

# The epidemic of suicide by fire

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On 2 October 1978, Lynette Phillips, a 24 year old Australian heiress, burned herself to death in front of the Palais de Nations in Geneva. She had been arrested in London the previous week and deported after saying that she would kill herself in Parliament Square.

She was a member of the Ananda Marga sect, one of several branches of an organisation led by the seer philosopher, P. R. Sarkar, which claims four million members throughout the world. Sarkar's organisation is called PROUT (Progressive Utilisation Theory), and it maintains that it is seeking to change the world order by non-political means. In its opposition to corruption, PROUT had come into conflict with the Indian administration and Sarkar had been imprisoned. Subsequently, Proutist members were involved in violent protest in Australia (which included bombing) and there were plans to attack the Indian High Commissioner in London. And by the time of Lynette Phillips's death in October, seven other sect members had burned themselves to death.

In a statement prepared by Lynette Phillips and issued by PROUT in Denmark, the reasons for her action were explained. They amounted to a wide-ranging idealistic manifesto. Underlying it was the belief that Proutist ideas could lead to a new social order devoid of exploitation, misery and injustice.

Three days after Lynette Phillips's death, Pamela Evans Cooper, a director of Fortnum and Mason, committed suicide on the banks of the Thames at Windsor in an apparent imitation. She spoke to some anglers before sitting down at the water's edge, pouring petrol over herself and setting herself ablaze. Miss Cooper has been suffering from diabetes and had become depressed at the prognosis of her condition.

Within two weeks, a 34 year old Lancashire woman and a 19 year old London Asian man had died in this painful and often slow way, and by the end of the month there had been ten suicides by fire in England and Wales. In addition English newspapers carried reports of six overseas cases of self-burning: one in India, two in Australia and three in New Zealand.

By 1 October 1979, twelve months after Lynette Phillips's death, there had been 82 deaths by self-burning in England and Wales where a verdict of suicide was found, and several other suspicious deaths where open verdicts had been recorded. In addition, several burns treatment units reported cases of non-fatal suicidal attempts.

A preliminary analysis of 42 cases by Dr Stuart Donnan and myself, which was published in the *British Medical Journal* in Sep-

tember 1979, found that exactly half were male and half female, and that 31 per cent of the men and 40 per cent of the women had a known history of psychiatric disturbance. Ten of the men and twelve of the women had been receiving psychiatric care, mainly for depression, and four of the men had been diagnosed as schizophrenic. In only one of the 36 cases where details were available, was there no history of psychiatric or personality disorder. In none of the cases was there any suggestion that the suicide was intended as a political protest.

Faced with a terrible fashion of this kind, where media exposure is undoubtedly implicated, the responsible reaction can be either to hush it up or to examine the issues critically. I believe that the latter course is the only acceptable one in our society: it could encourage the press to change their reporting of suicides in such a way as to minimise their contagious aspect. This would be likely to happen if suicides were not presented sensationally and, in the case of this method, if it was made clear that far from resulting in instantaneous death, survival can occur, with gross disfigurement.

The earliest available account of a ritualistic self-burning is found in the writings of the Greek, Diodorus Siculus, in the 1st century BC. Diodorus described how the Indian philosopher, Caranus, who had been taken ill, arranged for a pyre to be built for him; when he had ascended it, he ordered attendants to ignite it.

## Widow-burning in India

Probably the best-known example of ritual burning is the Indian practice of suttee. It was established in law that wives, unless they were pregnant or had children, should be cremated along with their deceased husbands. If a woman refused to obey the law, she had to remain a widow for life, and she was debarred from sacrifices and other religious observances as unclean. It seems that widow-burning existed in other cultures before the rise of Hinduism and was practised by a variety of early European and Scandinavian tribes.

Today suicide by burning is a relatively common method among women of African and Asian extraction living in Israel. In a study reported in the *American Journal of Epidemiology* in 1970, almost 80 per cent of such suicides were by fire.

However, until recent times, these kinds of suicide have been an unusual occurrence in modern western countries. Kevin Crosby and his colleagues analysed all the accounts of suicides by burning which appeared in *The Times* of London and in the *New York Times* from 1790 to 1971, and published their findings in the *Inter-*

*national Journal of Social Psychiatry* (1977). In all, 133 cases were reported over this stretch of 181 years. From 1790 to 1962, only 38 cases of self-burning were reported.

### Politically motivated deaths

These occurred sporadically and none of them before 1963 could be described as a political protest. But 71 per cent of the reported cases appeared in the nine years from 1963 to 1972. A large proportion of these appeared to have a political motivation.

The trigger for the contagion appears to have been the dramatic and widely pub-

licised suicide of the 73 year old South Vietnamese Buddhist monk, Thich Quang Duc, on 12 June 1963. Quang Duc had announced his intended action in advance, as a protest against the policies of the Diem regime and a demand for religious tolerance. He allowed himself to be burned to death in the street after being saturated with petrol by a fellow monk. On 5 August a second monk burned himself to death, and on 16 August, a third monk and a Buddhist nun. In all, at least five more Buddhists died this way in South Vietnam in 1963.

*A young Buddhist priest enveloped in flames in Saigon in 1963*

In the ensuing years there have been a number of individual deaths, and also cases which have taken place in apparent clusters.

These have often attracted headlines. In 1964-65, five further Vietnamese monks died, and there were three politically motivated deaths among Americans. Alice Herz, an 82 year old Quaker pacifist set fire to herself as a protest against the arms race all over the world. Norman Morrison, a 32 year old Quaker official died on the steps of Pentagon as a protest on United States involvement in Vietnam. Roger la Porte, a 22 year old member of the Catholic worker movement, set fire to himself in front of the United Nations headquarters in New York for similar reasons.

In January 1969, the Czech student leader, Jan Palach, set himself alight in Wenceslas Square in Prague, in protest against the suppression of press freedom. This was followed by a series of other immolation deaths.

In 1970, a series of ten self-immolations occurred in France following that of a 16 year old in Lille, "to atone for the wrong committed in Biafra, against war, violence and the folly of men." In 1972, the popular Danish author, Karl Eskelund, burned himself to death at the mental hospital where he had been confined as psychotic. Before his death, Eskelund had become very involved with ideas of eastern philosophy, and had undertaken a pilgrimage to India. He had been imprisoned in Denmark for attempting to import marijuana, and he saw his death as a protest at the way society was organised and the way in which he had been treated.

Not all the deaths reported in recent years have been of a political nature. N. C. Andersen and R. Noyes published the details of 14 psychiatrically ill individuals who had attempted suicide by this method (in the *American Journal of Psychiatry* in 1975). Most were psychotic, and many had religious preoccupations. All the individuals involved were thought to have attempted suicide for personal and irrational, rather than for morally idealistic reasons.

### A symbol of violence

A variety of explanations have been proposed for the use of fire in the act of suicide, and its apparent propensity to cause emulation.

It's been suggested that the Buddhist ritual of burning oneself for the purpose of achieving Nirvana, and the oriental tradition of suicide as a means of public protest, may have had a particularly strong influence in the west in recent times. In a paper published in the *Annals of Medical Psychology* in 1969, M. Bourgeois listed as potential factors the increasing oriental influence in the west; the nature of fire as a symbol of violence, aggression and destruction; the violent nature of contemporary civilisation; the seductions of Asiatic mysticism and of sacrificial archetypes; and the role of the mass media in propagating the contagion.

Epidemics of disturbed behaviour seem



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