, India.

Figure 3 shows suicides due to failure in examinations. This is anomic suicide (Durkheim, 2005). It can be seen that the suicide number has not seen an overall decrease; students continue to commit suicide due to failure in examinations. In spite of so many education reforms, this number has not plunged. Students need to be supported in school and out of school. They should be allowed to explore their interests and learn with pride, and need to understand that failures are nothing but stepping stones to success. It is important that parents, teachers, school counsellors and all stakeholders (including the government) recognise that suicides happen, and the whole community needs to come together to support every child so that they can have a lively and enriching life.

Global Outlook

Statistics show that every year around 200,000 teenagers worldwide commit suicide while about 4 million adolescents attempt it. In 2002, a survey conducted on 6020 students in the UK showed that around 70% of teenagers involved in self-harming activities acknowledged that the primary reason for self-harm was their performance in school and the exams (Sharp, 2013). According to Therese Hesketh et al., (2002), Hoi Suen and Lan Yu (2006) and Kangmin Zeng and Gerald Le Tendre (1998), there are multiple reports in Japan, China, Hong Kong and several other countries in Asia that talk about exam stress related psychological problems, feeling of suicides and exam fear. An attempt is made to look at the suicide rates among countries which have high education standards. PISA ranking and Tertiary education attainment are the two parameters used to determine the education standard in a country.

PISA Ranking

PISA is an international assessment where countries across the globe compete in three categories: reading, science and math levels. All countries were selected whose ranking was under or equal to 10 in any of the three categories, and their data on suicides was available in the database of WHO. Out of these 11 countries, 8 of them had suicide rates higher than the global average of 10.5 (Table 2).

Table 2
Suicide Rate in the Countries Ranked Highest in PISA

Country	Suicide Rate
Singapore	7.9
Finland	13.8
China	8
Japan	14.3
South Korea	20.2
Canada	10.4
Estonia	14.4
Ireland	10.9
Norway	10.1
New Zealand	11.6
Switzerland	11.3
Global	**10.5**

Source: WHO Data

Tertiary Education Attainment

World Bank data on tertiary education attainment was perused. Out of the eight countries whose tertiary education attainment was 50 or above, six of them had suicide rates above the global average.

Table 3
Suicides Rate in the Countries Ranked Highest in Tertiary Education Attainment

Country	Suicide Rate
Australia	11.7
Lithuania	25.7
Luxembourg	10.4
Russia	26.5
Sweden	11.7
Switzerland	11.3
UK	7.6
USA	13.7
Global	**10.5**

Source: WHO Data

Table 3 clearly shows that the countries with high education attainment also have high suicide rates. Both PISA and Tertiary Education Attainment data show that higher levels of education in a country do not determine a mentally healthier population deterring suicides.

Conclusion: Re-Aligning the Goals of Education

When we speak of education, we tend to confine ourselves to discussing categories of institutions, their numbers, and the figures of those that qualify. Education has become primarily a tool for economic development. It's seen as an instrument of getting a job, or making sumptuous money. There are an exceptional few for whom education goes beyond this limited point, and this exception does not represent the people of this democratic society. As shown throughout the study, education has not been an effective instrument in equipping people with life skills: with the increase in education levels across the country, there has been an increase in the education level of people who commit suicides concomitantly, as if the education is happening in vacuum with no effect on the persona of people committing suicides.

Thus, it is significant we question our educational practices; and re-align our goals of education such that it leads to overall development of an individual. Education does not function in isolation. It is an important ingredient in the larger vision of society. Literacy is not the sole purpose of education; real education leads to a creative life. Exploration of knowledge can only succeed if education is not forced to conform to one explanation, and is based on a critical inquiry. Knowledge is not so much an external process as a process of interior awareness and self-discovery.

The challenge of our time is that we learn to exist in our own environment and to deal justly with our neighbours. As someone said, education is the supreme embodiment of morality. It is based on awareness of our own self and our potentialities. It is a perennial hope that can never be defeated by actuality. It is a timeless aspiration which gives meaning and illumination to human existence.

If students are to be accommodated in a global system, there has to be an emphasis on teaching them to think about what exists and to relate it to their aspirations. A crucial question that we need to ask today is: whether the education proposed will assist democracy, together with its components of human justice; whether the education will help bring about the society we are waiting. A society in which education is a means of discovering ourselves and our surroundings, and harmonising. If not, it is time we realign our goals of education such that it adds to every individual's mental health, and give each of them the confidence to live a more fulfilling and sustainable life.

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