



INCREASING SUICIDES AND COVERAGE BY MEDIA: A STUDY OF NEWSPAPERS IN KASHMIR

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ABSTRACT

Suicidal cases are on an alarming rise in Kashmir with reasons varying from the disturbances caused by the ongoing unrest, family problems, domestic violence, peer pressure, unemployment and so on. The fear and psychological imbalance caused by the militarization is taking a toll on the people leading to suicidal tendencies. On one side when loss of lives takes place because of the continuous violence, a considerable number of human lives are lost due to suicides. Unemployment and family problems add to these numbers, making it a serious concern to be considered. Experts believe that such an alarming situation needs to be addressed as soon as possible so that this situation is tackled before it gets too late. The role of media in such situations is peculiar and in a region like Kashmir where newspapers are the major media available, their role becomes fundamental in spreading awareness among people and acting as counsellors. Besides, proper coverage to the suicidal cases can make the concerned agencies aware about the seriousness of the issue and act accordingly. The current study focusses on the coverage given by newspapers to the suicidal cases and issues in terms of reporting and opinion and editorial writing. The study reveals that the newspapers have not been as proactive as they should have been and the issue of suicides has been largely ignored.

KEY WORDS: Media, newspapers, reporting, editorial.

INTRODUCTION

Suicide is a dangerous act wherein a person ends one's life to escape from the sufferings caused by worldly affairs. It could be result of extreme mental health issue where a person stops to withstand these worldly tensions and ending his/her life seems to be the only option to get rid of the agonies. Thus, it is a problem requiring attention so that it could be controlled and prevented. While as suicide rate is on an alarming increase in entire India, it is drastically increasing in the Kashmir valley. Dominant reasons in rest of India are family conflicts, poverty and social distress while as psychological disturbances because of armed conflict in Kashmir is the main reason, though other reasons cannot be ignored at all. A major contributor to stress and frustration giving rise to suicidal tendencies in youth is the intensification of competition for college seats, academic and athletic awards, job vacancies and employment opportunities (Corner, 1998). The number of patients suffering from mental abuse has risen alarmingly and as per the records available in 2004 almost 62000 patients had sought treatment in the psychiatric services departments in Kashmir Valley (Margoob). According to certain estimates 15.19% of the Kashmiri population suffers from life time Post-Traumatic Stress Disorders (PTSD). These alarming rates show that in Kashmir large sections of population suffer from permanent trauma and stress than usual. The chronic conflict in the region that has disrupted the peace and normal life of the people there for over a decade is one of the prime causes for this situation.

Considering the suicide prevention from public health approaches, it is widely recognized that responsible media reporting on suicidal behaviors is a moderating factor in the suicide rates (Mann, et.al.,2005 & Wasserman, 2001). While as some studies reveal that reporting of suicidal cases lead to imitative behavior by other people who end their lives by copying the acts as reported by media, majority of the experts believe that responsible reporting can be impactful in spreading awareness among masses and media specially newspapers can act as counselling agents to bring down the number of such acts.

In order to use the media for reporting and prevention of suicide, some modification in the reporting style of the suicide news and reports would be highly encouraged. The format of such news must be informative of the facts as well as discouraging of anyone who is likely to commit suicide motivated by the reported story and also make the people aware that suicide is an evil which must be discouraged. Specialized establishments have frequently and repeatedly issued guidelines for the suicide reporting by the media. Fundamentally, these guidelines insist on the concerns such as controlling and regulating the amount of coverage of such incidents, shunning the sensationalism in suicide story coverage, also barring the media to publish any detailed facts

concerning the method of suicide, and strictly avoiding any sort of positive publicity of the deceased (Berman, Silverman, and Bongar, 2000).

As described earlier, the Kashmir valley is a conflict torn region. There is also absence of uninterrupted electricity due to the shortage of power generation, weather conditions and conflicting situations. Thus, the electronic and the internet media are interrupted every now and then. In such a situation, the only uninterrupted source of information in the Kashmir valley is the print media which is possibly omnipresent. Hence, reporting in newspapers should be done responsibly because as far as the Kashmir valley situation is concerned, the newspapers could be thought of as an influencing medium.

Online availability of newspapers and use of social media as an effective means of news dissemination has revolutionized the way media and information are perceived. This holds true for regions like the Kashmir Valley also where limited access to forms of media other than the print media existed. Out of the fifty eight daily newspapers in the Kashmir Valley, around twenty one newspapers are available online. The online dailies are available in three different languages like English, Urdu and Kashmiri language. While only one online daily is available in the local Kashmiri language, the remaining online dailies are available in English and Urdu. After the availability of online technology through the internet, the media companies and newspaper agencies are also using the new technology to change the conventional ways in which they share and transfer information. Online newspapers help in sharing information globally in a more innovative manner using various platforms including audio, video, photos, graphics, texts etc. (Gul and Islam, 2013). With the advent of social media a new form of interactive information exchange through the digital platforms is available.

