

# URBANIZATION AS A CAUSAL FACTOR FOR SUICIDE: A STUDY IN INDIAN CONTEXT

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**Abstract:** Suicide, according to Merriam Webster (1828), is defined as an act or an instance of taking one's own life voluntarily or intentionally by a person of years of discretion and of sound mind. According to Condorelli (2016), Sociological analysis of suicide makes an opportunity for a more general discussion on the relationship between individual and community, individual identity and collective identity, human nature and social normativity. Thus, suicide which is considered as a personal act, purely based on the will of an individual is viewed from the perspective of social factors which leads an individual to take such a decision to commit suicide.

Urbanization, along with industrialization and economic development, brings about immense cultural changes in the society, leading to changes in the perspectives of people. Not all can cope with the cultural changes. When the existing institutions fail to meet people's requirements as per the changing perspectives, some people have an inclination towards adopting deviant behaviour.

This paper gives a picture about what suicide is, its place in sociological and social anthropological study and suicide as viewed from Durkheimian theory. It further undertakes to test the hypothesis: urbanization and modernization as one of the causal factors for suicide. Statistics of urban suicide is reported. Urbanization in India, especially urbanization in the Bangalore city and a scenario of a higher educational institution is discussed with regard to egoistic and anomic suicide.

**Keywords:** Suicide, Urbanization, Deviant Behaviour, Culture, Individual and Community, Emile Durkheim.

**Introduction:** Suicide, according to Merriam Webster (1828), is defined as an act or an instance of taking one's own life voluntarily or intentionally by a person of years of discretion and of sound mind. This paper analyzes the impact of urbanization on suicide, thereby testing the hypothesis that one of the major causal factors for suicide is urbanization, which in turn leads to modernization. "Modernization, in sociology, is the transformation from a traditional, rural, agrarian society to a secular, urban, industrial society" (Kumar 2016, 1).

The paper, through secondary research, especially through documents, studies 'suicide' in Indian context. It emphasizes on Emile Durkheim's theory on suicide and tries to assert the relevance of Durkheimian concept of suicide in Indian context generally and in the Indian urban context particularly. Statistics of urban suicide is reported. This is followed by a note on how cities have become "killers". In this context, special focus is given to the study of suicide cases in Bangalore city. Further, the paper analyses suicide in an educational institution in India in the light of 'anomic suicide' of Durkheim.

The current study contributes to the field of Sociology, social anthropology and Suicidology.

**'Suicide' in Social Anthropological Literature:** Suicidal behaviour raises questions about human culture and nature, thus becoming a sociological and social anthropological question. Bloch (2005) reports that anthropology in its broadest sense concerns about the questions that people ask about themselves and the world. Thus, the questions of survival or coping with difficult circumstances becomes one of the central themes of anthropological study (Staples and Widger 2012). Sociological analysis of suicide brings in an opportunity for a more general discussion on the relationship between individual and community, individual identity and collective identity, human nature and social normativity (Condorelli 2016). Thus, 'suicide' is studied from the perspective of social factors that moves an individual to decide to commit suicide

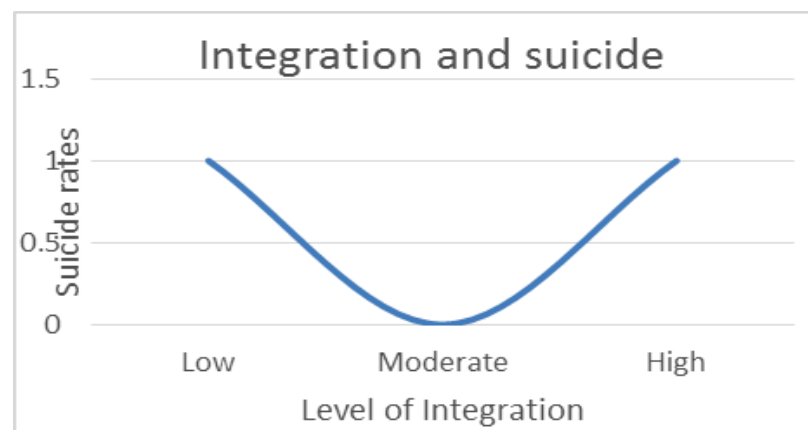
**Emile Durkheim and Suicide:** One of the earliest sociological studies on suicide was carried out by a French Sociologist, Emile Durkheim. In his seminal monograph 'Suicide' (1897), Durkheim puts forth four types of suicides prevalent in the society. They are egoistic suicide, anomic suicide, altruistic suicide, and fatalistic suicide. According to Durkheimian theory, egoism, altruism and anomie are moral states of society. Collective ways of acting and thinking influence the behaviour of the individual and pushes him/her to comply with moral pressures rather than acting on a free choice of self-determination. (Condorelli 2016).

