

## Approaches for ending the era of farmer's suicides

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**Abstract:** In recent years, a larger agrarian crisis, particularly in low rainfall and low irrigation tracts of Karnataka, Andhra Pradesh and Maharashtra has precipitated a spate of suicide death among socially and economically marginalized poor farmers. Indebtedness and its attained economic distress is the main reason behind suicide of farmers. The root cause behind the suicides is the fact that farming in low rainfall and low irrigation tracts has no longer remained financially viable. The non-remunerative prices, weather related uncertainties, fluctuation in market rates, rise in cost of inputs, lack of irrigation facilities, lack of accurate weather information and crops damages by wild animals- all these are the contributing factors for creating agrarian distress amongst the farming community in this region. In fact farmer's suicide is an outcome of a number of socio-psychological factors triggered by frequent crop failures, lack of alternative income-generating opportunities, scarce irrigation facilities, inductiveness, alcoholism and inability of the incumbent to fulfill family and social obligations. The economic consequences of suicides are fatal for the family of the incumbent- includes loss of income; asset depletion and deterioration of human capital are among others. The State and Central Government should take proper initiative to improve the rain fed farming in general and farmer's livelihood in particular.

**Key words:** Addiction, Agrarian crisis, Family disputes, Farmer's suicides, Indebtedness

### Introduction

"To be, or not to be" (Shakespeare, Hamlet) has been an important question among thinkers (Rauscher, 2000). As suicide is a complex social and psychological phenomenon, which factors are mostly responsible for farmer's suicides and which factors should have been taken for study is big question among researchers. However, Madan (1980) and Singh (2005) pointed out that the causes of suicide are complex, as are the causes of any social phenomenon. Many factors combine to cause, one particular individual (and not another) to divert his aggression upon himself in the form of suicide. Durkheim (2002) also pointed out that the neurobiological and socio-economic dimensions of risk factors are responsible for committing suicide, but the intersection of these two sets, where the relative risk of committing suicide is higher.

In recent review of the neurobiological literature, Mann (2002) cleared that the neurobiological risk factors are predisposing in nature and they internally existing with the individual. For example, reducing serotonin input to the brain and disorder of the central nervous system, particularly those affecting the pathology of the brain carry a higher relative risk of suicides in an individual. The neurobiological risk factors internally existing with an individual, hence it becomes difficult to study and identify. But the socio-economic dimensions of risk factors, that are external to the individual, become important and they are precipitating in nature and can be identified and may act as trigger.

In recent years, a larger agrarian crisis, particularly in low rainfall and low irrigation tracts of Karnataka, Andhra Pradesh and Maharashtra has precipitated a spate of suicide death among farmers. This is now public policy concern and has also received scholarly attention. The phenomenon of suicides of the farmers is one of the most tragic events in the history of India. Let us note that agrarian distress is not new to India;

but farmer's suicides are. In the history of the country, over the past several centuries, we have heard distress stories due to drought, pest and failure of crops. We have heard of the accounts of farmers abandoning cultivation and leaving their villages during medieval times. But what is happening today seems to be qualitatively different. If farmer's suicides were isolated cases then, we could shrug them away as aberrations. But they have been happening in droves and the frightening phenomenon continues to persist and recur year after year, without any signs of abatement, hence this issue has been important among thinkers, researcher and social workers.

"Farmer's suicides have to be viewed as a national disaster", the statement of the Former Prime Minister of India, himself a distinguished economist opens our eyes to the agrarian crisis that haunts the country today. Tens of thousands of farmers in different states of India have committed suicide. These suicides can no more be considered isolated cases of farmer's deaths but a symbol of deepening crisis of Indian agriculture. There is a debate regarding causes and number of deaths of farmers in the country. In the initial period of late 1990s when there were sporadic incidents of suicides across the country there was general indifference and apathy towards these incidents. But, when in early 2000 and onwards the number of farmers deaths started rising fast in Andhra Pradesh, Karnataka, Kerala, Maharashtra and Punjab, the Governments started feeling measures, some appointed commissions to probe into the truth of the matter.

