

The suicidal Bangalorean

The potent combination of rapid urbanisation, unrelenting work stress, academic pressure and a myriad relationship-straining factors have pushed many to the brink, forcing them to explore the deadly avenue of suicide

The average Bangalorean is not your pensioner of yore, but a motley mix of a migrant, a stressed-out techie, a social climber aspiring to be upwardly mobile. Caught in this struggle are millions, some well-to-do, most not so, but everyone wanting a place at the very pinnacle of their aspirations.

As Bangalore steams ahead in its rambling rush to secure a global city tag, it is unmindful of a populace that is getting increasingly insecure, incompetent to manage social, domestic tensions. So, when the National Crime Records Bureau (NCRB) tells us our city is again the nation's suicide capital, could we raise an eyebrow at all?

Bangalore's urban growth watchers are unanimous about its direct implication on the average citizen's social and family lives. Hardpressed to match the city's pace, the family solace is out of the window. Mutual affection, love, empathy, self-esteem, all factors that once cemented relationships are seriously strained. Stress from work instantly shows on the family, affecting bonds that once were taken for granted.

Altered social fabric

The combination of rising urbanisation, industrialisation and migration of people, not only from other cities but also from rural areas, has been potent enough to drastically change people's lifestyles. With many finding it tough to cope, suicides have become the norm. The NCRB's revelation that Bangalore recorded 1,778 suicides in 2010, is only a small reflection of the City's deeper malaise. That many suicides go unreported only adds to the problem.

Dr P Satishchandra, director of the National Institute of Mental Health and Neuro Science (NIMHANS), feels that suicides among adolescents, the middle-aged and the elderly, are penalties the citizens are

paying for the City's unchecked growth. "Bangalore is seeing rapid urbanisation not only in the IT/BT field, but also in the educational field with many students migrating here. With foreign investment and economic growth, citizens are becoming prey to social isolation. With the joint family system becoming a thing of the past, the nuclear family is only widening the gap among the family members. This has left people with loneliness, distress and depression," he analyses.

Served as a vent

In days past, the combined family systems in the City served as a vent for members to talk about their problems. But now, with both parents working, there is hardly any interaction among the family members. The sense of isolation and depression among individuals is only getting worse.

The stress among young children, especially school and college students, is immense, notes Dr Satishchandra. He attributes this mainly to peer pressure.

Parents add to the pressure by constantly demanding them to perform better to achieve greater academic goals. In some cases, parents who had missed out on achieving goals in their lives, expect their children to take on that role. Thus, the children are forced to pursue someone's dreams, not theirs. The sense of despair, stress and frustration couldn't get worse!

With playgrounds vanishing in Bangalore, children are forced to stay indoors, addicted to video and computer games. This is a sureshot way to boost isolation and make them wary of social interaction. Since they are engaged in their own tensions, parents do not have the time or patience to address children's problems in a meaningful way. Psychiatrists in the City have seen children, particularly teenagers, attempt to end their lives when they are

unable to perform under pressure. For the office-going crowd, work pressure is the obvious factor. The high demand to complete assignments and meet targets within strict deadlines conjures a pressure-cooker work environment. With money coming in, the urge to live a comfortable life also emerges. Failure to bear the stress and manage financial commitments sometimes leads even an emotionally mature professional to take his life. Working women, who play a dual role in office and

at home, sometimes succumb to pressure, a psychiatrist points out.

Loneliness and a sense of helplessness are factors that work against the senior citizens in Bangalore. While children living abroad add to the emotional isolation in many families, there are households aplenty where the elders are not treated well due to their financial dependence. Isolation and depression often lead to thoughts of taking their lives.

Satishchandra also blames the media

for not responsibly reporting suicides. "Media professionals try to sensationalise the incident by revealing every detail of the suicide. If a tongue is slit or a man hangs a woman with a saree, the information is detailed. They are not aware that many young children are also reading and watching this news in different mediums and can easily influence them and urging them to make such an attempt," he adds.

Centre for well-being

Nimhans recently started a Centre for Well-being for promoting mental health in society. The centre offers services of stress management for professionals, college students, homemakers, families and children, pre and post-marital problems among couples, training and workshops on preventive mental health for school, and college teachers on life skills, counselling and healthy parenting.