The current systematic study provides an overview about the role of media impacting suicides in the Kashmir valley. The study tries to relate the increasing suicidal rates in the Kashmir valley and the impact their reporting and portrayal by print media causes.

OBJECTIVES OF THE STUDY

The study is undertaken with the following research objectives:

1. To analyze the coverage of suicide news in some leading dailies of Kashmir.
2. To analyze the role of newspapers as a tool to curb increasing suicidal rates in Kashmir and hence their impact in stopping suicides in the valley.
3. To suggest recommendations on the basis of findings.

HYPOTHESIS

Print media in Kashmir has failed in influencing social attitudes to suicides and potentially the actions of vulnerable people. Thus it has not been able to generate awareness among masses

about suicide prevention and also most of the suicidal issues go unreported due to lack of coverage given by them. Keeping the above generalisation in mind it is hypothesized that, “There is no significant impact of media coverage on suicidal cases and its prevention in Kashmir like other states”.

REVIEW OF RELATED LITERATURE

1. A study was performed by Everall (2000) that explained the suicidal behaviour of the young adults. According to the researcher, the suicide among the young adult was considered as the most significant social and psychological problem. The study concluded that the suicidal behaviour of a person is developed by the factors like stress, depression, etc.
2. Akhter and Kulshreshtha (2016) in their study explored various case studies reporting different suicide attempts in the region of Jammu and Kashmir. The cases of suicides in the valley were at large count and only few newspapers were involved in reporting the attempts. Most of the cases of the suicides in the valley remain unreported because of some personal reasons and majorly because of lack of media coverage in the valley. As cases in the rural regions are rarely reported by the newspapers, the reason for this was family secrecy as they don't want to make the news public and sometime because the media does not made any efforts in covering those areas for creating news.
3. Shodhganga, (2008) describes the frequency of the suicide news that is gaining importance again and again. The impact of the suicide news between the news readers can be taken in multidimensional aspects with strong sociological content like, relationship, impersonal society and self-destructive behaviour. Phenomenon of the suicides in the Kashmir valley is analyzed with sociological framework that explains the cause, nature pattern, consequences, solutions and trends that feature ongoing suicidal attempts.
4. Pandita (2013) conducted a study to analyze the role of print media in the region of Jammu and Kashmir (India). The main aim of the study to understand the various aspects of periodical publishing the journals and newspapers specifically in the region of Jammu and Kashmir (India). The study analyzed the secondary data that provide the information about the present status of the print media industry in Jammu and Kashmir during the period of 1964-2013.
5. Bertolote, et al (2004) explains the prevention of the suicide behaviour by recommendations given for the media professionals. Media plays an important role as a channel of mass communication in the society by exerting powerfully positive influence on the social norms construction and values. The prevention of the suicide from the fatal attempt is encountered due to the mental conditions, deceased identity that should be understood by the media

persons. As the sensationalizing the suicide news can affect the vulnerable suicide individual, portrayal of the suicide should be very cautious to minimize the “copy-cat effects”.

METHODOLOGY

INTERVIEWS

An intensive study was carried out by employing the Interview Schedule as a methodological tool. Some prominent Editors and Journalists associated with different newspapers in Kashmir were interviewed for their experiences in covering suicides and their assessments of the impact of the print media in lowering suicide rates and the role played by media in creating awareness about suicide menace in Kashmir. In addition to editors and journalists, various psychologists, sociologists, psychiatrists, police officials, social activists, religious scholars were also interviewed to get a broader view of the research area. Overall 16 people were interviewed during the research process. Having signed a consent form, people were asked to talk about their experiences. People talked about increasing suicidal rates in Kashmir and also about the role played by the newspapers in highlighting the emerging trends of suicide in the valley. The interviews were audio taped and fully transcribed for analysis. The interviews were conducted through informal conversations with the experts to get more detailed views instead of using a questionnaire. But based on the responses of the experts, the interviews were divided into certain variables and the conversations revolved around those variables only. The variables which were touched by the researcher are:

- i. Reasons of increasing suicidal rates
- ii. Role of newspapers in creating awareness and diminishing suicide rates
- iii. Contribution of newspapers in highlighting the issue of increasing suicides and counseling people
- iv. What the newspapers need to do

FINDINGS

The interview sample said very much about the increased suicide rates in Kashmir and the role played by the newspapers in highlighting the core issue. All said that to their knowledge the newspapers in Kashmir have played a very little role in highlighting the growing suicide rate in the valley. The interview sample also included some editors and journalists associated with different newspapers in the valley. They also expressed their views on the role of media in highlighting suicides. The interaction with some sociologists, psychologists and social activists working in the concerned field gave the detailed insight into the problem. Besides psychiatrists working in the psychiatric and other renowned hospitals of the valley gave their views for their expertise on suicide, to discuss their perspectives on the menace and their concerns about media coverage of

suicides. Station heads of various police stations also provided their perspective regarding the subject at study. Various religious scholars were also interviewed to know their role in curbing the suicide stigma.

