

Research article

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Extreme escape attempts: Investigating suicide in contemporary Hindi fiction

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Abstract: Suicide is a serious global public health problem and India’s suicide death rates are among the highest in the world. In recent decades, the depiction of voluntary deaths (Hindi *ātmahatyā*) has become a quite common ingredient of Hindi fiction. Yatish in *Ṭ-ṭā profesar*, Anisa in *Dāstān-e-lāptā*, Sapam in *Pīlī chatrī vālī laṛkī*, and Jharna in *Ek naukrānī kī dāyri*, to mention a few examples, are some of the characters who decide to escape from their lives. Who are these people, and what role do suicides play in the narratives? Why are they so common? The paper attempts to answer these questions by linking some recent works of Hindi fiction with media reporting and data provided by the National Crime Records Bureau.

Keywords: *ātmahatyā*, contemporary Hindi fiction, suicide

1 Introduction

Globally, more than 700,000 people die by suicide each year, which is one person every 40 seconds, and for each suicide there are more than 20 suicide attempts (World Health Organization 2021). As far as India is concerned, suicide is a serious public health issue, and in recent years India has had the highest suicide rate in the South and Southeast Asian region, not to mention the third highest female suicide rate (14.7) in the world after Lesotho (24.4) and the Republic of Korea (15.4). According to the World Health Organization (2019), suicide accounts for more deaths than malaria, breast cancer, war, and even murder. This situation worsened after the outbreak of the Covid-19 pandemic, and the statistics for ADSI (Accidental Deaths and Suicides in India) in 2021, released by the National Crime Records Bureau (NCRB) report a total of 164,033 suicides in the country, a sharp rise compared to the years before the pandemic. It should also be noted that the number of suicides in India is likely to be underestimated, for a number of socio-cultural reasons. Until a few years ago, attempted suicide was considered a criminal offence under the Indian Penal Code (IPC Section 309). In fact, it was only in 2017 that suicide was decriminalized through the Mental Healthcare Act, which ensures medical assistance for those who attempt it. This act is actually a somewhat controversial measure that “mainly focuses on the rights of the persons with mental illness (PMI), only during treatment in hospital but is not equally emphatic about continuity of treatment in the community” (Math et al. 2019). In general, many suicides go unreported, and are instead reported as deaths due to illness or accident, both in order to avoid police investigation and because suicide is seen as bringing social stigma and tarnishing family members’ reputations (Radhakrishnan & Andrade 2012; Snowdon 2019). In this regard, Tripathi, Nadkarni and Pathare (2022) point out that “the overall suicide death rate in India, as reported by the NCRB, was 37% lower per year compared with the rates reported by Global Burden Disease (GBD). [...] Among men, the average under-reporting was 27% per year, and among women, the average under-reporting was as high as 50% per year”.

Nevertheless, Indian daily newspapers publish reports of suicides almost every day. Young people, students and farmers are often considered the most noteworthy victims, to such an extent that their

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suicides may even be overreported compared to their incidence in the broader population, especially when their deaths can be linked to social injustices (Armstrong et al. 2020, p. 2). The issue of farmer suicides, for example, has also received international attention, especially during the first decades of the neoliberal economic reforms. Between 1997 and 2007, the number of peasant households in debt doubled, and suicides among cash crop farmers in particular – growers of cotton, coffee, sugarcane, pepper and vanilla – increased dramatically. During those years, however, farmers were not the only vulnerable subjects in terms of suicidal intentions. The ADSI statistics for 1998 show, for instance, that although the proportion of persons involved in farming and agricultural activities who committed suicide was about 15.3 percent, and housewives constituted about 21 percent of the total victims, less attention was paid to the latter category of victims. Indeed, suicides among housewives are often neglected, despite the relevance of the issue. Garcia et al. (2022) point out that “Housewives accounted for 14.6% of the total of 153,052 suicides recorded in the South Asian country in 2020 and more than 50% of the total number of women who killed themselves”. Nonetheless, it is undeniable that the official figures on farmer suicides (182,936 people were recorded as having committed suicide) are alarming, and they probably do not even accurately reflect the magnitude of the problem, partly for the socio-cultural reasons mentioned above, and partly because the NCRB defines men who work in agriculture as “farmers”, but not women (Sainath 2009).