Dr Prabha S Chandra, professor of psychiatry and coordinator of the Well-Being centre, says keeping the communication channel open between peers, family members and friends in general is very important to avoid suicides and attempted suicides. "Suicide is a permanent solution to a temporary problem. In many cases, the victim does not understand. The act is mostly committed under severe impulsiveness, where the person has lost all modes of communication to express his/her reason for sadness and depression," she explains.

Most people manage themselves despite living with a certain degree of anxiety and depression. Problem starts when that management is not possible. Research has shown that nearly 50 per cent of those who commit suicide or attempt to take their lives have an existing mental health problem of either depression, anxiety, or adjustment problems.

Having seen a trend, doctors now stress the importance of checking on people who suddenly stop talking, lose appetite, develop amnesia and refuse to go out.

Family members could intervene at this juncture by constantly engaging with the person. It is important to guide them to seek help from helplines and counselling centres. To handle depression and stress-related issues, every school, college and organisation must have 'gatekeepers' or counsellors to whom people can go to seek help. The help need not be limited only to work-related stress, but also relationship issues and family problems.

Shift in approach

According to Indian Penal Code, attempted suicide is a punishable offence. Section 309 of IPC provides: "whoever attempts to commit suicide and does any act towards the commission of such offence, shall be punished with simple imprisonment for a term which may extend to one year or with a fine or with both."

Although the aim of the law is to prevent suicides by legal methods, it has proved to be counter-productive. Emergency care to those who have attempted suicide is denied as many hospitals and practitioners hesitate to provide the needed treatment fearing legal hassles. This results in difficulty to ascertain the actual data on attempted suicides, as many attempts are described to be accidental to avoid entanglement with police and courts.

Dr Sripada Venkata Joga Rao, professor of Law, National Law School of India University, feels that there is need for a 'policy change.' Suicide should be de-criminalised to help individuals who could then seek help to overcome their depression. Justice V S Malimath is also working towards this policy.

Poornima Nataraj

In coping with stress, men could be the weaker sex

Women have traditionally been labelled the weaker sex. But the National Crime Records Bureau (NCRB) data for suicide rates each year contradicts this and shows a consistent increase in the rate of suicides among men, especially married men.

In India, as many as 61,453 married men ended their lives in 2010, compared to 31,754 women. After Chennai, Bangalore tops the list with 515 husbands taking the extreme step. Also, the rate of

suicides among married men has almost doubled in the last 15 years. This makes us wonder whether more men are at the receiving end in marriages, or are there other issues that men face that need to be addressed.

According to Sneha Fernandes, counsellor at Transforming Lives, an organisation which provides family counselling, unlike women, men do not have options to vent their feelings of depression or frustration. "Women are expressive. They talk to their friends or family and depend on them for support. Whereas men are used to bottling up their feelings. I meet so many married men who just want someone to talk to and cry, but don't find the comfort in their partners."

While the lack of emotional support could be a reason for the high numbers, she says work stress also adds to the problem.

Dr Murali Raj, head of the Department of Psychiatry in Manipal Hospital, Bangalore, says lack of bonding between couples is one of the reasons why men are depressed. "I have seen many cases of IT and BPO professionals where lack of quality time between couples often drives the man to despair. Marriage is of ten not a deep commitment... And both the man and wife work so hard during the week they are too tired during week-ends."

He says he has also seen cases of men dejected because of dowry harassment and a minority of cases of men who have sexual problems.

Several groups to protect men's rights have sprung up in the City and they opine that the Indian laws favour women leaving men in a very disadvantageous position in legal issues. "I get 8-10 calls a week from men who are subjected to domestic violence. Even the police don't take them seriously when they complain about their wife or in-laws. Section 498 of the IPC or the dowry law favours women, irrespective of whether they are right or wrong," says Virag Dhulia, member of Confidare, India's first community centre for men's rights.

