Discussion

As we recall the present study was conducted with the aim of exploring the predictive role of stress (risk factor), optimism and social support (protective factor) in suicidal ideation of adolescents. Furthermore, the role of optimism and social support as buffering variables was also assessed. The discussion of the findings is presented in the following paragraphs.

Level and Prevalence of Suicidal Ideation among Adolescents

The present study revealed the level and prevalence of suicidal ideation was found to be very alarming among adolescent subjects. Majority of the subjects’ (boys = 99.5% and girls = 98.5%) have different levels of suicidal ideation. Only 1% subjects did not report any thought of suicide. In order to more closely examine the rate and level of suicidal ideation cut-off scores were used. The percentage of subjects lying in low and no ideator group was compared with the percentage of subjects lying in high ideator groups. The percentage of subjects lying in high ideation group is alarmingly high. The condition is more grave at Secondary School level and that also for boys as 66% of them fell into the high ideation group while only 15% of them fell into the low ideation group. The situation is better for SSS girls as only 39% of them fell into the high suicidal ideation group while 49% of them fell in the low suicidal ideation or non-suicidal ideation group.

The prevalence rate and the level of suicidal ideation do put an alarming clock to all parents and concerned youth workers. As suggested by Reynolds (1988) adolescents who score at or above the cut off scores should be referred for the further evaluation of potentially significant psychopathology and suicide at risk.
Impact of Age and Gender

Analysis of variance and further analyses shows that boys of both younger and older age group and girls of low age group were having almost similar levels of suicidal thoughts. It was only the SSS girls who reported the lowest level of suicidal thought as their mean reached below 10. The results of this study find support from the study conducted by Mackenzi et al. (2011) who, among college students, found that the frequency of depression was similar for men and women but thought of suicide was higher for men than women. Stewart et al. (2008) also found that men scored slightly higher than women on suicidal thoughts. The finding that girls of low age group are at high risk is partially supported by studies conducted by Thompson and Light (2011) and Garcia et al. (2008) who found that younger age was a risk factor for females but not for males and that a high percentage of ninth grade girls reported suicidal thought.

Though our findings are supported by the above studies, the review of earlier research conducted in India and abroad suggest contradictory results indicating higher level and prevalence of suicidal ideation among girls (Allison et al., 2001; De Man et al., 1993a; Laghi et al., 2009; Pronovost et al., 1990; Sharma et al., 2008; Sidhartha & Jena, 2006; Tomori et al., 2000; Ulusoy & Demir, 2005; Waldrop et al., 2007; Yoder et al., 2006) while completed suicides to be high among boys. One explanation that seem to be appropriate for our findings may be comparatively higher level of anxiety experienced by Indian boys (Deb, Chatterjee, & Walsh, 2010). According to these researchers, the difference may be attributed to cultural practices in Indian society. Despite the social changes brought about by globalization, underlying patriarchal structure persists (Da Costa, 2008, as cited in Deb et al., 2010) wherein boys continue to face more pressure
regarding their proper choice of vocation and future career (Deb, 2001). These adolescents also perceive comparatively higher expectations from their parents which put them at risk for psychological distress. However, at the same time, it is relevant to discuss that suicidal ideation among girls cannot be dismissed simply because the level of suicidal ideation is on average lower than of adolescent boys, as girls of the lower age group are also at high risk.

**Psychosocial Predictors of Suicidal Ideation**

One of the psychosocial predictors explored by the researcher was stress. Stress has emerged as potentially significant predictor of suicidal ideation among adolescents even after controlling for the effect of demographic variables such as gender, PPGE, and father’s education and has accounted for as large as 28.5% of the variance. The present finding is according to our expectations and consistent with earlier researches. Bonner and Rich (1987) found that suicidal students had experienced more recent stress than non-suicidal students including stress over exams. Studies conducted on suicidal ideation have indicated that recent stressful life events are associated with poor mental health outcomes including thoughts of suicide (Flannery et al., 2001; Yang & Clum, 1996) and that recency and degree of stress are significant in the prediction of degree and recency of suicidal ideation in students (Huff, 1999). Cluster of life events and life styles (Hintikka et al., 2009) and daily stresses (Izadinia et al., 2010) also have a positive relationship with suicidal ideation. Stress predicted suicidal ideation for both boys and girls as well as for two age groups i.e. SSC and SSSC levels, suggesting that stress is a risk factor for adolescents’ suicidal ideation irrespective of their gender and age.
Another factor that the researcher studied in relation to suicidal ideation was dispositional optimism. Consistent with our expectations and with previous research (Hirsch, Conner, et al., 2007), the findings of both correlation and regression analyses of this study demonstrate that adolescents with low optimism (pessimists) are more likely to experience higher level of suicidal ideation. Roberts et al. (1998) also found a positive relationship between suicidal thinking and dispositional pessimism. Additionally, Lynch et al. (1999) reported that greater pessimistic thinking at baseline predicted the development of suicidal ideation one year later. The beneficial effect of optimism may be seen across all cultures. In a cross cultural study on suicidal ideation, Abdel-Khalek and Lester (2002) concluded that pessimism was one of the several predictors of suicidal ideation for both Kuwaiti and American students. Moreover, Priester and Clum (1992) in college students found that explanatory style was predictive of hopelessness, depression and suicidal ideation with optimistic explanatory style resulting in lower levels of depression, hopelessness and suicidal ideation and pessimistic explanatory style resulting in higher levels.

