# RECALLING THE SUICIDE: Affective Storytelling and the Ethics of "Good" Womanhood

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Each year, more than 20,000 married women commit suicide in India[1] (Mayer 2016).[2] This is a statistical anomaly—a 2018 *Lancet* study found that more than a third of women who die by suicide globally are Indian, the majority of whom are married (India State-Level Disease Burden Initiative Suicide Collaborators 2018; Mayer 2016). Yet this phenomenon remains largely unknown, circulating in incomplete and fragmentary stories told by neighbors, friends, and relatives. Such stories are not just accounts of women's suicides; they are also sites imbued with the potentiality to critique the status quo by questioning the sociocultural norms, assumptions, and practices that undergird everyday life (Parry 2012; Staples and Widger 2012; Chua 2014). In examining how three married middle-class women recount the suicides of their female neighbors, this article demonstrates that such accounts are not neutral retellings but constitute ethical and political commentaries on how certain ways of living are valued, as well as on whose suffering is legible. These accounts are extracted from a larger set of ethnographic interactions with middle-class married women, their families, and suicide-prevention professionals in the National Capital Region (NCR) between 2018 and 2022. The ethnography overlapped with the 2019 general election campaign and its aftermath, which saw the ruling Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP) sweep back into power with an increased majority and a renewed mandate

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for Hindutva, the right-wing political ideology that conflates Indian identity with Hindu identity (Roy 2021).[3]

This renewed push toward Hindutva had reverberations in how the middle class understands and performs gender relations. The middle class in India has a hegemonic presence, shaping aspirations, norms, and values beyond those who self-identify as middle-class (Baviskar and Ray 2011; Upadhya 2011; Gooptu 2013). Middle-class discourses center the family in women's lives and judge their "worthiness" through their commitment to the family (Donner and De Neve 2011; Radhakrishnan 2011). This worthiness is measured by how well middle-class women balance traditional (Indian/spiritual) and modern (Western/material) ways of living (Donner 2008; Srivastava 2014). Increasingly, as Hindutva discourses dominate the mainstream, the purportedly traditional pole of this binary is being reframed as linked to Hindu identity, placing the onus of performing good Hindu womanhood on middle-class women (Gupta 2002). In this environment, the binary of Hindu traditions and Western influences does not just categorize women's life choices and experiences but it is the metric through which women's bodies, behaviors, and movements are judged.

Notably, this performance of gender-based middle-class identity dismisses caste as an outdated relic of traditional Indian social life (Jodhka 2015). Middle-class membership hinges on a modern meritocracy: a supposedly casteless identity enables members to claim middle-class status while erasing caste-based advantage. The rise of Hindutva has exacerbated the silence around caste; the Rashtriya Swayamsevak Sangh (RSS), the BJP's ideological wing, repeatedly calls on all Hindus to unite against the non-Hindu other, muting caste-specific experiences in favor of a monolithic understanding of Hinduism (Waghmore 2021).

Caste is thus elusive, rarely mentioned in suicide stories, but forming a crucial backdrop to them. Women's suicides are framed as primarily the products of modern pressures (Mayer 2016; Chua 2014).[4] Yet caste prejudice drives choices about whom people work and socialize with, how they live, and who receives their empathy (Jodhka 2015). In conversations among self-identified Hindu middle-class women, they often invoked "communities"—a nexus of regional and sub-caste identities, when discussing gender norms. Thus, when articulating a "life worth living," my narrators' storytelling choices reflect an ethic at least partially derived from their caste-based identity.

By examining the emotions, sentiments, and sensations in suicide stories, this article uncovers how women engage with and critique prevailing narratives around what constitutes worthwhile lives. Implicit within suicide tales is the difficult fact that the dead woman at the center of these stories decided that her life was not worth living. Narrators must channel the social discord emitting from this decision to end life through their affective storytelling choices.[5] As

such, *how* the women tell these suicide stories articulates an ethical response that does not rest on abstract principles of right and wrong but is developed and performed through storytelling (Das 2012, 140; Das 2010; Lambek 2010). In such an understanding, the emotions and experiences underscored by these narrators in their stories demonstrate how they continuously engage in everyday ethics, feeling, voicing, and negotiating among fragmentary, competing frames of value and worth (Das 2010).

The stories here were recounted to me privately, accompanied by fieldwork trappings of oral consent, institutional guarantees of anonymity, and follow-up conversations. They therefore starkly differed from public moral assessments or social gossip (Spacks 1985). Instead, these stories constituted vulnerable, intimate spaces where women recalled and reflected on the death of someone like them. Each retelling of the story unfolded new affective, subjective, and material dimensions (Chawla 2014). While ethnographically rich, the act of pinning these stories to paper is reductive, freezing something perpetually evolving. As a result, the context of these stories proves as important as their content. To foreground storytelling as the object of my ethnographic inquiry, I place these stories in dialogue—not only with each other but also with the narrators' biographies. In the process, I uncover how women understand and comment on the ethical frames through which they are valued.

