SENICIDE AS A MODERN PROBLEM IN INDIA: A DURKHEIMIAN PERSPECTIVE OF *THALAIKOOTHAL*

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Abstract

The *thalaikoothal* is a practice that has risen in Indian society, especially in the southern rural villages of the region of Tamil Nadu. The practice is a form of senicide, that is, a suicide or killing of the elderly, performed as a solution to many problems arising in the Indian society due to rapid social change. This issue of senicide is not talked about as much as other types of suicide or murder, and researchers have largely ignored the practice of thalaikoothal. An exception is the work of Pyali Chatterjee (2017), who tackles the issue from a legal and ethical standpoint. In this paper, I will contribute to the study of senicide in rural India by examining the issue from a sociological perspective developing a Durkheimian analysis. The article's approach will be functionalist, mobilizing relevant concepts such as anomie, disintegration and social pathology to make sense of the circumstances that are making some Indian families use this practice.

Introduction

There is a famous saying where modern problems require a modern solution, and the practise of *Thalaikoothal* is a problematic "solution" to a modern issue that has risen in southern rural India. Thalaikoothal is a form of senicide, that is, the practice of suicide or the killing of an elderly person —people over the age of 60 in most cases (Chatterjee, 2017). Senicide can be found in many cultures and tribes from around the world and its used to abandon someone so they do not become a burden to a family. The Japanese once had a practice called *Ubasute* where people would take an elderly relative to a remote area and leave them behind to die, and also during the 400 CE, a Germanic tribe called the Heruli would place the elderly on a long stack of wood and stab them before setting the body on fire (Chatterjee, 2017).

Thalaikoothal is mostly found in Tamil Nadu State, which is the most southern part of India. The thalaikoothal is a Tamil word meaning "leisurely oil bath" which is also the method that family will use to kill an aged person from their family in the name of mercy. As Chatterjee (2017) points out, the family will give the elderly an oil bath early in the day and then they are given several glasses of tender coconut milk throughout the day, which will cause the body temperature to fall and then enter into a cardiac arrest. When the autopsy is done, the doctors can simply say it is a cause of old age leaving no room for a police investigation.

What makes thalaikoothal different from other forms of senicide is that it is a relatively recent social phenomenon. There is no exact date to confirm when the practice started, but many believe it was after the British came to India, or around the 1950s, when the rural areas were experiencing severe famines (Magnier, 2013). In any case, the practice is not ancient but more recent. Sometimes the family will make the decision for the elderly, or the elderly seeks out the practice themselves. One of the possible explanations for this practice is that the family do not feel that the elderly is useful in the house anymore, nor useful to society (Priyamvadha, 2019).

This issue could be further illuminated through the works of classic theorist Emile Durkheim. This author described that society is ruled by a collective

consciousness, that is, set of shared beliefs and ideas throughout the social body that gives individuals a sense of belonging, in other words, the totality of beliefs and sentiments common to a social group (Durkheim, 1893/1964). When there is a decline in the connecting force of the collective consciousness —for instance, in times of rapid social change— it could lead to social disintegration and social pathology.

This perspective is useful to examine thalaikoothal, as it provides with interesting analytical tools to explain how the elderly, failing to integrate into a more modernized society, might cause the family to think such step is necessary. It also helps understanding how the elderly seek this practice for themselves when they see their social value diminished in the context of changing social circumstances, where they find themselves in a state of anomie and unable to find proper integration into society.

Changing roles versus traditional family values in India

Chatterjee (2014) examines how the Indian family has been ruled by traditions based on respect for the elderly. I can personally attest to this. Being born in an Indian family, the fundamental norm I was socialized into was that the elders are to be respected and worshipped. For instance, when referring to the gods, you say "Mataji" or "Pitaji", which translates to mother and father, which is what I call my grandparents. The assumption behind this primary socialization is that they have more knowledge of life and need to be cared for. Indeed, many Indian families live in a joint system where everyone lives together in one house and the extended family is the basic organization. The elders are the head of the household and are supported by their children, at the same time that they help raising the grandchildren. In Indian society, disrespecting the elders or sending them to a senior home facility carries a negative stigma and is socially unacceptable (Priyamvadha, 2019). The traditional joint family system has been a source of social and economic security of the elderly, but the norms are changing in India and many are seeking more of a nuclear family structure based on the modern structure composed of mother, father, their kids, and less dependent on the grandparents. This is breaking down that traditional support system of seniors where they no longer feel part of the family or that they are needed.

