

## SUICIDES AND OLD AGE.\*

*Read on—26th September 1906.*

*President.—MR. S. M. EDWARDES, I.C.S.*

The question of old age is one of the 33 enigmas asked by the sorcerer Akht to the Persian saint Gosht Frayâna as described in the Pahlavi Gosht Frayâna. There the seventh enigma is this (Gosht Frayâna, Chap II, 37, 39, 40):—

۱۱۴۱ کو کاشته د گله‌ها ۱۱۴۱ اوستا پنداره ۱۱۴۱  
۱۱۴۱ اوستا اوستا له ۱۱۴۱ ترمه د کاشته  
۱۱۴۱ س... کاشته کو کاشته ۱۱۴۱ اوستا  
۱۱۴۱ له ۱۱۴۱ کاشته سوه ۱۱۴۱ اوستا

Meman zak mandavam i mardumân pavan nihân Yezbâ-mund kardan, avshân nihân kardan la Shâyand ?

Gosht-i-Frayân Goft aigh . . . Meman zak zruvân aît mun aish nihân kardan lâ tobân Meman zruvân khud paêtâk yehvunet.

*Translation.*—What is that thing which men like to conceal, but which they cannot conceal.

Gosht-i-Frayâna replied thus : That (thing) is old age which nobody can conceal, because old age (however concealed) appears of itself.

The subject of my short paper is suggested to me by the Report of the Smithsonian Institution, for the year 1904, wherein there is an interesting article on "Old Age." It is the translation of a lecture delivered in the "Salle des Agriculteurs" on 8th July 1904, by Elie Metchnikoff, Sub-Director of the Pasteur Institute and published in the Revue Scientifique

\* Journal, Vol. VII. No. 8 pp. 577-90.

of Paris<sup>1</sup> (5th series, Vol. II., pages 65-70 and 97-105). Therein the authorities to give, what he calls, "an idea of the present state of our knowledge concerning old age," the problem of which, he says, "is one of the most complicated and difficult found in the biological field."

The greatest difficulty in considering the question of old age is, as the author says, the determination of the time when old age may be said to begin. It is a question, with which the Governments of all countries are concerned one way or another. For example, our Government of India have fixed 55 years after birth to be the time when old age begins. So, it asks all Government public servants to retire at that age, and gives extensions in exceptional cases only. We do not know what the limit is in France, the country where the lecture was delivered. But the author says that there the student class is very keen on the subject. The Government there lately "suspended the law prescribing a limit of age for the professors" in the Faculty of Medicine in Paris. Thereupon, the students raised a hue and cry saying "We do not want old-dotards," because they thought, that in old age, the professors were incapable "of assimilating scientific progress, of judging correctly concerning new advances."

We know that in ancient times, there were some people, who did not tolerate among them old people, not capable of useful work. Some modern uncivilized people correspond to a certain extent, to the people of very old primitive time. An instance of the people of Melanesia is given where the custom is "to bury alive old men who become incapable of useful labour." It is said that, "when the inhabitants of Tierra del Fuego are threatened with famine they kill and eat the old women before they do the dogs. One who asked, why they did this, was answered 'Dogs catch seals while old women do not.'"

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<sup>1</sup> Annual Report of the Board of Report of the Smithsonian Institution for the year ending 30th June 1904.

Thus the point is, that old men become incapable of useful work. Now compare with this the question of the "old age pension," lately started in some of the civilized States of the world. It is proposed that the State should give old age pension to all the old men of the State.