As regards the issue of student suicides, the ADSI report points out that 13,000 students died in India in 2021, which is a rate of more than 35 per day. This is a 70% increase from 2011 when there were 7,696 student suicides. These alarming numbers reveal the precarious mental health of many young people, who are dejected because of parental expectations and societal pressure and at risk of finally succumbing to anxiety and fear of failure. To cite just a few examples, between February and April of this year (2023), four students took their own lives at the Indian Institute of Technology, Madras, and, so far, twenty-four students have done so in Kota. For marginalized students, mainly Dalits and Adivasis, the situation can be even more complex due to institutionalized discrimination. A well-known case is the tragic death in 2016 of Rohit Vemula, a Ph.D. student at the University of Hyderabad, whose suicide received widespread media attention and has been interpreted as a consequence of state-sponsored discrimination against Dalits. To mention some more recent incidents, last February an 18-year-old Dalit student killed himself at the IIT in Bombay (Deshpande and Lakshman 2023), and between July and September two more Dalit students committed suicide at the IIT in Delhi (Aswani 2023). The issue of student suicides has recently been addressed not only in the media, but also in popular Indian cinema. For example, *3 Idiots*, a 2009 film directed by Rajkumar Hirani, shows a student who hangs himself after missing a project deadline, and one of the main characters attempts suicide because of his expulsion from university. Other films worth mentioning in this context are *Cal caleñ* (2009, directed by Ujjwal Singh), where a young boy kills himself out of extreme anxiety over pressure from his family to get good grades, and *Chichore* (2019, directed by Nitesh Tiwari), where a student attempts suicide by deliberately falling from the balcony after failing a very competitive exam. In general, suicide is actually a rather common ingredient in popular Hindi cinema (see Bhatia, Mathur and Thakur 2023). Voluntary deaths, especially in relation to disapproved relationships, failed marriages, and unjust treatment, have been represented for decades through a series of cinematic clichés. In *Ek dūje ke liye* (1981, directed by K. Balachander), for example, a boy and a girl of different origins and mother tongues jump from a cliff to escape the persecution and affliction they face because of their love for each other. In *Kamlā kī maut* (1989, directed by Basu Chatterjee), a young girl named Kamla jumps into the central compound of her chawl after discovering she is pregnant and being rejected by her boyfriend. In a more recent film, *Raksha Bandhan* (2022 directed by Aanand L. Rai), a newly married woman, Gayatri, commits suicide by drinking poison after her husband and in-laws ask for more dowry.

Unsurprisingly the deaths of celebrities by suicide can also generate widespread media coverage, as in the cases of 34-year-old Bollywood star Sushant Singh Rajput in 2020, and 20-year-old television actress Tunisha Sharma in 2022. Such events are considered particularly sensitive and have led to concerns about the role of responsible media reporting in preventing suicides. Indeed, it is commonly agreed that potentially harmful practices, such as describing suicide methods in detail, can cause a Werther effect of copycat suicides (Armstrong et al. 2021, p. 143).

Despite the relevance of the topic and the high exposure of Indian people to representations of voluntary death in fiction and non-fiction, limited studies have been done on the subject. In this paper, I aim to examine some suicides (Hindi *ātmahatyā*) depicted in contemporary works of Hindi fiction with the aim of showing how and why they are introduced into the stories. Like the newspapers, recent Hindi novels often include at least one suicide, with a preference for certain types of suicide victims. These tend to be young, educated men and women who are facing family or romantic problems. Some examples are Yatish in *T-tā Professor* (Jośi 2008), Sapam in *Pilī chatrī vālī larḳī* (Prakāś 2011), Anisa in *Dāstān-e-lāptā* (Ehteśām 2000), and Jharna in *Ek naukrānī kī dāyri* (Vaid 2014). However, there are also children, like Suryakant in *Maingosil* (Prakash 2017) and old men, like Baman Maharaj in *Dūb* (Jain 2014) and Thakur Harnam Singh in *Chappar* (Kardam 2012). The paper will thus focus on the patterns of fictional suicide that emerge from the narratives and on the characters' profiles, relating fictional data to the factual situation.