The elderly people are more vulnerable because of rapid social change in Indian society and government bodies failing on being able to provide incentives to the aging populations (Priyamvadha, 2019). This change has left them exposed to more emotional and financial stress. There is a stigma around families leaving their old relatives to elderly care facilities, so they are almost non-existent in India, especially in rural areas. There has been a recent improvement in these care facilities, but the elders often feel abandoned by their families as it is a very new thing compared to Canada where senior care homes are normal. The family slowly decreases in sense of collective consciousness and more individual roles are emerging due to acceptance of the nuclear family in India.

All of this results in the elderly members feeling a sense of normlessness or anomie and often times seek the thalaikoothal themselves. For example, the people in Virudhunagar who accept this practice and they do not even fight it (Chatterjee 2017). Even though the practice came to light because an elderly man ran away once he knew the practice would happen to him, others have just accepted their faith and even request thalaikoothal because they are ready to die. They also feel that the society they live in, has rendered them worthless. They no longer have a relevant status in their family.

Thalaikoothal and Durkheim's functional approach

India is a country of diverse cultures and traditions, but more recently the country has gone through intense processes of modernization of its industry, economy, technology, etc., which has had an impact on kinship systems and family relationships (Kashyap, 2004). In this context, the youth are being brought up into a changing society which makes it easier for them to socially adapt to these profound changes (Bhaskar, 2014). The rapid change in families is leaving the elderly behind most vulnerable, and the institutions around them are not responding to these changes quickly enough (Priyamvadha, 2019). In rural areas this is especially true since the lack of infrastructures such as medical facilities or senior facilities is almost non-existent, leaving the families experiencing great burden and making the seniors themselves feeling like burdens as well.

The functional approach of Emile Durkheim helps describing the problems between the decline of traditions in India and their replacement by increasing modern values (Lane et al., 2017). Durkheim believed that society is a complex system composed of interconnected parts that work together to preserve stability (Durkheim, 1893/1964). For Durkheim, society is glued together through shared norms and beliefs. Thus, he defines a collective consciousness (1893/1964: 79-80) in terms of:

"The totality of beliefs and sentiments common to average citizens of the same society forms a determinate system which has its own life; one may call it the collective or common conscience…. It us, thus, an entirely different thing from particular consciences, although it can be realized only through them"

For Durkheim, rapid social change has an effect in rates of suicide. In fact, he describes a type of suicide — egoistic— that takes place when individuals are not properly integrated into the social unit (Ritzer, 2008: 203). Social integration, then, gives people's lives meaning. Under this framework, however, social problems like senicide could be interpreted as the failure of social institutions that cannot adapt during times of rapid social change. In this sense, in India, taking care of the elderly is something that their children must do, but in under new economic circumstances increasingly all members of the Indian family must work to be able to make a living. In addition to this problem, there are no proper elderly care facilities and are usually underfunded, which makes it hard for family members to send their elderly to these care facilities.

In these conditions of modernization and rapid social change, the practice of thalaikoothal is developing in rural areas of southern India. There seems to be an increasing anomie or "normlessness" within some parts of the Indian social fabric given that, as Durkheim (1897/1951) explains, during periods of rapid social change norms become unclear and society's grip over individuals is weakened. One rather obvious way to deal with this social problem is to strengthen social norms and increase social integration by strengthening traditional institutions, but, with a growing youth who demand more modern institutions (Lane et al., 2017), there is a fundamental challenge in integrating the elderly into a modernizing Indian society where it is difficult finding new roles for them.

