

## Suicide Pact of A Married Couple: Double Hanging with A Single Ligature

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### Abstract

In suicide pact, two or more victims mutually agree and execute to end their lives together by predetermined method, preferably by hanging, drowning, gunshot, or poisoning. The victims are usually spouses, lovers, or friends, and the reasons behind such steps are various. In this reported suicide pact, a married couple was found hanging in their bedroom with each end of a single chunni (a cloth worn around the neck by Indian women) tied to the ceiling fan above their bed. Their bodies were found hanging in their bedroom by their neighbours. They were facing sudden financial constraints, and could not handle the stress.

**Keywords:** Forensic pathology; Suicide pact; Married couple; Partial hanging; Single ligature.

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### Introduction

A suicide pact is an agreement between two or more persons, who mutually agree to kill themselves

by predetermined methods.<sup>1,2</sup> However, these events are very rare, and amount to less than 1% among all suicides.<sup>3,4</sup> Individuals in suicide pact may be spouses, lovers, or friends: lover pacts seen in Japan; spouse pacts in Florida, USA, and in England; and friend pacts in India.<sup>5</sup> It has been seen that an older, married female of a high social class is more likely to commit suicide in a pact.<sup>6</sup> In the act, one person decides the manner of death, while the other agrees to participate. Methods of suicide are usually less painful and cause immediate death such as by gunshot, hanging, poisoning, jumping from a height and drowning.<sup>7,8</sup> To establish a case of suicide pact, the Forensic Pathologist has to take a multidisciplinary approach with thorough examination of scene of crime and meticulous autopsy examination, including toxicological analysis, to recreate the sequence of events leading to death, thereby determining the cause and manner of death. We report a case of a suicide pact of a married couple, who hanged themselves using a single ligature material.

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### Case Details

The husband had a small business, and had taken substantial loan in the recent past. His business suffered a setback and they could not handle the sudden financial crisis, and decided to end their lives together. Their bodies were discovered in their home by their neighbors, when no response was observed from their house for two days. Both husband and wife were found partially hanging by a single ligature from the ceiling fan located above their bed in the bedroom, (**Image 1**). Post-mortem examination was conducted at a Secondary level Hospital.



**Fig 1:** Couple found hanging partially by a single ligature

#### Case 1

The body of a moderately built 23-year-old male, with body length 157 cm and body weight 65 kg. The body showed early decomposition changes, with bloating of face, external genitalia and abdomen, along with peeling of skin and marbling at different regions of body. A yellow color ligature material (chunni) with a single fixed knot was found around the neck (**Image 2**). The circumference of the loop was 30 cm and length of free end was 15 cm. On removing it, an oblique, non-continuous ligature mark of width ranging from 1.5 cm to 2.5 cm was present over upper  $\frac{1}{3}$  of neck, located just below

angle of left mandible, 5 cm below chin, 2.5 cm below angle of right mandible, 4 cm below tip of right mastoid process, 5 cm below external occipital protuberance and there was a gap of 5 cm on left side of neck below left angle of mandible. The ligature mark was reddish brown in color and showed evidence of parchmentization and drying. Layer dissection of the neck did not reveal any bruising of the neck muscles or fracture of thyro-hyoid complex. All internal body organs were congested with fluidity of blood. No other external injury could be detected on the body. Toxicological blood studies did not reveal any drugs or alcohol. Cause of death was opined as asphyxia as a result of ante-mortem hanging by a ligature.



**Fig. 2:** Ligature mark in neck of male showing decomposition changes

#### Case 2

The body of a moderately built 19 years-old female, with body length 150 cm and body weight 52 kg showing early decomposition changes with peeling of skin and marbling at different regions of body. A yellow color ligature material (chunni) with a single fixed knot was found around the neck, (**Image 3**). The circumference of the loop was 35 cm and length of free end was 12 cm. Face was congested with bluish discoloration of lips and nails. On removing the ligature, a reddish-brown, incomplete ligature mark was noted at the front of the neck above thyroid cartilage, directed upward and backward merging posteriorly with the hairline. On removing it, an oblique, non-continuous ligature mark of width ranging from 1.5 cm to 2.5 cm was present over upper  $\frac{1}{3}$  of neck, located 2 cm below angle of left mandible, 5 cm below chin, 3 cm below angle of right mandible, 4 cm below tip of right mastoid process, 5 cm below external occipital protuberance

and there was a gap of 5 cm on left side of neck below left angle of mandible. The ligature mark was reddish brown in color and showed evidence of parchmentation and drying. Layer dissection of the neck did not show any bruising of neck muscles or fracture of thyro-hyoid complex. There was extravasation of blood Internal examination revealed diffuse congestion of internal organs. Toxicological analysis did not detect any drugs or poison. Cause of death was opined as asphyxia as a result of ante-mortem hanging by a ligature.



Fig 3: Ligature (chunni) in situ on neck of female

## Discussion

A suicide pact is a rare phenomenon in forensic practice, which shows a mutual agreement between two people, who determine to end their life together, usually at the same time and almost always in the same place.<sup>9</sup> Suicide pacts occur due to love and association between the participants, but there may be social or financial reasons as well.<sup>10</sup> The pact is most commonly seen between a married couple, between lovers and also friends.<sup>11</sup> The most common reasons include financial problems, marital discord, health issues and a threat of separation from loved one.<sup>12,13</sup> Very few cases of suicide pacts are reported in literature, as their incidence is quite low. In one instance of a suicide pact, a married couple drowned in a river with bound wrist, and the authors explained that the wrists were bound together so that, simultaneous death and consequent simultaneous recovery after death could be ensured.<sup>14</sup> A homicide-suicide pact and a suicide pact can often be differentiated by the suicide note. In the former, the accused kills

the victim and then takes his/her own life which may be very similar in presentation with the suicide pact.<sup>15</sup> These cases can be differentiated by the presence of a suicide note, which reveals the manner and motive for pact death.

The case presented here is unique as a common ligature was used by the couple to complete the process of hanging, which is cited rarely in literature. Behera *et al.* described a similar case of a married couple who hanged themselves using a single ligature.<sup>16</sup> Single ligature might be used by the couple so that simultaneous death can be ensured. They were depressed due to severe financial constraint, which might have triggered them to take such an extreme step. The decision might be evenly shared by both partners, or the initiative could come from one of them or it may be a result of two independent decisions: these are difficult to resolve in the absence of suicide notes.<sup>17</sup> However, in the present case, as a single ligature was used, most likely the decision to commit suicide was taken together by both partners. As no suicide note was left behind by the couple in this particular case, it cannot be commented who took the decision, while who participated in the suicide pact.

## Conclusion

This case report presents a unique case of suicide pact in which husband-wife duo hanged themselves from the ceiling fan above their bed in bedroom by a single ligature. A state of grief and shock may be experienced due to sudden financial stress, but committing suicide in such situation with a clear conscience and in a simultaneous act is relatively rare.

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