Rapid increase in indebtedness is at the root of farmer's taking their lives (Kale *et al.*, 2010a). Debt is a reflection of negative economy. Two factors have transformed agriculture from a positive economy into negative economy for peasants; the rising cost of production and the falling prices of farm

commodities. Both these factors are rooted in the policies of trade liberalization and corporate globalization.

In 1998, the World Bank's structural adjustment policies forced India to open up its seed sector to global corporations like Cargill, Monsanto and Syngenta. The global corporations changed the input economy overnight. Farm saved seeds were replaced by corporate seeds, which need fertilizers and pesticides and cannot be saved (Vandana Shiva, 2009).

According to the findings of National Sample Survey Organization 59<sup>th</sup> round survey, an estimated 27 per cent of farmers did not like farming because it was not profitable. In all, 40 per cent felt that, given a choice, they would take up some other career (Anon., 2005).

### Factors affecting the agrarian distress

Kale *et al.* (2014b) computed the composite index of agrarian distress of selected respondents with the help of selected 16 factors. The composite indexes were analyzed by using the method of Prem Narain (2011). This research study clears that near about cent per cent (99.58%) of the farmers have high Composite Index of Agrarian Distress Proneness. The non-remunerative prices (having Mean Severity Score (MSS)- 4 out of 4), weather related uncertainties (MSS-3.99), fluctuation in market rates (MSS-3.95), rise in cost of inputs (MSS 3.92), lack of irrigation facilities (MSS-3.87), lack of accurate weather information (MSS-3.66) and crops damages by wild animals (MSS-3.46) all these factors were having maximum Mean Severity Score (MSS) amongst the selected farmers and Rank on -I, II, III, IV, V, VI and VII, respectively. Hence government should take care of all selected factors for reducing the agrarian distress in selected six distress districts of Vidarbha. This finding was supported by Kale *et al.* (2011) and Kale *et al.* (2015).

### Farmer's suicides in India

According to the National Crime Records Bureau (NCRB), the total number of farm suicides since 1995 to 2013 has touched 2,96,438 in India. Maharashtra remains the worst single State for farm suicides for over a decade now (Anon., 2015).

As per the data of National Crime Records Bureau in 2011, five states showed increases of over 50 farm suicides as compared to 2010. These included Gujarat (55), Haryana (87), Madhya Pradesh (89), Tamil Nadu (82) and Maharashtra which alone showed a rise of 196. Nine States showed declines exceeding 50 farm suicides, of which Karnataka (485) and Andhra Pradesh (319) and West Bengal (186) claimed the biggest falls (Anon., 2012).

As per the Radhakrishna Committee Report (2007) the Government of India declared 31 districts in four States (Andhra Pradesh-16, Karnataka-6, Maharashtra-6 and Kerala-3) as distress districts. These districts are mostly rainfed, agriculturally less developed and low productivity districts, where the Prime Minister's Relief and Rehabilitation package is being implemented. This package designed with regional specificity to address issues of moisture conservation, infrastructural development, augmentation of non-farm sources of income and employment to farmers. Among distress districts

six districts are from Vidarbha region of Maharashtra State. These districts are Yavatmal, Buldana, Amravati, Akola, Washim and Wardha (Anon., 2007).

### Farmer's suicide in Vidarbha

In six distress districts of Vidarbha total 10,451 farmers committed suicides, during January, 2001 to August, 2014 and out of these, 3959 *i.e.*, 37.88 per cent victims were considered as a legal victims for allotting the compensation of rupees one lakh to their families from the Government (Table 1).

Farmer's suicide in Vidarbha is an outcome of a number of socio-psychological factors triggered by frequent crop failure, lack of alternative income-generating opportunities, scarce irrigation facilities, inductiveness, alcoholism and inability of the incumbent to fulfill family and social obligations. Suicides are committed mostly among socially and economically marginalized poor households. The economic consequences of suicides are fatal for the family of the incumbent— includes loss of income, asset depletion and deterioration of human capital are among others (Suri, 2006; Kale, 2008; Kale, *et al.*, 2010; Anon., 2010; Kale and Mankar, 2010; Kale, 2011; Kale, 2011a; Kale *et al.*, 2014; Kale *et al.*, 2014a).

