



Death wish

Chandigarh rattled by a spate of suicides

By VIJAYA PUSHKARNA

Chandigarh's newfound status as the best city to live in could be a popular myth. Every other day, there is a seminar or symposium where social workers, psychologists, bureaucrats, police officers, politicians and others discuss a disturbing kink in the city: suicides.

April was the cruellest month with 26 suicides in the city of eight lakh people; 20 of them were in their teens. Since New Year, 60 people have killed themselves. "Suicides are not a new phenomenon. But what we see now is more and more children taking their lives," says Dr Savita Malhotra, head of the department of psychiatry at the Post Graduate Institute of Medical Education and Research (PGIMER) in Chandigarh.

The suicides revealed no economic

or gender skew, and most people hanged themselves in their bedrooms by tying a nylon rope to the ceiling fan. The few suicide notes that were found blamed no one for the drastic decision.

Perhaps, they were under stress, with board exam results and entrance tests for professional courses coming up. On April 26, Nidhi, 15, hanged herself in her house in sector 44. A couple of days later, Deepika, a 22-year-old MBA student in the same area, put the noose around her neck. Surabhi, a tenth standard student, ended her life at her sector 38 home.

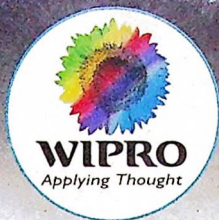
Satija, 11, of Dadua village on the outskirts of Chandigarh, set herself ablaze apparently for a simple reason. She was afraid that her mother, coming back from work, would pull her up for not attending to her two-year-old sibling who had strayed out of the house.



"Children don't know how to cope with stress. They know how to fight and succeed, to go after education that will get them power," says Malhotra. "But they are not being taught to face life as it comes." Relatives are bewildered by the deaths, like the parents of Neera, 18, a bright and cheerful girl who immolated herself three days after she joined the college of her choice.

Suicides in Chandigarh have been making news for a year now. Last.

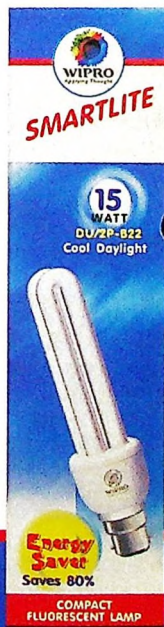
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Agony of the living

Preeti Sharma left for the temple after serving breakfast to her 14-year-old daughter, Surabhi. When she returned 25 minutes later, she found her daughter hanging from the ceiling fan. "It haunts me day and night," says Preeti, who is shifting to another house. "I cannot live under this roof anymore."

What could have gone through Surabhi's mind in those few minutes? None can know for sure. Preeti believes it is a *shakti* (power) that forces children to do such things. "I cannot figure it out," she says, wiping her tears now, and showing Surabhi's notebook and fondly touching a handbag she had bought a day before she killed herself.

Preeti does not think the *shakti* is television or pressure of school work. Surabhi never saw anything other than Punjabi folk and Indipop on TV, and her mother says she never put pressure on her daughter to study. "Of course, she used to struggle with mathematics and so I sent her for tuition. I would occasionally say, 'If you can remember every step of a dance on TV, why not your maths'. And I took her to the Post Graduate Institute of Medical Education and Research, where she was being treated for

epilepsy," says Preeti.

Surabhi said or did nothing that gave her mother any idea of something being wrong. The only time she talked of death was when Columbia crashed killing Indian-born astronaut Kalpana Chawla. "That's the way everyone should die. Doing oneself and one's country proud," she had said. Surabhi's uncle, Om Prakash, remembers that whenever she read reports of kids taking their lives she would remark that they were crazy.

Surabhi loved life. Being an epileptic, she had written the telephone numbers of her family members in the first page of her tuition notebooks, anticipating emergencies. The middle-class neighbourhood, too, was like home to her.

Is nurture to blame? Preeti is sure that she could not have given her more attention. "I wish I knew what parents could do to prevent such things. We should give children good values, education. We did, but I don't know why. She was not unhappy with anything," says Preeti, wondering how her daughter got the courage to kill herself when she was afraid of even a minor bruise on her body. "She was scared to even cross the road when there were speeding vehicles."

Preeti Sharma (showing her daughter's notebook) wonders why 14-year-old Surabhi hanged herself. She believes it is a *shakti* that forces children to do such things.

August, Abhinav Nayyar, a journalist, hanged himself after leaving a note that he was "absolutely distressed" with society that "has become corrupt". If that was existentialist angst, the next day, a 33-year-old mother of two, who was a doctor of the Government Medical College Hospital, took her life for reasons unknown. The same week, two more in Panchkula decided to end it all: businessman Mukesh Kumar, 25, and a homemaker, Sulochana, 44.

Experts, who often attribute suicides to depression and stress, blame the media for the spurt in the number of cases. According to them, when youngsters see reports of suicides with photographs displayed prominently, they start thinking that it is an easy way out. "Why put the news on the front page?" asks Malhotra. "Many youngsters learn the methods from newspapers."

Her suggestion: "End every story with a message. Write how it could

have been avoided if parents or teachers had been vigilant. Ask people to share their feelings." According to her, the younger the person committing suicide, the greater the culpability of the society and the family.

Parents in their growing anxiety are discouraging their teenage children from reading the news of suicides. They fear the impact it might have on their psyche.

Many institutions in the city have



Photos/PRAMOD PUSHKARNA



'DON'T JUST WASH THE LEAVES CLEAN, BUT NURTURE THE PLANT': Dr Savita Malhotra calls for a systemic change

Helping hand

A survey by the department of psychiatry at the Post Graduate Institute of Medical Education and Research (PGIMER), Chandigarh, among 963 schoolchildren showed that 6.33 per cent of them had psychiatric disorders. The study, from 1992 to 95, was led by Dr Savita Malhotra and Dr Adarsh Kohli.

Another study carried out in

decided to set up helplines in view of the rise in suicides. "But that is not the total solution," says Malhotra. "Parents and teachers have to be taught to prevent circumstances that lead to suicide. What we need is a systemic change. Not just wash the leaves clean, but nurture the plant."

The PGIMER, which has proposed a crisis intervention centre, wants its school mental health programme (see box) to be taken more seriously. It envisages the formation of a school

1998-2002 assessed children of the earlier study and used community-based intervention models. The citywide School Mental Health Programme is a result of the active interaction of the team with school teachers in Chandigarh during the study.

Following is the outline of the programme.

■ Open forums with children, parents and teachers on difficulties of behaviour, emotions, adjustment and

performance.

■ Question-answer sessions with committee members who are trained to identify children with problems.

■ Regular follow-up involving families.

Based on the visits to schools every fortnight for six months, the PGIMER team has prepared a manual for teachers and parents to impart mental health and life skills training to kids.

mental health committee with teachers, parents, school doctor or counsellor and student representatives on it. The idea is to impart skills to identify and manage emotional problems of students.

Parents now bring their children to the institute when they start showing symptoms of deep emotional upheavals like depression, disturbance or anxiety. Even a headache can be the last recourse of the mind when it is unable to cope. "Parents should be

aware that children, like adults, have problems, given the fact that life is a lot more stressful than it was 20 years ago," sums up Malhotra.

Baffled by the 'whys' of suicides, the Government Medical College Hospital is conducting a study of the families involved. Prof. B.S. Chavan, head of the department of psychiatry here, hopes to find some clue that may have gone unnoticed and the factors that prevented the desperate from seeking help. ■