

Sacred Fire Walking - Psychological Issues and Awareness Module in Karnataka

Dr. Vaniprabha G.V^{1*}, Dr. Madhusudhan.S²

ABSTRACT

This longitudinal study was conducted to understand the psychological issues involved in sacred fire walking where despite education, scientific knowledge, these rituals which undoubtedly have grave consequences are still being practiced with a belief that the sins will be punished and they shall lead a happy and prosperous life henceforth. So, a need to develop an awareness module along with psychotherapy in MBCC ward, Victoria hospital, Bengaluru was seen and this study was initialized. Hence for a period of 3 years from 2015 to 2018 in this study 27 patients were taken up of whom 10 succumbed to fire walking and the remaining 17 survivors were administered psychotherapy to make them understand the precautions needed.

Keywords: *Fire walking, Awareness module, Psychotherapy*

Fire worship, is practiced as a rite of purification, healing, initiation and transcendence, it has a long thread in the cultural tapestry of our planet. Many tribal people had, or have, rituals and ceremonies to honour the sacred aspect of fire – honouring its gifts and acknowledging its transformative power. Fire worship and fire walking has nourished and warmed the human spirit since the dawning of humankind. In contemporary society, fire walking has evolved into a powerful tool for self-realization and empowerment.

An ancient practice, fire walking is considered a wonderful example of the mind-body connection at work and a means of demonstrating that we do have control over the process. Fire walking has apparently been practiced for centuries as a religious ritual and as a healing ceremony.

Since pre recorded history, cultures all over the world have practiced the ancient art of fire walking and fire dancing rituals — yet no one seems to know just how old fire walking is or where it began. The earliest known reference to fire walking dates to 1200 B.C. The oldest recorded fire walk was over 4000 years ago in India.

¹ Clinical Psychologist, BMCRI, Victoria Hospital, Bengaluru, India

² Assistant Professor, BMCRI, Victoria Hospital, Bengaluru, India

*[Responding Author](#)

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Romans were exempted from paying taxes if they could demonstrate their ability to walk on fire without burning. Kung Bushmen in Africa used fire dance as a powerful healing ritual for their tribe. Their ceremony not only included fire walking, but also rolling on the fire.

Mind over matter is the psychological issue that makes walking on fire easy among people, however there have been incidents that have been grave and tormenting for people who have not successfully completed the fire walk or rather lost life and had irreparable damage to them. This aspect which at many times become an irreparable loss to the person, family and society at a larger level and a deep concern is expressed towards person's absence at work place can cause an economic loss to the society as well. Hence, this study was initiated to understand the dynamics of scared fire walking and create an awareness module.

Sacred fire walking used as a method to wash away sins; to fulfil vows is rather a superstitious outlook becomes tormenting physically, psychologically and socially when the individual becomes a victim of the fire.

Design of the Study

A longitudinal study considering the case history of 27 firewalkers from 2015 to 2018 who were admitted to MBCC ward under the department of plastic surgery, Victoria hospital, BMCRI, Bengaluru were taken up. Survivors were administered a short questionnaire and a brief psychotherapy session was taken up.

METHODOLOGY

27 patients who were participants of a religious fire walking ceremony admitted to MBCC ward from 2015 to 2018 was taken up of which 2 were female children while others i.e., 25 were male. They were all diagnosed for accidental thermal burns (ATB) and had varied degrees of burns they were treated after hydrotherapy and necessary treatment and dressings. A brief analysis using a short questionnaire was done to understand the need for fire walking o the survivors. They reported that the performance of fire walking is said to ensure a good harvest, other times to purify the participants; a man who is accused of a crime or of uttering an untruth may be asked to undergo the ordeal of fire to prove his innocence, and if he emerges unscathed his innocence is proved. Fire walkers believe that only those who lack faith will suffer from injuries from fire, while the faithful are spared. Most of them undertook fire walking in fulfilment of vows.

A short psychotherapy was initiated to sensitize them regarding fire walking, bio psycho social aspects related factors, future precautions to be considered and grave risk involved in these religious procedures.

An awareness module regarding fire walking and the precautions to be followed was developed for future usage.

RESULTS

In 2015 two female children aged 5 year old and 12 year old were carried by their fathers as a part of the vow they had taken during the child birth to walk the fire ritual and to exvoto it they ran the stretch of about 400 to 500 meters of coal fire to fulfil it and in the process fell into fire and sustained injuries to themselves and the child they were carrying. It was 46% and 29% respectively with facial burns and the children died 6 and 7 days after the incident, the fathers sustained burn injuries to the extent of 20 to 30%.

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In 2016, 1 male patient aged 17 years was admitted with 78% of burns after the annual fire walking ritual of Maramma Devi at Tumkur in MBCC ward and succumbed after 3 days of the accident.