**Egoistic Suicide:** Emile Durkheim holds that, social integration and suicidal rates are inversely proportional. Social integration refers to subordination of individuals to the group. "Subordination of individual self-interest to others is viewed as central to giving life meaning according to Durkheim (1897/1966)" (Stack 2004, 10). Durkheim believes that greater the social integration, greater the chance of people finding meaning in life and thus resulting in lower suicidal rates. He illustrates that suicidal rates among the Catholics is lesser as compared to Protestants as they have greater integration (Stack 2004). Durkheim points out the dark side of freedom. He holds that modernity and individualism comes at a cost; the cost is isolation which leads to lack of meaning in life itself (Condorelli 2016). More specifically, in such a circumstance, life no longer has any sense because it has no purpose, as society; the family, the Church, the Fatherland have become more and more extraneous to the individual (Condorelli 2016, 1). "The increased modernization levels results in weakening of social ties and social isolation increases. The more an individual depends only on himself/herself and recognizes no other rules of conduct than which are founded on his/her private interest, the more egoism increases, leading to more social isolation. With loss of identity and loss of the sense of life itself, people commit suicide (Condorelli 2016). Hence, Egoistic suicide is characterized by the prevalence of individual interest to that of the collective interest. Durkheim suggests that family and religion act as major factors which prevents suicidal tendency. "Statistics today present greatest suicide rates for the same religious groups and marital status that were treated by Durkheim in his sociological study: protestants, singles, childless married couples, widowers, separated and divorced people..." (Condorelli 2016)

**Anomic Suicide:** Durkheim conceptualizes anomic suicide as typically present in modern societies which stems out of loss of society's power of regulation. Here Durkheim's conviction regarding human nature is that of having uncontrollable passions, which only strict, obligatory social rules can control, which in turn safeguards life in society. The term anomie was defined by Durkheim as a condition where social norms and rules are unclear, undefined or are not present. This, according to Durkheim would lead to deviant behaviour. This kind of suicide can be witnessed in times of industrial or financial crisis. Whenever there is a disturbance in equilibrium, there is a tendency for suicide as the existing norms cannot suffice the changes in the society (Condorelli 2016).

**Fatalistic Suicide:** Fatalistic suicide stems out of excessive regulation. This kind of suicide is committed by people whose passions are suppressed by oppressive discipline. Conditions of slavery may cause 'fatalistic suicide'. A person, in the state of slavery feels condemned by fate and feels that suicide is the only way to escape. This type of suicide is less to be seen in the modern industrial societies according to Durkheim. (Durkheim, 1897)

**Altruistic Suicide:** Altruistic suicide essentially has four features: 1) a context of abnormally excessive societal integration; 2) is generally marked by support from public opinion; 3) it benefits society materially or culturally; and 4) is often marked by positive emotionality opposed to a melancholic psychological state. Here, the person is so integrated to the group that he/she loses the sense of individuality. Individuals commit suicide for something that they love better than themselves. This kind of suicide is seen in primitive societies and in modern military. (Stack 2004). Durkheim observes that altruistic suicide is unlikely to occur much in modern, industrialized society where 'individual personality is increasingly freed from the collective personality.' "A U-shaped curve, thus best depicts the relationship between integration and suicide. Suicide is high at very low levels of integration, and then lowers as integration reaches moderate levels. Suicide rates again increase at very high levels of integration" (Stack 2004, 3).