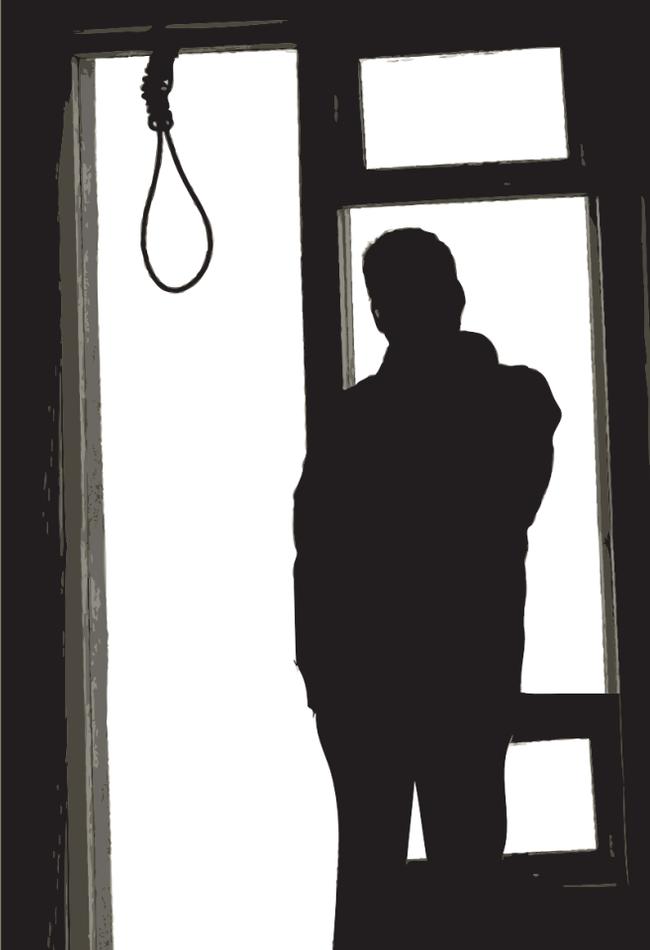
He says there is an absolute lack of awareness about men's problems and that there is a need for a strong social support system and an official communication channel for men to come out with their problems.

The NCRB data shows that apart from married men, 243 widowers and 16 widows, 62 divorced men and one divorced woman committed suicide in Bangalore in 2010 — the highest in the country, yet again proving that there could be a lot of men who need help to lead happier lives.

Parvathy Anoop

Strategies to help prevent suicides

- Early recognition of those with suicidal behaviour, and timely help
- Establishing social and crisis support mechanisms for people and communities in distress and those at higher risk
- Developing life-skill programmes in all educational institutions
- Expansion of mental health services and training of professionals with skills to recognise and manage people with mental health problems like depression
- Expanding and strengthening counselling services across institutions
- Limiting easy availability of drugs and organophosphorus compounds
- Banning all lethal pesticides from routine availability
- Improving care and support for those with past suicidal attempts
- Measures to de-stigmatise and de-criminalise suicides
- Improving trauma care practices in hospitals and first aid skills for families
- Surveillance and research to delineate risk factors and causes



Killer statistics

Here's a detailed look at the suicide statistics of Bangalore from the police records. The City accounts for nearly 139 suicide deaths every month. More than 60 per cent of the victims are men aged above 20 years and the rest are women.

On an average, nearly 2,000 people end their lives each year due to various reasons. The City recorded as many as 2,430 suicides in 2007, while the number was 2,374 the following year. As many as 2,167 people committed suicide in 2009 and the number came down to 1,778 in 2010. This year till October, Bangalore has already recorded 1,253 suicides. The number is likely to go up by another 400 if the trend continues.

"The reason why men are prone to suicide is not known. Even the mode of suicides which the victims chose is varied," observes a city police official. More than 30 per cent of the victims prefer ending their lives by hanging, while nearly 25 per cent consume poison. Curiously, in nearly 40 per cent of the cases, the mode of death is not known.

Compared to men, more women choose to end their lives by setting themselves on fire. As many as 228 women burnt themselves alive in 2007 as against 141 men. The number was 203 as against 134 in 2008. One hundred and seventy-nine women set themselves afire in 2009 as against 107 men. In 2010, the number was 211 as against 116. Shockingly, 146 women burnt themselves to death till October

this year as against 89 men.

Suicidal men prefer consuming poison to end their lives and more than 70 per cent choose this mode. Use of arms to commit suicide has been uncommon. In the last five years, only one person, a male, ended his life by shooting himself. The incident was reported in 2009. This shows Bangaloreans don't misuse arms, notes another officer.

However, the worrying trend for the police is the rise in family suicides. As an officer, who has worked with Central Crime Branch informs *Deccan Herald* that during the last couple of years, mass suicides within a family is on the rise. An individual ending his/her life is less intense, but five members of a family ending their lives in one place is more intense and tragic, he analyses.