### Causes for farmer's distress

Revathi (1998) studied 50 deceased farmers in Warangal district of Andhra Pradesh and revealed that, well was the largest source of irrigation for about three fourth of the farmers. Only about one third of the wells were dug under the subsidy schemes of the government. In the rest of the cases farmers themselves have borne the expenses for digging of wells. Besides this the depletion of groundwater in the recent years has necessitated deepening of wells and laying of in-well bores, the investment of wells and laying of in-well bores, the investment for which averaged any where between ₹ 50,000 to 1,00,000. Moreover the periodical depending of wells also required amounts in the range of ₹ 10,000 to 15,000. In spite of these efforts only 25 per cent of the wells could yield sufficient water.

Desphande (2002) worked on farmer's suicide in Karnataka and presented that the middle age group seems to be more prone to suicides as against the younger or elder people and the probability is highest at around 35 years of age. Probably this is the age when a good number of decisions have to be borne, and when the entrepreneurial qualities are at their peak. He also reported that a large number of victims have only rainfed lands and quite a few cases where the victim's families

Table 1. District wise suicide cases in six distress districts of Vidarbha (Jan. 2001 to Aug. 2014)

Districts	Total Cases	Legal Cases
Yavatmal	2903	1059
Amravati	2297	731
Buldhana	1580	603
Akola	1494	728
Washim	1096	392
Wardha	1081	446
Total	10,451	3959

Source: Commissioner Office, Amravati Division, Amravati, 2014

earned their livelihood by engaging in other production activities to supplement their income.

### National Commission on Farmers

According to the National Commission on farmers (NCF) major causes of the agrarian crisis are unfinished agenda in land reform, quantity and quality of water, technology fatigue; access, adequacy and timeliness of institutional credit, and opportunities for assured and remunerative marketing and adverse meteorological factors add to these problems (Anon., 2006).

### Dr. Narendra Jadhav's report

According to the Dr. Narendra Jadhav's Report submitted to the Government of Maharashtra (Jadhav, 2008), the various conclusions have been drawn about the socio-economic strata of the farmers who have committed suicides; these are in farming families, it is mainly the bread-earning men who have committed suicide. The incidence of suicide is almost negligible amongst the landless labourers or marginal farmers. Almost 75 per cent of farmer's suicides have occurred amongst the farmers with land holding between 2 and 12.5 acres. The incidence of farmer's suicide is considerably more among the other backward castes (OBCs); in contrast, the incidence of suicide was minimal amongst the scheduled castes (SC) and scheduled tribes (ST). Farmers who have committed suicide primarily included those who relied on mono-cropping or those with little or no irrigation facilities and those who did not have supplementary occupations.

### Proximate reasons for suicide

Different study groups have given a whole range of reasons driving farmers to commit suicide. As per the Mishra (2006) report submitted to Government of Maharashtra indebtedness (93.00%); financial stress (74.00%); family disputes (55.00%); droughts (41.00%); adverse effect on social status (36.00%); problems relating to marriage of daughters or sisters (34.00%); addictions (28.00%) and health related problems (21.00%) are the major causes. Most of these reasons are overlapping, as a matter of fact, all these reasons can be classified in one of the three groups namely Indebtedness, Family Disputes, and Addiction and Health related Problems.

Illustratively, indebtedness and consequent financial distress causing damage to social status in turn creating difficulties in arranging marriage of daughters or sisters, are overlapping reasons and as such can be classified under a single group of factors: indebtedness. Family disputes constitute the second group, while the third group comprises addiction and health-related problems. Of these three groups, the most dominant one is of course, the indebtedness. In many cases even family disputes or health-related problems emanated from economic distress arising from indebtedness. In other words, indebtedness and its attendant economic distress is the main proximate reason behind the suicides by farmers.

### The root cause of farmer's suicide

While indebtedness and its attendant economic distress is the main reason behind suicide by farmers, the root cause behind

the suicides is the fact that farming in Vidarbha has no larger remained financially viable.

There are at least three major reasons why farming in Vidarbha has become financially unviable over the last 20-25 years: Grossly inadequate irrigation facilities, Acute shortage of electric pump-set connections and Inadequate supply of institutional credit.