The three women I have selected are not representative of Indian women or the Indian middle class's views on gender. Rather, they illustrate the range of storytelling styles I encountered. This article begins by discussing a specific type of suicide story—a non-emotional, matter-of-fact retelling, through an examination of Kanchan's story of her neighbor's suicide.[6] At the time of my fieldwork, Kanchan was a new mother in her early thirties. Next, I examine Shruti's empathetic retellings of her neighbor's death. Shruti was in her early forties and had two teenage children. Finally, I consider Anita's storytelling; she refused to categorize the ambiguous death she recounted as suicide. Anita was in her fifties, in an inter-caste marriage, and has a son in his twenties. I conclude by weaving together these stories to explore how, through an affective ethics, these women articulate a life worth living and respond to emerging norms around ideal Hindu womanhood.

## TRUNCATED EMOTIONS AND THE NON-EMPATHETIC SUICIDE TALE

During my fieldwork, I would hear descriptions of suicides that were short, vague sentences. People would make statements like, "She walked into the lake"; "She jumped in a well"; "She was upset and—." When I would inquire why the person committed suicide, the storyteller would shrug and say that they did not know, or they speculated that there was, in their words, "something wrong with

the family background" or their "mental capacity." These reasons, the dearth of details, and the apparent lack of emotion around the death rarefied the suicide and boxed it in the category of the exceptional, the strange, and the rare, thereby allowing it to remain unknown and irrelevant to normal life.

The silencing of women's voices in recounting their suffering has an entrenched record in Indian history (Das 2006; Menon and Bhasin 1998; Rao 2010; Roy 2012; Spivak 1988).[7] Two discourses on Hinduism and womanhood particularly, valorize women's suffering while rendering them silent and passive victims. One promotes the idea that the woman's place is in home; the other portrays women as vulnerable and in need of protection. While these discourses are contested, they still circulate, shaping gender relations. By situating the "pure" and "self-sacrificing" woman within the home, women's suffering becomes integral to conceptualizations of Hindu womanhood (Sarkar 2001). This discourse hides women's suffering within the private sphere and depicts them as passive, submissive victims, socially subordinate to other family members. It reinforces the discourse of Hindu women as vulnerable and in need of (male) protection, women safe only within the home and under their relatives' oversight. Undergirding this understanding of passive, vulnerable womanhood is a rhetoric that derides women's intelligence, portraying them as governed by unruly desires. Hindutva proponents of Love Jihad, an Islamophobic conspiracy theory that alleges Hindu women are being seduced and converted by Muslim men as part of a wider demographic "war" against India, have "portrayed women as 'foolish,' easily 'lured,' and 'brainwashed'" (Gupta 2016, 296). The perceived need to safeguard Hindu women's virtue justifies Hindutva's aggressive chauvinism and leads to the redefining of patriotic identity as that of a "good" Hindu man acting as protector (Gupta 2016; Srivastava 2015; Anand 2007; Banerjee 2005).

These two discourses—women belonging in the home and being inherently vulnerable—work in tandem to instrumentalize gendered suffering while dismissing women's lived experiences. Recognizing women's own narratives of privatized suffering would effectively destabilize the moral foundations of patriarchal value systems like Hindutva. So, when women's suffering becomes public, as with suicide, pressure exists to domesticate the trauma, relegating it to the private sphere and attributing it to individual, exceptional family circumstances (Chua 2014; Roy 2012). Women's suicides are inherently political deaths, and in sharing these stories, my narrators suggest that the experiences, aspirations, and desires of Hindu women beyond the family are excluded from Hindutva's narrow view of women as mothers, wives, and daughters. It appears unsurprising, then, that, as in other cultures, women's suicides in India are considered "bad" deaths, stigmatized to contain the challenge they pose to the moral authority of patriarchal social norms (Andriolo 1998).

The truncated suicide stories I heard delegitimize both the suffering experienced by the woman and the woman herself. By refusing to acknowledge any but the most basic facts, the narrator of such stories bypasses the task of imbuing the dead woman with motivations, emotions, and socially recognizable experiences of suffering. Kanchan's story of her neighbor's suicide attempts to be such a matter-of-fact suicide narrative, yet she slips in her retelling and, rather than suppressing the affective undercurrents of her story, becomes emotional. Her retelling shows that far from being an exceptional but irrelevant act, the suicide disturbed her, and she had to limit its potential to destabilize the narratives around social worth to which she ascribes.

When I first met Kanchan, she had been married for just over a year and had a newborn daughter. Her marriage was fraught; Kanchan had not wanted to marry, and she earned significantly more than her husband, who expected her to quit her job once their child was born. Her decision to pursue a career led to her husband accusing her of privileging her work over family, a common allegation levied at women who work outside the home (Twamley 2014; Radhakrishnan 2011; Bhandari 2020). Kanchan never mentioned her caste identity but would implicitly invoke it—emphasizing that she and her husband belonged to the "same community," sharing caste-based values, including those around women working outside the home. By insisting on working, Kanchan felt that she was defying both her husband's wishes and her community's view of ideal womanhood. Yet Kanchan hoped that her job would cement the family's rise to middle-class status, and she would light up when discussing the "good life" she wanted for her daughter. Her definition of this good life went beyond material achievements to desiring a life where her daughter was acknowledged and respected for her own *pehchaan*, or identity. Kanchan's aspirations both justified her continued work outside the home and infused her life as a working mother with meaning and value.

