Suicide in a central Indian steel town

Jonathan Parry

Over the past 15 years 'farmer suicides' have occasioned grave public concern; and it has recently been claimed that Chhattisgarh has the highest incidence in the country. This article suggests that the representation of such cases as the major public policy problem to do with self-inflicted death is politically inflected and that there are good grounds for supposing that—at least in certain pockets—the urban suicide rate is as high, if not higher. In the industrial area around steel town of Bhilai, this has risen dramatically over the last 20 years and it is the aristocracy of public sector labour that is significantly most susceptible. This is ultimately attributable to the liberalisation of the economy and the consequent downsizing of this workforce, which has led to a crisis in the reproduction of class status. Such workers are privileged; think of themselves as different from the informal sector 'labour class' and fear sinking into it. Suicides are significantly under-reported and the official statistics are systematically inflected by fear of the police and the law, which encourage both concealment and the deliberate obfuscation of likely motives, and almost certainly increase the 'lethal probabilities' of suicide attempts.

Keywords: Suicide, public-sector, formal versus informal sector employment, police and law

I
Introduction—Three claims

Suicide is a distressing subject; not one I intended to investigate during my fieldwork in the central Indian steel town of Bhilai. Since 1993, however, I have been going there regularly and have been forced to pay heed by the frequency with which I encounter it.

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Over the past decade, the official all-India annual suicide rate has in round figures fluctuated between 10 and 11 per 100,000.[1] With double that rate, Chhattisgarh—in which Bhilai is located—is amongst the four most suicide-prone states in the country.[2] During this period, peasant cultivators in several states have killed themselves in considerable numbers, supposedly due to rural immiseration and indebtedness, widely attributed to the costs and risks of commercialised agriculture. These 'farmer suicides' have provoked moral panic; and in some parts of the country generous state and central government funds are allocated to compensate surviving dependants and help them discharge their debts (resulting—since attempted suicide is a penal offence—in the moral irony that the state provides a safety net for the families of criminals, and in the temptation to fabricate loan documents to show that suicides that have nothing to do with indebtedness are 'farm-related' [Nilotpal 2010[).

In Chhattisgarh, 'farmer suicide' has recently become a big issue. Based on National Crime Records Bureau statistics and local enquiries, Shubhranshu Choudhary—a Delhi-based journalist—has suggested that Chhattisgarh has the highest rates in the country, 5.3–7 per 100,000 of the general population between 2001 and 2006.[3] Given that the general Chhattisgarh rate is over 20, these figures may seem unimpressive; but they are higher than elsewhere and—for technical reasons to do with the restricted definition of 'farmer' they deploy—are almost certainly an underestimate. If, moreover, the rate is calculated per 100,000 Chhattisgarh farmers, rather than per 100,000 of the whole population, it comes out at either 33.7 or 44.8 (depending on how the figures are done). And if the focus is narrowed to the central 'rice bowl' districts it rises to 51.

The local intelligentsia has reacted to these claims with incredulity; the political establishment with apoplexy. Incredulity because 'everybody

[1] By comparison, the 2005 World Health Organisation figures for the United Kingdom and the United States were, respectively, 6.7 and 11.0. See http://www.who.int/mental_health/media/unitkingd.pdf. Also unitedstates.pdf. Accessed on 2 October 2011.

[2] Excluding Union Territories.

[3] See, for example, http://www.thesouthasian.org/archives/2009/discovery_farmer_suicide_in.html. Accessed on 14 January 2010. See also, http:///www.groups.yahoo.com/group/chhattisgarh-net/message/11414. Accessed on 1 April 2009 and htpp://sanhati.com.articles/773/. Also http://groups.yahoo.com/group/Chhattisgarh-net/message/10702 and *Tehelka*, 'The secret suicide pact', vol. 6, issue 35, 5 September 2009. The Chhattisgarh situation is helpfully contextualised by Nagaraj's 2008 synthetic review of the statistical data on farmer suicides.

knows' that 'farmer suicides' are associated with commercialised agriculture and with the indebtedness this entails; and 'everybody knows' that in subsistence-farming Chhattisgarh that cannot be the problem. Apoplexy because these stories appeared during the run-up to State Assembly elections, when the rural vote would be crucial to the Bharatiya Janata Party's (BJP) hold on power. It was not the moment to remind that electorate of its miseries. Articles discrediting them were planted in the local press, and the Chief Minister announced that after exhaustive enquiries he could confirm that there had not been a single 'farmer suicide' in the whole state that was due to indebtedness. What needed investigation were not farmer suicides but those who circulated these stories. Given his government's human rights record, this sounded like a threat; but Choudhary stood his ground, citing instances that police investigations attributed to 'debt' and evidence that the incidence is greatest in districts where pesticide sales are highest.

The intended inference is presumably that pesticide use is an index of commercialised cultivation and thus of rural distress—though it could of course be that suicide rates rise when farmers have a surer way of committing it. As to the burden of rural debt, the data for Chhattisgarh does not exist; and even if it is oppressive we need to know why. In villages around Bhilai, medical expenses, alcohol and *satta* (a numbers racket) are major contributors, as are unprofitable investments in non-farm enterprises (like a shop or brick kiln).[4] Nor, as I will suggest, should much store be set by the 'causes' of suicide assigned by the police and aggregated in the national statistics. But the crucial point here is the focus on farmers. Nobody seems bothered about either the rates for the rural landless[5] or (my first major claim) that the urban situation is likely worse. If the state government's denial of 'farmer suicide' is politically motivated, its identification as *the* problem is not politically innocent either. It diverts attention from segments of the urban population who probably commit suicide even more frequently.

Which segments? In Bhilai (my second major claim), suicide is disproportionately concentrated in the most privileged stratum of the industrial workforce, its aristocracy of labour. It is in households that currently

[4] See also Assayag (2005), who points out that peasant indebtedness has been reported for decades and cannot by itself explain the 'farmer suicide' problem.

[5] For the Punjab, however, Gill and Singh (2006) have reported that owner–cultivators are significantly more suicide-prone than agricultural labourers.

depend on, or previously enjoyed, secure and remunerative public sector jobs that the propensity to suicide is greatest. Their vulnerability pre-eminently has to do, I suggest, with the difficulty of living up to the demands and meeting the expectations that membership in this upwardly mobile stratum imposes, and with the threat of dropping out of it into the ranks of the informal sector so-called 'labour class'. In showing that the truly disadvantaged are relatively immune, I am uncomfortably aware of seeming to imply that the poor are happy in their station. Actually, they are significantly more likely to die younger, of other causes, and their lower suicide rate must mask at least as much misery.

Suicide rates are, of course, socially constructed—for a start, by the way in which suicide is defined. Most commonly, it is as an act of self-harm intended to result in death. But intent is hard to assess. Much of the time many of us are hopelessly muddled about our own intentions. Clairvoyance about others is unlikely. Many acts of self-harm that are cries for help or protests against perceived wrongs must result in death when that was not firmly intended. Intent, however, is critical to the legal definition of suicide in India (as elsewhere), and it is the police who are required to establish it and the victim's motives.

The rate is also a product of collective responses at three stages: prior to the act, of responses to any warning signals given; at the time of it, of the speed and decisiveness with which others react before death has resulted; and—posthumously—of the way it gets classified as 'suicide' (Atkinson 1971; see also Firth 1971). What my ethnography underlines—my third major theme—is the crucial role that the law and the police play in 'making' the suicide rate at the last two of these junctures. Fear of them increases the likelihood that an act of self-harm will actually result in death and that suicide deaths are significantly under-reported. When they are reported, they provide a powerful incentive for family and neighbours to dissimulate about the circumstances and likely motives of the victim. The effect is to skew the aggregate national statistics on the 'causes' of suicide in specific directions.

II
The ethnographic context

The state-owned Bhilai Steel Plant (BSP) was constructed in the late 1950s and 60s on a green field site in a then rural backwater. The local

peasantry were initially reluctant recruits to its labour force (Parry 2008a). Workers flooded in from all over India and many stayed on. By the late 80s, BSP had 65,000 workers on its direct payroll. Several thousand others were employed in and around the plant by associated public sector corporations, and in the railway marshalling yards; and around 10,000 contract labourers toiled for daily wages in it. A new economic wind has since blown and by the end of 2010 BSP had shaved its direct labour force to 31,500—shedding more than half of its permanent posts in just over 20 years.