**Figure 1:** Figure Showing the Relationship between Level of Integration in the Society And Suicide Rates

**Modernization and Suicide:** Knowledge about Durkheim's theory on suicide would augment to study the impact of urbanization and modernization on suicide.

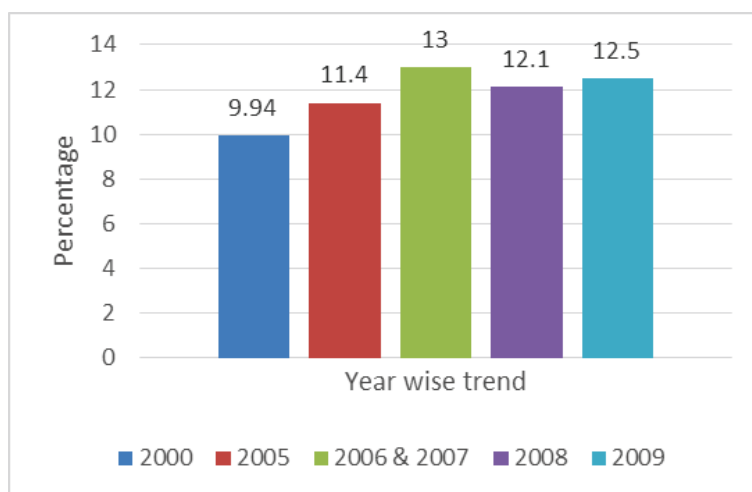
City, by the eighteenth century, became more or less a metaphor for habits like intemperance, melancholy, decline of religious faith, and licentiousness, which, since the seventeenth century had been connected with the causes of suicide. The association of suicide, urbanization, and modernity gained immense intensity in the beginning of the nineteenth century as it witnessed the swelling of urban populations and the growth of urban classes which exhibited less attachment to traditional authoritarian structures. (Kushner 1993)

Modernization is one powerful cause that is often linked to suicide in many of the countries. The rising crime rates due to increase in urbanization and modernization in the newly independent third world has been studied by Clinard and Abbott (1973). Their argument holds that higher expectations with regard to education and better employment of new migrants could not be met by rapidly growing cities. This in turn became a causal factor for increase in crime rates. Thus the 'revolution of the rising expectation' argument leading to high crimes can be perceived as an outcome of growing gap between material desires and urban reality. Hence, the ones who tend to be drawn into criminal activities are the unemployed urban slum dwellers, who are deeply affected by these forces. (Kushner 1993)

There is also an emerging trend for cyber-based internet-facilitated suicide pacts which increasingly involve two or more strangers who meet on the internet and share similar world view (Radhakrishnan and Andrade 2012). The Blue Whale game or Blue Whale Challenge is believed to be a suicide game wherein a group of administrators or a certain curator gives a participant a task to complete daily — for a period of 50 days — the final of which is the participant committing suicide. Participants are expected to share photos of the challenges/tasks completed by them (DESK 2017). The computer game, believed to have been developed in Russia in 2013, has become one of the most controversial online games worldwide and has been blamed for suicides by more than 130 teenagers worldwide (Bushan 2017). Dr. Samir Parikh (2017), director, department of mental health and behavioural sciences, Fortis Hospital, Gurgaon, explains, "...Teenagers are the best targets for such games that look out for vulnerable teens who seek acceptance, acknowledgement and attention from peers. Dr Seema (2017) shares, "Many teens come to me complaining about loneliness. They complain their parents are too busy for them and they have no friends. I recently had a 16-year-old come to me complaining he doesn't want to live because no one likes him. These are the same kids who are searching 'painless deaths' on Google. They go to suicide forums" (Sharma 2017). The tendency of teenagers to commit suicide under such circumstances can be studied under the 'egoistic suicide' of Emile Durkheim, where social integration becomes low, leading to more social isolation.