Consistent with our expectations, the findings of the present study add support for the role of dispositional optimism as a stress buffering factor in suicidal ideation. The positive association between stress and suicidal ideation is found to be significantly exacerbated for low optimists (pessimists), than for high optimists (Figure 6). High optimists are at lower risk of suicidal ideation at both low and high levels of stress as compared to low optimists who experience higher level of suicidal ideation and whose risk for suicidal ideation is increased in high magnitude under high stress condition. The results suggest that individuals who are able to maintain a positive attitude regarding the
future, despite the presence of low to high levels of stress may receive the benefit of a buffering effect that protects them against suicidal thoughts. This finding is consistent with the results of the previous study (Hirsch, Wolford, et al., 2007) with college students in which dispositional optimism moderated the relationships between negative life events and current suicide ideation and previous suicide attempts, after controlling for hopelessness and severity of depression. Hirsch et al. (2007a) also suggested that individuals with a tendency to view the world in a future-oriented manner may think about negative and potentially traumatic life circumstances more favorably and may be less likely to think about or attempt suicide. Also, optimistic explanatory style mitigates the influence of negative and potentially traumatic life events on thoughts of suicide, above and beyond the effects of hopelessness and depression (Hirsch et al., 2009). Optimism has a buffering effect for both secondary school (lower age group) and senior secondary school (higher age group) students (Figure 9 & 10, respectively). But exploring samples by gender reveals that optimism has served as a protective factor against stress only for boys and not for girls (Figure 8). Earlier Shaheen (2009) also found that attribution for negative events was the most important and significant predictor of psychological distress only for males and not for females. For girls, optimism has only a direct effect on suicidal ideation. A person who is a dispositional optimist may also be protected by the use of active, adaptive coping strategies (Miller et al., 1996). Scheier and Carver (1993) and Puskar et al. (1999) found that dispositional optimists cope more adaptively than dispositional pessimists and are more likely to tackle problems directly rather than avoiding them. Dispositional optimists are more likely than dispositional pessimist to accept and attempt to change uncontrollable situations, strive to overcome
adversity, and persevere toward the accomplishment of goals (Scheier et al., 2001). However, Khosla and Hanghal (2004), among undergraduate students found that optimists as compared to pessimists displayed higher cognitive and physical resources rather than in different coping strategies.

Dispositional optimism as measured by LOT-R is assumed to be stable and trait like, but it may also be a malleable and trainable attribute (Schwarzer, 1999, Wrosch, Scheier, Miller, Schulz, & Carver, 2003). There is ample evidence that training individuals to think optimistically can reduce depression (Hawkins & Miller, 2003; Vaillant, 2003) and “perhaps similar techniques could be used to decrease suicide ideation and behaviors in these at-risk populations” (Hirsch, Conner, et al., 2007, p. 182).

Perceived social support is another factor that was examined in relation to suicidal ideation. Perceived support from family has a direct as well as moderating effect on suicidal ideation. Previous studies have identified social support and its dimensions (i.e. perceived support from family, friends and significant others) as protective factors for suicidal ideation among adolescents. The results of correlational analyses shows that perceived social support from family, friends, significant others, and overall global support are significantly negatively associated with suicidal ideation. These findings are supported by earlier findings with both adults and adolescents which indicate that suicidal individuals lack supportive relationship with others (e.g., D’Attilio et al., 1992; De Man et al., 1993a; Howard-Pitney et al., 1992; Rudd, 1990; Slater & Depue, 1981; Paulson & Everall, 2001). The results of hierarchical regression analyses of the present study shows that level of perceived support from family predicted adolescent suicidal ideation suggesting an increased likelihood of suicidal ideation in the absence of support from the
family. The results are consistent with findings of other research studies that have identified family support as protective factor for suicidal ideation among adolescents (Harris & Molock, 2000; Morion & Range, 2003) and hopelessness about parental support related directly to depression and suicide ideation (Harter et al., 1992). Morano et al. (1993) also found loss and low family support as the best predictors of an adolescent’s suicide attempt. De Man et al. (1993) in their study also found suicidal ideation in adolescents to be associated with lack of sufficient parental support. Rubenstain et al. (1989) also found that high school aged adolescents who reported an attempt to hurt themselves in the previous year had stress scores 33% higher than those of nonsuicidal adolescents. Moreover family cohesion was found to offset the effect of stress.