These are the most privileged and prestigious blue-collar jobs in Bhilai and regular plant workers are its aristocracy of labour. In comparison, however, with those employed in the private sector factories that now surround the plant, and for which it provided a magnet, all who have regular posts in public sector industries (*sarkari naukari*) are greatly advantaged in terms of wages, benefits, security and prospects for promotion, and in terms of the amount of time and effort they must devote to their duties. Within the private sector there is again a crucial distinction between a minority of relatively secure and well-remunerated company workers and contract workers on lower pay and liable to summary layoff. The biggest gap, however, is between those with *sarkari naukari* and the vast army of informal sector labour that works for daily wages on construction sites, or sorting scrap, carrying loads and the like. In terms of their material circumstances, life chances and aspirations, and sense of identity, the gulf between most BSP workers and what they refer to as this 'labour class' is so great that it makes little sense to see them both as members of a single social class with significant interests in common (Parry 2009). This major cleavage is strongly reflected in the suicide patterns.[6]

It also emerges in the fact that BSP households are on average larger and more likely to support aged parents and other kin; and that BSP workers belong to highly solidary and stable workgroups (Parry 1999), while daily-wage labourers are liable to work in different gangs from day to day. Contrary to Durkheimian expectations, plant employees are in these respects better 'integrated' but are more susceptible to suicide.

[6] This account will not deal with the intermediate category of regular company workers in private sector factories. Extremely few of them live in the neighbourhoods on which it will focus.

And as we will see, there are other significant ways in which my data run counter to Durkheim's (1970) predictions.

Many BSP workers live in its company township; others own houses in one of the new middle class housing colonies on its fringes, or in one of the old Chhattisgarh villages now engulfed in the sea of slum-like urban sprawl on the other side of the tracks. Two of these, Girvi and Patripar,[7] are neighbourhoods I have known since the start of my fieldwork. Both have suffered a significant number of suicides in that time. For both I know of only one case before 1979. During the 80s there were a handful. The subsequent spate of them is new, and its timing coincides with the progressive downsizing through the 1990s of the plant labour force, which had over the two previous decades become a privileged enclave increasingly cut off from other 'fractions' of 'the working class'.

In 1951, Girvi had a population of 949. By 1994, around 3000 were living on its old settlement area (*abadi*). Of the 'outsiders' who had moved in, the vast majority were Chhattisgarhis rather than long distance migrants from other states. Of Girvi's 555 households, 153 (28 per cent) were currently supported by a BSP income.

Patripar is on the other side of the company town, and township-folk regard it as a slum. In 1951, its population was 410; by 1994, 3,394. About 71 per cent of its 725 households had roots in Chhattisgarh and the rest were migrants from elsewhere—the lion's share from UP and Bihar, though there were smaller contingents from fourteen other states. 15 per cent of its households had a BSP income.

In both *basti*s ('settlements') one or more members of most of its original inhabitant (*mul-nivasi*) families has at some stage held a BSP job. As part of the compensation package for its compulsorily purchased fields, one male from each dispossessed household was entitled to plant employment. By now, however, nearly all these workers have either retired or are close to it. Their often now landless sons have no entitlements, recruitment has dried to a trickle and the pool from which appointments are made has recently been greatly extended. In both *basti*s, the number of BSP workers appointed since 1994 is negligible. For Girvi, I know of just one.

In the early days of the plant, even for outsiders such jobs had been easy to obtain, and the material circumstances of those who took them

[7] I employ pseudonyms throughout, both for locations within Bhilai and for people.

greatly improved when public sector wages took off in the 1970s. Through the BSP school system (which has standards far superior to that run by the state government) the ambitious and industrious son of a BSP worker might realistically aspire to managerial or professional employment. But while some were in significant measure upwardly mobile, others felt little compulsion to strive. Their father's wage would provide, and when he retired there would be his lump sum Provident Fund payout and their turn to work would come. The plant would provide. That illusion has by now been largely shattered.

Although Kundara Tola is also an old Chhattisgarh village, its residential site was bulldozed during the construction phase of the plant and its original inhabitants were displaced. But that land was never used and squatters moved onto it. The *basti* is close by the BSP slag-dump, a recently commissioned public sector power plant and one of the largest railway marshalling yards in the country. Many residents are railway workers. In terms of regional ethnicity, Chhattisgarhis predominate; but there are also a large number of Telugus, many Oriyas and smaller numbers from elsewhere. Kundara Tola is atypical of peri-urban Bhilai in being sharply divided into ethnic enclaves. Telugus are 'ghettoised' in their own *para*s ('quarters') and it is not uncommon to find Telugu women who have lived in Bhilai for decades, who speak no language but their own. Similarly, there are separate Chhattisgarhi and Oriya *para*s. At the 2001 census the population was close on 8500. My attention was initially drawn to the *basti* in 2004 when one of the local newspapers reported on a suicide epidemic that was currently afflicting it.

Data from these *basti*s is supplemented by records held by the various police *thana*s ('circles') into which they fall; and by limited access to medical notes on 60 patients who arrived during 2005 at the main BSP hospital suffering from poisoning or burn injuries that were probably self-inflicted. I also learned (in variable detail) of numerous other suicide cases from other parts of town. The local press carries several suicide stories a week.

III
Local discourse on suicide

Though prominent press coverage might suggest high public awareness, in fact few realise that the suicide rate has been climbing alarmingly.

As to what motivates the victims, most seem content with the standardised answers I will elaborate shortly. There is little speculation about psychological states. The deed itself, however, is the object of unabashed curiosity. Gruesome pictures of the body often accompany press reports. When that of an elderly Christian Telugu lady was recovered from the Kundara Tola tank in which she had drowned herself, a crowd of four or five hundred gathered to watch. When Chandu's mother hanged herself one evening in their Girvi house, the police refused permission to cut her down before their photographer arrived. That was at 9.30 the next morning and by then half the *basti* (including many of its children) had come 'to look'. What is to me striking is the disjunction between this unblinking fascination with the 'spectacle' and the thinness of verbal exegesis on the underlying circumstances that might have provoked the act (as opposed to being its immediate trigger).

Though suicide (*atamhatya* or *khudkushi*—'self-killing') is morally problematic, it is not surrounded by the shame and horror attached to it in the areas of north India in which I previously worked. Religious doctrine is seldom invoked. What is stressed is the abnegation of family responsibilities. For the Hindu majority, I am also struck by the contrast with Banaras, where my priestly informants would regale me with graphic accounts of the torments suffered by the ghosts of suicide victims (Parry 1994). Of such horrors I heard nothing in Bhilai, and most denied that their spirits were condemned to remain in a ghostly limbo or were liable to take their sufferings out on the living. Suicide notes hardly ever allude to an after-life. The discourse on suicide is largely pragmatic and secular,[8] and moral evaluations of it are largely contextual. When the victim was

[8] If my earlier experience of fieldwork in the orthoprax pilgrimage city of Banaras suggested that my informants there were close to one end of the spectrum in terms of the dominance of 'ritual' over 'practical discourse', many of my friends in Bhilai seem to me closer to the other. While it would be a great exaggeration to portray them as inhabiting a religiously disenchanted world, there is certainly much wider scope for the expression of religious scepticism or even frank disbelief. Though there is much more to be said, I have touched on some of the conditions for this in earlier writings (Parry 2008b; Parry and Struempell 2008): the religious, ethnic and linguistic heterogeneity of the town has the effect of relativising belief; and the fact that Bhilai was built *de novo* as a self-conscious icon for the Nehruvian nation-building vision for a secular, modern industrialised India, for which it was to offer a 'beacon'. These values have been significantly internalised by many inhabitants (and especially by the BSP workforce).

a wastrel who left vulnerable dependants behind, his act is condemned. When others drove him or her to it, it is they who attract obloquy. Often there is room for dispute.

Largely pragmatic and secular, but by no means entirely. By March 2004 Kundara Tola's suicide epidemic had certainly penetrated its collective consciousness. Since January up until *Nauratra* ('the nine nights of the goddess') in the middle of March, there had been eight suicides. During the festival, a party of Kundara Tola pilgrims in a packed jeep travelled to Dongargarh for *darshan* ('auspicious sight') of the goddess. The jeep collided head-on with a truck. Six passengers were killed and 14 others injured. All of the fatalities were from the immediate vicinity of the recently constructed Hanuman temple, and it was from this predominantly Telugu quarter that nearly all recent suicides had come.[9] Over the next seven months, nine more suicides followed. Something was plainly amiss, and the *basti* began to argue over what that was—many concluding that it was suffering from some divine retribution or curse.

