

## Tibetan Self Immolation And Suicide -Two Sides Of The Same Coin



### Sociology

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### ABSTRACT

*Like a suicidal attack, an act of self-immolation involves an individual intentionally*

*killing himself or herself (or at least gambling with death) on behalf of a collective cause. According to Dur-*

*kheim suicide results from over integration and excessive regulation between individual and society. Altruistic suicide is that form of suicide where there is over integration of the individual with his social group and strong community-bound consciousness which propels one to sacrifice for the benefit of others and this is one of the major reason for self immolation to take place not only in Tibet but in other regions of the world inhabited by Tibetan refugees. Fatalistic suicide refers to excessive regulation, when the futures is pitilessly blocked and passions violently choked by oppressive discipline. This is clearly depicted among the Tibetan prisoners who are excessively regulated by the Chinese authorities.*

### Introduction

**“To express will by burning oneself ,therefore ,is not to commit an act of destruction but to perform an act of construction ,that is to suffer and to die for the sake of one’s people”- TichNat,Han.**

Like a suicidal attack, an act of self-immolation involves an individual intentionally killing himself or herself (or at least gambling with death) on behalf of a collective cause. Unlike a suicidal attack, an act of self-immolation is not intended to cause physical harm to anyone else or to inflict material damage.

The suicidal attack is an extraordinary weapon of war whereas self-immolation is an extreme form of protest on consciousness to human rights and suffering (biggs) .This can be observed among the Tibetans not only in Tibet but all over the world . However, there is a relation between Durkheim work on suicide and the rationale behind the self-immolations by the Tibetan people .

*Suicide*, written by French sociologist Emile Durkheim in 1897, was a groundbreaking book in the field of sociology. He explored that suicide rates were higher among men than women, those who are single than those who are married, people without children than people with children, soldiers than civilians, and at times of peace than in times of war. Durkheim was the first to argue that the causes of suicide were to be found in social factors and not individual personalities. Observing that the rate of suicide varied with time and place, Durkheim looked for causes linked to these factors other than emotional stress. He looked at the degree to which people feel integrated into the structure of society and their social surroundings as social factors producing suicide and argued that suicide rates are affected by the different social contexts in which they emerge (Durkheim, 1952; morgan, 1985). He defined Suicide as “*all cases of deaths resulting directly or indirectly from the positive or negative acts of the victim itself who knows the result they produce*”. He classified suicide into four types egoistic , altruistic , fatalistic and anomic suicide. Out of them the major focus would be on suicide that results from over integration and excessive regulation between individual and society, that is altruistic and fatalistic suicide (morgan, 1985).Integration refers to the strength of attachment and regulation refers to the degree of external constraint on people.

**Altruistic suicide** is that form of suicide where there is over integration of the individual with his social group and strong community-bound consciousness which propels one to sacrifice for the benefit of others. These individuals strongly identify with goals, beliefs and are highly integrated into the norms and customs of a society (morgan, 1985) . In the Tibetan case, it is seen that a significant proportion of the Tibetan people espe-

cially the monks are institutionally integrated via their religious scriptures and practices into a code of beliefs, religious freedom being the principal one and this is one of the major reason for such immolation to take place. It is their strong identity as a Tibetan and slogan of “Free Tibet for Tibetans” which provides greater scope for integration within themselves against the Chinese people .In spite of the great stress on nonviolence by the spiritual leader his holiness the Dalai lama amongst his Buddhist practitioners altruistic suicides seem to be emerging as an alternative strategy to fight for their cause thereby creating world awareness.

The Tibetans’ desperate actions not only have caught the world’s attention, but rightly have led to the global condemnation of China’s policies in Tibet from the international community, including the United Nations, the European Parliament and U.S. On numerous occasions the U.N. human-rights commissioner has acknowledged the human-rights violations toward Tibetans seeking to exercise ‘fundamental human rights of freedom of expression, association and religion (bureau).Self-immolations by fire among Tibetans in contemporary times started in the exile community in 1998 and in Tibet in 2009. In 1998, Thupten Ngodrup, a sixty year old ex-Buddhist monk from Tashi lhunpo monastery (Central Tibet) and ex-soldier (in exile), set himself on fire in Delhi (India). He was about to participate in a hunger strike unto death organized by the Tibetan Youth Congress as he said in an interview, “to give his life to bring about peace and fulfillment to his unhappy people”. But before his turn came, while the six hunger strikers were on the 49th day of their movement, the Indian police began their forced removal on April 27, prevented from fasting unto death, Thupten Ngodrup self-immolated (Buffettrille, dec 2012).

