



# STRATEGIC EVALUATION OF SUICIDE NOTES

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## ABSTRACT

**Background and objectives:** Suicide note is message left behind by a person who intends to commit suicide. Study of such suicide notes show the psyche of the patient and play important role in understanding reasons for suicide. Very few studies have concentrated on such suicide notes from Indian subcontinent. Aim of study was to evaluate such suicide notes with respect to mode of writing, to whom it is addressed and victim's last wish.

**Methods:** This prospective study was conducted among victims of hanging brought to Dr. B. R. Ambedkar Medical College morgue, Bangalore during the period November 2010 to October 2012. Detailed information regarding the deceased and the circumstances of death was collected from the police and relatives. In some cases, this information was supplemented by either, visit to scene of occurrence or from the photographs of scene of occurrence

**Results:** Out of 232 cases studied, suicide notes were found in 22 cases. Last wish was mentioned in fifteen cases. In thirteen cases suicide notes were addressed to the parents. One suicide note in the form of mail was reported.

**Conclusions:** Suicide note is an important piece of evidence showing psyche of the patient. Due importance should be given at the site of crime for recovery of suicide note. Studies involving larger number of victims are required to have psychological insight and eventually such data may lead to prevention of suicides

**Key Words:** Suicide note, Hanging, suicide, Suicidal thoughts

## INTRODUCTION

*“To end is to start; to surrender is to know.  
Despair and depression, together they grow.  
Hope shall meet hopeless when there's nowhere to go”.*

Misao Fujimura, a Japanese philosophy student and poet has written this famous poetry in his suicide note.<sup>1</sup>

A message left behind by a person who intends to commit suicide constitutes a suicide note. It can be a written note, typed message sent through mail, an audio message, or a video. The reasons for writing suicide note may be diverse. The most common among them is to dissipate guilt in the survivors. A person may write that terminal note to increase the pain of survivors.<sup>2</sup> Suicide note may give out valuable information about the reasons for suicide. Person by writing a note may try to express his/ her feelings which otherwise not expressed in life. Study of suicide notes show light on the psyche of the person.<sup>3</sup> It will show light on the possible events which would have led to fatality.<sup>4</sup> It may reveal the possible loneliness,

alienation, isolation, rejection, exclusion of victim. Writing suicide notes are rare because most victims feel highly disturbed and think that communication through a note seems meaningless.<sup>5</sup>

Leaving a suicidal note was thought to be a result of victim's desire to share his or her dilemma with the acquaintances. Suicide notes, though may give direct lead to the suicide, reasonable average rates would be 25%.<sup>6</sup> Unfortunately, there are very few studies have been conducted in this regard. In this study an attempt was made to analyse and evaluate such suicide notes. We analysed suicidal notes of hanging victims not only from death scene investigation but also from other sources. Ours is the first study to report suicidal notes from south Indian scenario in hanging.

## METHODS

This prospective study was conducted among victims of hanging brought to Dr. B. R. Ambedkar Medical College

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morgue, Bangalore during the period from November 2010 to October 2012.

Detailed information regarding the deceased and the circumstances of death was collected from the police and relatives. Apart from this, we have visited the scene of crime wherever possible. Photographs of scene of suicide were also evaluated. In every case we enquired police and relatives and also searched for the possible suicide notes or any other written or typed documents communicating the message left by the deceased person. Whenever such documents are noted they are photographed using digital camera under proper day lighting. They are analysed for the following: written or typed; to whom it was addressed; last wish of the deceased; motive for the suicide. All suicide notes were handed to investigating officer for further legal action.

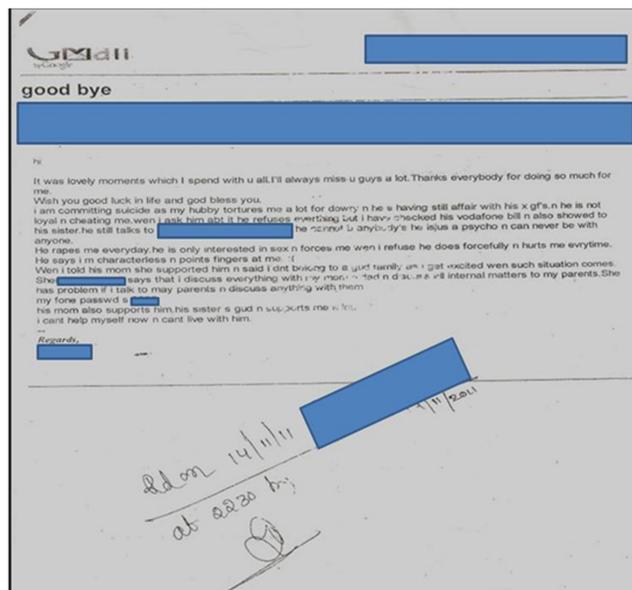
### RESULTS

We studied 232 cases of hanging. Among them suicide note was noted in 22 cases (9.48%) (Table1). Remaining 210 cases (90.52%) had not written any suicide note. Twenty one suicide notes were handwritten and one suicide note was typed and sent through mail. Last wish was mentioned in fifteen cases. In thirteen cases suicide notes were addressed to the parents. In one case it was written without any reference to any person, place or time. Reasons mentioned in the suicide note are tabulated in table 1.