There were several hypotheses: the Sitala temple, which protected the old pre-BSP village, had been desecrated by a powerful witch; the goddess Durga is customarily offered blood sacrifice, but of that she had been lately deprived since the spirit of modern reformist Hinduism strongly discountenances the practice. These recent deaths were an assertion of her rights, of her taking for herself with increment what should have been given her voluntarily. Alternatively Durga had been angered that the funeral procession of a (Telugu tailor) suicide victim had passed in front of the 'pavilion' in which her image was installed for the festival (by its Chhattisgarhi sponsors); or that menstruating women (also probably Telugus) had entered it.

The most hotly debated theory, however, was that the Telugu big men on the Hanuman Temple Committee had provoked the carnage by sponsoring the enactment of Hanuman's marriage, attended by worshippers of both sexes. To non-Telugus, this was sacrilege. Hanuman, the divine monkey and champion of Lord Ram, is a celibate (*brahmachari*). In Chhattisgarh, women cannot even worship him. Whether marriage had sapped his power so that he was no longer *able* to protect his devotees

[9] In 2004, there was also a much-publicised spate of 'farmer suicides' in Andhra, though these appear to have been concentrated in the period between May and July (Sridhar 2006).

against malign forces (in particular those emanating from *Shani* (the planet Saturn), or whether he had been so enraged by this act of lese-majesty that he was no longer *willing* to do so, nobody was clear. And for their part, the Telugu oligarchs remained unrepentant. Their *pandit*s revere a text that records that Hanuman had to marry the daughter of the Sun in order to become the possessor of all forms of knowledge.[10] Anyway, they would have been first to die if he were really displeased. It was just a rumour spread to set their Chhattisgarhi neighbours against them. Recently the biggest of these big men, a BJP activist, had run the party's campaign for Councillor (*Parshad*) for the Kundara Tola ward on the Bhilai Municipal Corporation, and had corralled the Telugu vote. A local Satnami—'Untouchable'—nominated by the Congress Party and supported by most Chhattisgarhis and Oriyas narrowly won. The credibility of the claim that Kundara Tola was reaping Hanuman's revenge largely depended on whether one was a Chhattisgarhi or Oriya Congress voter, or a Telugu supporter of the BJP. It was the camp of the successful candidate, the big man activist alleged, who promoted these stories; and when the new Councillor's wife consumed poison a few months later, he was happy to point out that it seemed unlikely that Hanuman was to blame. Their Parshad was constantly drunk, his wife had often sought refuge with neighbours at night to escape his violence, and only the day before there had been a violent row when he brought his *rakhel* ('kept woman') into their home.

In my view, however, Hanuman cannot be exonerated. Promoted by the Hindu nationalist right, his cult has recently burgeoned all over India, and his prodigious power and virility have made him the chosen deity of those struggling to gain and maintain a foothold in the new middle classes (Lutgendorf 2007). If so many of his 'natural constituency' in Kundara Tola give way to despair, that can only be because he is unable or unwilling to afford the protection expected of him.

But for many, none of this talk about supernatural causation was compelling; and for some it was downright offensive. 'We are all God's

[10] She is identified as Suvarchala Devi and the principal textual authority for their marriage—required so that Hanuman might become the 'master of the nine "grammars"' (*nau vyakaran pandit*)—is claimed as the *Parasara Samhita*. A series of new websites posted from south India have recently been publicizing the (to most Hindus) surprising 'discovery' that Hanuman is married. See, for example, http://www.hanumddas.tripod.com/ (Accessed on 29 May 2010).

children, and what parent would wish such a death on their child?' Even in Kundara Tola, most discourse about suicide is couched in the language of practical reason, and most explanations of it rehearse the same short list of likely causes: *nasha-baji* (addiction—to alcohol, *ganja* or gambling); *randi-baji* and *avedh sambandh* ('womanising' and 'illicit [sexual] relationships'); *parivarik* (family) 'tension' (the English word has entered everyday vocabulary); mental and physical illness, or indebtedness and *arthik tangi* ('economic problems'). So often is this litany recited that in the field I smugly considered it glib. It is salutary to discover that it is hard to do better. Where it is manifestly inadequate, however, is that such explanations radically reduce the complexity of the motives involved, and that they say nothing about the causes of these 'causes'.

IV
The statistical fog

Even to those closest it is not always clear whether death was intended. Few victims leave a note. At least in retrospect, there were sometimes omens—previous attempts, evidence of preparations or stories of the suicide feeding toffees to the children or buying a last round of drinks for his cronies. In many cases, however, the survivors profess sickening surprise (sometimes perhaps to cover their failure to heed warning signs).

My friends in Bhilai accept—indeed embrace—certain life-threatening risks with astonishing equanimity and their actions often strike me as suicidal. Many think nothing of driving powerful motorbikes at speed, and helmet-less, up the wrong side of busy main roads against on-coming traffic. When the barriers descend at the main railway crossings, on both sides the vehicles build up across the width of the road, so that when they are raised it is like two jousting armies confronting each other head-on. And in the meantime, there are always a number —too impatient to wait—who manoeuvre their motorbikes under the barrier to cross the tracks in advance of the train. In 2003 there were 35 deaths on the 6 km stretch of the main road that runs through the *thana* into which part of Kundara Tola falls. It also recorded 35 suicides. Between 1998 and 2009, 14 Kundara Tola residents deliberately threw themselves under trains; at least eight others were killed on the tracks. Probably not all were accidents. A lame epileptic 50 year-old Bengali—the police concluded—had been crushed when a stationary freight train started as he squeezed

between the wagons to cross the line; a young man, who lived by stealing coal from transiting wagons, when he missed his footing one night after several drinks as he jumped between them on a moving train. If not an intent to die, such 'accidents' suggest a willingness to gamble with death. Between them and 'completed suicides' the line often looks thin; and many suicides and suicide attempts suggest an element of wager, or of submitting to an ordeal the outcome of which is left to fate or to God (cf. Firth 1971; Stengel 1977: 116f; Weiss 1971). The resolve of those who unflinchingly stand in front of an approaching train on a deserted track seems clear. But under other circumstances or with other methods the 'lethal probabilities' are less probable and many suicides resemble a game of Russian roulette, which different individuals play with different numbers of bullets in the chamber. Even those who hang themselves often do so with family members in the next room. When they are cut down they are sometimes still breathing, but subsequently die. Intentions seem to range from rock-solid to highly equivocal; outcomes from virtually inevitable to razor-edge.

It is not only railway deaths that may be ambiguous. Was the poison consumed by mistake? Did the stove explode, did the deceased douse himself or herself with kerosene and light a match, or did somebody else do that? Hanging is plainly less easy to pass off as an accident, which may explain some of its statistical predominance. Many suicides get recorded as mishaps. Apart from shame and social opprobrium, families have several incentives to dissimulate—a house now harder to sell, awareness that if one of their daughters-in-law is known to have killed herself their subsequent sons will find it harder to marry, and above all fear of police harassment. Sometimes the corpse is sneaked off for cremation before neighbours and kin can assemble or the police arrive; sometimes the latter are induced to misclassify. Naturally, it is the well heeled and powerful, those who have 'approach', or those who are 'known to the police' and therefore know them, who are best placed to influence them. But even without influence, their task is difficult enough. At what odds should a gamble with death be regarded as 'suicide' (Taylor 1982: 90)?

The line between accidents and suicides is often unclear, as is that between suicides and murders. Commonly, the family alleges murder while the evidence suggests suicide. When Michael—a Telugu Christian from Kundara Tola—returned home to find his thirteen year-old sister hanging, he at first supposed she was playacting. Her feet were barely off the

ground. And when it dawned that she was really dead, he assumed foul play. It was only the post-mortem that persuaded him otherwise. Though there are far fewer murders than suicides, several deaths in my three *basti* sample that the police recorded as 'suicide' were probably murders, even if a larger number of officially-recorded 'accidents' were almost certainly suicides.

