

Takeaways from the Burari Death Cases

Ayushi Kenia¹

Post Graduate Student, Department of Psychology, Christ (Deemed to be University), Bangalore.

Corresponding author: Ayushi Kenia

Email: ayushikenia@gmail.com

The Burari death case consists of the death of 11 family members of the Bhatia family in Delhi, India in 2018. This family comprised of three generations living together- one grandmother, three pairs of parents and five children.

On the surface, their death looked like the result of a well-planned suicide, but none of the officials were convinced by the surprising act of three generations committing suicide in what looked like a dramatically horrifying scene. The surprising element of this case revolved around the social and financial status of the family- they were well-to-do and had strong social ties- what could have led all the members of that family to participate in such a heinous act? It was a question that troubled everyone who knew about this incident during the time and after the release of a documentary showcasing this incident.

The Documentary

The Netflix documentary that covered this incident focused on multiple perspectives that arose as a result of uncovering and solving this case.

One of the main and major aspects here is the social and cultural rules that most, if not all, Indian families conform to by presenting themselves as a collective unit to the world but struggling with keeping secrets internally. It's how Rachna Johri puts it: "I think that what we saw in this family was an extreme version of what we see in families all over the world; the family presents itself as this beautiful, harmonious, intact "Indian family". Families have secrets and they can be preserved at all sorts of costs."

Secondly, we were introduced to the discovery of the diaries that the family maintained almost daily from 2007 to 2018 (11 years). Experts who studied and analyzed these diaries found that:

- The tone of the content written was conversational, almost like the family members were conversing with each other through the pages of those books
- It looked like every member of the family was providing their inputs on a daily basis
- After a point, the tone of the content took a supernatural turn, making the written matter seem more directional and authoritative than conversational.

Apart from that, there were things discovered about the youngest son of the family, Lalit. Lalit's history of being a victim of a couple of severe traumatic accidents brought to the surface some serious physical impairments that he faced for quite some time in his life, without much medical attention for the same. For instance, after a failed attempt by his competitors to kill him in a fire that was planted in his warehouse, Lalit lost his voice for a very long time. Here, instead of consulting a professional about his condition, the family decided to not talk about it at all and encouraged their friends and relatives to do the same. It was as if brushing away that conversation under the carpet would undo its negative consequences and erase it from happening at all. The possibility that such a traumatic incident would scar Lalit emotionally and have serious psychological consequences was not taken into consideration. This is where the concern of a psycho-somatic disorder arose among professionals who were working on solving this case.

A continuation of this line of concern was Lalit's confession of hearing his dead father's voice and the latter's spirit entering his body. Not seeking help and support from a professional in a vulnerable state, led Lalit to go through the experiences that he did. The viewer here is faced with a dilemma about the complexity of

this facet of the case. Was this supernatural or psychological? Was Lalit internalizing his father's absence, given how physically and emotionally vulnerable he had become?

A lot of the directional and authoritative tone in the diaries was contributed to by Lalit's father who was "visiting" Lalit's body from time to time. This became a routine for the family wherein all of them gave in to this strange transaction. It was as if there was no clear demarcation between faith and delusion, to a point where a 14-year old and a 60-year-old were convinced to participate in what appeared to be a suicide that followed a series of other strange practices and rituals.

Rachna Johri shares her views on this matter- "I don't know how the multiplicity of voices, which is usually there in human beings, can be so completely silenced?" She also adds, "The maternal instinct to protect the children was absent."

This brings to mind the issue of **Shared Psychosis**. As the name suggests, it's a diagnosis that is assigned to a group of people who develop a delusional system as a result of their close relation and association with a person who is delusional. In this particular case, we have Lalit's family who, after believing that the paternal head of the family was back in the form of a spirit and residing in Lalit, followed all the rituals and commands from the said entity.

The story that the experts and the officials had built seemed to give the idea of a cult, a setting where nothing can be executed without complete submission of all the members. This submission is possible to achieve if the leader demonstrates an extraordinary feat, as Ambrish Satwik puts it. The central question that everyone wanted to find answers for- how can three generations commit suicide together- had its roots in this cult-like setting, among other theories. It appeared that Lalit was the cult's silent leader, who, by regaining his voice after his dead father's spirit entered his body, proved his superiority to be considered fit to lead the family ahead. This led them to be socially isolated, and in turn reinforced the belief in the theory of the supremacy of secrets in families among the masses.