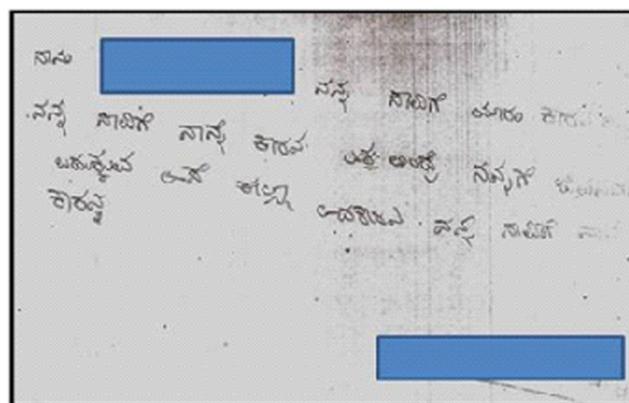
**Table 1: Distribution of the study population according to the Suicide Note produced and reasons cited in the suicide notes**

	Numbers
Total cases studied	232
Suicide note noted	22
No suicide note	210
Hand written	21
Mail	01
Reasons	
Extra marital affair	02
Financial problems	07
Dowry harassment	07

Suicide note written through mail indicating extramarital affair and dowry harassment (fig 1) and a hand note which is totally neutral not indicating any person or event (fig 2) are given below.



**Figure 1:** Suicide note sent in the form of mail showing extra-marital affair and dowry as theme of suicide note. Areas revealing victim's identity has been darkened.



**Figure 2:** Suicide note not revealing any other person or event as cause of suicide. Areas revealing victim's identity has been darkened.

### DISCUSSION

Suicide notes may serve some explanatory purpose and may have a therapeutic role in helping the surviving relatives to understand the suicide. Knowledge of the messages contained within suicide notes could be useful for suicide prevention programmes. The significance of suicide notes is best understood within the context of the occurrence of suicides. To decipher the contents of suicide note one needs special training. Forensic linguistics is the branch of linguistic studies which investigates legal text in crime. One can use the linguistic aspects to investigate the suicide text to have an insight to victims' psy-

che.<sup>6-8</sup> John Pestian et al have devised computational algorithms for understanding a suicidal patient's thoughts, as represented by suicide notes.<sup>9</sup> Study of suicide note gives inside information about psychopathology of suicide victims. Suicide notes are used as an important piece of evidence for abetment under section 306 Indian Penal Code.<sup>4, 10</sup>

Suicide notes analysis may show us different themes of writing. Tom Foster has studied 42 suicide notes and noted prominent themes like "apology/shame", "love for those left behind", "life too much to bear", "instructions regarding practical affairs post-mortem", "hopelessness/nothing to live for". He concludes that most of the victims with major unipolar depression are more likely to pen down their feelings than those without.<sup>11</sup> Writing suicide notes may be influenced by age. Allen Darbonne has found out that there will be certain degree of consistency and meaning of suicide notes with relation to age groups; which may permit accurate interpretation of intent for suicide. This may help in prevention and therapeutic approach for suicide.<sup>2</sup> We noted themes of apology and life too much to bear.

Suicide notes are recovered from the sight of crime in about 25% of the cases with a range of 8 to 40% (table 2). In our study we have found notes in 10% of the cases studied. Similar incidences of suicide notes are reported by Demirci S; Bhatia MS; Mohanty S.<sup>3,4, 12-16</sup> Contrasting to the reported percentages, Demirci et al noted a very high incidence of suicide notes.<sup>17</sup>

**Table 2: tabulation of previous studies on suicidal notes**

Name of study	Number of cases	Suicide note found	Percentage
Ho TP <sup>3</sup>	979	154	15.7
Mohanty S <sup>4</sup>	538	27	5
Demirci S <sup>17</sup>	72	10	59
Our study	232	22	9.48

Ho TP, the pioneer in suicide research has studied suicide notes from Australia, New Zealand and Hong Kong. He has classified note-leavers as young females, of non-widowed marital status, with no history of previous suicide attempts, no previous psychiatric illness, and with religious beliefs. He has concluded that suicide notes written by young people were longer, rich in emotions, and often begging for forgiveness. Suicide notes written by the elderly were shorter, contained specific instructions, and were less emotional. He notes that a significant proportion of note-leavers did mention their difficulties.<sup>3,5,18,19</sup>

Manjeet Bhatia has studied 40 suicide notes from Delhi region and concluded that all suicide notes were handwritten and a last wish was mentioned in 30%. Suicide

note was most commonly addressed to a sibling. They also noted disturbed love affair and financial problems were the common reasons mentioned in suicide notes. Hopelessness and depression were commonly noted.<sup>20</sup> Our study goes according to this except that we found most notes were addressed to parents. This could be due to difference in age groups of suicide victims considered under the study.

Recently there is increase in number of suicide cases. One would expect a similar raise in suicide note writing trends. But according to a study conducted in Kobe City, incidence of suicide note did not increase despite the increase in suicide rates during the economic recession.<sup>21</sup> In other words, the incidences of note-leaving remained constant throughout the recent two decades although many socioeconomic factors such as economic recession and natural/artificial disasters, and/or cultural, ethnic and racial variations indirectly affect the suicide rate. In the notes from youth suicide victims, they present themselves they are fully responsible.<sup>22</sup> We too noted similar self responsibility in notes from young individuals.

## CONCLUSIONS

Suicide note is an important piece of evidence showing psyche of the patient. Due importance should be given at the site of crime for recovery of suicide note. Studies involving larger number of victims are required to have psychological insight and eventually such data may lead to prevention of suicides.

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