

Death As A Way Of Life

Despite having one of the highest standards of living in India, Pondicherry is now its suicide capital
Soutik Biswas

WAKING up early one scorched day in Pondicherry recently, 18-year-old Nalini Vaidyalingam, wife of a watchman, took off her sari and hanged herself from the ceiling. The police said she was suffering from chronic ulceritis. A few hours later, Kumurappan, 42, and his wife began quarrelling over some trifle a few miles away. Minutes later, the farm worker walked out of his home in the neighbourhood, and hanged himself in an orchard. And as evening fell on this quiet town, 19-year-old Chitra Shankar, wife of a construction worker, ground yellow oleander seeds into a fibrous paste, spiked it with sugar, and swallowed it. At night, she lay dead in a government hospital. The police said she took her life after a tiff with her husband over his drinking habit.

This is just another day in the life of Pondicherry, the sleepy French colonial town-turned-busy Union Territory of 88 lakh people, 162 km south of Chennai. Just too many people are taking their lives—everyday. Its wide and dusty streets, bustling bazars, quaint faux French eateries, rocky seas, craggy beaches and fabled spirituality synonymous with the ashram of revolutionary-turned-philosopher Sri Aurobindo is beginning to look like a deceptive exterior to the disquiet within. Put simply, Pondicherry is the suicide capital of India: 69 per 1,00,000 people took their lives in 1995, according to the National Crime Records Bureau (NCRB). Provisional estimates for 1997 suggest a suicide rate of 55 per 100,000 people, translating into 442 suicides.

The suspected drop does not cheer mental health professionals. For even this figure is still way ahead of the national average—9.9 per 100,000 people—and other Indian states (see box). "Suicide is a serious problem here," says Dr S. Gunasekaran, head of Pondicherry University's sociology department. "Every morning, in the papers, you read of people taking their lives."

The evidence is everywhere. Since the mid-'80s, the number of suicides in Pondicherry has hovered well above 400 a year, peaking at over 600 during 1993. Last year, some 203 patients, mostly women, clogged Jawaharlal Institute of Postgraduate Medical Education and Research (JIPMER), the territory's efficient hospital, after trying to take their lives. At Maitreyi, a suicide prevention helpline in congested Thiagu Mudali Street, volunteers handle three to four calls from people on the brink every day. This apart from numerous letters from suicidal people every week. "Reporting of suicides is high here," says Dr R. Chandrasekaran, head of JIPMER's psychiatry department, "but the numbers are still steep."

It sure is. Pondicherry's dubious status is an interesting paradox to sociologists and psychiatrists alike: Why are people so blue in a land of plenty and a spiritual haven? The 492-sq-km Union Territory, on the threshold of attaining statehood, has a 74 per cent literacy rate, way above the national average of 52 per cent. Per capita income is also way above the national average, soaring at Rs 11,276. Some 65 per cent of the populace live in towns. A slew of industries—23 large and 73 medium-scale—along with a clutch of multinationals offer plenty of employment opportunities. The hip international yoga festivals, the international township of Auroville wedded to the principle of vasudhaiva kutumbakam (the world is your family), the pristine Aurobindo Ashram, the sunwashed beaches, and the sheer cosmopolitanism of the place makes Pondicherry, according to travellers' guides, an "oasis of peace and tranquility".

But, again, some of the world's most affluent places, like Japan, have the highest suicide rates. "This is also true for Pondicherry," explains Dr Laxmi Vijayakumar, a Chennai-based psychiatrist who has

studied the problem. "Kerala, with such high literacy rates and so on, has one of the highest suicide rates in India, while Bihar, one of the poorest states, is at the bottom of the list."

So why do people kill themselves at the slightest pretext in Pondicherry? The virtual absence of holistic studies on the subject makes it difficult to attribute the phantom blues to any particular socio-economic cause. There is little buzz about the phenomenon in local homes and workplaces. "We keep hearing about suicides. But many youngsters do take their lives after failed love affairs," says G. Vincent, 39, who runs a photocopy shop with his teenage daughter in the town. But that's only part of the problem—the last NCRB figures suggest failed love affairs account for less than one per cent of suicides. What are the other reasons that make people here so suicidal?

GOING by NCRB's figures, culled from Pondicherry police records, 48 per cent of the suicides were linked to 'family problems', hinting mainly at spousal and other interpersonal problems. A JIPMER study involving 15,600 residents of Bahoor village, some 16 km from the town, found women outnumbered men in suicide attempts, but more men actually "completed the process" and died. One major reason driving spouses to commit suicide, say psychiatrists, is possibly the chronic drinking habit among men—consumption of beer in the Union Territory has quadrupled from 4,142 kilolitres in 1992 to over 17,000 kilolitres today. The other major reason, going by NCRB estimates, is illness which was linked to over 33 per cent of the suicides. "Chronic physical illnesses," says R. Srinivasa Murthy, dean of the Bangalore-based National Institute Of Mental Health And Neurosciences (NIMHANS), "account for 20 per cent of all suicides in India."

But Pondicherry's gloom has its own individual roots as well. "Suicides are associated with pockets of high change," says Murthy. The town has morphed radically over the years. Initially, the French East India Company converted this obscure village into a flourishing trading centre in mid-17th century. They left behind a rich repository of culture when departing from its shores. Over the last two centuries, the place has turned into a spotted cosmopolitan town: high-skill migrant workers working with the multinationals, some 30,000 French pensioners of Indian origin, over 12,000 foreign tourists a year, and largely expatriate islands such as Aurobindo Ashram and Auroville. This, say psychiatrists, possibly leaves the locals with an identity problem. "Pondicherry is a divided society," says sociologist Dr Gunasekaran. "I have a feeling that the rapid changes have overtaken the natives. They are being placed in situations for which they haven't been socialised."

The locals agree. Senthil, a 25-year-old teacher at Auro-ville, remembers Pondicherry as a "sleepy and quiet" place with "happy-go-lucky" residents even 10 years ago. The springing up of plush spiritual enclaves, the arrival of multinational manufacturing facilities, and the fast-paced urbanisation—an 1,800-sq-ft plot in town could cost anything between Rs 6 to 10 lakh—has possibly left the inhabitants bewildered. "Too many changes in an essentially small town have made the locals stressed and alienated. They feel scared looking at the glitzy shops and posh homes," he says.

This alienation and an acute sense of social dislocation was reflected in a Maitreyi survey involving 100 Pondicherry residents two years ago. A worrisome 80 per cent of the respondents found relationships in the town "superficial" and wanted more emotional sustenance. Interestingly, 47 per cent of the callers on the local suicide helpline report domestic problems—with spouses and in-laws and squabbling over dowry—and "love failures". Maitreyi director Vaidyanathan S. remembers: "A year ago, we had a drunk suicidal man on the line for two hours threatening to commit suicide on his lover's death anniversary." Psychiatrists feel the place's booming cinema culture pushes young people into copycat reactions during relationships: there are some 50 theatres in the town; and entertainment tax accruals, at over Rs 202 lakh today, have doubled since 1987.

Clearly, this looks a case of a small town which has grown too big for its citizens to cope with. Most of the indigenous people in the hamlets comprise the majority of people taking their lives—some 60 per cent of suicide attempts, according to a JIPMER study, are carried out with the help of insecticides and yellow oleander seeds which grow freely in the wild. "People here need to rediscover their roots, network better and integrate faster," says a worried Senthil. Till that process begins, Pondicherry residents will continue to take their lives chasing an elusive nirvana.

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