2 *Ātmahatyā* and recent Hindi fiction

2.1 Youth and suicide

2.1.1 Profiles of the victims

The most common suicide victims in recent Hindi fiction are young men and women who are struggling with family or social issues. In *Pilī chatrī vālī larḳī* (translated into English as *The Girl with the Golden Parasol*) by Uday Prakash, for example, the reader is introduced to a college student named Sapam who jumps into an old well. Sapam is a Manipuri friend of the protagonist who is suffering from his brother's murder during the Manipur riots and repeated assaults by some local criminals (Prakāś 2011, p. 57). He cannot endure the pain of his loss (he cannot even attend his brother's funeral, as the trip is too expensive and the situation in Manipur too dangerous), and the physical and psychological harassment inflicted by the goondas. During the latest episode of violence, the goondas entered his room on the university campus and not only stole his money and watch, but also forced him to strip naked and urinate on a hot electric heater. In *Mujhe cāmd cāhie* (English translation, *Give me the Moon*) by Surendra Verma, there are actually two suicide victims, both young actors struggling with difficulties related to their careers. The first one is Madhukar Zutsi, who had completed his training at the Drama School some years before the protagonist (Varsha). He was experiencing very precarious living conditions, and he did not even have a place to stay except with his friends (Varmā 2009, p. 185). His corpse is found hanging by a noose on the set of *Āmdher nagrī* (an 1881 satirical play by Bhartendu Harishchandra), where he had his last contract. The second victim is a more relevant character, Harsh, Varsha's colleague and lover. Unable to find a balance between his personal and artistic ambitions, he suffers from his lover's more successful career. He seeks refuge in heroin and eventually dies of an overdose on a Mumbai beach (Varmā, 2009, pp. 545-546). In the short novel *T-tā profesar* (English translation, *T-Ta Professor*), Manohar Shyam Joshi depicts the suicide of a young man named Yatish, who hangs himself from a ceiling fan. He was Professor T'ta's son and a pupil of Mr. Joshi, the novel's protagonist and narrator. He came to America as a cabin boy and later became an officer with the shipping company. He married an American girl and became an American citizen. However, after a huge argument, his wife divorced him and successfully fought a bitter custody battle over their son. The court accepted her testimony that Yatish was a mentally ill person

with homosexual tendencies who was unfit to bring up their son. After these sad and stressful events, Yatish returned to India and committed suicide on the day of his second wedding with Miss Yen, one of the teachers at his father's school (Jośi 2008, pp. 90-91).

As for women characters, in Manzoor Ahtesham's *Dāstān-e-lāptā* (English translation, *The Tale of the Missing Man*), a tragic fate befalls a medical student, named Anisa (Ehteśām 2000, p. 155). At a young age, she had a troubled affair with the protagonist, which supposedly began as a brother-sister relationship. In fact, when she first met Zamir Ahmad Khan, Anisa seemed to see her late younger brother in him. The protagonist learns of her suicide from a newspaper with the headline "Medico Commits Suicide". Anisa dies by suicide on her birthday, after being abandoned by Zamir. In Krishna Baldev Vaid's *Ek naukrānī kī dāyri* (English translation, *The Diary of a Maidservant*), it is Jharna, the eldest daughter of a Bengali family for whom the protagonist works as a maidservant, who kills herself. She has a love affair with a Muslim boy, but her family opposes it firmly. After a secret abortion, she hangs herself in her bedroom, and a couple of days later the newspapers report the suicide of her boyfriend (Vaid 2014, 85-91).¹

A first element that is easily noticed is that in these works of contemporary Hindi fiction, the suicide victim is never the protagonist, but a minor or a secondary character. The situation is thus rather different from that in earlier works of fiction such as Rahi Masoom Raza's novel *Ṭopī Śuklā* (1969) or Premchand's short stories such as *Dhikkār* (1925) and *Beṭom vālī vidhvā* (1932). In Raza's novel, it is the protagonist, Topi who, oppressed by Hindu-Muslim communalism, commits suicide. In Premchand's *Beṭom vālī vidhvā* (The Widow with Sons), the main character, the widow Phulmati, is unable to bear her own sons' behavior and drowns herself in a river. In *Dhikkār* (Reproach), Mani begins to consider suicide after the death of her husband and the mistreatment she receives from her relatives. She stops thinking about it for some time and secretly remarries. However, after suffering further humiliation, she kills herself (Gupta 1991, 96-7). In contrast to these examples, and as noted above, contemporary Hindi fiction tends to include the suicide of a minor or secondary character, who chooses to die voluntarily for family or love reasons.

These depictions accurately reflect the suicides most commonly presented in Indian newspapers, with the interesting exception of farmer suicides, which are never mentioned in the fictional works studied. The profiles of the fictional victims largely match the middle/upper-class profile of the core readership, increasing the likelihood of identification and emotional response. As Armstrong et al. (2020) point out about media reporting, the noteworthiness of a suicide is closely linked to the profile of the victim and to the social and political issues surrounding the incident. Suicides of low-profile people are often perceived as less interesting to audiences, so much so that their deaths may be ignored. Evidently, people from poor backgrounds are perceived as less important in Indian society. In this regard, Armstrong et al. (2020, p. 9) quote the cynical words of a Delhi-based editor: "All suicides are not noteworthy... I would not spend resources trying to stop suicides in a slum. I would rather try to save those