Kanchan has herself lived through a story of upward mobility. She was born in a former resettlement colony gentrified during her childhood. These planned neighborhoods house the evicted residents of razed unauthorized slums (Bhan 2013). They are often poverty traps, with residents having little opportunities for mobility, especially as they lack the right to sell or rent their land, and contend with patchy civic services and limited transportation. While Kanchan lived in this neighborhood, the rapidly expanding city enveloped it, increasing property prices as landowners informally rented, sold, and rebuilt their houses. This gentrification benefited her family, since her father worked in the building trade. Nonetheless, Kanchan and her natal family struggled with economic insecurity, leading to a disrupted childhood, during which she juggled school and taking

care of her siblings. Kanchan persisted with her education, becoming the first in her family to earn a degree.

Kanchan's childhood neighborhood comprised a series of thin apartment buildings, four or five stories high, separated by narrow alleyways that could accommodate a motorcycle, but not a car. Her story is set in this neighborhood. Her neighbor, a married woman, set herself on fire and ran out to the balcony crying for help. The neighbors were unable to rescue her; the lanes too narrow for fire trucks and the multi-story buildings too difficult to navigate in time. Instead, they were helpless bystanders, watching as the trapped woman burned to death.

Initially, Kanchan gave a brief description, merely saying that her neighbor set herself on fire. For most of her narrative, she stuck to the material facts of the suicide, focusing on the mechanics of it—where it happened, what type of oil was used, and even the woman's identity as South Indian, setting her apart from her North Indian neighbors. By reciting these material facts, she highlighted the particulars of the suicide, thereby distancing herself from it—almost literally, as she never mentioned whether she witnessed the woman's death. Nonetheless, Kanchan was sure of the woman's motives and of her emotional state—proclaiming that she attempted suicide because of her marriage and that she "did it out of anger." She emphasized that the death was through self-immolation, a means of suicide disproportionately used by Indian women. While self-immolation is read as an act of protest in mainstream media, for women in India it is associated with marital disputes and dowry deaths (Bhate-Deosthali and Lingam 2016). In her neighbor's case, Kanchan describes the death occurring because of "husband-wife *ke beech mein baath thi*, or "a matter between the husband and the wife." This phrasing enshrouds the woman's motivations within the intimacy of marriage. By rendering it unknowable and private, Kanchan invokes the narrative of the hidden, suffering woman at home, and separates herself, as a working woman, from her neighbor.

In Kanchan's story, the driving emotion emerges as the woman's anger, which she believes triggered the suicide. By highlighting this emotion, her story portrays the death as unintentional, thereby denying the neighbor agency. Instead, in her anger, the woman loses control, unable to realize the consequences of her actions until it is too late. At the same time, no one is else to blame for her death: the husband remains absent, there is no mention of children or other family members, and the neighbors appear helpless. The lack of a culpable perpetrator means the suicide emerges as a random, unfortunate occurrence, effectively limiting its scope to critique the social sphere.

Nonetheless, this fragment of a story haunts Kanchan and her family—she recalls her father bringing up "this incident" just days before sharing it with me.[8]

In Kanchan's retelling, the other primary emotion is fear. In it, the woman is afraid of what she has done when she sets herself on fire, and Kanchan describes her set alight, at the balcony, calling for help. Yet the woman transforms from a subject of fear into its object; she terrifies Kanchan, who conflates the vileness of her death with the figure of the woman herself. Kanchan became visibly upset as we spoke, particularly when I asked about the woman's life beyond her death. In the end, she cut our conversation short by declaring, "I don't know . . . I didn't want to know," a phrasing that demonstrates her need to leave the woman in obscurity. The fact that the woman so visibly suffered no longer elicits compassion or pity; instead, her burning body transforms her into something from which Kanchan must look away.

As Judith Butler (2004) argues, the death of a dehumanized other has little or no implications for society to wrestle with, allowing it to be shunted aside and moved on from. In this case, by reducing the woman to a frightening existence, Kanchan is neither able to mourn her nor consider the validity of her suffering. This lack of mourning means that Kanchan does not give the woman the status of a passive victim; she comes across as foolish and out of control at best, and at her worst, as a character out of a tale of horror: a monstrous, terrifying woman. Hence, the story has neither an easily identifiable perpetrator nor a grievable victim. Instead, the horror of the suicide itself becomes a barrier to communication that Kanchan cannot cross, even when she recounts it to me, years later. The suicide affects her, but rather than scaling this affect to morally critique the social sphere, it alienates Kanchan.

Yet there still exists, implicitly, a moral response in this story. Given her fraught marriage, we can easily understand Kanchan's reluctance to examine the suicide too closely. However, after she had told me the story, she turned to her own marriage as a topic. She explained that her decision to stay in her job, despite her husband's disapproval, was not just to provide a better life for her daughter. She declared that the work benefited her mental health, as it brought her peace to have something beyond the home. In highlighting the importance of work to her, Kanchan subverted the cultural norm that values women through the lens of family and home. In doing so, is Kanchan articulating an alternative narrative of a worthwhile life? If, in her story, the woman's reasons for setting herself on fire are based on a private and inaccessible marriage, then Kanchan, through her insistence on working outside the home, may be signaling that by living a more public life she can ward off the circumstances that caused the woman to take such a drastic step. Yet Kanchan does not frame it as such, and she hesitated to revisit the story in our subsequent conversations. Instead, the suicide story lingers as a half-remembered, fear-filled fragment from her childhood, full of unknowables that she cannot confront or mourn.