One of the major secrets was silencing and not addressing Lalit's traumatic past. Another major secret was to follow the orders of their father's spirit that came and went regularly through Lalit's consciousness. The family was so emotionally tied to this incident that they did not find any traces of strangeness and absurdity in it. Instead of addressing it and seeking help and guidance from a professional, they resorted to silently following orders of the alleged spirit.

Another perspective that can be applied in order to understand this case better belongs to social psychology- **Conformity**. Conformity, which is one of the most widely studied ideas in social psychology, refers to the act of following behaviours exhibited by a group irrespective of one's opinions and beliefs about that particular behaviour. In other words, it is the act of "following the herd". This concept was first studied by Solomon Asch in the 1950s, and has since then, opened the doors of social psychology to study human behaviour in social settings in a much deeper and refined way.

Coming to this case, the staggering questions that never seem to leave our minds- "How and why would a family of three generations who are living together agree to do this?" "How can a 14-year-old not mention this to his friends?" "How can a 60-year-old not have talked sense into the younger ones?" "How can such educated people fall prey to the claws of superstition and blind faith?"- can be explained using the findings of research based on Conformity.

Conformity, according to the results procured by Rob Bond and Peter Smith¹, is affected and influenced by the following factors:

- Whether the participant is Male or Female
- Size of the majority group
- Whether the majority group is made of ingroup members
- Whether the culture is individualist or collectivist

These factors when put into the current context would make evident certain patterns of behaviour in hindsight. Here, we had majority in terms of the paternal head ordering the family through the supernatural realm (or what seemed like it); a lot of us, I am sure, can imagine the impact of such a condition in a patriarchal society. Then, we had the element of ingroup members, the close-knit setting- "nothing comes

in and nothing goes out of the family”. Lastly, the cultural orientation, collectivism, seems to have played a major role here. Conformity in collectivist cultures is the highest due to the members’ needs for social association and approval, more than what seems to be true for individualistic cultures.

Significant Takeaways

Secrets in a family are natural and a part of their makeup, but the lines that people cross to maintain those secrets within the walls of the house can be abnormal and problematic. Not only does it deprive individual members of the family of their independence and autonomy, but it also causes an irreparable imbalance in the social design, especially in this case.

The character analysis that was procured during the psychological autopsy of all the members of the Bhatia family highlighted what is common in our collective society- mass resistance to talk about mental health issues. Barkha Dutt gives her inputs on this matter- “At the heart of our society lies a mass resistance of talking about mental health because we have stigmatized these conversations. I think this is the reason why a lot of times we never find out the truth.”

Alok Sarin, a psychiatrist, also gave his opinion on the matter- “Not having these conversations is not an answer. The trouble is that unless we have those unsettling and difficult conversations, this might happen again.”

It’s like a double-edged sword- Indian society, with traditional Indian families as the target population, are vulnerable to falling into the trap of false beliefs and myths about mental health concerns. The more dangerous part makes itself visible when we see people mistaking psychological disorders to be the result of supernatural phenomenon or the doing of a superstition coming true. It is due to this massive denial that this population needs the most exposure and education in the realm of mental health awareness.

With regards to this case, it includes helping them cope with the death of a loved one (Lalit’s father), acknowledging and addressing the multiple traumas that Lalit had faced and dealing with the changes that the trauma had inevitably brought about.

This is where I’d like to quote Alok Sarin yet again on his insight about our society as a collective cultural unit- “The secrecy with which this (the death of the Bhatia family) happened speaks of the lack of interconnectedness of our society, in terms of addressing mental health issues. We need to have these conversations, even if they’re unsettling because telling the true story of these people is in itself giving closure to both- them and us.”

The opening of this case for public viewing was in a way, a thoughtful decision of educating individuals and families about the importance of acknowledging and addressing something out of the normal in the area of mental health. It also opened doors for more force from professionals to promote the importance of seeking help when needed. Not talking about an important familial issue and flushing it down the drain will provide one with only a momentary assurance of it not coming back or not repeating itself. But the scars that form on the psyche of an individual or a group of individuals after a traumatic event stay with them and come out in unexpected ways and at unforeseen times.

All said and done, no amount of explanations and theories will ever suffice in convincing us of the occurrence of such an incident. Learning from this incident and making up our minds about being ok with conversing about mental health issues is the next step that we as a society must consider, not only for ourselves but also for the upcoming generations.

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