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BEHAVIOUR

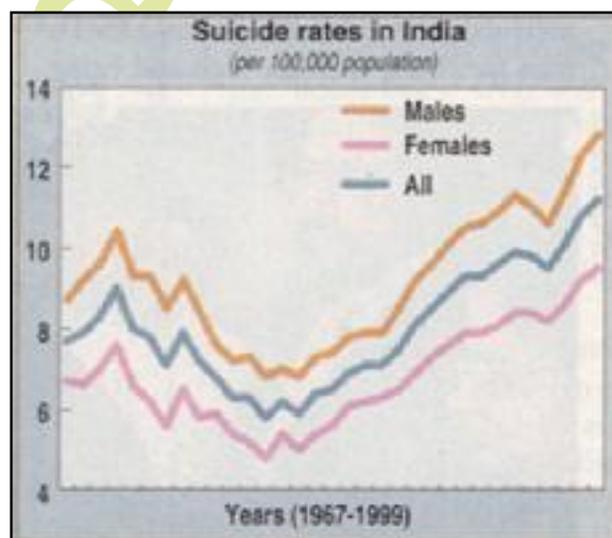
The Indian situation

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MORE than one lakh persons take their own lives in India every year, and the problem is assuming alarming proportions. The rate of suicides in India, about 5 per 100,000 persons in the late 1960s, has more than doubled since then. The gravity of the problem is highlighted by the fact that nearly three-fourths of all suicides in India are by people in the socially and economically productive age group of 15 to 49. The increase is particularly striking since the mid-1980s - the number of suicides per 1,000 deaths has doubled from 6 in 1985 to 12 in 1998.

A paper presented at the Congress by Professor K. Nagaraj, senior economist at the Madras Institute of Development Studies (MIDS), reveals that although the suicide rate has generally tended to be high in the larger cities, the rate has also been increasing sharply in cities other than the major metros.

While the suicide rates have been decidedly higher in the southern States, the variation across the country has been diminishing in recent years. In other words, States elsewhere have been "catching up" with the southern States in the last few years. While the national average is currently about 11 per 100,000 persons, the southern States together have a rate of 30 for male suicides. The lowest rate for males is in the northern region, about 4 per 100,000 persons.

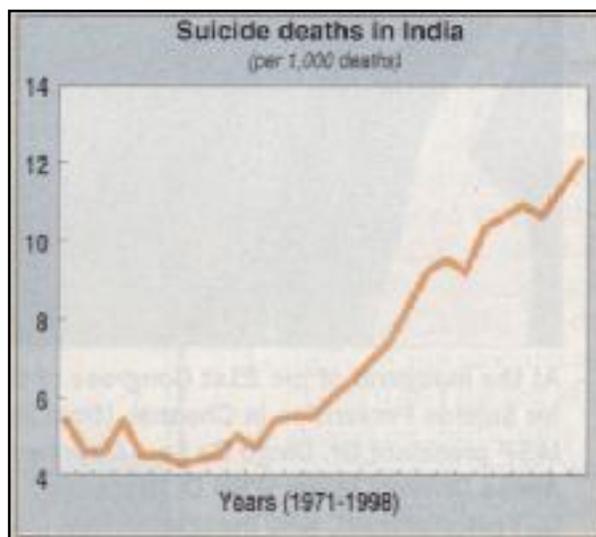


Across the country, the suicide rate for females is consistently lower than that

for males, in keeping with the global sex ratios of suicides. But in the younger age group, between 5 and 29 years, the female suicide rate is as high as that for males. Moreover, the rates for educated females - those who have gone beyond primary school - is higher than that for males. The greater vulnerability of women is also associated with the more unstable nature of their livelihoods. Nagaraj's study reveals that the suicide rates for women are significantly higher than those for men among those engaged in non-agricultural activities - whether they are engaged in the activity on a regular basis or are self-employed. He points out that employment and incomes in such activities are unstable. The growing reach of the market into these sectors further destabilises life in these sectors.

Nagaraj's study provides shocking data of suicide rates among those who declare themselves totally unemployed. For males in the age group of 30 to 44, the rate is a whopping 508 per 100,000 persons; for women it is more than 200. More important, as the duration of unemployment increases, suicide rates rise dramatically - the rates among men in the age group of 45 to 59 is a shocking 1,812 per 100,000 persons and among women, nearly 550.

The distribution of suicides by marital status reveals some interesting patterns. The rates do not vary much between the sexes for the never married. Among those currently married, while the rate for males is about 17 per 100,000 persons, the rate for females is 11.4 per 100,000. Among those widowed, while the rate for males is 21 per 100,000 persons, the rate for females is also significantly lower, at 6.6 per 100,000. However, among divorced males the suicide rate is 164 per 100,000 persons, but even in this class, among females the rate is only 63 per 100,000. While the suicide rate for separated men is about 167, for females it is only 41 per 100,000 persons.



Development by itself does not appear to make societies more secure. For instance, suicide rates are higher in the southern States such as Kerala (30.5 per 100,000 persons) and Karnataka (24.2), Tamil Nadu (18.6) and Pondicherry (58), which has the highest suicide rate in the country. This appears to be paradoxical in the context of the high degree of access that people in these States have to social sector

facilities like health and education.

Nagaraj argues that the characteristics of societies in these States perhaps explains the paradox. He points out that these societies are "more plural", in which "the aspiration levels of people are higher". Moreover, the rural-urban linkages are greater, enabling "the greater play of urban values and the media".

Nagaraj argues that the greater reach of the market as an institution in these States is another key factor. He points to Kerala's direct linkages to the world market - the large presence of Malayalees in the Gulf countries and the dominance of plantation crops in the State's economy being two instances. He argues that these have exposed society to greater instability and insecurity.

There is little evidence to show that the government has done anything even to acknowledge the presence of a mounting social problem, let alone combating it. The suicide rate in Pondicherry is a classic example of this neglect. The rates are, according to a paper presented at the Congress, "at world record level" for some sections of the population.

While voluntary and non-governmental organisations can play a role at the "micro" level, particularly in suicide prevention, it is evident that they are hardly in a position to intervene in the larger social processes that cause suicide and suicidal behaviour. For instance, suicide prevention organisations play a useful role during particularly stressful times such as when examination results are due. It is also a period when not only children but even their parents are under stress. By all accounts, it is evident that they are successful in preventing at least some suicides during this period. However, until the factor that constitutes the stressor in this situation, the examination system and the larger issue of school education, is addressed, the problem will remain. And this is where the state has a role to play.

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