## SUBVERTING NARRATIVES IN THE EMPATHETIC SUICIDE STORY

If Kanchan showed reluctance to tell her suicide story, Shruti eagerly spoke about her neighbor's suicide, revisiting the story several times. Through her storytelling, Shruti demonstrated that the affective conditions around her neighbor's suicide are intimately familiar to middle-class women like her, and that the possibility of suicide appears all too understandable.

More than a decade after her unnamed neighbor's death, Shruti, her husband, and their two teenage children still live in the apartment directly below her neighbor's. Shruti and her husband are first-generation, upper-caste migrants from Bihar, but her caste has no local equivalent in Delhi. Regional biases against Biharis, who tend to be dismissed as lower class, mean that Shruti feels like an outsider in Delhi. A self-declared progressive, Shruti was one of the few women I met willing to explicitly discuss caste. Shruti lives in an upper-class neighborhood, home to politicians and celebrities and near elite malls and private schools. However, the section where Shruti resides consists of comparatively smaller two-bedroom apartments. Shruti viscerally experiences being middle-class, sandwiched between her wealthier neighbors with their lavish lifestyles and the impoverished settlements that supply their domestic labor. Her immediate neighbors include public-sector employees, like Shruti's neighbor, or middle-class, salaried professionals like herself. The neighbor and Shruti had shared a stairwell in their apartment complex, with interactions initially limited to greetings. This changed once the neighbor became pregnant, and they bonded over their children.

Shruti's narrative of her neighbor's suicide focuses on the events that led to it, rather than the actual incident. The neighbor was in a live-in relationship with a lower-caste man. Although this raised eyebrows in their neighborhood, Shruti admired the neighbor for "knowing what she wanted" and for her professional success. The couple married, and his mother and sister moved in. From this point, Shruti heard fights from their apartment. She speculated that the husband and his family colluded against the neighbor, violently trying to reduce her to the dutiful wife serving the marital family instead of supporting her career. The neighbor threw out the husband and his family, but they returned when she found out she was pregnant. From here the narrative takes an emotional turn—the neighbor loved her newborn daughter ferociously, telling Shruti that she "would not let one tear fall from her eye." When the neighbor committed suicide a few months later, it felt sudden, unexpected, and devastating.

Veena Das (2007, 77) reflects that the "poisonous knowledge" left in the wake of a violent event such as a suicide is dealt through "the patient work of living with this new knowledge—*really knowing* not just by intellect but through the passions." The work of "recovering the everyday" in the aftermath of suffering involves engaging with and shaping a future where the violence that prompted

this suffering is either sealed off or acknowledged and recognized within larger social narratives (Das et al. 2001, 5). In Kanchan's case, she was reluctant to gain this knowledge around her neighbor's self-immolation, refusing to engage too closely with the suicide and choosing a narrative that allowed her to distance herself from it. This suicide remains an individuated event, with little to no context grounding it. For Shruti, though, the "passions" guide her retellings of her neighbor's death. Her stories delve into, to borrow Das's (2007) word, the affective "tentacles" of the suicide, examining how they reach out to her, common strands of shared affects that bind the two women despite their disparate situations. Shruti empathizes with the neighbor, exploring her affective state and using it to comment on women's experiences in general.

In Shruti's retellings of her neighbor's suicide, the line between narrator and actor blurred. She did not simply recount the story; she embodied it, glaring to reflect her neighbor's anger and choking up when conveying her sadness. *Rasa-bhava*, the predominant storytelling method in Bollywood and Hindi dramas, explains Shruti's highly affective storytelling. It aims not just to convey events but to evoke empathy, transporting the audience into the emotional reality of the narrative (Hogan 2003; Jones 2010; Chakravorty 2009). Shruti made the caveat for her stories that she could not know what happened, just that she woke to the news of her neighbor's death. This unknowability renders questions of agency and intentionality irrelevant; instead, the focus is on the affective and ethical implications of the death. The ethical impulse is clear: Shruti rails against exploitative gender relations that, in her view, sap the worth out of the lives of Indian women and make suicide a temptation that "all women struggle with."

Shruti's understanding of the neighbor's feelings is based on conjecture, and she draws on her own affective experiences to find parallels between herself and her neighbor. She empathizes with the neighbor through the *saas-bahu* (mother-in-law versus daughter-in-law) trope. In this trope, the warring mother-in-law and daughter-in-law fight for the attention and affection of the son/husband. The woman the son/husband favors gains status, while the woman he ignores suffers, risking humiliation, neglect, abandonment, and, in the daughter-in-law's case, violence, murder, and suicide. *Saas-bahu*, thus, evokes a broader cultural understanding of women's subordinate and precarious roles within the marital family.

In Shruti's story, the *saas-bahu* trope is not just a fight between two women for a man's attention but an issue of an older, poorer, lower-caste mother-in-law imposing outdated patriarchal norms on the younger, educated, high-caste daughter-in-law. Like her neighbor, Shruti has a mother-in-law who is less educated, conservative, and hails from a small town. In both cases, Shruti blames the mother-in-law for failing to "adjust" to her daughter-in-law's lifestyle.