¹ Further suicides can be found, for example in novels such as *Kali-kathā:vāyā bāipās* by Alka Saraogi and *Naukar kī kamīz* by Vinod Kumar Shukla, and in *Cikh*, a short story by Ajay Navaria. In Saraogi's novel, the protagonist (Kishor Babu) recalls a news item describing how a poor girl died by suicide in a nearby lake. Her father wanted her to start begging, but she refused because she did not have enough clothes to cover her body (Sarāvgī 2003, pp. 141-144). Later, there is another reference to a suicide in connection with Kishor Babu's brother-in-law. He suffered from a vaguely defined mental illness and was hospitalized for repeated suicide attempts. Considered recovered, he returned home only to succeed in his planned suicide by falling from the balcony (Sarāvgī 2003, p. 244). In *Naukar kī kamīz*, the protagonist, Santu Babu, has bought some kerosene on credit and is drumming up business for the shopkeeper among his acquaintances. While doing so, he remembers a professor of Hindi literature who probably would have refused to buy any kerosene due to a past tragedy. His first wife had doused herself in kerosene and set herself on fire. The professor no longer kept any flammable substance in his home for fear that his second wife might also attempt suicide (Śukla 2000, pp. 87-98). In *Cikh*, Ajay Navaria mentions the suicide of a beautiful Brahmin girl, Revati, who lived for some time in the same Bombay apartment as the protagonist. He offers no explanation of the incident, saying only that the girl succumbed to the sorrows of life (Nāvāriyā 2006).

precious educated men who can serve the country more. Because the contribution to the economy from that person from the slum is not as much. So I would rather not spend more on saving his life. It's not a priority for a poor country". A similar tendency can be recognized, at least in part, in contemporary fiction, which seems to "privilege" suicides involving people from middle/upper-class backgrounds. Comparing the profiles of the fictional victims portrayed above with factual data on suicide in India, it is clear that the novels only partially reflect the actual reality. While the ADSI confirms that suicide is a particularly serious problem among young people (see also Gupta and Basera 2021), it also shows that young people with low levels of education are most at risk. Specifically, in the 1990s (when most of the works of fiction mentioned here were published), but also in more recent years, the ADSI reports show a prevalence of relatively young victims, especially males in the 15-29 age group (40.9% in 1995, 34.5% in 2021)², followed by the 30-44 age group (32.61% in 1995, 31.7% in 2021). However, as previously mentioned, *real* suicides are especially frequent among people with a low level of education, ranging from no education to matriculate/secondary level (91% in 1995 and about 70% in 2021), among the self-employed people (34.59% in 1995, 12.3% in 2021)³, and among housewives (19.93% in 1995 and 14.1% in 2021). In the fictional works studied, on the other hand, three characters who commit suicide are explicitly described as having a high educational profile: Sapam and Anisa, both university students, and Harsh, who was trained at the National School of Drama.

As regards the causes of suicide, the ADSI reports of 1995 and 2021 show that the main known reasons are illness (20.2% in 1995, 18.8% in 2021) and family problems (15.4% in 1995, 33.2% in 2021). The first factor does not appear at all in the novels mentioned here, again probably because it is perceived as less appealing to the core audience. As a senior reporter from Chennai explained in an interview with Armstrong et al. (2020, p. 7), "Suicides are two types. One is due to mental illness. The second is the social issue. You can't present just anything uninteresting to the public. If something is a social issue, the public will listen". Family problems, along with love and marriage issues, are perceived as much more engaging and thus seem to be favored by both journalists and fiction authors.

2.1.2 Suicidal episodes within the narratives

After analyzing the most typical profiles of suicide victims in Hindi fiction, it is necessary to highlight how suicides are described and the roles they play in the narratives. In *T-tā profesar*, for example, Manohar Shyam Joshi briefly mentions Yatish's suicide towards the end of the story, through the words of an aspiring writer who informs Mr. Joshi of the tragic incident during a funeral. The young man recalls the death scene with these words: "I saw Yatish's body swinging from the ceiling fan. I cannot tell you how revolting it was, sir! [...] Yatish's tongue had popped out, sir, and shit had stained his clothes" (Joshi 2008, p. 137). He thus seems to be indulging in graphic details to evoke an emotional response, as is sometimes done in media reporting. (It should probably be mentioned that Manohar Shyam Joshi worked as a journalist and for Doordarshan.) However, the description soon ends, as the writer is asked to help with the pyre logs. Yatish's suicide seems to be just a parenthetical event, one among many others, exactly as with *real* suicides in the daily news. On a more superficial level, the episode does not appear to affect the story itself. Nonetheless, the reader learns that Professor T'ta died of a massive heart attack on the first anniversary of Yatish's death: "They say he died of a broken heart, although he never breathed a word of his sorrow to any living soul as long as he was alive. Not even when his only son committed suicide. No one ever saw him shed a tear, but occasionally he used to mutter, 'Why? Why?' in English to himself" (Joshi 2008, 135). Yatish's suicide is explicitly linked to T'ta's death, and the latter highlights the impossibility of writing a story about

² These data come from the Accidental Deaths & Suicides in India 1995, p. 61, and the Accidental Deaths & Suicides in India 2021, p. 203.