**Urbanization as a cause for suicidal behaviour: A study in Indian Context:** India has been a major contributor to the urban explosion in Asia because of its large demographic weight and the dynamics of urbanisation. India's share of the projected world urban population is expected to be increasing to 14 percent in 2050 from 10 percent in 2011, and a rapid increase in the number of cities in 1950 have been cited as evidence of unprecedented urban growth in India. While urbanization has brought in economic, political and social progress, it has also lead to many socio-economic problems. Pollution, crimes, overcrowding, unemployment, shortage of water and sewage problems are only few of the problems that urban dwellers face. (Kundu 2011)

The tendency for suicide in urban society is higher. The causes include :dissolution of social bonds as individuals move away from their family and community; faster pace of life; and growth of overweening ambition. Urban areas generally report higher suicide rates because of various stressors related to living and working in cities, including social isolation and overcrowding. During the year 2000, though the suicide rate in India was 10.8%, the rate in urban areas was slightly lower at 9.94%. There has been an increase in urban suicide rates to 11.4% in 2005, 13% in 2006 and 2007, and 12.1% to 12.5% in 2008 and 2009 (Radhakrishnan and Andrade 2012).



**Figure 2:** Figure Showing Suicide Rate and Their Corresponding Year, In Urban Population

Studies in recent years are consistent in this regard: attempted suicides and suicides were more common in persons living in urban areas. (Radhakrishnan and Andrade 2012) "In India, the top 10 causes or correlates of suicide in 2009 were family problems (23.7%), illness (21%) [Including insanity/ mental illness (6.7%)], unemployment (1.9%), love affairs (2.9%), drug abuse/addiction (2.3%), failure in examination (1.6%), bankruptcy or sudden change in economic status (2.5%), poverty (2.3%), and dowry dispute (2.3%). High rates of suicide among persons with mental illness and drug abuse/addiction, though not a measure of intent, are of much concern. Many of the remaining causes namely, suspected/illicit relation, cancellation/non-settlement of marriage, not having children (barrenness/impotency), death of a dear one, dowry dispute, divorce, ideological causes/hero worship, illegitimate pregnancy, physical abuse (rape, incest, etc.), poverty, professional/career problem reflect the unique social structure of our society and the social pressures that individuals face". (Radhakrishnan and Andrade 2012, 312). The number of suicides in Indian cities has gone up — from 13,071 in 2008 to 18,280 in 2011. It was 13,675 in 2010. The steep increase in 2011 over 2010 is due to the emergence of 18 new mega cities, the NCRB (2015) report states.

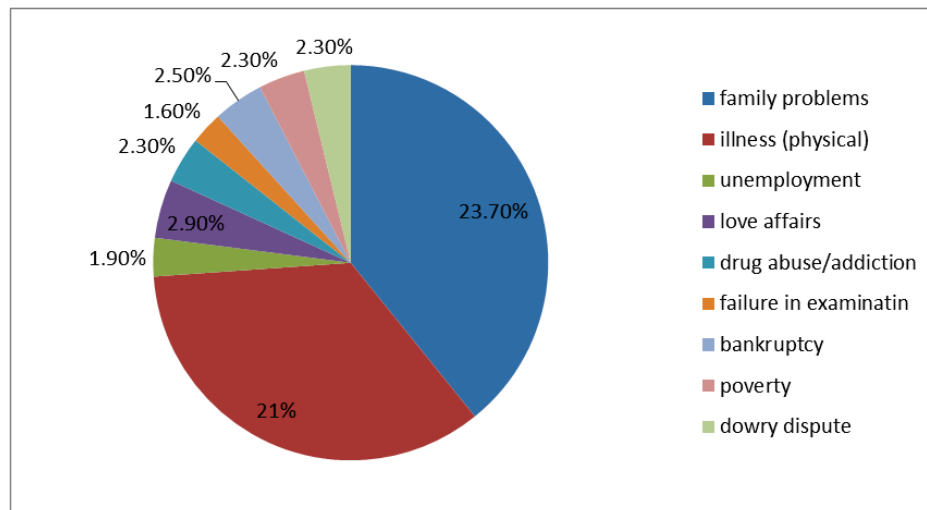


Figure 3: Pie Chart Showing Causes of Suicide in India (2009)