Adjusting constitutes a form of lateral agency, involving "making do" and reproducing the status quo by avoiding clashes between family members (Berlant 2011; Dyson 2017). Among affines, the daughter-in-law's ability to adjust signals her dutifulness and willingness to adopt the marital family's values (Dyson 2017; Twamley 2014; Uberoi and Singh 2006; Donner 2008). It marks a moral act demonstrating that the daughter-in-law is a reliable member of the marital family rather than a suspicious interloper. In this case, however, Shruti upends the question of who must adjust. She insists that the mother-in-law should adjust to her better-off daughter-in-law's way of living. In doing so, Shruti argues that gender norms that put the onus of adjusting on the daughter-in-law are regressive. Moreover, by implying that both her own and her neighbor's mothers-in-law have inferior ethics, Shruti suggests that they are not truly members of the urban middle class (Säävälä 2006, 2010).

Unlike her neighbor, Shruti feels emboldened to resist her mother-in-law because her husband supports and shares her views on gender relations. Shruti's marriage, while it has the social approval of an arranged marriage, is, in practice, a companionate relationship founded on fairness, "emotional closeness," and aimed at "individual fulfilment and satisfaction" (Wardlow and Hirsch 2006, 4). Yet Shruti's mother-in-law invokes a separate set of cultural norms that frame romantic love as inferior and consider the wife an outsider, tolerated on the basis of her usefulness to the family (Mody 2008). Shruti cycles through being appalled, offended, and defeated when she recounts her mother-in-law's visits. She extends this affective understanding to her neighbor, believing that the devaluing affects she herself struggles to adjust to would have been exacerbated in her neighbor's case, since her mother-in-law resided with her and her husband offered no support. By identifying this difference, Shruti distances herself from her neighbor, even as she continues to empathize with her.

Shruti reserves her angriest attacks for the neighbor's natal family. She faults them for disowning the neighbor because she crossed caste lines. Instead, she argues that had they been supportive, their daughter may have divorced her husband rather than commit suicide. By focusing on the natal family, Shruti's narrative differs from typical deployments of the *saas-bahu* trope, where, apart from the husband and mother-in-law, other family members remain absent or peripheral. This focus demonstrates that Shruti doubts the neighbor could be an autonomous, agentive, "strong" individual who seeks to fulfill her desires without the supportive scaffolding of family, whether marital or natal, around her.

For all that Shruti admired her neighbor, she did not depict her suicide as heroic. Instead, the pathos in Shruti's story stems from the fact that she considers the neighbor's suicide a tragedy, one that morally implicates patriarchal

practices such as *saas-bahu* relationships. She depicts the self-inflicted death as an act of destructive agency, which, ultimately, does not shift the patriarchal power hierarchies that devalued the neighbor. By cultivating empathy for the neighbor's experiences, Shruti creates an alternative narrative, one that instead of dictating the roles women play in families, asks the moral question: "How do families fail women?"

Such a question resonates with a broader debate among the women I met. This debate centers around whether *samskaar* is out of date, particularly when it comes to gender. *Samskaar* or *sanskar* has multiple, context-dependent meanings that revolve around the idea of perfecting or marking the transition from one life stage to another (McGregor 1993, 970). Women would use *samskaar* in our discussions on motherhood and child-rearing. I found the use of *samskaar*—a formal Sanskrit term—at odds with my otherwise informal and slang-filled Hinglish conversations. I asked narrators to define *samskaar*, and was told that it referred to the norms, morals, and values they were trying to nurture in their families.

In their promotion of monolithic Hinduism, the RSS has articulated a patriarchal and upper-caste *samskaar* (Waghmore 2021), invoking it around socially reproductive life rituals such as marriage, education, and child-rearing (Waghmore 2021; Sur 2018). For instance, *garbha sanskar* describes a series of medical and religious practices, derived from interpretations of Hindu scriptures, aimed at upper-caste pregnant women. Ostensibly, these practices create a "perfect child" and a disciplined Hindu citizen capable of resisting the temptations of the "West" (Sur 2018). It reflects Hindutva's shift from viewing women primarily as subservient daughters-in-law or submissive wives to explicitly glorifying women as mothers who inculcate purportedly Hindu values (Gupta 2002). *Samskaar* specifically champions sacrifice, perpetuating the belief that family needs supersede individual (particularly female) desires.

Through her story, Shruti directly challenges *samskaar*, arguing that it fails to fully account for women's autonomy or success. She calls for a new social ethics around how families conduct themselves, one that explicitly recognizes women as equals and worthy of care. In doing so, she frames traditional gender relations, which position women as subservient to the family, as derived from an immoral, inferior, and outmoded *samskaar*. Instead, the *samskaar* Shruti embraces in her story is based on an ethics where the neighbor's qualities ("strong," "intelligent," and "good at her job") are superior to her "illiterate" mother-in-law and "less intelligent" husband.

In this social ethics, worth is indexed to merit, an understanding of value that, as Carol Upadhya (2007) notes, reproduces class and caste privilege, especially as Shruti favorably contrasts the upper-caste woman to her lower-caste

marital family. Ironically, in practice, meritocracy proves exclusionary; institutions that signal merit (like the Indian Institutes of Technology) disproportionately favor upper-caste Hindu men and uphold patriarchal and caste hierarchies (Subramanian 2019; Henry and Ferry 2017). Women remain mostly excluded from meritocracy, with their achievements outside the family underplayed. Thus, even though Shruti rejects the patriarchal and caste expectations inherent in the dominant understanding of *samskaar*, her embrace of meritocracy does not entirely free her from these hierarchies.