In sum, the statistical fog is dense and positivistic assertions about the 'real' suicide rate are problematic. I would, however, claim that some estimates are more real than others. In anticipation of my subsequent argument, moreover, it needs to be said that even if rates derived from police records are partly an artefact of the rate of concealment, it is highly improbable that bottom-of-the-heap informal sector workers are better placed to conceal suicides than privileged public sector employees. There is thus little danger that the figures exaggerate the disparity between the two sets of workers. Nor does my limited evidence suggest that, in Chhattisgarh, the disparity between the official and the 'true' rate is as wide as it has sometimes said to be in various Western countries, for which it has been estimated that anything up to half of all suicides may go unrecorded.[11]

Where there was robust local consensus that the death was self-inflicted (surprisingly often affirmed by household members themselves), I have counted that case, even though the police did not record it as suicide. When in doubt I have excluded it. Since there are inevitably borderline judgements, Table 1, culled from WHO, gives a range. The first two columns show the population of the three *basti*s and the number of completed suicides I recorded for each. Column 3 shows the number for varying periods since 1990 for which my information is most complete and on the basis of which I have calculated a rate per 100,000 in column 4. What that reveals is an incidence nearly five to seven times higher than the official all-India figure. Some confirmation that this is not exaggerated is that between January 2000 and October 2004 the two *thana*s responsible for all but a small corner of Kundara Tola registered 28 suicides from the

[11] Though based on a very small sample from rural Andhra, Vijayakumar and Babu's (2009) evidence suggests a gap of that magnitude. For eye-catching claims about under-reporting in various Western countries at various periods, see the evidence cited by Atkinson (1978: 51, 55) and Douglas (1970: 172).

basti, and there were two other suspected cases that were yet to be classified. That yields an annual rate of 69.3–74.4 per 100,000, higher than my own estimates for a longer period. It is, however, improbable that they can be legitimately generalised to Bhilai as a whole. More cursory enquiries in other *basti*s suggest some have a lower incidence. Significantly these are neighbourhoods in which public sector jobs are few. An index of this patchiness is the number of suicides recorded by one of the *thana*s into which Kundara Tola falls. 10 per cent of these cases over the five-year period beginning January 2000, and 27 per cent over a ten-month period in 2004, were from that *basti* alone. This *thana* covers 51 peri-urban neighbourhoods and this part of Kundara Tola accounts for only 3.4 per cent of its total population.

By comparison, the number of murder victims is small. While the Kundara Tola thana just mentioned recorded 171 suicides in the period 1 January 2001–20 October 2004, it registered only 24 murders. For the *thana* into which Patripar falls I calculate a murder rate of 2.4 per 100,000. For Patripar itself I know of six murders; for Girvi nine, and for Kundara Tola 10, two of them closely connected to suicide cases. One involved a young man of mixed Bihari–Nepali parentage who had hanged himself after interrogation by the police on suspicion of being an accomplice of the (absconding) grandson of a Telugu railway widow who had been murdered just after she had withdrawn a large pot of pension money to reconstruct her house. In the other case, the murder victim was an Oriya—an 'Untouchable' Garha by caste—who was himself just out of jail for murder. In the interim, his Chhattisgarhi Oil-Presser wife, who has a lucrative business in illicit liquor, had been the mistress of a much younger Oriya man who had recently committed suicide. Amongst my newspaper cuttings are reports of desperate mothers who killed, or tried to kill, their children along with themselves.

Returning to Table 1, Column 5 shows the regional ethnicity of suicide victims, which in Girvi and Patripar is consistent with their proportions of the population. In Kundara Tola, Telugus are over-represented. Though some read Telugu newspapers, and most watch Telugu newscasts and know of the 'farmer suicide' epidemic in Andhra, the majority are from Srikakulam, a district hardly affected. Telugu propensity to suicide has, I believe, less to do with regional origins and culture than with their concentration in railway employment. That is suggested by the last two columns that show the proportion of victims who come from households

Table 1
Incidence of suicide in the three basti*s*

	1 *Population of basti*[1]	*2* *Completed suicides recorded*[2]	*3* *Recent suicides (range)*	*4* *Rate per 100,000 (based on column 3)*	*5* *Regional ethnicity of victims (based on column 2)*	*6* *Proportion of suicides from households with BSP/other public sector jobs*	*7* *Proportion of* basti *households with BSP or other public sector jobs*
Girvi	c. 3000	34	24–27 (1998–2008)	47–53	94% Chhattisgarhi	65% (N = 22)	37.5%
Patripar	c. 3400	52	37–44 (1990–2007)	61–72	71% Chhattisgarhi; 29% others	60% (N = 31)	22%
Kundara Tola	c. 8500	Between 1999 and 2009, 64 'secure' cases (+ 11 others possible.[3]	60–69 (1999–2008)	64–74	Of 'secure' cases: 44% Telugu; 16% Oriya; 19% Chhattisgarhi; 21% other	65% total (48% railway HH; 17% BSP/other public sector HH)	Estimated maximum: 15–20%[4]

Notes: 1. For both Girvi and Patripar my calculations have had to assume that the population has not grown significantly since the time of my 1994 census. This is not, I believe, as unrealistic as might be supposed. In a 2010 re-survey of four Patripar *para*s (accounting for nearly one quarter of its total population) it showed little change. The 8,500 population figure for Kundara Tola is taken from the 2001 census, and it is probable that its population has subsequently declined. Operations on the BSP slag dump have since been mechanised and many who worked on it have been made redundant and left the *basti*. The new power plant has since been commissioned and many construction workers have also moved on; and significant numbers of Telugu and Oriya railway workers have returned to their ancestral villages on retirement.

2. While the police record suicides by the *thana* in which they occur, my figures are based on the place of residence of the victim. Thus the Girvi BSP worker who killed himself in the plant, the Girvi polytechnic student who threw himself off a train, and the Girvi tailor who hanged himself from a tree in a neighbouring village that is under the jurisdiction of a different *thana*, are rated as 'Girvi suicides'. Almost certainly my figures underestimate the problem, not only because some of the deaths excluded as accidents may have been suicides, but also because there are undoubtedly cases that never came to my attention.

3. From 1 April 2003–31 March 2004, there were 66 Kundara Tola deaths reported to the government health workers. Of these, seven were recorded as suicides and 15 as accidents. According to police records the number of suicides during this period was nine. My information suggests 12. Roughly, that is, between 11–18 per cent of all deaths were suicides.

4. This estimate is admittedly crude. It was arrived at by going from street to street with the 2009 voters list, and asking people to identify those with railway jobs or pensions, and those with current or previous jobs in other public sector enterprises (mostly BSP or the State Electricity Board). On this basis I calculate that 8–9 per cent of bona fide voters fall into the first of these categories, and 3–4 per cent into the second. Assuming an average household size of five, and unrealistically assuming that none has benefited from more than one such job, around 30 per cent of the population would be members of a household that has at some stage been supported by a public sector income. But since a very large proportion of those with such jobs are the sons of former public sector workers, the true figure must be very much less.

that have, or have had, public sector employment and the proportion of such households in the *basti* at large. In the suicide figures they are greatly over-represented. Amongst the male suicides in these public sector families, more than half were committed by men in the age group 21–35, and around one-quarter by men of 55 and upwards who were on the brink of retirement or just recently retired—just when the first of these cohorts is in desperate search of secure jobs and the second is relinquishing theirs and worrying about the prospects of their sons.[12]

For all three *basti*s, the ratio of male to female suicides is 63:37, which is close to state and national norms. Of 55 female victims, about one-third were young *unmarried* women. As to methods, Table 2 largely speaks for itself, though I will later comment on the high proportion of women who die from burning, though it is striking that road deaths are hardly ever suspected as suicides, and that one reason why suicides by drowning appear so relatively rare is probably because such deaths are so hard to distinguish from accidents.

Table 2
Suicide methods in the three basti *sample (150 cases from Column 2, Table 1)*

	Male	*Female*	*Total*
Hanging	46	16	62
Burning	4	21	25
Train	26	6	32
Poison	16	9	25
Drowning	3	3	6
TOTAL	95	55	150

Not uncommonly, the means seem to make a statement about the cause: the jealous husband who hanged himself with his wife's *saree*, and the teenage daughter—pulled out of school to become a domestic drudge for her demanding father and brothers—who did the same with a favourite one of her recently deceased mother; the father who six months later hanged himself in the same room and in the same manner as his son; and

[12] Significantly, this is totally at odds with Mayer and Ziaian's observation (2002) that for India as a whole the highest incidence of suicide is in the 30–44 age bracket. See also Mishra's (2006) report on a sample of 'farmer suicides' in Maharashtra, in which an absolute majority of victims were between 31 and 50.

the recently married daughter of a train driver who, when he tried to force her to return to a husband she disliked, stood defiantly on the tracks with outstretched arms in the path of an Express. Its unfortunate driver must have spotted her from half a mile off but been powerless. Train suicides are particularly horrific. Bodies are shredded and the family gets back parts. As such instances suggest, and though it is difficult to find a language to describe it that does not sound insensitive, there is a 'performative' aspect—even an element of 'theatricality'—in such acts. That is perhaps of a piece with what I said earlier about popular fascination with the 'spectacle'.