The self-immolation of a young Tibetan monk from Kirti Monastery in Sichuan Province on 27 February 2009 marked the beginning of a new form of protest against the severe repression imposed by the People’s Republic of China (PRC) on the people of Tibet. Between 16 March 2011 and 20 April 2012, the self-immolation of 34 more people, most of whom died, has revealed the degree of tension that prevails in the region (tibet). Altruistic suicide is taking one’s own life for the sake of cause with a feeling that it is their duty to do so. “**Beloved children of the white snow / Sons and daughters of the land of the snows / Great sons of the snow-mountains / Do not forget that you are Tibetan!**” Last written words by Sangay Dolma, who self-immolated on November 26 ,2012. (Translated by Lama Jabb).

**Fatalistic suicide** refers to excessive regulation, when the futures is pitilessly blocked and passions violently choked by oppressive discipline .It occurs in overly oppressive societies, causing people to prefer to die than to carry on living within their

society (wik). One such example is the prison where such kind of suicides take place. This is clearly depicted among the Tibetans who are excessively regulated and choked by oppressive discipline by the Chinese authorities. Despite China's tight control over the media and information coming out of Tibet, data received from reliable inside sources makes it clear that human rights abuses in Tibet are widespread. Such abuses include not only the severe repression of any form of protest, arbitrary arrests and torture in detention, but also violations of freedom of religion, belief and association. Tibetans in Tibet are prevented from freely practicing Buddhism. Monks are regularly threatened and put under pressure. Young Tibetans are forced to seek authorization to become monks from central authorities and their overall number is regulated by the imposition of quotas and the issuance of permits and restrictions. The Tibetan identity is further oppressed by sophisticated techniques such as the use of 'patriotic education' sessions. These correspond to a set of systematic interrogation and thought influencing techniques (such as publicly reciting political literature) to make subjects denounce the exiled Tibetan leader the Dalai Lama as a 'separatist', and demonstrate the allegiance of the Tibetan people to the Chinese government and to Gyaincañ Norbu, the government-picked 11th Panchen Lama (Rights).

Testimony by a Tibetan in exile-Like many Tibetans, Tenzin experienced the close supervision of the monastery and witnessed a whole group of fellow nuns being beaten up and detained for months just to punish the monastery as a whole for celebrating the Dalai Lama being awarded the Nobel Peace Prize in 1989. Tenzin and several young nuns yelled "Long life to the Dalai Lama" and "Free Tibet" were arrested and taken to a detention center. Tenzin was held at the Goutsa Detention Center for four months after which she was tried. She then spent 12 years in Drapchi Prison. She suffered numerous hardships, both physical and mental. All political prisoners were frequently interrogated, beaten and even tortured. Psychologically abusive techniques were used such as false liberation, non-authorization to see family members on visit days (even as the family waited outside the prison doors), constant surveillance by both common law prisoners and warders, and a number of other tactics that left political prisoners in a constant state of fear and tension, never knowing when they would be summoned, searched, or interrogated (Rights). Drapchi prison in Tibet serves as an example where excessive regulation is exercised by the Chinese against the Tibetan prisoners and Durkheim clearly states that excessive regulation bound to result in fatalistic suicide. Like other minority groups in China, Tibetans feel their culture, language and way of life are marginalized by an authoritarian government dominated by Han Chinese. Government policies include the large-scale settlement of Han Chinese in local communities, heavy restrictions on freedom of movement and the forced relocation of nomadic communities from their grasslands to small towns, where they are cut off from their traditional ways of life.

As a result, thousands of Tibetans each year flee their homeland due to the repressive atmosphere that prevails there. They risk their lives to cross to Nepal or India (tshering c.).

An anonymous letter written by an exiled Tibetan from Ngaba and released by the International Campaign for Tibet stated that over 100 monks and other locals have disappeared, and that the immolations were a response to the repressive conditions. "In short, the occurrence of suicide as protest in Ngaba is because many people there cannot see how to go on living," the letter said. "To have to relinquish our ethnic-national identity and culture is to relinquish the point of living for Tibetans, so the present repressive and punitive policies are literally tearing out the hearts of the Ngaba people" (organisation).

### Conclusion

Altruistic suicide results when there is over integration of the individuals with the society, this can be observed in the self immolation by Tibetans to preserve their culture, tradition, strong identity as a Tibetan and slogan of "Free Tibet for Tibetans" which provide greater scope for integration within themselves against the Chinese. Fatalistic suicide is bound to take place due to the excessive regulation which can be seen in the oppressive rule by Chinese against the Tibetans. The prisons in Tibet such as Drapchi serve as a good example. Thus suicides and self immolations by Tibetan can be right fully seen as two sides of the same coin demonstrating the plight of the Tibetan people and serving as a medium to create world awareness.

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