Instead, Shruti articulates a compromise underpinned with caste privilege even while it strives for greater equality for women. She does not advocate for the emergence of a modern, liberal, individual female self that finds worth through her participation in meritocratic, capitalist life. Indeed, her storytelling suggests she remains skeptical of the individual's ability to flourish in a hostile family environment regardless of external successes. Her disappointment with gender relations stems from the refusal to recognize women as core to the family. This centering of women undercuts the dominant frame of understanding women's efforts to gain autonomy through binaries such as the individual versus society, modern secular versus traditional Hindu, or Western versus Indian. Instead, Shruti's storytelling suggests that she wants families themselves to change, evolving from pure social reproduction to not individual fulfilment, but more egalitarian intra-familial relations. This conceptualization shifts the ethical burden onto the family, away from the woman forced to navigate contradictory binaries. Moreover, her storytelling rejects Hindutva's valuing of women through their ability to serve and nurture the family, suggesting instead that women need more to find life worth living.

## RECOUNTING THE AMBIVALENT DEATH AND THE MASKING OF SUFFERING

Kanchan and Shruti have similar views on gender, *samskaar*, and the need for society to recognize and accommodate women's affects, achievements, and desires. Anita, however, insists that modern life has emboldened women to "take advantage of" marital families, leading to divorces and broken homes. She shows little sympathy for women, labeling them "spoilt" and prone to manipulating a system predisposed to favor them as victims. Such criticism echoes the Men's Rights Movement's (MRM) discourse on "greedy" daughters-in-law destabilizing families through the rhetoric of feminist empowerment and the prosecution of gendered crimes such as domestic violence and dowry deaths (Lodhia 2014, 2009).

Anita and her husband, Rakesh, have an inter-caste love marriage.[9] The couple follows traditional gender roles: he provides, working as a lawyer, while she, a self-declared housewife, offers free astrological advice. Five years ago, they were among the first residents of their newly built West Delhi gated community. Since then, many residents have moved in and out, renting apartments in Anita's building, and this constant turnover means her immediate surroundings lack close neighborhood-level ties. However, for most of her marriage, Anita lived in her father-in-law's joint family home in an older, more affluent West Delhi neighborhood. Like her current neighborhood, it was originally a resettlement site for Punjabi refugees after the Partition in 1947. Anita and her husband's family were newer first-generation Punjabi migrants, and they did not share the same traumatic history of Partition.

Of the three women discussed, Anita is the wealthiest, due to her husband's inheritance from his late father, whereas Kanchan and Shruti primarily rely on their own and their partners' salaries. Despite her relative wealth, Anita feels economically insecure. After her father-in-law's death, his house was sold, and the proceeds divided with Rakesh's siblings. This led to a dip in their fortunes, forcing them to downsize and move into their comparatively smaller, current home. Although the new home's values have risen, the increase has been lower than expected, in part because of their distance from the Delhi metro. Anita is nostalgic for a past where she had status, could entertain lavishly, and "dress well."

This rapidly changing material context—from joint family to a nuclear home, from dense kin networks to an isolated gated community, from social prestige to relative anonymity—informs Anita's moral world and her storytelling. Anita believed that women did not commit suicide, arguing that female suicides were murders, miscategorized as suicides. I asked her if she had come across any such murders, and she told me about the following incident:

> Yes. Ten to fifteen years ago. A few houses down our street there was a couple. They had a big wedding, with lots of functions. Both families were very rich. We all liked the girl very much—she was very popular in the neighborhood.
>
> Anyway, one and a half months later, there were a lot of police cars on our street . . . the girl had committed suicide. Later we found out the boy had killed her in their car. He had taken her body and hanged it to make it look like suicide. . . . They must have got into a fight or something . . . he had hit her, and she died immediately. So, they tried to make it look like a suicide.

> The media made a huge fuss. They were covering it all the time. The reporters found broken *chura* [bangles worn in the first year of marriage] in the car and said that since she was five feet five inches, she was too tall to be hanged.
>
> The boy's family had to sell the house and leave the neighborhood. They had to give a lot of money to the girl's family, and they gave one crore [10 million] rupees to the police. It completely ruined their lives. But these suicides, they are normally murders only.

As with Kanchan, Anita's narration focuses on the concrete, highlighting the elaborate wedding arrangements, the physical signs of the police and media presence, and the "hard evidence" of broken *chura* and the dead woman's height. She narrates the story as if building a legal case, lining up material facts to reveal her understanding of the woman's death—that it was a murder, illustrating her argument that women's murders are disguised as suicides. Yet in the media and court records,[10] the woman's death remains unclear. Initially, the media reported it as a murder, but the interim court called it a suicide by hanging. The final judgment dismissed a case of dowry death against her husband and in-laws while classifying her death as "unnatural," a description that encompasses murder, suicide, or accidental death.