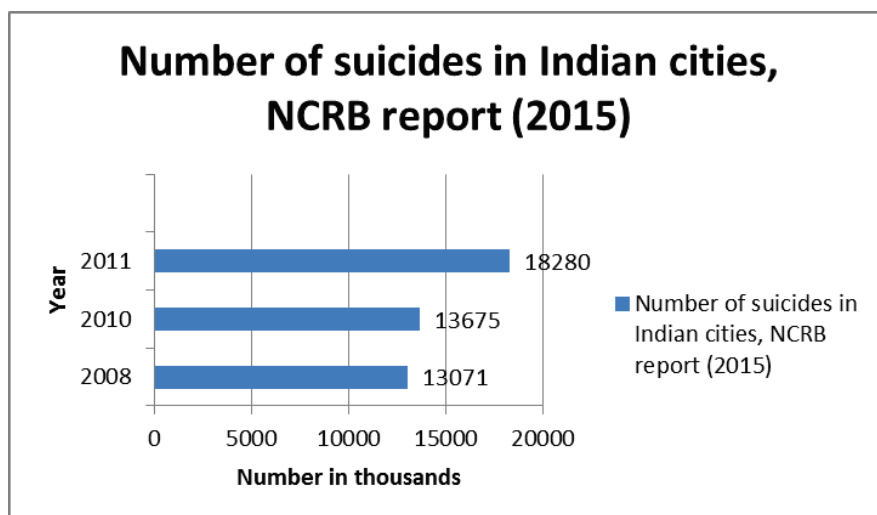
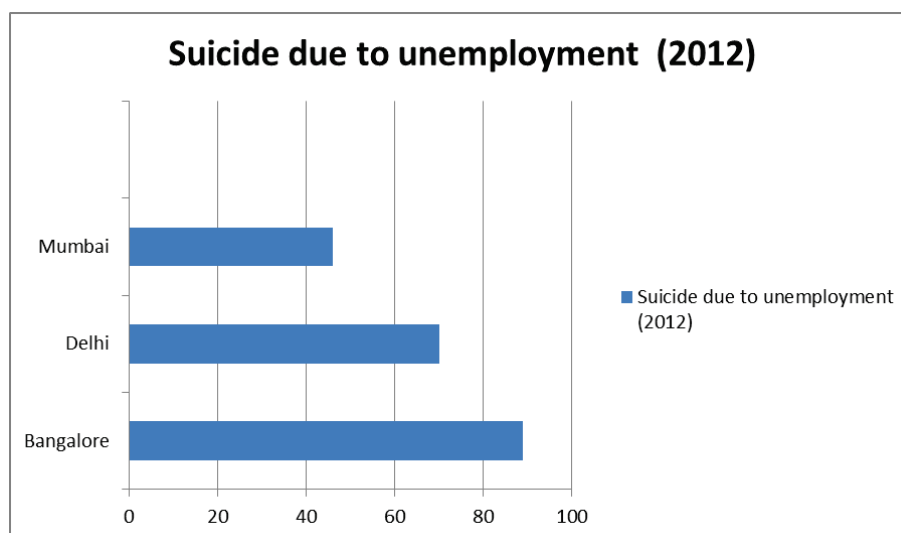


Figure 4: Bar Diagram Showing the Number of Suicides (in thousands) in 2008, 2010 and 2011