Several cases involved suicide pacts. One young Girvi couple, unable to marry, dressed up in wedding finery and hanged themselves from the two ends of a single rope from a rafter in the boy's father's house. Though eligible partners in terms of caste and *gotra*, it is said that the latter insisted that his son restore the family fortunes by marrying a brotherless heiress from a landed household. In Patripar, a young woman and her elder brother's daughter, who were close in age, consumed poison together; and nearby was one much-publicised case in which four unmarried sisters aged between 16 and 24 simultaneously hanged themselves in their two-roomed house—apparently in despair at their marriage prospects. Their deceased father was a local Satnami (the largest 'untouchable' caste in the region) and their mother a Maharashtrian Muslim. Though there were Satnami suitors, both mother and daughters were said to want Muslim boys. I also heard of several cases of a suicide pact on which one of the parties at the last minute reneged.

Suicide can be contagious and certain households have been tragically prone. In Kundara Tola, two recently married young women—one Telugu, the other Oriya—burned themselves to death within an hour of each other. Though they lived not far apart, they had never actually spoken. But when news of Jyoti's self-immolation spread through the *basti*, Lachmi went 'to look', and then went straight home and did the same. In Patripar, there are three households that have suffered two or more suicides, in Kundara Tola one; and in all three *basti*s there are households in which one member has committed suicide and others have attempted it. In two instances of self-immolation—neither from the sample *basti*s—the suicide took one or more rescuers with her, in one case a husband and daughter who had tried to extinguish the flames.

V
On the causes of 'causes'

Though *Anna Karenina* famously opens with the claim that 'every unhappy family is unhappy in its own way', there are patterns. Quite a few of these suicides were transparently acts of accusation and revenge, others of atonement or expiation. On such motivations, however, local discourse is disappointingly thin. What is endlessly recited is the short catalogue of 'causes' already alluded to: addiction, sexual philandering, family 'tension', debt and economic difficulties, and illness. Often, of course, several of these go together, one exacerbating another to create a spiral of despair. The question is why relatively privileged public sector workers should be especially susceptible to this syndrome. What are the causes of these 'causes'?

Alcohol is often a major contributor. The victim was drunk, or had been continuously so over the past few days (which is one reason why many suicides occur during festivals); or there had been endless rows about his constant drinking. In Girvi, I know several households entirely sustained by the daily wages of a wife who works on construction sites because the BSP salary of her husband is dedicated entirely to drink. The suicides of several married women were held to have been provoked by a drunken husband—by his violence or inability to provide. Amongst the most spectacular drunkards a disproportionate number are public sector workers. It is only they who can afford enough liquor to remain incapacitated for a fortnight, and only they who will still have a job when they are sufficiently sober to report for duty. Since suicide is often a gamble, and since alcohol fogs sound judgement on the length of the odds, I surmise that—this side of becoming paralytic—the suicide attempts of drunkards are more likely to result in death.

Indebtedness has many causes. Drink is certainly one. Though ostensibly for other purposes—buying a new motorbike, building a house or funding a marriage—BSP workers can obtain large loans from the plant (and from various co-operative societies) with which to indulge their habit. When these sources dry up, there are plenty of loan sharks eager to advance money at 10 per cent interest per month against the security of their bank passbooks, ATM cards or property deeds. It can easily become a downward spiral. Loan repayments to the plant halve one's take-home pay, and the creditor who has one's passbook claims the rest

in interest. The worker finds himself working for nothing and decides to stay home. Though plant management is remarkably tolerant of persistent absenteeism, its patience is not bottomless and it is under increasing pressure to get tough. Though generally later rather than sooner, the worst absentees are eventually fired. Several of the suicides in my sample were of public sector workers who had been sacked or coerced into taking voluntary retirement as a result of alcohol-related absenteeism, or were on the brink of termination.

Satta, the numbers racket, is another source of indebtedness. For many it becomes an obsession. Or again, the often hair-brained business ventures on which many young unemployed men embark, with the grudging backing of their BSP fathers or with loans from friends or relatives, may leave a millstone of debt.

As with unemployment—in India something that only the relatively affluent can afford (the truly disadvantaged must make a living as rag-pickers, rickshaw-*vala*s and the like (Holmström 1984))—so with debt. Which moneylender will advance ₹100,000 to a coolie? If debt is a major contributor to the suicide rate, it is *a priori* unlikely to be the most deprived who kill themselves. Not that the poor do not have debts, but these are less likely to be out of all proportion to their chances of liquidating them. When they are, they can more easily disappear. Most live on rent. It is generally those with collateral who run up significant debts—farmers with fields, or those with BSP or Railway jobs. It is not those who live from hand to mouth who kill themselves, but those whose circumstances give them aspirations beyond their reach. And one aspiration that sons of public sector workers undoubtedly entertain is to reproduce their membership in the labour aristocracy. Recently, however, this has become increasingly difficult, as the public sector has downsized.

This downsizing might suggest that the greater propensity to suicide amongst BSP employees and their families is related to increased pressures at work as a result of tighter manning and the restructuring of work practices (as has been suggested for the much publicised recent spate of suicides amongst French Telecom workers[13]). In my view, however, this is implausible. When I first spent time in the plant in the mid-1990s (Parry 1999), manning levels were extremely generous and the

[13] See, for example, http://news.bbc.co.uk/1/hi/8252547.stm. Accessed on 22 December 2010.

pace of work was generally relaxed. Though 10 years later BSP workers bemoaned the reduction in the size of their work teams, and complained of the consequent pressure, my own observations suggested that the intensity of their labour had not greatly increased (Parry n.d.). Many of the toughest unskilled jobs had been simply reassigned to cheap contract workers.

In the past, BSP provided a 'compassionate appointment' (*anukampa nyukti*) to one dependant of an employee who died during his period of service—regardless of whether he had been killed in an industrial accident within the plant, suffered a heart attack outside it, or committed suicide. Pradeep got his after his father had thrown himself under a train. But the rules have changed and only the dependant of a worker who dies in an accident inside the plant, or on the way to or from work, is now eligible. The families of others will, however, draw the inflation-proofed equivalent of their Basic pay up until the date at which they would have retired.

Railway regulations similarly used to entitle one dependant of a worker who died at any time and of any cause during his period of service to a compassionate appointment. Now this applies only to those who have a minimum of five years service left. The present retirement age is 60, which means that there is much to be said for dying by the age of 55. In Kundara Tola it was claimed that railway workers nearing the end of their careers were committing suicide in order to secure a job for a son. In one of the three instances cited, the witness statements recorded in police files were full of the deceased's obsessive anxieties about the future of his family following his retirement.

Though it would be a gross exaggeration to claim that railway workers routinely kill themselves so that their sons can run the trains, such considerations should not be discounted entirely. Consider the death (not a suicide) of a railway worker whose family I have known intimately since I began in Bhilai. The prehistory of devious manoeuvrings of his eldest son, Adhikari, to obtain railway employment I have recounted elsewhere (Parry 2000). The sequel is that his father subsequently developed cancer that would plainly prove terminal. This was before the rules had changed, and even if nobody said so aloud (though Adhikari came close), it was also plain that it would be best for everybody if he died before his 60th birthday—for the suffering patient, for his other four children and wife, and of course for Adhikari himself. Naturally the family, who are Telugu Catholics, did everything possible to save him—prayer meetings and

pilgrimages as well as endless attendance at the railway and mission hospitals. As it transpired, however, he died 'just in time'. Adhikari is now a railway clerk, and today when he speaks of his father's death it is as his final sacrifice for his family, an act of will by which he secured their future. With this parable in mind, and acknowledging that the reasons for wishing oneself dead may be manifold and largely other, it does not seem extravagant to suppose that those contemplating suicide might easily persuade themselves that they would be doing 'the right thing' by their households. One son will be guaranteed lucrative lifetime employment and his widow will get a pension. Even a BSP worker's family will draw most of his salary.

The negotiation of these compassionate appointments requires much agonised strategising in many Kundara Tola families, and the family politics surrounding them have played a significant role in several suicide cases.

1. Chhotu was the youngest and best educated of the five sons of a railwayman who died after a long illness, through which Chhotu had nursed him on the clear family understanding that it would be he who inherited his job. When it came to claim it, however, it turned out that on his school certificate his father's name was the one by which he was familiarly known in the *basti*, not the name in his railway records. Chhotu was disqualified and the job allocated to one of his brothers. Chhotu had a sweetheart (*premika*) he was planning to marry, but when that happened 'she turned her face from him'. He consumed insecticide and died a week later in hospital. Revealingly, the police investigation recorded none of these circumstances. The family members they interviewed claimed to be completely mystified about his motives.
2. Kamla was the younger unmarried sister of two married brothers. The elder one had a lucrative job in the Gulf. When their father died he returned to Bhilai in the expectation of a job in the railways. In the interim, however, the younger brother's in-laws (his *sasural*) had managed to get it assigned in his name. The family atmosphere was poisonous; Kamla could not stand it and burned herself alive.
3. Surya Prakash hanged himself before dawn from an outside beam on his house. He had had been drinking even more heavily than usual and was in poor mental shape, sitting morosely by himself

all day and unable to bear the slightest sound. Relations with his wife were terrible, and recently there had been violent rows over his wish to take voluntary retirement (VR) from the railways. His wife was bitterly opposed. He was now 56, and if he accepted VR he would ruin any chance of his son or widow obtaining a compassionate appointment in the event of his death during the next four years—which is what, gossip supposed, she was counting on. She was not a devoted wife and reputedly had a lover. While Surya Prakash was a lowly gangman, he was a railway clerk. When the lover came to their home, he would be turned out and would sometimes wander all night. Before his suicide, his son had worked as a contract labourer in the plant. Immediately after it, he packed that in because the promise of a railway appointment meant that he could now obtain more than enough credit to live on for the next year or so until it came through (which it did).