Various psychologists, sociologists and psychiatrists have conducted numerous studies on the growing suicidal rates in Kashmir. They believe that media has a huge role and responsibility in highlighting this grave issue of suicides through their write ups and campaigns. The researcher approached the noted people in the field and asked about their views on the subject at study.

Renowned academician and psychologist Professor A. G. Madhosh, noted sociologist Dr. B.A Dabla, Dr Arshad Hussain, Professor at the Department of Psychiatry, Government Medical College Srinagar, Dr. Mushtaq Margoob, renowned psychiatrist, Professor and Head, Post Graduate Department of Psychiatry, Government Medical College Srinagar, Basharat Ahmad, senior investigation officer at Police Control Room Srinagar, Shafqat Hussain, Station House Officer of Budgam police station, Mufti Bashir-ud-din, religious scholar and the grand jurist of Islamic laws in Kashmir, Fayaz Ahmad Kaloo, editor of the daily Greater Kashmir, Shuja'at Bukhari, editor of the daily Rising Kashmir, Zafar Mehraj, editor of the daily Kashmir Monitor, Dilnaz Boga, a Mumbai based journalist and some others were interviewed during the course of the study.

From the interviews conducted by the researcher, it was concluded that the increasing suicidal rates in Kashmir valley has emerged as a serious issue in the current times. This growing menace has been increasing from past few years and needs a serious consideration by the media. The newspapers being a dominant medium of communication in Kashmir have played a very little role in highlighting this grave issue of rising suicides in the valley. Newspapers are believed to provide the public with information and resources that could save lives. Journalists often fail to do this, despite the obvious potential to do well. Newspapers through their write ups could launch a campaign against the alarming suicidal trends in the valley but experts believe that they have failed in doing so. Newspapers in Kashmir through their news reports, articles and editorials can educate the masses about suicide prevention besides reporting on such issues. Stories about suicides can inform readers and viewers about the likely causes of suicide, its warning signs, trends in suicide rates and recent treatment advances. The newspapers in the state have not done much in order to control the growing suicide rates in the valley. They need to initiate a campaign through their write ups against the alarming suicidal trends which will remain more effective in lowering the raise suicidal rates in Kashmir.

RECOMMENDATIONS

From the findings above it was found that newspapers in Kashmir have played a very little role in highlighting the serious issue of rising suicides in the state. During the study period it was

observed that their coverage has remained confined to mere reporting of suicide attempts that have happened in different parts of the state that too in a lesser percentage. Their role in promoting education about increasing suicidal rates in Kashmir has remained minimal. On the basis of all the findings, analysis and observations during the course of the study, following recommendations are made:

1. A starting point would be to survey newspaper organizations in the state about the inclusion of suicide reporting in their curriculum and program requirements.
2. There is an immediate need to educate journalists about suicide coverage which should go beyond the publication of deaths caused by suicide. It may be productive to adopt the suicide reporting guidelines recommended by various news organizations in the world.
3. The reporters should include news stories about people who coped with their suicidal ideation by effectively accessing suicide prevention resources. They should describe actions that individuals can take to prevent suicidal behavior by others.
4. While reporting on suicide, the newspapers should publish stories that include information about suicide risk factors and warning signs, as well as the stories that include information about where a person could go to access help regarding suicide. Besides the stories that include examples of interventions that can contribute to the prevention of suicidal behavior should be published.
5. Newspapers through their write-ups, editorials and features could generate a huge awareness about the suicide stigma and its consequences on the lives of the victims and their families.
6. Once in a week the newspapers should come up with interviews with the experts who work in the field of suicides. Besides newspapers through their articles should communicate the views of religious scholars so as to impart religious education especially to those people who develop more suicidal tendencies with the existing circumstances.

CONCLUSION

The study clearly reveals that the newspapers in Kashmir have failed in highlighting the grave issue of suicides as compared to other issues which find a good space in these papers. The reportage of suicide incidents has remained limited to just covering a story about a committed suicide. Mere reporting of suicidal issues as a news story will no way lead to eradication of this growing social menace from the society. Newspapers through their write-ups, editorials and features could generate a huge awareness about the suicide stigma and its consequences on the lives of the victims and their families. They can also suggest the people how to cope up with the distressful conditions and think beyond the death lines in order to live a happy life which in the long run could prevent society from human loss and lead towards progress and prosperity.

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