

Faith or Delusion? Death Investigation of a Bizarre Mass Hanging- A Case Report

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Case report

- A tragic and bizarre case of mass hanging deaths of 11 family members (4 males, 7 females) was reported
- 9 were found hanging from the skylight of their living room.
- 1 from a ventilation outlet in the same living room
- 1, the eldest member was found lying on a mattress on the floor of an adjacent bedroom

S. no	Family Members	labeled	Age in years
1	Mother	A	80
2	Elder son	B	50
3	Younger son	C	42
4	Daughter	D	58
5	Wife of elder son	E	42
6	Wife of younger son	F	38
7	Grand-daughter	G	30
8	Granddaughter	H	24
9	Granddaughter	I	22
10	Grandson	J	12
11	Grandson	K	12

Case report

- Complete hanging: 3 ; Partial hanging: 8
- Plastic stools shared between members
- Strips of neatly cut cloth material strewn
- Blue plastic rope bundle was found on the bed
- House was being renovated for impending wedding of granddaughter

Autopsy findings

Ligature Material	No of cases
Scarf	11
Black telephone wire	10
Knots	multiple and fixed

Autopsy findings	No of cases	Material Used
Blindfolding	5	Cut outs from a fresh white cotton cloth
Masking	7	Adhesive tape
Padding	10	White cotton cloth
Gagging	1	Handkerchief
Cotton plugs in ears	10	

Binding of limbs			
Finding	No of cases	Material used	Position of hands
bound hands	5 (3 M,2 F)	rope, cloth, telephone wire	front: 1 back: 4
free hands	6	blue plastic rope on right wrist	
bound feet	6	cloth, loose figure of 8 fashion (3)	

Autopsy findings

- Knots of bound limbs were complex, multiple and fixed
- Ligature mark: typical of hanging in all the cases
- Asphyxial signs were seen in all cases
- Insignificant minor bruises over upper limbs in 2 cases
- No other fatal injuries appreciated

Crime Scene

- Multiple Registers/Diaries recovered (Entries dated back to 2011)
- Detailed stepwise instructions of a ritual
- Ritual was religious in nature (Hindu)
- For the well being and good fortune of the family.
- Few members assigned specific duties
- Indications of similar practices in the past

Diary notes

- Bizarre hallucination and delusion in the younger son (C).
- Auditory Hallucination: hearing dead father's voices
- 'C' used to assume his father's alter ego
- Instructions about the ritual given by him while assuming his fathers alter ego
- Family believed the dead father was communicating through the younger son

Other investigations

Toxicological report

- Negative in all the cases

Handwriting expert report

- Notes written by wife of younger son (F) and granddaughter (G)

Psychological evaluation of the diary entries

- Psychological evaluation conducted

Opinion:

- Delusion in the younger son
- Shared delusion among family members

Manner of death

Homicidal hanging?

- Disparity in size
- Victim drugged/ drunk
- Injuries/grip bruises/signs of resistance
- All of these were ruled out
- Bound limbs, gagging, masking, blindfolding also seen frequently in suicides

Suicide??

Points in favor

- Hangings are almost always suicidal
- Mass suicides do occur sporadically
- Suicide pacts common
- Bound limbs seen also in suicides

Points against suicide:

- No suicide note
- Diary entries did not show intention to die
- In fact showed intention to live and improve living conditions
- Motive to commit suicide not found

Accidental Hanging

- Points against:
- Accidental hanging usually seen in infants or children
- Not common in adults except Autoerotic hanging
- Mass accidental hangings not reported in literature
- Speculation how death occurred in spite of 6 free hands?
- Was death instantaneous that they could not survive or help each other?

Accidental

Points in favor:

- Absence of intention to die
- Belief of surviving the act
- Evidence of similar ritual with success in the past
- Hanging deaths are instantaneous leaving no time to change mind at the last second.

Was this act FAITH?

- Unmistakable religious background to the act
- The symbolism of the banyan tree formation
- Banyan tree is considered sacred in Hinduism and is a symbol of immortality
- "Havan": a sacred purifying ritual that involves a fire ceremony, offerings to the fire god Agni.
- "Maun vrat": vow of silence

WAS IT DELUSION?

DELUSION: DSM-5:

- Delusions are fixed beliefs that are not amenable to change in light of conflicting evidence.
- Delusions are deemed bizarre if they are clearly implausible and not understandable to same-culture peers and do not derive from ordinary life experiences.
- Their content may include a variety of themes (e.g., persecutory, referential, somatic, grandiose, **RELIGIOUS**)

Religious delusions

- Religious or spiritual content.
- Religious delusions are not caused by excessive religious belief
- Delusions reflects the predominant interests and concerns.
- These may be combined with other delusions, such as grandiose delusions, delusions of control, or delusions of guilt.

Difference between religious beliefs and religious delusions

- Delusion is held without any doubt.
- Religious belief is held with some doubts, or at least an understanding that others could have doubts about what I believe.

“EXTRAORDINARY CONVICTION”

Diagnosing delusion

- Conviction
- Preoccupation
- Extension
- Bizarreness
- Disorganization
- Affective response
- Deviant behavior/Morbid behavior

Shared delusional disorder

- Folie à deux, shared psychosis, or shared delusional
- Delusional belief and hallucinations are transmitted from one individual to another.
- Observed among people who live in close proximity and in close relationships.
- *folie à trois, folie à quatre, folie en famille , folie à plusieurs*