³ For 2021 the ADSI reports a larger share of suicides among daily wage earners (25.6%). This category was not actually mentioned in the 1995 report and was probably included in the "self-employed" category.

T'ta's life. This very point, namely the impossibility of writing about human experience in an adequate and exhaustive manner, is crucial to the short novel. Yatish's suicide cannot easily be dismissed as a minor incident, for its consequences are critical.

In *Mujhe cāṁd cāhie*, if the episode of Madhukar Zutshi's death is rather incidental, Harsh's death, on the other hand, is relevant from several perspectives. First, it is connected to the issue of drug abuse and addiction, a rather pervasive phenomenon in Indian society. Despite becoming an actor of international repute, Harsh is unable to find his own way of life and escapes his troubles with heroin. Secondly, the episode allows for criticism of the media's voracious appetite for potential scoops. When Varsha arrives the airport after seeing Harsh's body, Doordarshan's people are waiting and pounce ruthlessly: "In her deep personal sorrow Varsha was unable to face herself, and here people were wanting her to face the camera" (Verma 2014, p. 696). Harsh's death was covered extensively in newspapers, and film magazines ran cover stories with pictures of Varsha as a "platonic widow". Thirdly, Harsh's suicide underscores Varsha's resilience, a young woman who despite all the difficulties and sorrows is able to maintain her life trajectory. When Harsh leaves her alone and pregnant, she does not surrender, but continues on her artistic and professional path. In Varsha's words, suicide is a selfish act done without regard for what happens to those left behind. The latter "are worth worshipping, who in spite of screaming the pain and misery return and pick up the threads of life" (Verma 2014, p. 699).

In Ahtesham's *Dāstān-e-lāptā*, on the contrary, Zamir Ahmad Khan experiences a kind of personal regression after Anisa's suicide. Reading about her death, he sits in silence: "A silence that was only to become deeper with time and age, that was to throw him off balance and make living life difficult. That would drive him out to wander the streets, disturbed, incurable" (Ahtesham 2018, 165). Not only does Zamir Ahmad Khan not support Anisa after she confides in him, but he resolves never to meet her again. He even decides to get rid of anything that could remind him of her; he fills an old bag with things and throws it into a well, hoping to free himself from a significant burden. He has lied to himself, believing that he tried to fulfill his duties, that it is not his fault if he was unable to meet them. However, *that silence* keeps growing and reminds him of the chapter of his life called "Anisa" and of his own unfair behavior. The suicide, even though it is only described in a few lines, represents a critical moment in Zamir Ahmad Khan's life.

In *Pīlī chatrī vālī laṛkī* by Uday Prakash, the self-inflicted death of Sapam bursts into the story through the simple and direct words of one of his friends: "Sapam committed suicide. He's dead" (Prakash 2013, p. 74). Kartikeya informs the other students of the discovery of the body in an old well behind the hostel, and again the consequence is a deep silence, "screaming and ringing even in the absence of sound. Like after a falling meteor breaks up, or after a big explosion, or after a horrific death" (Prakash 2013, p. 74). Sapam's suicide becomes the scream of many voiceless victims of social wrongs, denouncing, on the one hand, a deteriorated university campus where local criminals harass people and go unpunished, and on the other hand, the tragic situation of the Manipuri people, and of many people from northeastern India, who face daily protests and acts of violence. Sapam's death is recalled near the end of Uday Prakash's novella when a geologist, Dr. Watson, is described as standing near the well with a rock in his hands. Suddenly, with a flash of lightning in his eyes, he throws the rock into the well, where Sapam's flip-flops were still floating. Dr. Watson, an internationally known scholar, had resigned to move to Australia, because he no longer felt safe in India (Prakāś, 2011, p. 130).

