Decoding the Blue Whale Challenge from Sociological Perspectives

Anirban Mukherjee* and Satish Kumar Shukla**

We are living in a world characterized by technological advancement and change. Recently there has been a surge in the suicide rates among the teenagers across the world and the cause is attributed to the “Blue Whale Game”. This online game was invented by Philip Budeikin and he justified the self-mutilating nature of the game as an act of cleansing the biological waste of society. India has not been immune from the attack of the Blue Whale Challenge suicide and there has been instances of such suicides or suicide attempts in the cities of Mumbai, Kolkata, and Thiruvananthapuram. As per the Hindustan Times Report (2017), 130 boys and girls across the world were the victims of the Blue Whale Challenge. Therefore, this study attempts to interpret the seemingly ‘individual act’ of suicide from different sociological perspectives namely, the structural functional perspective, conflict theory, symbolic interactionist approach, and postmodern perspectives.

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1. Introduction

The intentional act of killing oneself is designated as suicide. There can be various reasons for committing suicide and some of them are depression, bipolar disorder, other schizophrenia, personality disorder, substance abuse, alcoholism, financial issues, relationship troubles, etc. Thus, the general conception of suicide is that it is a personal act and an individual resorts to suicide because of personal
and psychological reasons (Khan, Naz, and Khan, 2017). Sociologists, on the other hand, designate suicide to be a social problem and attribute its cause to unstable social environment. Emile Durkheim (1897), for instance, viewed suicide to be a social fact and identified its cause in lack of social integration and regulation.

Suicide is indeed a social problem in India and the magnitude of the problem can be gauged from the fact that one student commits suicide every hour in the country (Report of Hindustan Times, May 8, 2017). In fact, according to the Lancet Report of 2012, the country has the dubious distinction of having one of the world’s highest suicide rates among the youths in the age category of 15 to 29 years. An exemplifying statistics in this regard can be 8,934 students committed suicide in 2015 and in the five years leading to 2015, 39,775 students engaged in the self-annihilating act (Report of Hindustan Times, May 8, 2017).

Recently, there has been a rise in the suicide rates among the children and teenagers across the world and the cause is attributed to an online game, “Blue Whale Game”. The game was invented in 2013 by Philip Budeikin, a 21-year-old psychology student. The self-mutilating nature of the game was justified by Budeikin as an act of eradicating the “biological waste” of society. In fact, Budeikin was arrested in 2016 for inciting suicide of 16 teenage girls (Report of Mail One, May 10, 2017). As per the report of Hindustan Times, August 4, 2017, 130 boys and girls across the world were victims of the blue whale challenge.

The blue whale game is controlled by an administrator, who instructs the participant about every stage of the game. The game involves various challenges that the participant has to accomplish within a span of 50 days and the challenges become increasingly pernicious with the final stage being suicide. Some of the baleful challenges are poking one’s hand with needles multiple times, cutting one’s lips, standing on the edge of a bridge, curving “f 57” on one’s hand, etc (Report of the Hindustan Times, August 27, 2017). Now let us briefly describe some of the blue whale suicide cases in India and then discuss the interpretation of such suicides from various sociological perspectives.

2. Blue Whale Suicide Cases in India


Manoj C. Manu, a 16-year-old boy from Kerala hanged himself to death on July 26, 2017. An interview with the boy’s mother, Anu, revealed that Manoj was playing blue whale game since the last nine months and noticed drastic changes in his behaviour subsequently. For instance, Manoj of late used to visit beach all by
himself, stayed awake all night, used to go to cemeteries, delved into river despite not having swimming skills, made a friend to curve three alphabets on hand using compass (Report of The News Minute, August 15, 2017). Also, Manoj was reported to be introvert by nature, stayed occupied with mobile games and isolated himself further in the months before his death (Report of the News Minute, August 15, 2017).

Similarly, Ankan Dey, a tenth standard boy in West Bengal suffocated himself to death by covering his head with a plastic bag. It was later disclosed by a friend of Ankan that he was playing the Blue Whale Challenge (Report of NDTV News, August 13, 2017). Ankan was also an addict of online games and on the fateful day remained absent from school to go to his father’s shop to play games on his computer (Report of the Times of India, August 13, 2017).

Nineteen-year-old J. Vignesh alias Vickey of Tamil Nadu is identified as another victim of the blue whale challenge. Apart from piercing the image of blue whale on his forearm, the boy in his suicide note explicitly mentioned blue whale challenge to be the cause of his death and described the blue whale trap to be “inescapable”. (Report of the NDTV, August 31, 2017). His parents also noticed him to be absorbed in his phone and playing the game stealthily during odds hours of the day. He was further found to be depressed and preferred to remain secluded in the last few months (Report of the NDTV News, August 31, 2017).

