

## Accidental Drowning of Child or Maternal Filicide by Strangulation: A Case Report

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### Abstract

*Introduction:* Filicide, defined as the deliberate act of a parent killing their own child, is not uncommon in India and usually occurs if the child is female. Females are killed off even before they are born, as they are considered to be a burden to the parents and family. The risk of a child being killed is highest during the first year of life. The child may be killed by the perpetrator by using knives, blunt objects, manual strangulation, poisoning and drowning.

*Case Details:* A body of a seven months female was brought for autopsy with the alleged history of accidental fall in a bucket of water and subsequent drowning. On external examination multiple abraded dermal contusions were found on the neck along with one crescentic shaped abrasion. On dissection hematoma was present over the underlying muscles. Pulmonary findings were within normal limits. The mother declared that she was alone in the house with the child at the time of alleged drowning. Later after exhaustive police investigation, she confessed to murdering her daughter. She clarified that she was suffering from depression, marital discord and was apprehensive that the female child was only a financial burden to their family.

*Conclusion:* The article discusses about the reasons that prompt a mother to kill her own child and if a female child is that much a burden to the family that she does not deserve even an iota of chance to live. Further research is needed to improve identification of children and mothers at risk. Suggestions for prevention are made based on current literature and the authors' experience.

**Keywords:** Filicide; Depression; Manual Strangulation; Drowning.

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### Introduction

Infanticide means murder of a child under the age of one year by his or her parent or parents. Filicide refers to murdering a child till the age of 18 years by his or her parents or guardians and stepparents. Mothers are more often found guilty of committing filicide than fathers. Often the perpetrator is suffering from some form of psychiatric dysfunction

and depression. In new mothers postpartum or lactation depression could be a reason for such extreme step. The other reasons to end life of child could be disability, sex of the child, lack of finances, illegitimacy etc. Filicide occurs in all part of the world with variation in motives. More Cases of Filicide are reported in Western Countries as compared to India. The statistical data and motives behind such acts vary from country to country; like in South East Asian countries female child is often

victimized as they are considered financial burden [1-5]. This case report illustrates a case of maternal filicide where the female infant was killed by the mother having chronic depression.

### Case History

Mother of the deceased infant alleged that while she was asleep the baby woke up, climbed down the bed, crawled to the attached washroom and accidentally fell into the bucket filled with water (Scene of incidence as shown in Fig 1 & 2). Infant was taken to hospital where she was declared brought dead. Dead body of the infant was

brought to the Department of Forensic Medicine & Toxicology for postmortem. During postmortem examination, it was observed that Crown–heel length of the body was 65 cm, head circumference was 41 cm, chest circumference 41 cm and neck circumference 26 cm. There was a dermal abraded contusion of length 11 cm and breadth 8 cm over the antero-lateral aspect of neck, 4 cm below mentum and 3 cm above suprasternal notch along midline. Left lateral end of this injury was 3 cm in breadth, located 3 cm below left angle of jaw and 3 cm below left pinna. Right lateral end of the injury was 3 cm in breadth, located 3 cm below right angle of jaw and 3.5 cm below right pinna. The other injury comprised of a crescentic shaped abrasion



Fig. 1: Scene of Incidence



Fig. 2: Scene of Incidence



Fig. 3 & 4: External neck injury



Fig. 5: External neck injury



Fig. 6: Crescentic abrasion below chin

measuring 0.6 cm by 0.1 cm placed 3 cm below chin and 1.5 cm lateral from midline on right side of neck having downwards convexity (Figs. 3,4,5 & 6). On dissection of neck, a hematoma of size 1 cm by 0.5 cm was detected over left sternocleidomastoid muscle. Streak of hemorrhage was present within the fibers of sternothyroid and sternohyoid muscles.

On dissection of scalp, sub-scalp hematoma was present over right parieto-occipital region over right sub-occipitalis muscle, 2 cm lateral from midline. Skull did not show any fractures. Brain was congested with multiple petechial hemorrhages over the parenchyma. Both right and left lungs were congested and weighed 117 gm and 104 gm respectively. Heart was unremarkable and weighed 40 gm. Stomach was empty with congested mucosa. Liver, spleen and both kidneys were congested. No congenital anomalies were detected. On thorough postmortem examination no sign of drowning could be appreciated and the cause of death was opined as 'Asphyxia due to Manual Strangulation'. During further investigation by the police, biological mother confessed that she strangled the baby with a dupatta and later on framed the story of baby being drowned into a bucket filled with water. Mother was a patient of chronic depression, and believed that the baby had brought bad omen to the family.

### Discussion

Resnick studied 131 cases of filicide and categorized motive of filicide into the following five: [6]

1. *Altruistic*—the parent kills the child as they perceive the world to be cruel or to safeguard them from disease and disability.
2. *Acutely psychotic*—the parent suffering from psychosis or in automatism due to seizure or in post-ictal state kills the child without any rational motive.
3. *Unwanted child*—an unwanted child considered as hindrance by the parent is killed and in rare cases to get insurance or to marry another person.
4. *Accidental*—the parent accidentally kills the child during physical assault, like in Munchausen syndrome.
5. *Spouse revenge*—to take revenge from a separated or unfaithful partner a parent may kill the child.