Ek naukrānī kī dāyri narrates Jharna's story and its sad epilogue in a discontinuous manner through the naive gaze of the protagonist, a young maidservant named Shanti. Jharna's vicissitudes and suicide are, in fact, presented through the pages of Shanti's fictional diary, highlighting the emotional impact of the incident on Shanti and Jharna's family. Upon the discovery of Jharna's body hanging from a fan, the Bengali home is of course overwhelmed by sorrow, but the family seems unable to comprehend a tragedy that was largely predictable. In fact, just before committing suicide,

Jharna had “mysteriously” left home for a few days, and when she returned, she appeared weak and deathly pale. Shanti writes that she would have been overjoyed when she first saw the girl, but then became worried about her condition. Jharna smiled, but even her smile was weak and faded. Shanti would later learn that because of the family’s refusal to accept an interfaith (Hindu-Muslim) relationship, Jharna left to get a secret abortion. During the days between Jharna’s return and her suicide, everyone seems to believe that Jharna is recovering. Nobody is able to understand what is happening in her heart. Jharna commits suicide, linking her fate to that of many young women who are defeated, both in fiction and non-fiction, by communalism, and by conservative social forces. Through Jharna’s suicide, Krishna Baldev Vaid is thus able to address a sensitive and contemporary social issue. On November 3, 2022, to mention a rather recent example, the *Times of India* published an article titled “Uttar Pradesh: Girl hangs self hours after kin ‘beat’ Muslim beau to death in Saharanpur”, which reported the suicide of a 19-year-old college student (Rai, 2022). Vaid, moreover makes use of this incident to stress the power and potentialities associated with writing. In fact, through the diary, Shanti reflects on Jharna’s death and on her own emotional response to the tragedy.

2.2 Children’s suicide

The ADSI statistics for 2021 indicate that 10,730 children below the age of 18 ended their lives, with family problems, love affairs, and illness being identified as the main contributing factors. Suicide is the second leading cause of death among adolescents in the age group 15-19 years, and the Covid-19 pandemic saw an increasing number of children and adolescents attempting suicide. During the first wave (March-October 2020), for instance, 173 children and adolescents aged 10-18 years, died by suicide in Kerala (Chhabria and Khar 2023).

Maingosil by Uday Prakash, is the only short story involving a child’s suicide that I have been able to find so far. It depicts the death of Suryakant, who jumped off the roof of his home at the age of nine. The child is afflicted by an unknown and incurable disease called *maingosil* which causes his head to grow larger and larger, and which was expected to cause his death during his very first years of life. Soon after his birth, his parents Chadrakant and Shobha realize that not only is his head growing bigger, but his mind is also developing at an unnatural pace. Unlike other babies, he never cries. Instead, he closes his eyes and makes the pain disappear inside. When he gets hurt, he never makes the same mistake again, and he constantly looks absorbed in thought. At the age of three, he is found watching the news on TV, and he soon starts studying at home by himself, and even begins speaking and writing in English (although his parents do not know any English at all). With his feeble shoulders and disproportioned head, Suryakant is much older than his biological age. Despite the medical predictions, he reaches the age of nine, which is when he commits suicide by jumping off the roof of his house after an apparently banal episode of jealousy with his younger brother. Both children ask for a cap gun, but only the little brother’s request is fulfilled. They are supposed to play together on the roof while their mother is busy in the kitchen preparing lunch. Suddenly the woman hears screams and shrieks from the roof and the sound of people running downstairs. She immediately realizes that something terrible has happened. She is worried that Suryakant, with his “cold, hard, machine-like voice, eyes red, head trembling, that look of wildness on his face” (Prakash 2016: 213), might have strangled his brother or pushed him off the roof. However, when she reaches the spot, she finds Amarkant clinging to the railings, sobbing quietly. “The women said Amar came back to the roof with his cap gun, and as soon as he fired the first shot, Suri began to have trouble breathing. He grabbed his head with his hands, and tottered over the edge. And from there he jumped quietly.” (Prakash 2016: 2014). As the narrator stresses “it wasn’t the disease that caused his death. He himself chose when to end his life” (216).

However, this mysterious disease, *Maingosil*, is a crucial part of Suryakant’s brief experience of life, affecting him in many ways: he suffers from massive headaches, has difficulty breathing, and is

almost unable to sleep. He is ridiculed by other children and neighbors because of his disproportioned head, and unlike his little brother, he is not sent to school. Nonetheless, his mind is sharp and he demonstrates an unusual ability to understand the world. Towards the end of the short story, it is Suryakant himself who describes the origin of the illness that the doctors cannot explain. He asserts that his head has grown out of proportion “because it keeps knowing things little heads can’t know, or don’t want to” (Prakash 2016: 199). The *virus* that causes his mysterious illness is nothing but poverty. Suryakant and his family are considered to be above the poverty line, but they have to endure many hardships. They live in Jahangirpuri, a modest neighborhood in northwest Delhi, in a half-flat beneath the stairs of a four-story building, with no proper front door and an open sewer two feet below their tap. During the monsoon season, insects, snails, frogs, and even a snake enter their flat from the gutter, so the children are growing up in an extremely unhealthy environment. Their condition is related to the situation of millions of children in developing and third-world countries who fall victim to deadly diseases because of poverty and malnutrition. According to a report mentioned in the very last pages of the novella, supposedly written by the World Health Organization, in recent years many children in these regions have been affected by this disease, which causes their heads to grow much faster than the rest of their bodies. Suryakant’s life and premature death become a powerful tool to denounce an extremely serious problem that still affects a considerable portion of the world population.