Well, though the civilized nations do not kill their old, as the uncivilized, yet the "life of the aged often becomes very unhappy. Incapable of any useful work in the family or the community, old people are considered as a very heavy charge." Hence, according to our author, there are many cases of suicide among them. M. Metchnikoff says: "Old men not only risk being assassinated; they often end their lives prematurely by committing suicide. Deprived of the means of existence, or attacked by serious maladies, they prefer death to their unhappy life. The frequency of suicides among old men is well established by statistics and supported by a quantity of precise data. This fact has long been known. New statistics tend to confirm it. Thus, in 1878, in Prussia, there were 154 suicides per 100,000 individuals among men from 20 to 50 years of age, and almost double that, 295, among men between 50 and 80. Denmark, the classical country of suicide, confirms the rule. There were at Copenhagen, during the years from 1886 to 1895, for every 100,000 individuals, 394 suicides among the men from 30 to 50 years of age, and 686 cases of self-murder among the old from 50 to 70 years of age. The young and strong adults furnished, therefore, 36½ per cent. of suicides, while the number afforded by the aged amounted to 63½ per cent.

"It is only in exceptional cases that these suicides can be attributed to the failure of the instinct of life. Most frequently life, although desired, becomes intolerable because of such circumstances as we have already mentioned. The desire to live, instead of diminishing, tends, on the contrary, to increase with age." ("Old Age," by Elie Metchnikoff, in the "Annual Report of the Smithsonian Institution, 1904," p. 535.)

Now it is these statistics of our author that has suggested to me this short paper. I give here a table of suicides in Bombay during the last 11 years. I am indebted for this table to Khan Bahadur Bomanjee Byramjee Patell, who has been kindly giving our Society interesting details of suicides in our city for these last several years. In the first column, I give the number of suicides before the age of 50, and in the second column that of suicides of old persons after 50. Taking the average of 11 years, our figures come to 64.9 suicides of persons under 50, and of 9.2 of persons above 50.

No.	Years.	Suicides of persons between 20 and 50.	Suicides of persons between 50 and 80.
1	1895	68	10
2	1896	72	10
3	1897	57	6
4	1898	76	14
5	1899	68	12
6	1900	75	12
7	1901	65	5
8	1902	69	9
9	1903	64	13
10	1904	54	5
11	1905	46	6
	Total ...	714	102
	Average per year	64.9	9.2

This gives 74.1 as the annual average of suicides in Bombay.

Thus then, we see, that our figures do not support the theory of the author of the paper under examination.

It is possible that other countries of the West may give figures which may support our author. But the figures of Bombay do not support him.

During these 11 years under review, we had two censuses of our population. We have the following figures about the population of our city :—

Years of census.	Population.
1901 ... ..	776,006
1906 ... ..	977,822
Total ...	1,753,828

This gives us an average of 876,914 as the population of our city. So, the suicide figures of our city come to 8.4 per 100,000 of population, while according to the statistics given above of Prussia, they come to about 224.5 per 100,000 individuals.

For comparison, I give below a table showing the number of suicides per 100,000 individuals in Prussia, at Copenhagen, and at Bombay :—

Suicides per every 100,000 individuals.

Prussia. During the year 1878.		Copenhagen. Average per 1 year during the years 1886 to 1895.			Bombay. Average per 1 year during the years 1895 to 1905.			
Age.		Average of all suicides.	Age.		Average of all suicides.	Age.		Average of all suicides.
20 to 50.	50 to 80.		30 to 50.	50 to 70.		20 to 50.	50 to 70.	
151	295	221.5	394	686	540	7.3	1.4	8.7

The explanation seems to be that the following two causes work to bring about these better results:—

I. The writings of the East teach a better treatment of parents.

II. The customs and manners of the people help the teachings of the writings.

I. Looking to the three great communities of India, the Hindus, the Buddhists and the Mahomedans, we find that they all agree in the matter of their writings and of their old customs about the treatment of the parents. Vivekananda thus presents the view of Vedantic teaching:—

“Knowing that mother and father are the visible representatives of God, the householder always, and by all means, must please them. If the mother is pleased and the father, God is pleased with that man. That child is really a good child who never speaks harsh words to his parents.”<sup>1</sup>

Rhys Davids thus sums up the duty of children towards parents:—

“To support father and mother,  
To cherish wife and child,  
To follow a peaceful calling;  
This is the great blessing.”<sup>2</sup>

In case of the Mahomedans, the fatalistic tendency of the teachings of their books has to a certain extent the advantage of keeping them away from suicides and asking them to submit to the Will of God.