As per Resnick's study, the most common motive was altruism, accounting to 49% of all the cases reviewed and the least common motive was spousal

revenge accounting to 2%. He also concluded that ratio of mother: father perpetrators were nearly 2:1 [6]. This comprehensive classification system can be applied to both female and male perpetrators. Pitt and Bale in their study conducted in 1995 identified females as the main perpetrator of filicide [7]. However, the study conducted by Jason et al. in 1983 showed that the fathers were most common perpetrator and male children were more victimized than female [8]. In another study conducted by Freidman et al. in 2005, 65% of the perpetrators were fathers and remaining were mothers; the median age of victim was 2.2 years and altruism was the commonest motive in association with depression among parents [9]. Most of the maternal filicides occur due to maternal psychiatric illness than due to maltreatment of the child. Mothers may kill a sobbing child who won't stop crying. A mother with battered childhood is likely to batter her own children as well [10,11]. A study conducted by Jennings et al. in 1999 compared depressed mothers with non-depressed mothers of children less than 3 years of age and concluded that 41% of depressed mothers had thought of harming their children as compared to 7% of non-depressed mothers [12]. Another study conducted by Levitzky S et al. on 23 mothers having colicky infants found that 70% of the mothers experienced aggression while 26% had ideation of infanticide; among these 23 mothers, 90% had marital tension and social disruption [13].

The studies mentioned above depict the international scenario of the filicide, but in India and other South Eastern countries, the categorization of filicide has an additional feature of being sex selective killing, often victimizing girl child. A prospective study conducted by Chandra PS et al. depicts Indian statistics of maternal aggression toward infants among hospital admitted cases of women with postpartum mental illness. 43% and 36% of women had infanticidal ideation and infanticidal behavior respectively, while 34% had both infanticidal ideation and behavior. Infanticidal ideas were associated with depression and psychosis whereas infanticidal behavior had another additional factor i.e. having a female infant [14]. A case of maternal filicide was reported by Sahu et al. in 2014 where a mother with depressive disorder, abusive marriage, alcoholic husband, belonging to low socio-economic status killed her daughter to get rid of the financial burden [15]. Another case report of suicide-filicide has been reported by Behara et al. where the mother hanged herself after hanging her children [16]. A case study of four maternal filicide cases conducted by Gowda et al. in 2018 provides

description of maternal filicide in India. The mean age of mothers in this study was  $32.7 \pm 4.1$  years. All the risks factors of maternal filicide were found associated in these cases i.e. depression, low socio-economic status, nuclear families, unemployment and limited education [17].

In the present case report, the authors describe a case of maternal filicide, wherein a female child aged seven months was strangled by her mother, who was suffering from chronic depression. The mother belonged to a low socio economic status with limited education and history of chronic depression. She tried to present the death of her child as accidental, but postmortem examination revealed a completely different scenario. The presence of external injuries in the form of abraded contusion over neck and crescentic nail marks pointed towards application of manual pressure over the child's neck and corresponding internal hematoma further refuted her version of the incident. The features of asphyxia in both drowning and strangulation overlap each with presence of cyanosis over lips, nail beds, mucus membranes and a generalized congestion of organs. In infants the neck folds are often mistaken as ligature marks and an autopsy surgeon needs to very carefully differentiate such neck folds from pseudo strangulation. Since the skin of infants is very sensitive to injuries, a contused abrasion with dimension of 11 cm by 8 cm over the neck raised suspicion about the manner of death. Moreover the crescentic nail marks over the neck are typical features of manual strangulation. On internal examination, presence of neck hematoma, sub-scalp hematoma and also the absence of any specific findings of drowning e.g. oedematous lungs, presence of froth in nostrils etc. further confirmed the cause as well as manner of death. Considering the post mortem finding and circumstantial evidence like inquest papers and crime scene photographs, the final cause of death was opined as 'Asphyxia due to manual strangulation'. Final opinion of the postmortem report helped the investigating authorities to investigate about the actual sequence of events. During the investigations, it was brought into light that the mother was a known case of chronic depression and since birth of the infant considered her to have brought ill fate to the family. In many Western countries there is Infanticide Act which provides partial defense to women killing their infants, considering the disturbed mind by reason of not being fully recovered from the child birth or due to the effect of lactation. But in Indian context, there is no specific Infanticide Act and such offence is charged and punishable for murder.

## Conclusion

Instances of maternal filicide in India are far less as compared to Western countries, but such cases are not as rare as presumed to be. Most of the mothers killing their children have some form of depressive disorder in association with low socio-economic status, abusive husband, marital discord, financial strains and low education. Mothers with suicidal ideation often kill their children with an altruistic motive. This case report also points out that depression among mothers' especially new mothers is a risk factor for commission of filicide. Enquiring about the proper history of the case, circumstantial evidences, meticulous autopsy as well as knowledge and skill of the autopsy surgeon can collectively help to determine the cause, manner and purpose behind death of filicide victims; and in turn also guides the investigating agencies to solve such mysterious deaths.

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