2.3 Suicide and old age

Although suicide is more often associated with people in the younger age bracket, it should not be forgotten that it affects the elderly as well. The 1995 and 2021 ADSI reports show that senior citizens accounted for 6.17% and 8.87% of the total number of victims, respectively. In a changing socio-economic scenario, this is an extremely sensitive matter, as many elderly people who have spent most of their lives in joint families seem to be abandoned to loneliness and alienation (Patel, 2022). Furthermore, this problem has increased dramatically in recent years in connection with the Covid-19 pandemic. Mandatory isolation and the fear of infection have placed the elderly at greater risk of anxiety and depressive disorders and have led to increased suicide rates among senior citizens. While there are no suicides related to old age and solitude in the works of fiction discussed here, at least two incidents are worth mentioning since they are connected to shame, guilt and expiation, concepts that are particularly relevant in the Indian context. The first involves the character of Baman Maharaj in Virendra Jain’s *Dūb* (lit. “Submergence”),⁴ an old *pūjārī* who commits suicide, presumably due to the burden of his son’s sin. As a well-known servant of *Dharma*, Maharaj is aware that the villagers will respect him only as long as his image remains spotless. Unfortunately, his son Kailash is a cause of considerable trouble for him, since he shows no interest in his studies, in his father’s duties, or in any kind of work. Moreover, he has raped an Ahir girl from their own village. Baman Maharaj is worried that his son’s misbehavior will be discovered and that, as the culprit’s father, he will have to participate in the *pañcāyat*. How could he live with such shame? When the old Brahmin finds out that the girl has become pregnant, he discusses the matter with Mate, a respected elder Ahir. Since the options of abortion and an inter-caste reparatory marriage are both considered impossible, the girl is temporarily sent away from the village, and custody of the child is given to another woman. Some years after these events, Baman Maharaj commits suicide, and most of the villagers cannot even imagine the reason for his extreme act.

4 This novel actually contains another suicide, involving a Thakur who was jailed after beating some villagers belonging to the Chamar group. One of them, Ghuma, had dared to ask him for payment for his work in the fields, and the landowner decided to punish the Chamars by assaulting some people with a club at night. Before the community could testify against the Thakur, he committed suicide (Jain 2014, pp. 68-76).

The second character is Thakur Harnam Singh, from Jai Prakash Kardam's *Chappar* (lit. "The Shack"). He is one of the most important people in the village of Matapur (where part of the novel is set), and nothing seems to happen in the area against his will. He holds conservative views and uses every means at his disposal to prevent Sukkha, the protagonist's father, from sending his son Chandan to a nearby city to complete his education. (It was inconceivable that a Chamar could be the first villager from Matapur to study in the city.) When the winds of change begin to bring humanist and egalitarian values to the village, he feels guilty and disturbed, and attempts suicide. He is about to jump into an old well when he is stopped by none other than Sukkha (pp. 112-113).

Both Baman Maharaj and Thakur Harnam Singh are convinced that their social image is irreparably compromised and wish to die because of shame or guilt. They feel that they can never be rehabilitated in the eyes of others and that they cannot live with such a burden. Suicide in these cases might be read as a viable way to escape suffering, but also as a form of expiation (*prāyaścitta*).

In a Hindu context, suicide is generally considered to be a violation of the code of *ahimsā* (non-violence) and therefore just as sinful as murdering another person. For example, *Manusmṛiti* 12.1.1 verse 5.89 states that libations of water, which are usually offered to the departed souls, should not be offered to those who commit suicide. Similarly, *Āpastamba Dharmasūtra* 1.28.16 states that anyone who kills himself (or someone else) becomes a heinous sinner. Explicit condemnations can also be found in some Puranas, such as *Garuḍa Purāṇa* II.22.18, where suicide victims are said to become ghosts condemned to roam the earth, and in the *Bhagavadgītā*, where suicide "for selfish reasons" is condemned, stating that the victims of such a death cannot have the all-important last rites.

