



## Ponnani Rekha:

### *A ten-point program to counter suicides in a community*

| Manoj kumar Therayil & Praveenlal Kuttichira |

**P**re-adolescent marriages are discouraged universally and Government of India regularly organizes campaigns against it.

One of the Block Panchayaths in Kerala also falls under the target area for interventions due to high frequency of pre-adolescent marriages. In the year 1999-2000 during the period of Peoples' Plan Campaign (Thomas Issac & Richrad Franke 2002) the program was organized by local political activists involving subject experts in the locality. Instead of the usual pattern of counter-propaganda based on highlighting negatives, it was decided to highlight the need for maturity for a healthy married life. Under the Project AMMA (Mother) trained volunteers visited 25000 households under Ponnani Block Panchayath. They actively interacted with people and distributed handouts. The feedbacks were an eye-opener.

The people reported that they were already aware of all those facts and messages, but their worries were about other things.

They narrated how their children were stressed from studies and did not know how to handle it. They asked for useful tips to support and care for aged parents and sick relatives. Parents of the mentally-impaired expressed their inability to take children to far-away hospitals for getting required medical certificates for pension. They showed *Thoongithara* (platform of hanging) at the village centre where many people committed suicide in the past few years and demanded advice to stop it. No activist can continue to work in the same community ignoring such questions. Encouraged by the mood existing in the community with *Janakeeya-soothranam* (Peoples' Planning-popular term in Malayalam for People's Plan Campaign Project) in the background, all these questions were systematically responded to.

A two-day workshop of local activists, grassroots-level social workers and experts deliberated on the issue of rising trends of suicide. The workshop was held at Thavannur, Ponnani, on 15<sup>th</sup> and 16<sup>th</sup> of January 2000 (TherayilM, Praveenlal K 2000). The participants included politicians, social activists, mental health professionals, doctors and persons with concern, including a former District Judge and a consultant of State Planning Board. Wide areas were covered and many issues were appreciated.

*The following is the brief:*

People of different socio-economic status will have different lifestyles, interests and wishes. Based on one's background, circumstances, capabilities and possibilities, one has to decide one's goals in life. Without comparing with others, one has to feel satisfied and strive towards the goal. While visualizing everything from one's own view, there is a



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- ❖ To start Life-skill Education for students covering social support (how to seek, offer, accept and appreciate), Problem-solving and developing mature attitude in love and sex.
- ❖ Prominently incorporate Pro-life ideas in school curriculum.
- ❖ Start counselling centers in Colleges.
- ❖ Organise Continuing Professional Development Programs by Local Self-Governments for General Practitioners, to identify and manage depressive disorders.
- ❖ Organise awareness programs for those who deal with people in distress- eg: clergy, politician, police and teachers.
- ❖ Media to avoid glorifying suicide acts and presenting it as the only method for problem-solving.
- ❖ Start at least one suicide prevention centre in every district.
- ❖ All NGOs to include suicide prevention in their agenda as one of the objectives.
- ❖ Strictly seal all unauthorized financial channels; to avoid debt traps.
- ❖ Catalyze all activities countering poverty, agony and ignorance.

need to visualize from others' viewpoint also. Differing views need to be acknowledged and accommodated, even if not agreeable. There is a need to develop strength to make demands for the rights and express the emotions. Expression of opinions, interests and needs to be firm but polite. Developing tolerance to face failures and overcome conflicts is needed. One must learn to practise democracy in personal life, too. Airing different views, reaching a consensus and implementing the majority decision are the key elements in democracy. The habit of not owning what is not due is to be cultivated. This principle is to be followed universally by all big and small.

How to overcome a conflict, opposition or crisis is to be learned from experience. Proper analysis, consideration of all available options, pathways and resources, differentiating those needing immediate attention and those

that can be postponed—all these are to be assimilated. Like the body, the mind also needs rest and relaxation. One has to identify and assimilate the best technique for oneself. Friendships, cultural activities, arts, sports, politics—there are many options. Social activities are to be encouraged. Enhance the relationships with surroundings. Social loneliness is to be countered. There is a need for a shift from solitary to group activities; eg: games in computer to games in playgrounds.

Not to limit education to scoring marks or bagging jobs. Decide one's goal, based on capacity and strive for it. Encourage healthy boy-girl relations, boundary-setting and skill to keep safe distance within friendships. Not to keep secrecy for sake of upholding family honour or personal prestige. Such acts will weaken the mind and the matter of concern will be given up later, leaving a scar within oneself and

make the offender habitual. Keep truthfulness in everyday life.

The outcome of the workshop was the development of a ten-point programme intended to provide a guideline for comprehensive suicide prevention activities in a community (Box). This formed the guiding principle for the District-Based Suicide Prevention Programme which emerged as a peoples' movement in Thrissur District in response to a family suicide in which seven lives were lost. (Praveenlal Kuttichira 2009)■

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