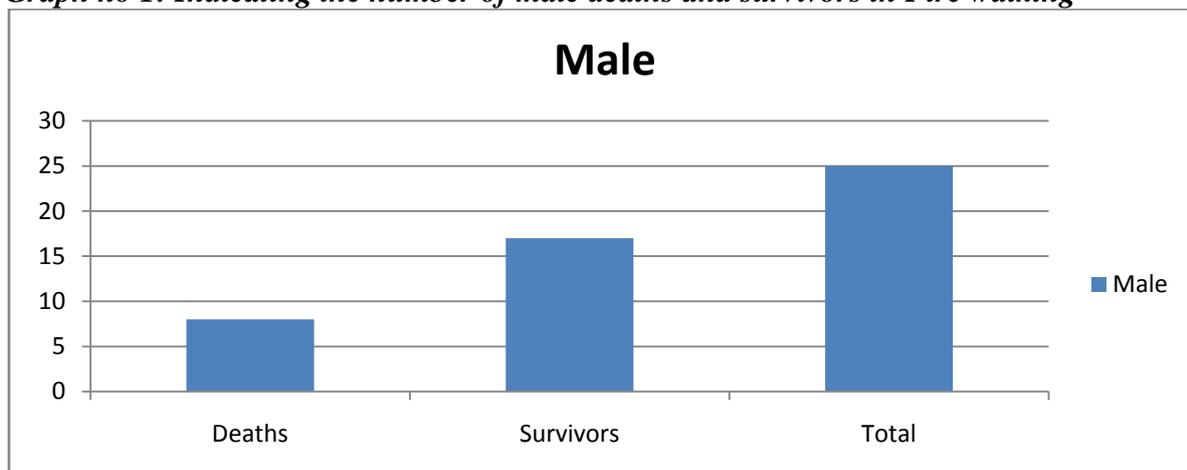
In 2017, 21 male were brought in from Hettenahalli village, 12 kms from Tumkur district after a mass accidental thermal burn injury was reported due to fire walking at the annual Maramma Devi festival celebration they suffered burns after plastic bags thrown in the coal pit got stuck to their feet. The burns injury ranged from 7% to 45 % and the ages of these men ranged from 16 years to 42 years, of these 21 patients 7 succumbed and the remaining 14 were discharged after a brief psychotherapy.

July 2018 another case of 6% accidental thermal burns was treated at MBCC where a 39 year old male was injured after a religious fire walk at Maramma Devi temple at Tumkur. On the whole of the 27 cases, 10 succumbed to their injuries while 17 survived with pain, scars and repeated infections for which a long time treatment is still being carried out.

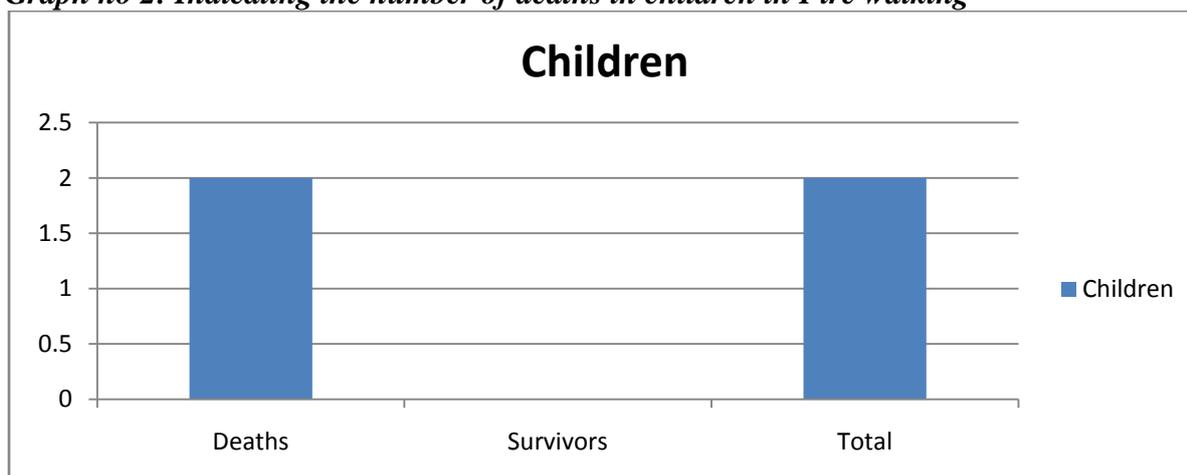
Table no 1: Indicating the number of survivors and deaths in Fire walking

Gender	Deaths	Survivors	Total
Male	8	17	25
Female	-	-	nil
Children	02	-	02

Graph no 1: Indicating the number of male deaths and survivors in Fire walking



Graph no 2: Indicating the number of deaths in children in Fire walking



Patients were sensitized with these precautions for future:

1. Do not apply any oil or lotion 36 hours prior to fire walking.
2. No heavier things to be carried while fire walking.
3. Cotton clothes to be worn.
4. Cold water to be poured on the participants before the event.
5. There should be ample and open place in case of injuries.
6. Plastic and inflammable items to be banned in the surrounding area of the event.
7. An ambulance with medical practitioners and paramedics to be stationed at the fire walking place to cut down further damage.
8. Police personnel to be informed of such events and to require permission from the heads of the districts.

Psychotherapy and Awareness Module

1. The patients were motivated to un follow these rituals as these lead to damage of biological, psychological and social health of the community.
2. No god is pleased with pain that is afflicted to its children.
3. Fire walking is not a method of fulfilling vows.
4. Innocence cannot be proved by fire walking.
5. Those who emerge unscathed need not be pure and those who are hurt are not un faithful.
6. Religious procedures are not to test anybody's physical or psychological strength.

45 minutes session thrice a week for 4 weeks was taken up wherein pain relieving techniques was taught, co morbidities lowered and their self esteem improved during these sessions.

These safety precautions and awareness module was a part of the psychotherapy that was spread to them. An awareness camp regarding fire walking has to be initiated in these areas.

CONCLUSION

Religious fire walking led to a death of 10 people among 27 admissions. Religious or sacred fire walking is restricted in certain areas of Karnataka state like Tumkur, Ramanagara, Kolar etc and these events are often during the months of March, April and May. Hence, a keen observation of these areas and time of the year have to be taken.

Limitations

The study is limited to patients admitted in Victoria Hospital, Bengaluru.

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Conflict of Interest

The authors colorfully declare this paper to bear not conflict of interests

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