Speaking of Persia, the birth-place of my religion, its literature advises all possible reverence and respect for the parents and solicitude for their welfare. The *Viráf-Nâmeh* refers to sinful children who distress their parents. The *Pand-Nameh* of Âdarbâd Mârespad enjoins all possible respect towards parents. In the *Âshirwâd* or the benediction recited on a marrying couple, they are enjoined to treat their parents well.

<sup>1</sup> Vivekanand's *Vedant Philosophy* (1896), Vol. I., *Karma Yoga*, p. 15.

<sup>2</sup> *Buddhism*, by Rhys Davids (1883), p. 121.

II. The writings of the West are not without their teachings of respect and reverence towards the parents. But then, in the East, the customs and manners of the people help the teachings of the Scriptures. In the West, a son separates from his parents after marriage and lives apart. In the East, he generally lives under the same roof. So, he and his family are in constant touch with the parents and are in a better position to look after them.

Again, in the East, a man is asked to bring himself up in a way so as to provide for better treatment in old age. For example, he is advised to lead a married life. This provision for married life leaves greater chances for him to be cared and looked after by somebody, *i.e.*, by the children who are the fruits of marriage. In Irân, as well as in India, it was and is still considered a good or a righteous thing to have a son after one's self. If a dying person has no son, it is enjoined that he may adopt one or that one may be adopted for him. This very injunction made it desirable that one should marry and lead a settled life and have a progeny. This provision then ensures, that he would have somebody in his after life to look after him.

The following story, which some of you must have heard typifies the general belief about one's duty towards his parents :—

A man was preparing three plates for the meals of three persons. One asked him: Why were there three plates? He said, one was for himself, the second he had to give as debt, and the third he had to lend. By this reply, he meant that one was for himself, the other was for his aged father to whom he was indebted for bringing him up in his childhood, and the third was for his young child. As to the last, he said: "I consider it as lending it to him, hoping that when I become old, he will return to me what I lend him, *i.e.*, he would support me in my old age."



I will conclude this paper with the following quotation :—

“These are the rules that he drew up for this purpose. All the organs must be preserved in a state of vigour. Morbid tendencies, whether hereditary or acquired during life, must be recognised and combated. Moderation must be used in the consumption of food and drink as well as in the pursuit of other corporeal pleasures. The air within and about the dwelling must be pure. Corporeal exercise must be taken daily in all conditions of weather. In many cases it is also necessary to take respiratory exercises as well as to walk and climb. One must retire early and rise early. Sleep should be limited to six or seven hours. Every day a bath should be taken or the body be well rubbed. The water employed for this may be cold or warm according to individual temperament. Some times warm and cold water may be alternately employed. Regular work and intellectual occupation are indispensable. The mental attitude should be that of enjoyment of living, tranquillity of mind, and a hopeful conception of life. On the other hand, the passions and nervous disturbances of sorrow should be combated. Finally, one should have a firm determination that will compel the preservation of health, the avoidance of alcoholic liquors and other stimulants as well as narcotics and analgesic substances.”<sup>1</sup>

P. S.—After I had read the above paper, I received in reply to my letter of inquiry, dated 4th September 1906, communications from several quarters of India in the matter of suicides. Unfortunately, the figures are not according to age. So we are not in a position to ascertain whether in the other cities or provinces of India the suicides in old age are fewer than those in younger ages, or not. However, for future reference for some purpose, I give the figures as I have received them. I also give the figures received from some other countries of the world.

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<sup>1</sup> Dr. Weber of London quoted in “Old Age” by Elie Metchnikoff, in the “Annual Report of the Smithsonian Institution, 1904,” p. 549.

