

The Socio-Cultural Background of the Temporal Changes in the Ratio of Suicides in Sri Lanka: A Sociological Review

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ABSTRACT

Each living being in the world involves in a continuous battle for survival, to protect itself from numerous dangers, to survive them and continue to live on. We Humans are the exceptional species among all the other, due to the fact that 'Humans are the most advanced in mind and wisdom'. And they are the only species who acts to fulfill their needs and objectives according to a collectively incorporated system of ethical and moral values. There is another exceptional feature among Humans. They are the only species in the living world that tends to intentionally cause one's own death (suicide). Therefore the clue, Why Humans who are the sole cultural species and who possesses an advanced mind and wisdom, are prone to intentionally cause one's own death?, has been in observance among scholars in various subject fields.

Keywords: death, humans, international, living being, suicides

I. INTRODUCTION

Emile Durkheim who conducted a classical study about the suicide in the 19th century, stressed that 'the act of suicide does not rely on one's personal, biological, physical or psychological reasons but depends on the influence of the socio-cultural environment that person was based upon' (Amitai & Apter, 2012/Goldney, et al., 2008). According to a general definition, suicide is understood as a person causing their own death. But realistically the suicide can be defined as 'a death of an individual caused by certain acts of others' (Bandara & Nawarathna, 2018). Through this idea, the argument made by Durkheim; 'the suicide of an individual is caused by the socio-cultural acts of others associated with him', will be endorsed.

According to the World Health Organization (WHO) standards, if the suicide ratio of a certain country is on or below 6.5 deaths for a population of hundred thousand (6.5:100000), it won't be considered as a social issue. But it can become a critical social problem if it reaches 13 deaths for a population of hundred thousand (13:100000); (Widger, 2013). Statistical data proves that the number of suicidal deaths against the world population has rapidly risen in the modern world. As numbers stand, one person in the planet is committing suicide in every 40 seconds (Senevirathna & Sanjeevani, 2009). Between eight hundred thousand to one million people (800000-1000000) from the world population dies by committing suicide each year (Bandara & Nawarathna, 2018). According to WHO statistics from the causes of deaths, suicides rank 13th position. World Health Organization states that 60% of deaths in Asian region are deaths caused by suicide. In reference to the above mentioned numbers, it's extremely evident that the number of suicides in the contemporary world is on a rise and a huge social challenge is presented by it.

Population of Sri Lanka amassed 19 million in 1990s and the suicide ratio in the year 1995 was 47 from a population of hundred thousand. This is an eightfold increase from 6.9 per hundred thousand which was recorded in 1950 (Gunnell et al., 2007). Aforementioned ratio in the year 1995 crowned Sri Lanka as the country with highest recorded suicides in the world. However, it can be seen that the rate of suicides in Sri Lanka has decreased considerably after the dawn of the 21st century. The suicide ratio in Sri Lanka in the year 2000 was recorded as 28 per hundred thousand and by 2005 it decreased further in to 24.1 per hundred thousand (Thalagala, 2009). The downward curve was clearly discernible when considering it was only 19.9 people committed suicide per hundred thousand in the year 2009 (Gunnell et al., 2007). According to the World Health Organization report published in 2014 on Prevention of suicides in the world, Sri Lanka ranked 4th among the countries with highest suicidal deaths. The ratio was 28.8 per hundred thousand (Knipe et al., 2015). But these numbers can be considered outdated as the WHO report was considering the statistics given by Sri Lanka in 2006. According to the data collected by the statistical division of the Sri Lanka Police, by 2012 the suicide ratio in Sri Lanka fell up to 17.1 per a population of hundred thousand. Therefore researches have indicated that by

then Sri Lanka was the 22nd among the countries recording highest number of suicides. It is a 26% decrease when considering 2006 data (Knipe et al., 2015). WHO global health observatory data states that, in line with the changes in the demographical dynamics in Sri Lanka the rate of suicides has fallen to 14.8 per hundred thousand in 2015 and further up to 14.25 per hundred thousand by the year 2019. Therefore, by 2019 Sri Lanka acquired the 29th position among the countries with highest suicides (Senevirathna & Sanjeevani, 2009).