In all the above mentioned cases of blue whale suicides, it was found that the teenagers were depressed and suffered from low self-esteem (Report of the Hindustan Times, August 4, 2017). Consequently, their sense of self-inadequacy urged them to engage in games and challenges that would earn them approval and affirmation from their peers. The developers of the game are very much aware of the prevailing mental setup of teenagers and they specifically target(ed) those who feel unhappy and frustrated at their present state of being. Thus, the blue whale administrators are quick to reach out to the teenagers who express their vulnerability and depression on online platforms (Report of the Hindustan Times, August 1, 2017). Initial interaction with such teenagers help the (game’s) administrators to gauge their mental state and few tasks are given to understand their eagerness to proceed with the challenges (Report of the India Today, August 13, 2017).

3. Interpreting Blue Whale Suicide Cases from Sociological Perspectives

3.1 Structural Functional Perspective

The Structural Functional Perspective compares society to a system having various parts and these parts work together in the maintenance of societal harmony and integration. These parts, namely educational institutes, kinship and
family ties, religion, state, etc., are functional in shaping human life and maintenance of stability in society (Ritzer, 2011).

In line with the structural functionalist approach, Emile Durkheim in his work “Suicide” (1897) posited that the apparently personal act of suicide has social roots. He observed that suicide is caused by particular social currents that are ‘external’ to an individual and exerts ‘coercive’ influence over him/her. The Durkheimian approach to suicide was more concerned about explaining the difference in suicide rates among various groups than about explaining individual cases of suicide (Ritzer, 2011). Thus he believed that differences in suicide rates across groups could be explained in terms of variation in the degree of social integration and regulation (Thorlindsson and Bjarnason, 1998). He defined integration as the degree to which collective consciousness is shared by the group members and regulation as the level of external constraint on group members. Therefore, based on differential levels of integration and regulation, Durkheim classified suicide into four categories-egoistic, altruistic, anomic, fatalistic (Bearman, 1991).

Egoistic suicide is more common in societies featuring low levels of social integration. In large societies people are free to pursue their private interests and such unrestrained egoism often leads to dissatisfaction as all needs of a man cannot be fulfilled. Nonetheless, individuals strongly integrated in society by virtue of participation in familial, religious, and political ties are discouraged from committing suicide. In other words, Durkheim believed that agony resulting from pursuit of excessive individualism and concurrent loss of social ties predisposes individual in committing suicide (Ritzer, 2011). Similarly, Halbwachs (1930) explained the rise of suicide rates in cities in terms of increased impersonality and lack of social integration.

In contrast to Egoistic suicide, people commit Altruistic suicide when “social integration is too strong” (Durkheim, 1897/1951: 217). Mass suicide of women according to the Jauhar tradition, because their husbands suffered defeat in the battle is an instance of altruistic suicide. Thus, in variance to egoistic suicide, altruistic suicide is sacrifice of life because of “beautiful perspectives beyond this life” (Durkheim, 1897/1951: 225).

Anomic suicide occurs when the regulatory mechanisms of society are in waning conditions. Thus, during the times of economic boom and bust, the collectivity have little authority over individuals, which leads to normlessness or anomie. Individuals, in such conditions, have little control over their passions, and unfulfilled desires instigate them to commit suicide (Ritzer, 2011).

While Anomic suicide is caused due to loss of regulatory mechanisms of society, Fatalistic suicide occurs because of excessive social regulation. The suicide of army personnel due to excessive social regulation whereby their “passions violently chocked by oppressive discipline” is an example of fatalistic suicide (Durkheim, 1897/1951: 276).
Applying Durkheimian (1951) analysis to the Blue Whale suicide cases, such suicide could be seen as instances of ‘Egoistic Suicide’ and the cause may located in the lack of social integration and ‘excessive individuation’ that characterizes the modern society.