Bangalore, the silicon city of India is also the city of suicide. As per the statistics of 2004, as many as 2,000 cases are registered every year in Bangalore, which accounts for 17 percent of all suicides in the country. Bangalore, unlike any other city in India, has transformed into a bustling metropolis within a generation. The society, economy and infrastructure have rapidly changed, thus making it difficult for the residents to cope with fast changing atmosphere. The city has turned out to be a suicide hub. Some of the reasons for this include, teenagers being forced to take professional courses as per the demands of the job market. There is a prejudice among the south Indian families against humanities. Arts and humanities are considered as the courses which are supposed to be taken by girls who wished to get married. The media also projects the software titans as heroes. (Guha 2004). "What's bothering the current adolescent generation is stress due to academics, relationship with parents, peer groups and romantic relationships," mentions Dr M Manjula (2012), associate professor, department of psychiatry, NIMHANS. The rise in incomes had led to rise in desires. The growing competition in the field of software and the rapidly changing lifestyle also include to be causal factors of suicide in the city. While software professionals are flocking towards the city, it is to be noted that Bangalore has witnessed highest number of suicides because of unemployment (Deccan Herald, 2012). Deccan Herald reports that, according to the recently-published 'Accidental Deaths and Suicides in India 2012' report, 89 people ended their lives in Bangalore due to unemployment, while in 2011 the figure was 47. A comparison with other metros shows that Bangalore is way ahead: Delhi recorded 70 cases and Mumbai

46 in 2012. An analysis of figures also showed that Bangalore accounted for more than 50 per cent of suicides by jobless in Karnataka, which had 166 cases. Though Maharashtra had 258 such cases, its capital Mumbai saw just 46 such cases. Bangalore also accounted for more than 50 per cent of suicides due to poverty among metro cities, with 123 cases out of the total 214. The statistics and the scenario presented shows that Durkheim's theories on suicide are still prevalent. As he had pointed out, egoistic suicide and anomic suicide are the most prevalent forms of suicide in industrial societies; including cities like Bangalore.



**Figure 5:** Bar Graph Showing Suicide Rates Due To Unemployment In 2012 In Mumbai, Delhi and Bangalore

Apart from increase in the rates of unemployment, the instances of anomic suicides in Indian cities can be observed in higher educational institutions. According to Durkheim, anomic suicides occur when individual's expectations exceed and when social norms and rules are unclear, undefined or are not present. If we are to draw inferences from Durkheim's concepts of anomic suicide which is said to stem out of loss of society's power of regulation, the suicide of Rohit Vemula, a Dalit (term which denotes members of lower casts in India) research scholars from University of Hyderabad and similar such cases show the failure of implementation of rules (especially with regard to Right to Equality) in right spirit and failure of the society to understand the aspirations of Dalit scholars and making space for their growth. Due to rapidly occurring cultural changes; one of the reasons for this being modernization and urbanization, educated Dalits in India expect a life in which there is no discrimination based on caste. When these expectations cannot be reached and further they are humiliated to have such expectations, there is a tendency for a different behaviour, mostly in the form of protest against the existing social set up regarding the issue. In such a scenario, if institutions fail to regulate the circumstances, I believe individuals have a tendency to commit suicide, to register their protest against the circumstances they have encountered. Assuming Durkheim's conviction regarding human nature of having uncontrollable passions, which only strict, obligatory social rules can control, which in turn safeguards life in society (Condorelli 2016) to be true, it can be observed that in the Dalit scholars suicide, the controlling minds of the society/Institution failed to understand that aspirations are unrelated to caste and their aspirations were not a threat to any particular community or individual in the society.

**Conclusion:** Urbanization, along with industrialization and economic development, brings about immense cultural changes in the society, leading to changes in the perspectives of people. Not all can cope with cultural changes which include changes regarding one's relation to family, religion, country etc. This sometimes leads them to end their lives. Modernization also brings about changes in the outlook of people. When the existing institutions cannot meet the requirements as per the changing perspective, people have an inclination towards adopting a deviant behaviour. Thus, egoistic suicide and anomic suicide are widely prevalent in modern society. There are also instances where modernization



causes rural suicide. According to P. Sainath (2004), corporate farming and large entity farming lay greater pressure on farmers leading them to commit suicide.

The paper, thus gives a picture about what suicide is, its place in sociological and social anthropological study and suicide as viewed from Durkheimian theory. It further undertakes to test the hypothesis: urbanization and modernization as one of the causal factors for suicide. Urbanization in India, especially urbanization in the Bangalore city and a scenario of a higher educational institution is discussed with regard to egoistic and anomic suicide. The essay can further be augmented if both qualitative and quantitative studies are made with regard to sociological aspects of suicide and the theory of Durkheim in accordance with the contemporary circumstances in India.

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