

## Research Article

# Sociocultural Context of Suicidal Behaviour in the Sundarban Region of India

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The role of mental illness in nonfatal deliberate self-harm (DSH) is controversial, especially in Asian countries. This prospective study examined the role of psychiatric disorders, underlying social and situational problems, and triggers of DSH in a sample of 89 patients hospitalised in primary care hospitals of the Sundarban Delta, India. Data were collected by using a specially designed DSH register, Explanatory Model Interview Catalogue (EMIC), and clinical interviews. Psychiatric diagnosis was made following the DSM-IV guidelines. The majority of subjects were young females (74.2%) and married (65.2%). Most of them (69.7%) were uncertain about their "intention to die," and pesticide poisoning was the commonest method (95.3%). Significant male-female differences were found with respect to education level, occupation, and venue of the DSH attempt. Typical stressors were conflict with spouse, guardians, or in-laws, extramarital affairs, chronic physical illness, and failed love affairs. The major depressive disorder (34.6%) was the commonest psychiatric diagnosis followed by adjustment disorder (6.7%); however 60.7% of the cases had no psychiatric illness. Stressful life situations coupled with easy access to lethal pesticides stood as the risk factor. The sociocultural dynamics behind suicidal behaviour and community-specific social stressors merit detailed assessment and timely psychosocial intervention. These findings will be helpful to design community-based mental health clinical services and community action in the region.

## 1. Introduction

Presently both fatal and nonfatal deliberate self-harm (DSH) are major public health concerns globally. Fatal DSH (i.e., suicidal death) accounted for more than 900,000 lives lost in 1995 [1]. The rate of non-fatal DSH is 10 times more than fatal DSH [2]. In India, the suicide rate is approximately 11.6 per 100,000 populations [3]. Research has revealed that young age, female sex, low educational level [4], being married [5], and housewife status [6] are potential risk factors for both fatal and non-fatal DSH. Several studies also document psychiatric illness, especially major depression, as associated with DSH behaviour [7, 8]. However, the relationship between suicidal behaviour and designated psychiatric illnesses is a matter of great controversy. Unlike some western

studies [9–11] in which psychiatric and personality disorders are referred to as predominant DSH antecedents, some Indian urban studies [12, 13] have pointed out that many people who come to clinical attention after DSH do not have any designated Axis I (DSM-IV) psychiatric disorder; rather they are stressed by psychosocial factors like adjustment problems or social and situational factors. Few recent western and other studies also highlighted the fact that mental health factors are "not the sole indicators of risk of self-harm" [14, 15]; on the contrary, the life events and psychosocial factors [16] play a significant role in DSH behaviours. Detailed psychiatric assessment of self-harm patients is always difficult, and especially so at the primary care level. There is no convincing data available till date to comment on the relation of designated

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