The objective of this article is to consider the quantitative data about the suicides in Sri Lanka in the era 1970-2020 and to sociologically analyze about the Suicides in Sri Lankan demographics within these 5 decades. Hence this work will include a thorough sociological review on the changes in the Sri Lankan society, the resulted socio-cultural phenomena within the social, economic and cultural spheres and how the socio-cultural reforms affected by those phenomena decided the number of suicides in the island.

II. OBJECTIVES

The objective of this research article is to sociologically analyze the socio-cultural transformations occurred in different eras of Sri Lanka demographics and how those transformations has resulted in fluctuating the rate of suicides in Sri Lanka.

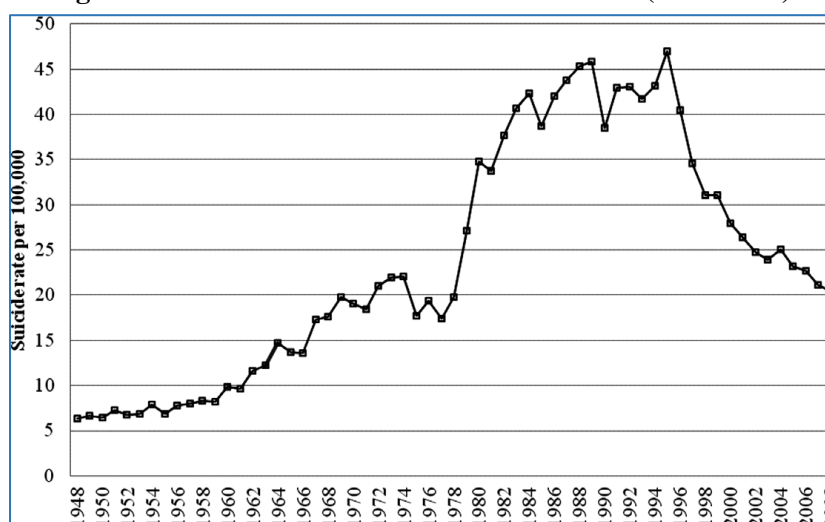
III. METHODOLOGY AND DATA

The recorded data about the suicide deaths in Sri Lanka in the time period of 5 decades from 1970-2020 were used for this sociological review. The reports published from institutional structures such as the World Health Organization (WHO), the statistical division of the Sri Lanka Police, the Registrar General's office in Sri Lanka and the Department of Census and Statistics in Sri Lanka were examined to acquire the aforementioned secondary sourced data.

IV. DISCUSSION

When observing the history of Suicidal deaths it can be seen that the number of suicides was comparatively low in the period Sri Lanka became independent from being a British colony. According to the Figure No.1, the suicides ratio in Sri Lanka was 6.9 per hundred thousand by 1950. But in two decades time, this number accelerated up to 19 per hundred thousand at the beginning of the 1970s (Department of Census and Statistics). The social, economic and political reforms in Sri Lanka done in the post independence era brought major changes in to various aspects of the society. Implementation of the Free Education act in 1947, the 1956 political transformation which enacted the Native language act and the community becoming able to get education in their native languages, can be named as a few. Simultaneously, numerous socio economic transformations took place such as the widening of ethnic divisions and the resulting ethnic conflict and the unemployment among educated youth as a result of the broadening of education opportunities. The socio-cultural relationships gradually becoming intricate and the problematic nature of people's lifestyles are the highlights of this period which corresponds to the transformations happening. It can be stated that the social disarray and anxiety in the initial years of the 1970s has lead to a climb in suicidal deaths (Marecek, 2016).

Figure No.1 - Suicide Death Ratio in Sri Lanka (1948-2006)



Source: Department of Police, Sri Lanka.

According to the represented data in the Figure No.1, it's evident that the suicides ratio 19 per hundred thousand recorded in 1970 further escalated in a rapid manner by the end of the 1990s. It reaches 34.8 per hundred thousand in 1980, 38 per hundred thousand by 1985 and clocks 47 suicides per a population of hundred thousand in the year 1995. Sri Lanka witnessed various socio-economic and cultural changes in this period which directly caused the number of suicides to shoot up to the brim. The social, economic and cultural reforms and factors which affected to the significant increase in the number of suicidal deaths in Sri Lanka from 1970 to the mid 1990s can be sociologically summarized as follows (Knipe et.al., 2014).