The problem is not only one of retaining a berth in this 'creamy layer' of the industrial workforce but also of meeting its increasingly exacting standards in terms of educational attainments and consumption patterns. Over the period I have been visiting Bhilai the latter in particular have been revolutionised by the spectacular growth of a new middle class with disposable incomes undreamed of just 20 years back. In terms of 'the size of the purse', BSP workers who are still in post, and who have good attendance records and have been modestly prudent in taking out loans, fall comfortably into this bracket (Parry n.d.). But those who retired 10 to 15 years back with Provident Fund settlements of perhaps ₹200,000–300,000, which seemed at the time like the riches of Croesus, now find themselves pinched. The interest on the bank deposits on which many of them rely for an income has plummeted, prices have rocketed, and today the severance pay out of a retiring worker might be ten times as much. Many, that is, find the pace impossible to stay with, and many parents and children quarrel over the necessity of doing so. Several suicides in my sample are part of the fall-out.

1. On his BSP salary, Khorbara—a Girvi Satnami and barely literate himself—had managed to educate his son, of whom his hopes were high and who was intended to become an engineer. In 1996, the boy was studying in a Polytechnic in Indore but failed his exams.

In the expectation of being able to alter that result with a bribe, Khorbara's son set out for Bhopal (the then state capital). Having failed in that too, he threw himself out of the train on his way back home.[14]

2. Shambhu Kurmi is a senior BSP worker on an excellent salary, and the owner of 16 acres of productive land in an outlying village. By Girvi standards he is a wealthy man, though he is reckoned tight-fisted. In May 2001, he married off three of his children simultaneously.[15] To the mortification of the eldest boy, Mangal Das, his *barat* (wedding party) travelled to the village of his bride by tractor. He expected a bus. He had arranged that it should be accompanied by an *Angrezi baja* (an 'English band') to which his friends could dance. When the band showed up, however, his father sent them away. Mangal Das felt humiliated and hanged himself within two hours of their return to Girvi with his bride.
3. Rameshwar (also a Girvi Kurmi) retired from the plant in February 2007 with a handsome Provident Fund payout (in the region of ₹1.2–1.5 million). Out of this he bought land in a village some distance away, in which he and his wife went to live, leaving his ancestral house and its adjoining threshing floor to his two married sons. The younger has a BSP job, and has constructed with loans from the plant and some help from his father a magnificent new mansion on the threshing floor, complete with marble floors and air-conditioning. His elder brother, Devnath, was a contract worker. Though his father gave him the apparently quite princely sum of ₹300,000 to rebuild the old house, it would never compete with his brother's. A day or so after the concrete had been poured he pressed his father for a further subvention. Rameshwar refused. Devnath went to the rail track where he stood in the path of an oncoming train.

[14] This is the only exam-related suicide in my three-*basti* sample, though I know of half a dozen other cases from elsewhere in town.

[15] That was the source of the problem, some said. He had set up three marriage pavilions (*tin maduva madvaya*), which is inauspicious; and had dismissed advice to set up a fourth, in which he would simultaneously celebrate the token marriage of a mango tree, as the superstition of 'illiterate yokels' (*unparh gvar*).

For local Chhattisgarhis who have joined the aristocracy of labour just as important are new expectations about marriage. By north Indian standards, sexual mores in this area are 'traditionally' relaxed. In the pre-BSP past, child marriage was the norm throughout the caste hierarchy.[16] Its purpose was 'to lift the weight of virginity'—which fell heavily on the shoulders of a girl's parents, who would have been irredeemably shamed if their daughter engaged in sexual activity before her *shadi* (the actual ritual of marriage). After it, however, she would remain in their house until well into puberty, when *gauna* would be performed and she would be sent to live with her husband and their union consummated. In the gap between *shadi* and *gauna* there was considerable licence to form romantic and sexual liaisons with third parties, and many couples never actually lived together because one of them had run off with somebody else before *gauna*. By most Indian standards, marriage was highly unstable and when it broke down both husband and wife would almost invariably enter into a secondary marriage with another partner, over the choice of whom they might legitimately exercise considerable personal autonomy that to some degree extended even to the choice of a spouse of a different caste.

For the aristocracy of labour, industrialisation and the large influx of outsiders have brought new and more puritanical values. Though primary marriages are arranged, there is a new stress on the couple, new expectations about their romantic inclination towards each other and a new ideal of conjugal intimacy. Child marriage has all but disappeared; and in the labour aristocracy it is now usual to delay marriage in the hope that by the time of it the groom will have secure employment. Young men of that kind want educated wives and these days girls often spend as many years in formal education as their brothers. Today it is common for a groom to be in his early- to mid-thirties at marriage, and for his bride to be in her middle- or even late-twenties. Given this protracted period of waiting, it is unlikely that the sexual involvements of young people are any less common than they were, though the new moral climate makes them more angst-ridden. Certainly, parents have to bear 'the weight of (their daughter's) virginity' much longer and have more reason to feel threatened by its premature loss. Marriages are increasingly expected to

[16] This and the following paragraph summarise more detailed published accounts (Parry 2001 and 2004).

last; their breakdown increasingly disparaged. In the past there was no shortage of suitors who would seek out young married women after they had gone back to stay in their natal homes having left their husbands, and who would take them in secondary unions. Today they rarely come, with the result that beleaguered parents and brothers—faced with the prospect of supporting them indefinitely—put heavy pressure on their married daughters and sisters to return to husbands they detest. Amongst the informal sector 'labour class', by contrast, the age of marriage is appreciably younger; the conjugal bond has remained scarcely less brittle formerly and is less freighted with romantic notions about the communion of souls, and attitudes towards sexual peccadilloes are more forgiving.

The implications for suicide are predictable. Out of the 150 cases from the three *basti*s, more than a third involved intolerable situations created by illicit love affairs. In all three there were instances that (reportedly) involved the pregnancy of an unmarried girl by a man of different caste, including two in which it was the male lover who killed himself. When a young unmarried woman is the victim, the police post-mortem routinely tests for pregnancy and in some cases in which the results were negative the pathologist had noted on the file that the hymen was ruptured. While in all other age groups, men were at least twice as prone to suicide, amongst those aged under-21 there were 21 female victims to four males. Several fathers were supposedly so humiliated by a daughter's involvement in a cross-caste liaison that they committed suicide. A Kundara Tola Chhattisgarhi woman, who had set up with an Oriya man, hanged herself in remorse at having 'lost caste' and being no longer welcome in her parents' home. Six cases involved young married women who had left their husbands and had been living in their parental home for some time without attracting a new husband. The largest proportion of these suicides, however, was seemingly provoked by marital infidelities. Labour aristocrats have the wherewithal to tempt 'labour class' women to provide them with sexual favours for material rewards. Across class, adulterous relations generally go 'with the (hypergamous) grain'. But not only husbands philander. Unless he is an alcoholic, a BSP worker can afford, and almost certainly prefers, to keep his wife at home, where boredom may make her susceptible to the advances of an unemployed brother-in-law or the charms of some neighbourhood Romeo. The most striking thing about these suicides related to sex and marriage, however, is their concentration in the aristocracy of labour.

Finally, my sample includes several cases in which the suffering caused by some chronic or acute physical illness is said to have provided the motive. Three of the victims were being treated for mental illness by the Psychiatry Department of the BSP hospital at the time of their deaths, three were consulting a *baiga*-exorcist about mental states attributed to *jadu-tona* (witchcraft) and/or to some spirit (*bahari hava*), and several others were said to be 'mad' (*pagal*) or 'cracked- brained' (crack-*dimag*).

VI
Suicide and the law

How did Durga die? Was it suicide? What motivated it? The police have the duty to decide[17] and their checklist of motives is no different from anybody else's. The national statistics demand they pick one and their choice is constrained.