Anita's focus on the facts means that her story's subjects fail to emerge as fully fledged characters, particularly as she does not empathize with them. This holds especially true for the woman; despite Anita's insistence that "we all liked her," she reveals nothing of her relationship with her, leaving the listener with a vague impression of popularity. The woman emerges as little more than a cipher; although the narrative revolves around her, it is as a dead body. In contrast, by insisting that the woman's death was a murder, Anita treats the man as an agent, focusing on how he killed his wife and his subsequent actions. She neither excuses nor condemns his apparent killing of the woman. Instead, by referring to the couple as "girl" and "boy," she effectively infantilizes both, undercutting any intentionality in their actions and trivializing a serious act.

However, Anita seems affected when discussing the social status of the husband's family. In the aftermath of the death, the bribes paid to the police and the girl's family leave the marital family "ruined." Accompanying this downturn in the family's fortune are Anita's regret and dismay, a reaction that contrasts sharply with her lack of mourning for the woman. Instead, her sympathy for the man's family reinforces her broader moral argument: as rapidly changing social norms empower daughters-in-law and seek recompense for their suffering, the marital family's wealth, social status, and well-being become endangered.

This selective muting of emotions constitutes an act of domestic citizenship, allowing Anita to frame the marital family as the victims of an intrusive state and to minimize their culpability in the woman's death (Das and Addlakha 2001). In doing so, she suggests that female suffering and the state's attempts to redress it destabilize the institutional validity of the family and hamper the quest to live the "good life" of intact, multi-generational familial ties. She stressed that women must emotionally discipline themselves, casting aside what she calls "the ego" and working for the greater familial good. As an example of this, Anita shared how angry she felt when she found that her brother had neglected their mother in her old age. Yet Anita insisted that "there is no point in fighting" with him and explained how she did the "difficult" work of putting aside her emotions to continue her relationship with him. When I pointed out the injustice of this approach, she explained that it was "not her role" to punish him. Moreover, she pointed out that it would hardly have made her mother happy to have her children fighting over her. Such emotional discipline and selective silencing of suffering is an everyday ethical routine, prioritizing the intact family over individual suffering and reproducing a moral order that privileges the family over the individual (Lambek 2010).

Similarly, her storytelling choices also constitute everyday acts of ethical prioritization. They are formulated to remove any consideration of the woman's point of view. She discards not only the dead woman but also her natal family (who pursued legal action against her husband and in-laws). Nor does she reveal if the woman was working to consider whether this might have allowed her to find value beyond the family. In her retelling, the man and his family are the sole earners, using their money to get around the state through bribery. The woman, in contrast, is depicted as powerless and fragile (dying from one hit), and any form of agency by her or her birth family is rejected. Yet it is unclear whether Anita could dismiss the woman's suffering if her story concerned a suicide.

Anita's refusal to consider suicide underscores its power to confuse accepted cultural narratives. By fusing supposed culprit and victim, the suicide story demonstrates that women can both suffer and have agency (Münster and Broz 2015; Staples and Widger 2012). The possibility of suicide raises the question: Is the good life of familial wealth and status all that good for the women involved? This question attacks the morality of traditional gender relations by demonstrating that women suffer for the acts of social reproduction demanded of them. Thus, by insisting that the woman was murdered, Anita preserves the binary between victim and culprit. Her storytelling is not a neutral recounting, but effectively upholds the patriarchal order by erasing female suffering. In doing so, Anita neatly sidesteps the question of whether this purportedly good life is actually worth living.

**AN AFFECTIVE ETHICS?**

The affective storytelling choices of these three women shape how they invoke cultural narratives around gender relations, engage in the ethical work of detecting the human, and categorize death itself. Both Kanchan and Shruti are haunted by the suicides they recounted, albeit in different ways. While Kanchan struggled to limit the impact of her suicide story by deliberately muting the affects within it, she recognized that the woman's suicide was based on a reality that might parallel her own. Her lack of knowledge about the details of the suicide simultaneously shielded her from its horror while trapping her in uncertainty about the woman's motivations. In juxtaposing this suicide with her lived experience, an incipient moral response emerges that questions how women's lives are valued through their family ties.

By contrast, Shruti engages closely with the affects around her neighbor's suicide and can, through a highly empathetic retelling, demonstrate that these affects do not make for isolated experiences. She demonstrates how various familial ties (her neighbor's husband, affines, and the absence of natal family support) all enmesh the neighbor into a situation where, to Shruti at least, suicide is an understandable option. Unlike Anita's forensic interrogation of her neighbor's death, Shruti does not identify a specific crime, but a social situation of suffering, with no single culprit but a series of family-based failures. In doing so, Shruti exposes and directly indicts the patriarchal structures that enable and perpetuate these failures. Thus, through affective storytelling, her narration of the neighbor's suicide becomes both a call to action and an ethical argument: if the affective circumstances around her neighbor's death are recognizable to other women, then a change is needed. For Shruti, this constitutes not just a feminist stance but an ethical and political critique of the gender relations promoted by Hindutva.