As is well known, the Hindu *Dharma* considers human life to be especially precious because it provides a unique opportunity to pursue liberation and escape the cycle of birth and death. However, there are certain cases where suicide is accepted or even glorified. Suicide may be contemplated, for instance, when it is an act of self-destruction and self-sacrifice (*ātmāhuti*)⁵ on the path of liberation, or an instrument of expiation (*prāyaścitta*). The latter seems to be the option presented by Virendra Jain and Jai Prakash Kardam through the extreme acts of the Brahmin and the Thakur. In fact, Baman Maharaj bequeaths some land to Ramdulare (the child conceived in the rape), passing over his son Kailash, in an attempt to remedy the injustices he has committed. Moreover, Ramdulare, who has become an engineer and a writer, decides to give away these lands and the compensation he might receive from them, earmarking everything for the people of Matapur. Similarly, after being rescued, the Thakur wishes to make up for his mistakes and decides to distribute his fields to the poor and landless people. He abandons his haveli and moves into a small house. Furthermore, he does not want to be called Thakur Sahab anymore, but simply Harnam, highlighting that all human beings are equal, and that humanism is the true faith. Both the Brahmin's suicide and the Thakur's attempted suicide can thus be read as a form of atonement that seeks to make good what was once bad (i.e. the community, the rape, the mentalities of the Thakur and the Brahmin), reflecting the etymological meaning of *prāyaścitta*. (*Prāya* means "destruction or austerity" and *citta* "joining together", so *prāyaścitta* literally means "making good what is lost, what was once bad".)

3 Concluding remarks

Suicides and suicide attempts have become a recurring feature in contemporary Hindi fiction and media, reflecting a serious public health problem. The works of fiction examined here depict the self-inflicted death of at least a minor or secondary character, preferably matching a specific profile: a young man or woman with a good education who is facing family or love troubles. Authors presum-

5 The term *ātmāhuti* has to be considered as opposed to *ātmahatyā* in terms of intention and purpose. *Ātmāhuti* is meant as a meritorious act and an example of extreme devotion, renunciation and surrender, while *ātmahatyā* is a selfish action done to avoid suffering or to escape from duty and obligation.

ably focus on certain types of characters because they are perceived as similar to the core readership, increasing the chances of identification and empathy. Suicides are usually included as a way of commenting on a particularly sensitive social issue, and even if they are presented in only a few lines or pages, they can be considered relevant from several perspectives. First, as in some of the works of fiction mentioned here, they can determine the evolution or regression of the main characters' internal state, as in the cases of Varsha in *Mujhe cāmd cāhie* by Surendra Verma and Zamir Ahmad Khan in *Dāstān-e-lāptā* by Manzoor Ahtesham. While the former reacts to her lover's suicide by fighting for her personal and professional life, the latter is defeated by Anisa's death. Secondly, suicides provide an opportunity to speak about social injustices and highlight their tragic effects on individuals. In *Ek naukrānī kī dāyirī* by Krishna Baldev Vaid, for instance, Jharna's suicide serves to denounce a conservative mentality that is unable to rise above communal tensions and prejudices. In Uday Prakash's *Pīlī chatrī vālī larḳī*, Sapam succumbs to a corrupt and violent environment where local criminals can harass people with impunity. He also remembers the struggles of many people in northeastern India, whose lives are plagued by unending conflict. Similarly, in *Maingosil*, the suicide of young Suryakant shines a light on the squalor and precarity that still permeate the lives of many children in developing and third-world countries. As for the suicides (actually a suicide and a suicide attempt) of the oldest characters, Baman Maharaj in Virendra Jain's *Dūb* and Thakur Harnam Singh in Jai Prakash Kardam's *Chappar*, they are linked to social injustices and represent breaking points in the narratives that lead to radical changes. In this case, however, voluntary death becomes a way to atone for one's own or one's family's sins and, according to the etymological meaning of the word *prāyaścitta*, to make good what was previously bad.

The suicides become a kind of cautionary commentary on social issues that are particularly relevant in the Indian context, such as communal hatred, ethnic violence, poverty, and degradation, but at the same time they reflect the side effects of a contemporary global reality that is more complex than ever before, and that drives many people to seek extreme forms of escape (Cohen and Taylor 1992). By referring to suicide, the works of fiction examined here remind the readers of the difficulties many Indians (and others) experience under the constant bombardment of stimuli and pressures, and when faced with contradictions of an ever-changing contemporary society.

Finally, it should be emphasized that suicide is an extremely delicate topic and, when portraying it, it is important to consider a range of potential issues and effects on readers. If we consider the "Werther fever" that followed the publication of Goethe's masterpiece (suicide victims were found with copies of *The Sorrows of Young Werther* under their pillows or in their pockets), it is clear that the relationship between real and fictional suicides is not unidirectional. As Patnoe (1997, p. 31) points out, the series of suicidal reactions to Goethe's epistolary novel "is a striking reminder of the power of literature to mold individual and collective attitudes and behavior". It is important to keep in mind that it is not only the case that reality informs fiction, but that fiction can also affect the "real world" on various levels.

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