Under IPC Section 309, attempted suicide is a crime punishable by imprisonment for up to one year and/or by a fine.[18] Under IPC 305 and 306, it is also a criminal offence to abet or instigate suicide—and this covers harassment designed to trigger it. Abetment is punishable by up to 10 years imprisonment; but if the victim is a minor, is insane, delirious or intoxicated it can attract the death penalty or a life sentence. To cover 'dowry deaths', IPC 304 B makes special provision for cases involving women who commit suicide within seven years of marriage. Harassment is presumed, the accused must prove innocence, the offence is non-bailable and however flimsy the evidence the police have little option but to take them into custody during enquiries. Those convicted face a statutory minimum of seven years imprisonment that may extend to life. There are no penalties for maliciously filing a false case.

My Kundara Tola sample includes one in which a recently married Chhattisgarhi husband, his mother and younger brother all spent a couple of months in jail because his—by all accounts—mentally unwell wife

[17] Unlike English coroners, they do not have the option of an 'open verdict'.

[18] As had an earlier one in 1971, a recent report of the Law Commission of India has recommended repeal of section 309, though this has yet to be acted on (Report 210, October 2008 [http://lawcommissionofindia.nic.in/reports/report210.pdf. Accessed on 22 December 2010]). Though attempted suicide is a criminal act, completed suicide is not (since the 'culprit' is beyond the law). Suicide ceased to be a criminal offence in England and Wales only in 1961, later than in many other European countries.

had killed herself and her brothers claimed 'dowry torture'. Though I know of other instances of this sort involving local families, most Chhattisgarhi castes do not 'traditionally' pay dowry and even in the modern industrial context dowry extortion is not a significant problem.

The stereotypical instance of a 'dowry death' is by burning, and the reflex of many young wives who feel (and perhaps are) persecuted is to reach for the kerosene can. It is a way of reminding their affines of the trouble they would face if they actually went through with the threat. Adhikari's elderly mother and one still unmarried sister have recently been driven from their home by the suicide gestures of his disturbed and manipulative wife. Her father had earlier accused them of dowry harassment, a complete fabrication I am convinced. They now regard it as too risky to remain under the same roof. With matches to hand, it is easy to imagine how half serious suicide gestures may trip into real tragedies. As I would see it, that—rather than the legacy of deeply engrained cultural notions calling on the symbolism of, say, *sati* and fire sacrifice—is the most immediate reason that such a high proportion of female suicides die by burning.

The law also makes it less likely that those who attempt suicide will get proper medical attention. Too frightened to take her to hospital, Bisauha sent out for a tube of 'Burnol' to treat the 85 per cent burns from which his wife died. In fact, many local hospitals turn such patients away. They attract the police. Two Kundara Tola cases almost certainly resulted in death because crucial time was lost when the victim was refused admission.

The frequency with which the police actually pursue cases against those who attempt suicide is low and the penalties imposed by the courts are token. For the *thana* into which Girvi falls, which has a total population of around 65,000, there were just two such prosecutions during the five years between 2005–2009. For a *thana* that covers a substantial chunk of the BSP township there were eight in three years. Charges of abetment are more common, resulting in perhaps 10 per cent of cases (though the frequency seems to vary between *thana*s). But what is as important as the numbers is the knowledge that the police will be looking for dirt, and that any they find may put people in jail or cost a great deal to bury.

Maya, whose father is a BSP worker from Patripar, had attempted suicide before. She had been unhappily married and had tried to burn herself. Subsequently she returned to her parents' home with her baby

daughter and found a menial job in an office complex nearby. Opposite was a restaurant with a Sindhi manager with whom she began an affair. In February 2008 the manager married a suitable Sindhi girl. During the wedding, Maya set fire to herself in the street outside his house. Admitted to hospital, the police registered a case against her under Section 309. When she died a couple of weeks later, her erstwhile lover was charged with 'abetment'.

When one evening Krishna and I ran into his old friend, Arjan, Krishna complained at the time since they had met. He had been in jail for the past three months, Arjan explained, and away before that. He was running a lucrative business installing cable TV connections and his wife's two brothers had tried to muscle in. That created serious domestic dissension and his mother and wife were always bickering. Arjan left Bhilai while tempers cooled. During his absence his wife slit her wrists and was rushed into the BSP hospital. While convalescing she went up to its roof and jumped off. Twenty days later her two brothers had registered a case against him, alleging that she had left a note attributing her suicide to 'dowry torture'—though no such note was ever produced. The Town Inspector suggested that ₹20,000 would see charges dropped. Arjan refused to pay, had spent the last three months in jail and was still facing prosecution.

Four of the suicides from Patripar and Girvi had led to the arrest of creditors who were allegedly harassing the victim. Another case I found on police files involved a BSP worker with political aspirations who had taken voluntary retirement in the hope of securing the BJP ticket to fight the Assembly Elections in one of the local constituencies. He had left a long suicide letter addressed to a prominent local politician seeking justice for his family and pointing the finger at five individuals who had ruined him financially. Now they were under investigation. Foremost amongst them was an erstwhile Coke Oven colleague in whose *satta* operation the deceased had invested ₹400,000 from his severance money. From that he had never seen a pie. In the majority of suicide notes I have seen on the files, the deceased formulaically assumes complete responsibility for his or her own actions and explicitly exonerates family and associates of blame. Nearly all the exceptions are ones that accuse a creditor of extortion—though it is possible that those that hold kin responsible are destroyed before they can come to police attention.

But what also makes creditors vulnerable to abetment charges is that the bereaved have an interest. In one case I know, the threat of filing such a case was calculatedly used to deter a (licensed) moneylender from pressing for full repayment of the debt from the BSP victim's Provident Fund.[19] If the police treat the populace as a source of rent, the populace use the police and the law to pursue their own agendas—which are sometimes about loosening the grip of creditors and sometimes about the pursuit of vendettas against kin and affines with whom relations are bad. To some degree the police and the victim's family are sometimes complicit.

Abetment may become an issue in different kinds of circumstance. Mahendra slapped Raju about for supposedly molesting his sister. Next day, Raju threw himself under a train. Mahendra spent a week in jail and faced charges under section 306. Pushpa was accused of instigating the suicide of her *derani* (HyBW) by her carping criticisms of her, part of a long history of family disputes. In another case from police files, a young Chhattisgarhi was under investigation in the case of the suicide of an Adivasi girl who appears to have been playing him off against a hard-to-get would-be Bengali boyfriend with a flashy motorbike. The former had allegedly tried to blackmail her into a more intimate relationship by threatening to send compromising MMS's (mobile phone movie clips) of them together to her parents and classmates. 'Abetment', as the Chhattisgarh constabulary (and the Chief Judicial Magistrate[20]) deploy it, thus seems an elastic concept; and—judging by recent Supreme Court judgements[21]—it is doubtful that most cases the police initiate would stand up on appeal. In bringing them, however, it might be supposed that the police reflect, or may even crystallise, popular moral sensibilities. It is their decisions about which cases to pursue that define as 'crimes' those acts that most offend against 'strong and definite states of the collective conscience' (it being, as Durkheim (1933: 80) saw it, the task of

[19] Sridhar (2006) reports that farmer suicides in Andhra do not result in the liquidation of the debt, and that their families are harassed for repayment within days of the death.

[20] Where a criminal offence is suspected, the *Thana* in-charge forwards the file and the police recommendation to the office of the Chief Judicial Magistrate, who initiates legal proceedings. Other cases are signed off by a Sub-Divisional Magistrate, who returns the file to the *thana*.

[21] Http://www.lawisgreek.com/supreme-court-judgments-abetment-suicide (accessed on 16 December 2010).

penal law to sanction such acts). Given the variable nature and gravity of the cases they pursue, however, this hardly seems convincing; and most ordinary people certainly see their decisions as arbitrary, as having more to do with opportunism and cupidity than with upholding core values.

Sometimes they may also have to do with the political pressures on them, as my final case history suggests. It comes to my attention as this article goes to press, chiefly through coverage in both local and national newspapers;[22] and I invoke it here not only to make a point about the politics of suicide but also because it resonates with several other themes that have run through my discussion.