*Statement showing the number of suicides in some of the Provinces of India during the years 1895 to 1905.*

Name of the Province.	1895	1896	1897	1898	1899	1900	1901	1902	1903	1904	1905	Total.
Bombay Presidency.	595	684	652	668	633	646	597	559	516	554	498	6602
Bengal ... ..	2,216	2,174	2,396	2,386	2,418	2,477	2,580	2,429	2,635	2,582	2,767	26,960
Eastern Bengal and Assam.	930	1,053	1,071	1,065	1,072	1,035	1,142	1,130	1,147	1,201	1,180	12,026
United Provinces.	3,353	3,480	3,834	2,600	2,593	2,671	2,653	2,530	2,536	2,766	2,986	32,002
Central Provinces and Berars.	1,237	1,324	1,695	889	813	1,217	1,059	842	791	807	770	11,444
Burma ... ..	74	75	84	90	104	110	106	131	158	137	171	1,240
Ceylon ... ..	83	103	138	159	102	130	146	146	157	166	144	1,474
Madras ... ..	.....	.....	.....	.....	.....	.....	.....	.....	1,963	2,075	1,990	6,028

*Table of Suicides in Scotland, kindly supplied by the  
Anthropological Institute of Great Britain  
and Ireland.*

Deaths from Suicide in Scotland and in Edinburgh during  
each of the years 1895-1904.

## SCOTLAND.

Years.	Under 20 years.	20 and under 50.	50 and under 80.	80 and upwards.	Total.
1895 .. ...	6	150	110	.....	266
1896... ..	10	160	125	2	297
1897... ..	7	167	104	3	281
1898... ..	8	146	105		262*
1899... ..	6	134	100	4	245*
1900... ..	8	127	83	4	222
1901... ..	4	131	101	1	237
1902... ..	9	132	111	4	256
1903 .. ...	8	141	123	2	274
1904... ..	8	164	119	.....	291
Total ...	74	1,452	1,081	22	2,631

## EDINBURGH.

1895... ..	.....	14	8	.....	22
1896... ..	.....	13	9	.....	22
1897 .. ...	1	21	12	.....	34
1898... ..	1	13	7	...	21
1899... ..	1	10		.....	22
1900... ..	.....	9		1	23
1901 .. ...	1	11	11	.....	23
1902... ..	1	12	12	.....	25
1903... ..	.....	18	12	.....	30
1904... ..	.....	14	14	.....	28
Total ...	5	135	109	1	250

\* Includes one, of which age was not specified.

*Table of Suicides in Ireland kindly supplied by the Anthropological Institute of Great Britain and Ireland.*

Statement showing the number of deaths by suicide of persons between the ages of 15 years and under 55 years, and 55 years and under 85 years, respectively, registered in Ireland during each of the eleven years, 1895 to 1905.

(Extracted from the Registrar-General's Annual Reports.)

Years.	15 and under 55 years.	55 and under 85 years.
1895 ... ..	90	61
1896 ... ..	86	42
1897 ... ..	82	45
1898 ... ..	94	51
1899 ... ..	78	49
1900 ... ..	82	33
1901 ... ..	75	52
1902 ... ..	98	47
1903 ... ..	92	52
1904 ... ..	92	58
1905 ... ..	109	47
Total ...	978	537

*Table of Suicides in Prussia, kindly supplied by the Anthropological Society of Prussia.*

Suicides in the total population of the Prussian State in the years 1895 to 1905.