It is also observed that those who perceive high family support are at lowest risk under both low and high stress conditions. Earlier research show that meaningful and supportive interpersonal relationships that foster a positive future orientation may be important for preventing suicide (Barber & DeRubeis, 2001; Gillham & Reivich, 2004). This is understandable, as when adolescents are under stress, support and assistance from the family members is more valuable and buffers them from its adverse effect, thus lowering the chance of developing severe level of suicidal ideation. Results of the analyses for SS and SSS students most closely resemble the results of the overall sample suggesting that family support is a protective factor against suicidal ideation for both the age groups, but it has moderated the effect of stress among SSS students only. Although adolescents generally seem to be rebellious and detached from families, support from family is still significant in providing them buffer when they face distress in their lives. SSS students who are at the verge of planning and preparing for career and who are
facing a great deal of pressure (in the form of expectations), may find family support as a boon in lessening of their stress and protecting them from higher level of suicidal ideation. Separate analyses for boys and girls revealed that family support predicted suicidal ideation only for girls and had an independent effect on suicidal ideation. For boys, family support did not predict suicidal ideation.

As far as friends’ support is concerned it is observed that perceived support from friends did not significantly contribute to the prediction of suicidal ideation for the total sample as well as for the subgroups. The results of the present study are corroborated by the research studies which show that perceived family support is a more powerful protective factor against adolescent suicidality than friends’ support (Eskin, 1995; Marks & Haller, 1977; Rubenstein et al., 1989; Rudd, 1990). O’Donnell et al. (2004) also did not find peer support as a significant correlate of suicidal ideation or attempts, while family closeness came to be a strong resiliency factor.

Perceived support from significant others also did not significantly contribute to the prediction of suicidal ideation. The results of this study does not support our hypothesis and stands against the findings of previous research (De Wilde et al., 1994) which found that high risk suicidal ideation group reported less support and understanding from siblings and relations outside the family.

Thus, the results of the study support the direct and moderational / stress buffering models for the role of optimism and social support for the total sample. But separate analyses for boys and girls indicate that optimism is more protective for boys and moderates the effect of stress while perceived support from family does not have either direct or moderational effect on their suicidal ideation. For girls direct effect hypothesis
of the role of optimism and perceived support from family was supported but the buffering effect model was not clear. For the two age groups direct as well as buffering effect hypotheses of the role of optimism were clearly supported while the role of perceived support from family as moderator of stress was found only for senior secondary school students and not for secondary school students.

**Demographic Predictors of Suicidal Ideation**

Though, in the present research, the effect of the demographic variables was controlled through the hierarchical regression analyses, their contribution in the prediction of suicidal ideation cannot be ignored. These variables accounted for 9.4% of the total variance in suicidal ideation in the total sample, 12% of the variance in boys sample, 2.2% of the variance in girls sample, 1.9% of the variance in SS sample, and 17.6% of the variance in SSS sample. Boys are at higher risk to have suicidal thoughts. Percentage of marks in previous Grade examination was significantly negatively related to suicidal ideation. Lower percentage of marks significantly predicted suicidal ideation among adolescents. This finding is consistent with some previous studies conducted by Dubow et al. (1989) and Hesketh et al. (2002). Similarly, Petzel and Riddle (1981) maintained that a poor or an overachieved academic performance can serve as a precursor to stress, subsequent depression, and suicidality. Additionally, a study performed on adolescents found that failing academic performance (compared to above average) was associated with a fivefold increased likelihood of a suicide attempt, controlling for self-esteem, locus of control and depressive symptoms (Richardson et al., 2005). Also, in another study involving school students, Martin et al. (2005) found that perceived academic performance, over and above self-esteem and locus of control, in some
instances, was a good long-term predictor of suicidality. Since class XI performance signals their performance in board examination at XII, which may adversely affect their course/career options after wards, poor marks in this examination may be a source of anxiety and depression causing them to have negative thoughts about their life. Father’s education was also significantly negatively related to suicidal ideation suggesting high suicidal ideation among those whose father’s education was low. But this was not true for girls’ sample. At the lower age level (SSC group) none of the demographic variables predicted suicidal ideation.