Durkheim on Disintegration and Social Pathology

Durkheim believed that societies evolved from mechanic types of organizations, based on a strong collective consciousness that holds them together, to organic solidarity where parts of the social system are different from each other and fulfill different functions. These results in low collective consciousness, that is, in low forms of moral social attachment. In other words, for Durkheim, the degree of social solidarity is crucial for determining the nature of a social system. In societies with high degrees of mechanic solidarity, "it is entirely mechanical causes which ensure that the individual personality is absorbed in the collective personality" (Durkheim, 1893/1964: 242). Indeed, the collective consciousness forms the long-standing traditions that binds the family together by perpetuating traditional values. In organic solidarity, however people are more rational and are more socially differentiated. That is why as societies modernize, there is a decrease in the moral connections in society, and individuals increasingly differentiate. The Indian family has been very traditional in so far as the grandparents have usually been the head of the family, the son the one working outside the house, and the wife taking care of the grandparents. However, under new modern circumstances, both the husband and the wife have to work, especially if they are coming from a poor background. India is already a culturally diverse place, but a consequence of this is that the structure of family increasingly changes values, accompanied by a loss of collective consciousness through which traditional ways of being are being challenged.

In this sense, the family is becoming more rational: culture and values are becoming increasingly abstract and that allows the members of the family to justify the act of senicide more and more. This creates tensions in Indian society and, from a functionalist perspective, pathological tendencies such as thalaikoothal emerge. In an increasingly modernized society, the decline of social integration of seniors seem to be due to the breakdown of traditional support systems (Priyamvadha, 2019). All the values and norms that the seniors were brought up by, now are rapidly declining leading to consequences such as thalaikoothal.

The declining role of the elderly

The elderly are the head of the family. This makes things hard for people living in the rural, poverty-stricken areas where having to feed the whole family can become a burden (Ramalingam and Ganesan, 2019). The elderly are no longer able to work themselves so they are at the care of their families. Currently, everyone in the household has to be employed or have to work long days outside so taking care of the elderly has become a burden. This results in the elderly themselves feel as if there is something wrong with them and they feel as if they are losing their value for the family. This is also hard on the family members as the cost of living is rising so frequently thalaikoothal appears as a rational solution (Priyamvadha, 2019).

There is also a gender bias in the practice. Even though women are generally cast as lower than men in the Indian society, elderly men are often the victims of the practice. This is generally because most men are limited in their housekeeping skills as compared to the women where they can help take care of the children or able to help make food in the house, "An old man can't even make his own tea or take care of the grandchildren, while older women remain useful," said an interviewee (as cited in Magnier, 2013). The practice is not always for relieving burdens or just not being able to care for the older relatives but sometimes, according to Chatterjee (2017), they have used the practice to get ancestral property which is usually and in most cases are under the name of men in the family.

The traditional family values seem to be decreasing in Indian society. The newer generation has a new outlook into the world (Lane et al., 2017). In the process of modernization that India has gone through, the has been a shift in values and traditional social norms, which Durkheim described as the change in solidarity from mechanical to organic. In this process, new arrangements have appeared to deal with shifting circumstances, such as the fact that husband and wife have to work to provide for the family in the Indian context. The family depend on each other, and if one fails or cannot contribute, then there is not much need

for them anymore. In that sort of situations is when thalaikoothal develops, for instance, as a means to gain property. Even then there is no trying to stop the practice, according to Magnier (2013), as many know that the government should try to improve on the social and economic issues that could prevent the practice even further. This could help the elderly into once again have that 'meaning' behind their lives and be able to have that social integration once again and are not left dissatisfied because they feel worthless in the society.

Conclusion

The world is aging, and many countries' demographic pyramids are under stress. This is the case of India. As Chatterjee (2014: 2008) writes, "Modernization has not only improved the lives of the people but it has also increased lots of hurdle in one's life". According to Durkheim, that is due to the fact of increased weakened collective consciousness in the society as people become more socially differentiated. In the case of the elderly in Tamil Nadu, they are vulnerable and as they feel and made to feel no longer able to contribute to the family or society in the way that they once were able to. The elderly feel less integrated into the new social condition which not only make them feel worthless but the family starts to believe that they are and as well as a burden but due to rapid urbanization and increase of poverty, many families are unable to care for more than themselves and their kids which is one of many hurdles in a modernizing society such as India's rural sector.

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