Years of Report.	Total No. of Deaths in the whole Population.		Deaths by Suicide.		Suicides in every 10,000 of the whole Population.		Out of every 100.				
							Of the Total No. of Deaths the Suicides were :—		The Suicides were of Age (in years) :—		
	Classes according to age (in years).										
	20 to 50	50 to 80	20 to 50	50 to 80	20 to 50	50 to 80	20 to 50	50 to 80	20 to 50	50 to 80	
1895	99,485	185,054	3,251	2,318	2.60	4.97	3.27	1.25	52.66	37.54	
1896	99,243	184,118	3,348	2,487	2.66	5.24	3.37	1.35	51.53	38.28	
1897	99,424	188,237	3,422	2,432	2.69	5.07	3.44	1.29	52.68	37.44	
1898	96,948	183,188	3,317	2,378	2.57	4.90	3.42	1.30	52.15	37.38	
1899	104,087	201,260	3,313	2,431	2.5	4.95	3.18	1.21	52.10	38.23	
1900	107,300	209,804	3,414	2,618	2.58	5.27	3.18	1.25	51.26	39.31	
1901	104,202	193,103	3,570	2,621	2.59	5.20	3.43	1.31	51.33	38.05	
1902	103,914	199,283	3,790	2,704	2.70	5.30	3.65	1.36	52.51	37.47	
1903	103,298	199,108	3,845	2,863	2.70	5.54	3.72	1.44	51.47	38.33	
1904	105,530	202,910	3,783	2,789	2.61	5.34	3.58	1.37	51.89	38.26	
1905	107,649	208,869	4,000	2,850	2.71	5.35	3.72	1.36	52.57	37.46	

*Tables of Suicides in the United States of America, prepared from "Special Reports—Mortality Statistics, 1900—1904" kindly sent by the Director, Bureau of the Census Department of Commerce and Labor, Washington.*

Deaths from Suicides in U. S. A. during each of the years 1900—1904 (pp. 159, 317, 475, 633, 791).

Years.	Under 15	15 to 44	45 to 64	65 and over.	Total.
1900	4	320	273	170	767
1901	3	336	289	154	782
1902	3	343	273	152	771
1903	5	395	299	154	853
1904	3	390	357	172	922
Total ...	18	1,784	1,491	802	4,095

Number of Suicides at each age period per 1,000 at known age, during 1900—1904 (p. CCIII).

Age ...	5 to 14	15 to 24	25 to 34	35 to 44	45 to 64	65 and over.
Per 1,000 ...	3.1	139.2	208.3	225.0	320.2	104.2

Table of Suicides in Japan, kindly supplied by the Anthropological Society of Tokyo, Japan.

Statistics of Suicides in Japan, during 10 years 1895—1904.

(From various causes.)

Ages. Years.	0 to 16.		16 to 20.		20 to 30.		30 to 40.		40 to 50.		50 and upwards.		?		Total.	
	Males.	Females.	Males.	Females.	Males.	Females.	Males.	Females.	Males.	Females.	Males.	Females.	Males.	Females.	Males.	Females.
Mēji 28 (1895) ...	93	110	195	361	955	722	687	372	819	358	1,696	889	1	1	4,449	2,813
" 29 (1896) ...	63	90	200	421	997	755	697	425	823	346	1,699	941	1	1	4,480	2,979
" 30 (1897) ...	79	83	234	442	1,032	782	758	398	835	387	1,684	940	3	1	4,625	3,039
" 31 (1898) ...	100	114	271	456	1,273	877	856	422	921	379	1,946	1,077	1	6	5,368	3,331
" 32 (1899) ...	92	89	251	460	1,187	941	738	439	856	374	1,912	1,029	2	2	5,038	3,334
" 33 (1900) ...	105	111	261	421	1,261	902	889	422	806	414	1,855	982	...	4	5,177	3,256
" 34 (1901) ...	119	100	286	413	1,289	960	731	436	784	385	2,015	1,061	3	...	5,227	3,355
" 35 (1902) ...	110	101	245	411	1,202	907	810	418	887	405	2,154	1,128	5	...	5,413	3,370
" 36 (1903) ...	89	89	254	448	1,381	986	919	495	971	416	2,521	1,275	18	2	6,153	3,711
" 37 (1904) ...	111	86	293	424	1,282	984	891	507	987	440	2,670	1,461	11	2	6,245	390
Total. ...	964	973	2,490	4,257	11,859	8,816	7,976	4,334	8,689	3,904	20,152	10,783	45	19	52,175	33,086