1. As a result of the political transformation in 1977 the prevailing closed economic model was replaced by a new open economic system: this brought a revolutionary change in the social, economic and cultural lives of Sri Lankans. Through vigorously transforming the economic base, it caused a dramatic shift in every aspect in socio-cultural superstructure according to the new economic model. Consequently, People were directed into prioritizing personal economic objectives by making economic status and money the ultimate dynamism while downsizing all the other so called values in the society. Individualism championed over collectivism and the social system of values including all the norms, morals and cultural values went powerless. The ultimate product of these social, economic and cultural transformations was the increase in the rate of suicides among the people who severed collective socio cultural ties and faced matters alone by themselves.

2. Escalation of the ethnic conflict in 1983 and the resulting Civil War: these ethnic conflicts dismantled the coexistence prevailed between Sinhala and Tamil ethnicities and resulted a huge chaos in the social environment. Death becoming a norm, society getting encapsulated by terror and violence, people's suffering due to the extreme uncertainty were the social consequences of the War. The socio-cultural life of an individual lost its substance and the social insecurity provoked anxiety among people. This had been a cause in the rise of suicides.

3. Sri Lankan women increasingly opting for foreign employment in the Middle East countries as housemaids after the introduction of the open economy in 1977: This radically transformed the traditional social status and the division of labour between men and women in the Sri Lankan society. It repelled the man from money earning and involved him in daily household chores and upbringing of the children as the woman became the financial linchpin being working abroad. This created significant changes and problems in the Sri Lankan family structure. The growing social discontent among men resulted in alcohol and drug addiction, adultery, family conflicts and divorce and this increased the tendency for suicide among men by 1990s (Thalagala, 2009). In the families with a foreign employed mother the children faced numerous issues such as being isolated, insecurity, tendency to get into love affairs in tender ages, being sexually abused by adults, unexpected pregnancies from pre marital sex and facing social defamation. This distress caused a hike in suicides among children in these families.

It's palpable that the above mentioned social, economic and cultural background was directly responsible for recording 47 suicides per a population of hundred thousand in the year 1995, which is the highest ratio recorded in Sri Lanka as well as the highest in the entire world in that period. However the Figure No.1 clearly denotes the start of a downward moment in suicides from the year 1996. The suicide ratio decreased up to 40 per hundred thousand in 1996 and following the same dynamic it lowered up to 28.8 by the year 2000. The ratio in 2000 is an 18% reduction when compared with 1995. Table No.1 shows the continuation of this positive decline from 2000 to 2019.

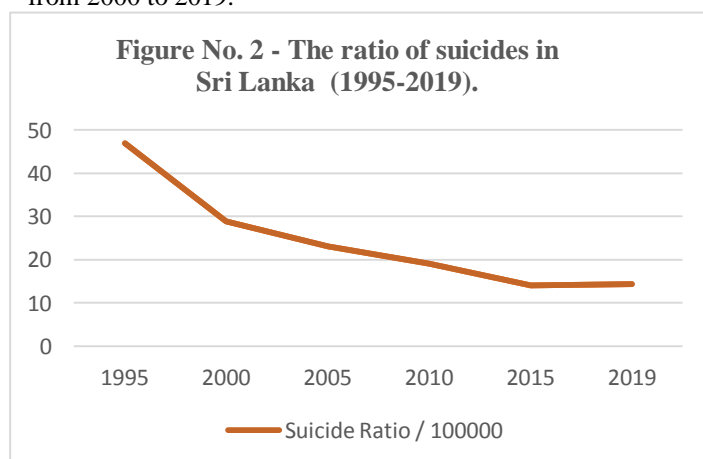


Table No.1 - Suicide Ratio in Sri Lanka (1995-2019)