Anita's suicide story, instead, examines how women's suffering makes men vulnerable. This framing inherently assumes women as victims, a trope used to justify draconian and arbitrary norms limiting women's movements to supposedly protect them from men and their own sexual autonomy (Gupta 2016, 2011; Kapur 2012). Anita advocates that women cultivate disciplined emotional selves, managing their affect so as not to disturb family relations. Her storytelling reflects this philosophy; by refusing to attach affect to the woman's suffering, Anita effectively normalizes and dispenses with her suffering. We can read her focus on the marital family as an act of ethical claim-making, which marginalizes women by positioning the intact family as the primary moral concern—not the suffering woman. The act of suicide is incompatible with this understanding of women's worth, because it forces onlookers to see the woman as directly agentive,

working to resist social norms rather than adjusting to them. Thus, ignoring women's suicides is not merely overlooking gendered suffering—it also dismisses a specific form of gendered agency and resistance.

The two moral responses toward women's deaths in Shruti's and Anita's narratives stand in opposition: one calls for the greater recognition of women's presence, achievements, and opinions within the family, while the other advocates for restricting and marginalizing this presence. Yet both respond to the gender ideologies promoted by Hindutva. They posit two different conceptions of who should be recognized and prioritized in ethical negotiations over the good life: the woman or the family? In doing so, they demonstrate that measuring middle-class women by their success in pursuing a modern, globalized "good life" while being rooted in traditional cultural norms and values reinforces patriarchal norms, rather than capturing how women themselves define worthwhile lives. Moreover, the ambivalence in Kanchan's story demonstrates that when caught in this binary, the burden of determining, acting on, and asserting the ethicality of one's behavior is on the woman, rather than on those around her.

The selective use of emotions, sentiments, and sensations in suicide stories thus not only links them to broader cultural narratives around gender and married life but also destabilizes them, by positing alternatives that reorient, confuse, and muddy the prevailing social ethics around gender. Such confusion nevertheless proves productive: it enables women to partake in Hindutva's narratives around gender, but simultaneously also to stand apart and critique them. In examining how these suicide stories are told, this article shows that women do not uncritically consume Hindutva ideas of good womanhood or a good life, but instead wrestle with, subvert, and reassert these narratives in their stories.

**ABSTRACT**

*Drawing on ethnographic research conducted in Delhi, this article examines middle-class married women's stories about the suicides of their female neighbors. Paying attention to "what moves" women emotionally and "what matters" to them in recounting their stories of life and willful death, these stories are ethical commentaries on what constitutes "good" womanhood, specifically "Hindu" womanhood. Anthropological scholarship in South Asia has established that supposedly good womanhood hinges on how successful middle-class women are in pursuing a modern, globalized "good life" while being rooted in traditional, predominantly Hindu, cultural norms and values. This analysis of suicide storytelling demonstrates that women are not passive subjects of this binary; instead, they actively adjudicate the ethical validity of mainstream constructs of good Hindu womanhood, in the process questioning middle-class understandings of what constitutes a life worth living and whose suffering matters. Such ethical questioning allows the narrators to make political claims for recognition*

*and rights while performing a subtle critique of the prevailing gender politics within Modi's India.* [gender; suicide; India; affect; ethics]

## NOTES

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1. Most stories note that the woman's death was ambiguous. Legally, the Indian state has categorized these deaths as suicides, recording them as such in national statistics. Yet for those left behind, these deaths remain amorphous, shifting constantly between the categories of suicide, murder, or accidental death. Nonetheless, I default to calling these *suicide* stories since the narrators actively confront suicide, or the willful nature of these deaths, in their stories, even if they ultimately reject this categorization.
2. The National Crime Records Bureau (NCRB) Accidental Deaths and Suicides reports are available at https://www.data.gov.in/dataset-group-name/Accidental%20Deaths%20and%20Suicides
3. This ethnography overlapped with the COVID-19 pandemic. However, most of the fieldwork was conducted before the pandemic and substantive follow-up interviews occurred after lockdowns were lifted in 2022. As such, the pandemic does not feature as a focus of this research, though the number of female suicides did increase during it (Singh et al. 2024)
4. The literature on dowry deaths—a legal category encompassing both the murders and suicides of women harassed by marital families for dowry—illustrates that these deaths cut across caste boundaries. Scholars link them to the material demands of modernity rather than any specific caste-based tradition (Babu and Babu 2011; Self and Grabowski 2009).
5. I understand *affect* as a category encompassing emotions, sentiments, and sensations, as well as an orientation toward and focus on "what *moves* and what *matters*" to interlocutors (Lutz 2017, 182).
6. All names are pseudonyms.
7. This article owes much to Gayatri Spivak's "Can the Subaltern Speak," not only in its focus on ambiguous deaths—be they sati or suicide—but also in its interrogation of who is permitted to speak and how subaltern voices are mediated. Here, the subaltern is multifaceted and never fully visible or heard; it includes the silent dead woman, the narrators, and even the selective presence of emotions in the recounting. These suicide stories reveal an affective space in which women navigate the ethical tensions between modern imperatives (such as market-driven merit, individual ambition, and consumer citizenship) and the traditional demands of familial duty and religiosity. This negotiation grows even more complex in the post-2019 context, as the emerging authoritarianism of Hindutva constrains the possibilities of gendered voices, agency, and resistance.
8. Kanchan's storytelling choices are likely influenced by her father's narrative of the suicide, but the extent of this influence remains unclear.
9. Like Kanchan, Anita did not explicitly mention her caste identity; instead, she alluded to it by noting that her community's cuisine differed from her husband's.
10. I do not cite these records, as they mention the victim's name and address, which could lead to the identification of Anita.

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