S, a 35-year old man, barricaded himself in his company quarters in the BSP township along with his mother and three unmarried sisters (aged 38, 32 and 28). They were threatening suicide if their demands were not met. The father had been a junior officer in the plant but had died in 1994, since when S had been petitioning for a compassionate appointment. BSP deemed him ineligible, however, as his father's death had been a 'proven case' of suicide and current rules preclude an appointment in such circumstances.[23] The family claimed that he was murdered. At the time of his death there had been five daughters, but two had died in the interim—one allegedly by her own hand, though this again they denied. The other three had remained unmarried. S's explanation is that they were 'too poor' and had been waiting for him to be employed. Reading the accounts of subsequent events, one is forced to wonder about the psychological consequences of being the only son, the prince, in a large family of girls. The immediate catalyst for the tragedy that unfolded in April 2011 was that BSP had at last resolved to take firm action to evict them from the company quarter that they had continued to occupy since the father's death, despite numerous notices to quit. They cut its water and electricity supply. S summoned the media and displayed a can of

[22] Amongst the former, see for example, *Dainik Bhaskar* and *Deshbandhu* for 13 April 2011. Amongst the latter, see for example, http://www.indianexpress.com/news/Driven-to-desperation-Bhilai-family-commits-suicide/775123 . Accessed on 5 May 2011; http://articles.timesofindia.indiatimes.com/2011-04-14/india/29417047_1_ghar-hai-assistant-manager. Accessed on 9 May 2011; http://www.asianage.com/india/mass-suicide-bid-family (accessed on 5 June 2011).

[23] Compassionate appointments had undoubtedly been made in such cases in the past. See, for example, the case of Pradeep, cited in Section V. above.

kerosene and some poison through the grilled windows of the house; a police guard was put on the premises and senior representatives of BSP and the district administration came to negotiate his demand that they be allowed to remain in their quarters, and that he should get a BSP job (or—it was later revealed—be paid ₹5 million in lieu). After four days of self-imposed siege, BSP had agreed to review the case sympathetically and the family had agreed to come out at 11.00 am the next morning. At 9 am, however, the police control room in the local *thana* received a phone call informing them that they had all consumed pesticide. The four women were dead on arrival at hospital and, apparently in mortal danger, S himself was placed in intensive care. A hostile crowd gathered at the hospital, to which a contingent of the Central Industrial Security Force was despatched to keep order. Feelings were already running high. The BSP hospital was also currently treating a young man who had taken poison two days previously in apparent despair at his employment prospects and a hundred industrial trainees were occupying a water tower in protest at not yet having been appointed to regular posts in the plant. The instant reaction of the politicians, from the Chief Minister down to the local MLAs, was to issue hand-wringing statements deploring BSP management's insensitive and inhumane handling of the case and the issue of compassionate appointments. It was not until a day or so later that the tide of public opinion began to turn, when—over S's loud protests that it was simply impossible—it emerged that the doctors had found no trace of poison in his body. The press began to question his role in the deaths of his mother and sisters, and to publish testimony that insinuated that it was he who had provoked his father's suicide. For present purposes, however, what is most germane is that—at least to the time of writing—the police have made no move to charge him with either attempted suicide or abetment, and nor have BSP renewed their demand that he vacate his quarters. Neither has presumably judged that politically expedient.

Police files on suicides are remarkable for the uniformity and blandness of the witness statements they record. Five witnesses with knowledge of the victim are summonsed to testify and almost invariably they speak with one voice. They have of course colluded. With reason people fear that if they admit that there were family rows or neighbourhood disputes, they will provide the police with opportunities for extortion and harassment. The safest story is that the cause was some vague and largely impersonal circumstance, like 'economic difficulties'; and if there were

debts, then at least the money-lenders are better positioned to look after themselves and probably deserve it anyway. The implications of this for the issue of 'farmer suicides' will be obvious. In significant measure, fear of the police produces suicides 'caused' by 'economic problems'. It is not that these do not exist or are unimportant, but rather that in actual cases the motivations are manifold and that it is not just statisticians whose interests are served by reducing them to one. It is also those of ordinary people who want the police off their backs. Where the kin group is solidary that is usually accomplished (and it may even be possible to get the suicide recorded as an 'accident'). Where there is dissension, a case for abetment is quite likely. With profound implications for the sociological theory of suicide, social integration may tell us as much about the conditions for successful concealment as about the conditions under which people kill themselves (see Douglas 1970: 200f).

VII
Conclusion

This article has made three central claims.

The first concerns the much-publicised issue of 'farmer suicide'. Whether it is true that Chhattisgarh has the highest incidence of such cases in the country, there are good grounds for supposing that—at least in certain pockets—the urban suicide rate is as high, if not higher. 'Farmer suicide' is often represented as the problem for public policy, but this is a product of politics.

Second, I have tried to show that in the industrial area around Bhilai the incidence of suicide has risen enormously over the last 20 years and it is the aristocracy of labour that is significantly most susceptible. This, I have argued, is ultimately a product of the liberalisation of the economy and the consequent downsizing of the public sector workforce, which has led to a crisis in the reproduction of class status. Such workers are privileged; think of themselves as different from the informal sector 'labour class' and fear sinking into it. There are two 'critical junctures'—between the ages of 21–35, when young men are desperately trying (and for the most part failing) to find public sector employment; and the period leading up to and immediately following retirement. The system of 'compassionate appointments' has been both a desperate lifeline and a source

of major anxieties; and new values surrounding sex and marriage have put new strains on inter-personal relations.

Given the ambiguity of many deaths, and given the pressures and biases that influence their investigation, there are obvious difficulties in establishing an objective suicide rate. My discussion, however, has been premised on the cautiously 'positivistic' assumption that some guesstimates about the 'true' rate are more true than others, and it is extremely unlikely that the statistical evidence I have presented exaggerates the disparity between the aristocracy of labour and the informal sector 'labour class'.

My analysis has been 'Durkheimian' (1970) in the broad sense of seeing the suicide rate as a product of society, even if beyond that I find Durkheim's (1970) two interpretative parameters of integration and regulation hard to apply. This is first because the distinction between them is so difficult to pin down, and it seems that the real role of the regulation axis in his theory is to provide a fail-safe mechanism that allows him to explain inconvenient facts that fall through the net of his integration hypothesis (Pope 1976). It is second because it is not easy to relate my case material to his classificatory scheme of four types of suicide. Did the Kundara Tola Chhattisgarhi woman who hanged herself in distress at being outcast for contracting a secondary union with an Oriya man suffer from too little 'integration' (as her original act of rebellion would suggest) or too much (as the collective reaction to it, and her remorse and eventual death, might imply)? Was it an 'egoistic' or an 'altruistic' suicide? Were Mangal Das (who could not have an 'English band' at his wedding) and Devnath (who could not build a house as grand as his brother's) suffering from under-regulated desires, or were they *over*-regulated by the expectations of their peer group? Were they victims of 'anomie' or of 'fatalism'? It is third because significant aspects of my data contradict both the theory of integration and the theory of regulation. According to the first, the BSP labour force should be protected by living in larger households and by being members of more stable and solidary work groups than informal sector workers. In reality, they are more likely to take their own lives. Long distance migrants from other states are less integrated into dense local kinship networks than Chhattisgarhis, but there is no discernible difference in their suicide rate. According to the theory of regulation, the rate should decline, as divorce and separation get more difficult. In fact, amongst BSP workers, it has escalated as the stability

of marriage has increased. What seems more relevant to my data than either of these parameters are the stresses and strains of class mobility and reproduction—though that was a dimension to which Durkheim's analysis paid little attention.

My third major claim has been that the official statistics are systematically inflected by fear of the law, which encourages both concealment and the deliberate obfuscation of likely motives. In most cases, the probable 'causes' of suicide are multiple; but the national statistics require that the police assign one. Fear of their harassment ensures that the 'default' position of witnesses is that the deceased was driven to despair by some impersonal circumstance, like 'economic difficulties'. The aggregate national statistics on the 'causes' of suicide are therefore particularly suspect and the suggestion that 'farmer suicides' are a simple function of economic distress must be treated with caution. The law and the police also increase—by some unknowable order of magnitude—the 'lethal probability' of suicide attempts; and I have further suggested that they—rather than deep-rooted Hindu cultural ideas and symbols—are the most immediately relevant context for understanding why such a high proportion of female suicides die by burning.

Indeed, though some of the ethnographic material presented in this article is no doubt only understandable in terms of a specific cultural logic, what strikes me more forcibly is how much of it is familiar from studies of suicide in other parts of the world. I should frankly acknowledge, however, that my discussion has left many loose ends and there is doubtless much more that needs to be said on the cultural construction of risk, on the sparseness of psychological exegesis and on much else besides. But the unanswered question that bothers me most is, 'why suicide?' Given their political emasculation, which I have discussed in some detail elsewhere (Parry 2009), it is not I think hard to explain why the predicament of the aristocracy of labour does not find expression in organised political action. What is less obvious is why many more people respond to it by killing themselves and not others.

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