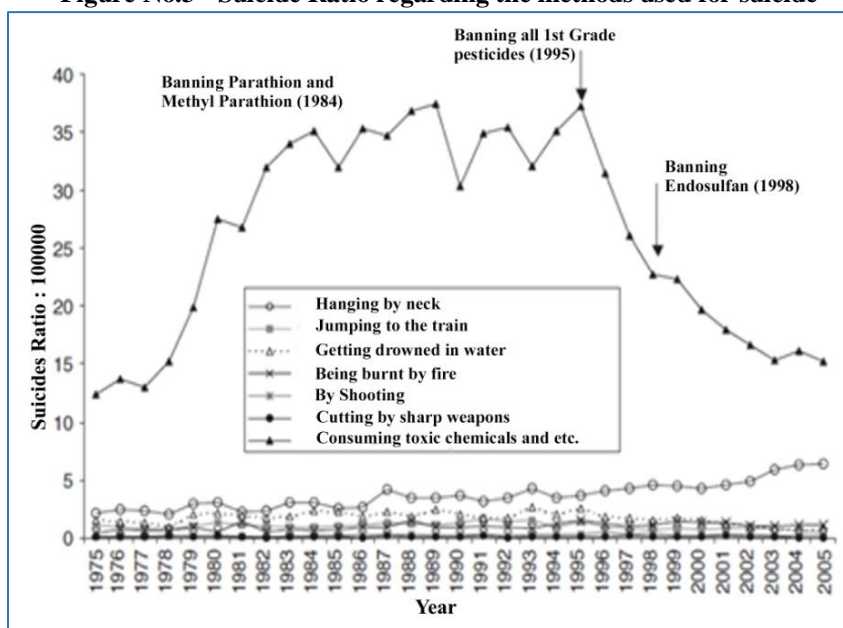
Year	Total Population	Total Deaths by suicides	Suicide Ratio /100000
1995	18242912	8574	47
2000	18777601	5408	28.8
2005	19544988	4515	23.1
2010	20261735	3870	19.1
2015	20970000	3058	14.8
2019	21900000	3135	14.3

Source: A data representation by the author citing various sources

According to the data represented in the Table No.1 and the Figure No.2, the year 1995 recorded the highest ratio of suicides which was 47:100000. It was the highest ratio recorded in the world in that year. Because of this Sri Lanka came under the world spotlight and the identification of suicides as a major social challenge to be addressed, paved way to implement various strategies to control the number of suicides since 1996. One major strategy was the appointing of a presidential commission to study this severe social matter and to construct an action plan to control it. Similarly, various government and non-governmental institutions initiated multiple projects to control the suicide deaths in Sri Lanka.

Public awareness programs, limitations in the use of pesticides, special programs to destroy the Oleander (Kaneru) plant which was abundant in rural areas and the training of medical staff can be named as some of the measures taken to control suicides in Sri Lanka. Above mentioned numbers demonstrate that these measures had an effect in the gradual declination of the suicide ratio after its peak in 1995 (Thalagala, 2009/ Kathriarachchi, 2009).

Figure No.3 - Suicide Ratio regarding the methods used for suicide



Source: Department of Police, Division of Statistics, Sri Lanka.

The data in the Figure No.1 reflects the rapid increase of the suicide ratio in Sri Lanka from the end of 1980s up to the beginning of the decade 1990s. The dominant method of committing suicide in this period was consuming pesticides. The Green Revolution implemented in 1960s brought considerable changes to the traditional Sri Lankan agriculture and the weedicides and insecticides began to freely circulate and be used. Sri Lankans got accustomed to use pesticides, to store them and to freely dispose the related equipment without any guidance or advice. As a result of the customary usage of pesticides among the common people, consuming pesticides became the most convenient manner of committing suicide. This is evident when 80% of the total suicidal attempts in the period 1987-1991 were carried out by consuming liquid pesticides or by a high dose of medicinal drugs (Kathriarachchi, 2009, p.176). The government back then got concerned about the effect of growing usage of toxic chemicals which was affecting the rapid increase in suicides in the country. The appointing of a secretary for the usage of pesticides in 1983 thereby constituting a legal foundation to regulate the pesticide use was an indication about the growing concern (Berger, 1988, p.827).