In most cases, heavy financial debt has provoked the head of the family to take the extreme step, forcing the wife and children to follow suit. In a few cases, men have poisoned their children, murdered their wives and then hanged themselves allegedly due to troubles in domestic life and extra-marital affairs. In October this year, four cases, where all members of a family either committed suicide or attempted to take their lives, were reported. It is high time doctors and counsellors contemplated on this to find a lasting solution, as police can't do much in this regard, the officer adds.

Jagadish Angadi

Young and wanting to die!

The suicide of 22-year-old IIMB student Malini Murmu after being "dumped" by her lover on Facebook had sent shockwaves across the nation. It also brought to the fore the power of a social networking forum like Facebook and the negative impact it can have on its users. But what is more unfortunate is that suicide cases among the youth does not end with Malini.

Suicide capital Bangalore also tops in the list of maximum suicides among youth in 2010 with 657 cases reported between ages 15 and 29 years. Strictly going by statistics, metros across India with the so-called 'modern' and developed culture are hot spots for suicides among the youth. The only other cities that come close to Bangalore are Delhi with 651, Mumbai with 582 and Chennai with 472 cases.

So what exactly pushes youngsters to the brink? Sa-Mudra Foundation founder K E Radhakrishna opines that Bangalore is a city of terrible contrasts, and places financial, occupational and aspirational pressure on the youth. "The children today speak to mobiles phones, laptops, tablets and the Internet. Not to his or her own parents. The concept of dining table family meals is very important, but it has vanished," says Radhakrishna. Sa-Mudra receives 20 calls on an average daily from youngsters complaining about various issues in their life. Among these, roughly five calls are related to the complex suicidal tendency. Shakun Mohini, member of NGO Vimochana, says, "There are lots of young girls who come to us seeking help and the numbers are rising. Many carry along with them a dangerous suicidal tendency." Out of the 657 suicide cases, 329 are of females.

"The City may be modern, but the modernity has yet to seep into homes. People in Bangalore live with double standards. Middle and upper class parents give their girl child plenty of freedom, but they are not supposed to 'fall in love'," comments Shakun. Failure in education has also become a prime reason and yet again the City tops the list in most number of suicides due to failure in examination with 50 cases. The ever-growing communication gap between parents and their children is a major cause of concern. While there are many organisations catering to help distressed youngsters, there is no improvement yet. A call Sa-Mudra received two years earlier still remains in Radhakrishna's mind. Girl: "Is this a helpline number?" "Yes". "Then will you help me commit suicide?"

The 18-year-old caller went on to represent India in the national volleyball championships overcoming the suicidal tendency thanks to counselling for a few minutes. While *Deccan Herald* cannot reveal her name, the important point is

that the tendency to suicide comes as a temporary excuse for not facing the hardships which are themselves temporary. Experts say youngsters must overcome this moment by talking to someone or call a helpline. If cases such as Malini's are not seriously addressed, Bangalore is most likely to hold the first rank again in 2012.

Shivakant Menon

SONIA NARANG, DCP, Bangalore South



The male population is more compared to women in Bangalore. They are unable to cope up with the changing lifestyle and work culture. Suicide-prone women prefer setting themselves ablaze as kerosene is easily accessible at home. Sense of insecurity is a major cause for suicides.

Helplines

NIMHANS Centre for Well-Being, 1/B, 9th Main, 1st stage, 1st phase, BTM Layout.

Call 26685948 or 9480829670 or mail nimhans.wellbeing@gmail.com

Services offered: 9:30 am to 4:30 pm (Mondays to Saturdays).

SAHAI helpline for suicide prevention and emotional distress.

Call 25497777

Services offered: 10 am to 6 pm from Monday to Saturday.

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DR P SATISHCHANDRA, Director, NIMHANS



Increase in the number of suicides is the penalty we are paying for our growth and development. People are becoming depressed due to social isolation. Media has to show sensitivity by not revealing details in suicide cases.

SUPRAJA V, Counsellor



Suicide rate in men is more compared to women because of decreased overall well-being. Women socialise better than men and find solutions to most of their problems, while men find it difficult. Telephonic and face-to-face counselling are the best way to prevent suicides.