

Understanding Suicide in India

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Understanding Suicide in India: Statistics, Law, and the Way Forward

Context

The Supreme Court recently acquitted a bank manager accused of abetting the suicide of a man who allegedly ended his life after failing to repay loans. This verdict brings attention to the complexities of handling suicide cases in India, particularly the legal and societal implications of abetment charges.

The issue of suicide remains a significant public health concern in India, with increasing cases each year. Understanding its drivers, legal interpretations, and preventive measures is essential for a balanced perspective.

Understanding Suicide

Definition

According to the **National Crime Records Bureau (NCRB)**, suicide is a **personal tragedy** that prematurely ends a person's life. It has a **profound ripple effect**, impacting families, friends, and communities.

Key Statistics

- **NCRB Data (2022):**
 - 1.71 lakh people died by suicide in India in 2022.
 - Suicide rate: **12.4 per 1,00,000**, the highest recorded since 1967.
- **State-wise Vulnerability:**
 - NCRB's 2021 data shows Maharashtra reported the **highest number of student suicides**, followed by Madhya Pradesh and Tamil Nadu.
- **Global Perspective:**
 - A **Lancet study** reveals that India has one of the **highest suicide rates globally**, with a significant number of adult suicides occurring between ages **15 and 29**.

Key Drivers of Suicide

The following factors are commonly associated with suicides in India:

1. **Poverty and debt**
2. **Domestic violence**

3. **Substance addiction**
 4. **Social isolation**
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Abetment of Suicide in Criminal Law

What is Abetment?

Abetment is defined under **Section 107 of the Indian Penal Code (IPC)** and **Section 45 of the Bharatiya Nyaya Sanhita (BNS), 2023**. A person is said to abet an act if they:

1. **Instigate** someone to commit the act,
2. **Conspire** with others for the act, or
3. **Intentionally aid** the act through actions or omissions.

Proving Abetment

To establish abetment of suicide under **Section 306 IPC (or Section 108 BNS)**, the following must be proven:

- There must be **direct and substantial evidence** showing the accused instigated or aided the suicide.
- Courts require proof of **specific intent** or **active participation** that led to the act.

Punishment

If convicted, the punishment for abetment of suicide includes:

- **Imprisonment up to 10 years**
- **A fine**

Conviction Rate

- **17.5% conviction rate** for abetment of suicide cases in 2022.
 - Overall conviction rate for all IPC crimes: **69.8%**.
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Ingredients for an Abetment to Suicide Charge

1. **Higher Bar for Proof in Official Relationships**
 - Example: Employer-employee or creditor-debtor relationships.
2. **Requirement of Direct Evidence**
 - In *M. Mohan v The State (2011)*, the Supreme Court held that abetment involves:
 - An **active or direct act** leading to suicide.
 - Intentional actions pushing the deceased into a **no-alternative situation**.
 - In *Ude Singh v State of Haryana (2019)*, the Court emphasized the need for:
 - **Direct or indirect acts** of incitement.
 - **Continuous conduct** creating a perception of no escape.

Supreme Court's Recent Observations

- **Guidance to Investigating Agencies:**
 - Agencies must ensure charges under **Section 306 IPC** are applied responsibly and not abused.
- **Balanced Approach:**
 - Genuine cases meeting the threshold for abetment must be prosecuted.
 - However, **casual remarks or informal exchanges** should not be misused to justify abetment charges.

Landmark Case (October 2024)

The Supreme Court quashed a case where a salesperson died by suicide following alleged harassment by senior officers over a voluntary retirement scheme. The Court found no evidence of **direct instigation or intent**.

The Way Forward

Recommendations

1. **Adopt a Whole-Government Approach**
 - Suicide prevention efforts should address **socio-economic risks** alongside **mental health interventions**.
 2. **Focus on Early Intervention and Stigma Reduction**
 - Create a supportive environment to prioritize **early detection** of distress and reduce stigma around mental health.
 3. **Implement Comprehensive Policies**
 - Expand on the **National Suicide Prevention Strategy (2022)** to integrate community-based support systems and raise public awareness.
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Conclusion

The Supreme Court's recent judgments emphasize the importance of a nuanced approach to suicide and its abetment. By addressing both the legal and social dimensions, India can work toward reducing suicide rates and creating a safer, more supportive environment for vulnerable individuals. A balanced framework, coupled with robust preventive strategies, is essential to tackling this pressing issue effectively.