The presidential task force founded in the year 1997 issued a manifesto on controlling suicidal deaths. Following these guidelines, the Department of Education introduced the subject 'Life Skills' in to the secondary school education and conducted various programs island wide. Imposing of restrictions for the use of highly toxic pesticides by the Secretariat on Pesticides, programs conducted with the aid of the Department of Agriculture to limit the pesticide usage of farmers by promoting combined pest controlling techniques, can be mentioned as a couple of special measures taken by the authorities.

Apart from this, the work carried out by the non-governmental organizations like 'Sumithrayo' such as identifying the high risk social groups who are more vulnerable for suicides and conducting psychological clinics, programs and guiding certain people for medication, was also instrumental in turning the tide for the gradual decline in the ratio of suicides in Sri Lanka after the year 2000 as witnessed in the Table 1 and the Figure 2 (Silva, 2003). These measures were responsible for the statistical decline of the ratio of suicides from

28.8 per hundred thousand in 2000 in to 14.8 in 2015 and further down up to 14.3 suicides per a population of hundred thousand which was recorded in 2019.

There have been considerable changes in the economic, social and cultural spheres in the Sri Lankan society since 2000 and these have positively shifted the Sri Lankan status of living, attitudes and socio-cultural relationships. The formalizing of the foreign employment of mothers and the statutory measures to ensure the safety of the families and children were conducted. Furthermore, the end of the civil war in 2009 which lasted for 30 years caused a significant transformation in the country. Due to that, the insecurity of people's lives and the uncertainty about the future dissipated and fresh hopes and objectives about the future started to grow. The steps taken by the governments in the post war era for the reconciliation between ethnicities also caused positive changes in the society.

After the conclusion of the ethnic war in Sri Lanka, several new development programs and projects were initiated in the country (highways and other road development projects, agricultural irrigation projects like Moragahakanda) and it caused a social upheaval and presented new employment opportunities for the youth. These socio-economic reforms changed the uniformity and the anxiety which was spread throughout the society and a social background which gives a meaning for the life was originated. The 50% decrease of the ratio of suicides from 28.8 per hundred thousand in 2000 to 14.3 per hundred thousand recorded in 2019, emphasizes the positive impact of the above mentioned socio economic changes and reforms.

V. CONCLUSION

The social norms and the system of values in the Sri Lankan society constituted of its unique traditions, culture, customs and core values, has been a predominant presence for a long period of time. Since the traditional era people were accustomed to deeply respect and obey the social values while carrying out their socio-cultural life activities. Hence, it's evident that the Sri Lankan community maintained a higher level of collectivism, co-existence and integrity in the past. However, due to the origin of certain social circumstances and the initiation of several programs in the post independence era and also in the last five decades from 1970 to 2020, our native socio cultural structure as well as the native self sustaining economic system got drastically transformed. These new socio cultural characteristics which correspond to the Western culture, has deprived the people from the support they had by the backbone of the traditional culture to maintain their collective life style.

The newly inscribed socio economic environment forced Sri Lankans into a Western emulated, social, economic and cultural way of living. Gradually, people were lead to competitively acquire their own personal economic interests while making money and profit making the ultimate objective. The logical outcome of this was the deterioration of unity and co-existence which prevailed within the community. By referring to the aforementioned statistical data, it can be stated that the increase in the ratio of suicides among Sri Lankan population from 1950 to 2000 is analogous to this socio cultural transformation. Furthermore, it's palpable that the measures taken by the government and non-governmental organizations in certain moments had generally succeeded in addressing the factors which directly and indirectly encouraged the people to commit suicide. This conclusion can be made by observing the continuous decline of the suicidal ratio from 2000 to 2019.

Through the above mentioned data, we can sketch a clear picture of the social, economic and cultural environment which existed within the country in times which the tendency of suicide was in a rise. When analyzing this condition sociologically, what is perceptible is the fact that the hike in the suicidal trend was an outcome of the effect on an individual, exerted by the socio-cultural environment which was undergoing certain transformations. Therefore, this sociological review further clarifies that the primary causes for a suicide are the 'social factors' in one's own socio-cultural sphere. Furthermore it can be concluded that the experimentally proven notion by the French sociologist Emile Durkheim (1858-1917) which states that, the 'Individualistic factors' such as the psychological and physical condition of a certain person has a secondary effect on suicides, can be validated for Sri Lankan social conditions.

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