3.2 Conflict Theory

The issue of rising blue whale suicide could also be explained from the Conflict approach. The approach focuses on inequality in society in terms of wealth, power, prestige, race, gender, caste, etc. and how such inequality leads to conflict and change. A conflict theory would thus reason the blue whale suicide cases in the eroding social capital in the modern capitalistic society. There are two forms of social capital—‘Cognitive Social Capital’ and ‘Structural Social Capital’ (Khan, Naz, and Khan, 2017). The former refers to the norms, values, attitudes, and beliefs that we learn in society and are instrumental in promoting cooperative and harmonious behaviour. The structural social capital, on the other hand, refers to the various social networks that individuals have and develop in society (Khan, Naz, Khan, 2017). It may very well be argued that modern industrial society encourages people to be goal directed, achievement oriented and individualistic. Such society, as Putnam (1995) argues, is underlined by the lack of community comradeship and declining social capital. This is evidenced in the form of declining civic engagement of people and their involvement in community affairs. In the race for success and profit maximization, empathy for fellow human beings is lost. In fact, Louis Wirth in his celebrated work, “Urbanism as a Way of Life” (1938) have highlighted on the alienating nature of urban life and how people feel frustrated and agitated in lonely urban life. Furthermore, metropolitan life is characterized by the declining importance of familial values and integration; as was aptly illustrated by Thorlindsson and Bjarnason’s (1998) study of suicide among Icelandic youth.

3.3 Symbolic Interactionist Approach

A Symbolic Interactionist would offer a different perspective in interpreting the blue whale suicides. They would argue that people are largely unsuccessful in social interaction and relationships in modern society and this results in substance abuse, domestic violence, divorce, maritaldiscords, discipline issues with children, etc. (Naroll, 1965; Krauss and Krauss, 1968; Khan, Naz, Khan, 2017). In fact, studies by Corcoran and Nagar (2010) and Samaritans (2012) confirm that people who are unsuccessful in their family and social relationships are more likely to commit suicide. Additionally, Symbolic Interactionists also view that modern society is becoming increasingly devoid of relations of reciprocity, which in times of crisis triggers higher rates of suicide (Palmer, 1972; Khan, Naz, Khan, 2017).
3.4 Postmodern Perspectives

The perspective is critical about the inability of the existing theories in explaining social life in modern societies. Postmodern society is characterized by information explosion and rise in the service sector jobs. Thus, ‘consumerism’ has become the existing norm and the electronic technologies have shrunk the world into a “global village” (McLuhan, 1962). In other words, rapid advancement of technology in the modern world have altered the nature of relationship through ‘time-space’ compression (Harvey, 1989). One of the main characteristics of postmodern societies is fragmentation (Beck, 1986; Baumann, 1999; Moller-Leimkuhler, 2003). It can be fragmentation of goals, purposes, ideals, values, etc. and the consequent prevalence of subjective construction of meaning (Eckersley and Dear, 2002). So, reality has become ‘unstable’ with the erosion of collectivity and individuals have become prone to suffer from identity crisis (Moller-Leimkuhler, 2003).

Higher incidence of blue whale suicides among the male teenagers compared to females can be explained in terms of greater emphasis on value of ‘individualism’ in the traditional male gender-roles (Moller-Leimkuhler, 2003). In the competitive postmodern world, males see themselves as struggling while “all other males seem to be happy, healthy, optimistic, competitive, successful and self-actualised.” (Moller-Leimkuhler, 2003: 6). They pay the extra price in the form of anxiety, stress, self-doubt, depression, etc. In their attempt to escape, teenagers refuge in the world of ‘simulacra’ or unreal representation of reality i.e. the virtual world (Jameson, 1990). Suicides because of blue whale challenge could be understood as instances of teenagers chasing simulacra or fake realities.

4. Conclusion

Modernity has both positive and negative consequences. On the positive side, modernity has provided us freedom, security and convenience, while, on the hind side, it has increased risk, competition, and individualism. In contrast to the pre-modern societies which was based on face-to-face social interaction, modernity has led to abstraction of time and space. This has disembedded our social relations across time and space and increased our reliance on abstract systems. Stated differently, we are and have become excessively dependent on unfamiliar experts and systems in order to ply through our day-to-day lives (Giddens, 1991; Appelrouth and Edles, 2007).

Modernity also implies a threat to our ‘ontological security’ (Giddens, 1991). Generally, people strive to routinize their lives and preserve their self-identities in order to better withstand the onslaught of uncertainty and risk of the modern age. However, our fast-paced lives challenge our sense of ontological security and identity. As a measure to cope up with the challenge, people try to develop and enter into relationships, which requires self-disclosure and development of trust.
Ironically, the concept of ‘intimacy’ is redefined in the modern world and people are increasingly seen to rely on outside agencies (like relationship expects) for building their relationships (Appelrouth and Edles, 2007).

Teenagers become increasingly deprived of the sense of ontological security in the modern times and as a result feel lonely and lost. In the absence of breathing space in the real world, teenagers seek solace in the virtual world. Dejected by rejection in the real world, blue whale challenge provides a platform for the teenagers to prove their mettle and emerge victorious.

Alas! The Challenge is won at the cost of life.

References