Dr. Jadhav summarized the disturbing tale of farmers' woes in Vidarbha can be pieced together, as follows: the support from the Government and the banks for farmers in Vidarbha has steadily declined for over 20 years. As a result, farmers had to rely on costly inputs. Illustratively, instead of bank credit at low interest rates, farmers had to borrow from money lenders at exorbitant interest rates; instead of cost-effective self-generated seeds, farmers had to buy expensive seeds from private companies. Consequently, the cost of farming rose significantly. At the same time, given the paucity of irrigation facilities, farmers had to rely on the vagaries of monsoon, which affected the farm production. At times even when farm production had increased, un-remunerative prices meant little or no increase in the income of the farmers. Moreover, during the years of natural calamities there was no supporting income from supplementary activities. As a combined result, indebtedness grew and the farmers were subject to severe economic distress, which also caused damage to their social status. Constant pressures from banks and more so from the unauthorized moneylenders led to severe mental distress, compromising their dignity and resultant frustration drove the self-respecting farmers to commit suicide.

According to Dr. Sudhir Goel, the Divisional Commissioner of Amravati, the farmer's suicides in Vidarbha were due to the agrarian crisis, which comprised of failure of green revolution in rainfed areas, indiscriminate promotion of cost-intensive farming, even in un-irrigated areas for the poor condition of farmers in the state. Indebtedness was a consequence of wrong agricultural practices, unbridled market forces and inadequate protection against the vagaries of nature (Anon., 2007a).

### Causes of suicides according Dr. PDKV, Akola studies

Dr. PDKV, Akola studies revealed that 67 to 70 per cent were the small and marginal rain fed farmers, majority of the deceased farmers not having any subsidiary occupation. About 97.00 per cent victims have very low to low socio-economic status level. The incidence of farmer's suicide is considerably more among the OBC's. Most of the (69%) victims are not having

Studies conducted by Dr. PDKV, Akola on Farmer's Suicide

Year	Research Project
2008	Socio-economic, Psychological and Situational Causes of Suicides of Farmers in Vidarbha Region
2009	Socio-economic Dimensions of Suicidal Farmers in Western Vidarbha (Comparison among the suicidal and non-suicidal farmers)
2009	Farmers suicides in Western Vidarbha: Case studies
2010	Socio-economic Dimensions of Suicidal Farmers in Western Vidarbha
2011	Livelihood study on families of suicide victim farmers of Vidarbha

any source to access irrigation, hence they reap only the *kharif* crops. Bt cotton and soybean were observed as a dominating crops. Low productivity was observed in all crops. Non remunerative prices and uncertain rains were the important hurdle to cent per cent farmers. Due to this yield, income, and ultimately livelihood of these farmers were unsustainable. Due to uncertainty in income they are not able to repay the institutional debts and pushed in indebtedness and defaulter trap and such farmers are not eligible for bank loan for next year, hence 36 per cent were turned towards non-institutional credit source mostly from the relatives (32%). This vicious cycle occurs year after year, hence deceased are not able to fulfill the family responsibilities. For every new venture they have to depend on non-institutional borrowing and if such loan is not repaid it reflects on the social prestige. Some of them take help of alcohol for forgetting the hard realities of life and few of them becomes habitual for regular alcoholic tendency (23 to 42%), 17 to 19 per cent had self illness, family member's illness observed in 25 to 33 per cent cases and 16 to 19 per cent had family disputes. Majority of the deceased have Introvert personality. All these factors lead the farmers toward non sustainable social and psychological web and finally they experienced the acute distress, depression and finally ended the lives by committing suicide (Kale, 2008; Kale, *et al.*, 2010; Anon., 2010; Kale and Mankar, 2010; Kale, 2011; Kale, 2011a; Kale, *et al.*, 2014; Kale *et al.*, 2014a).

#### **Recommendations of the study conducted by Dr. PDKV, Akola**

Farmer's suicides in Vidarbha are result of multi factors complex inclusive of indebtedness, consistent crop failures, introvertness, impulsiveness, health problems, alcoholic disorder and domestic disputes therefore, it is recommended to Government to provide social security, subsidiary occupations, crop/ animal/ weather insurance, health insurance and counseling (Anon., 2010b).

#### **Approaches and policy options suggested for prevention of farmer's suicides**

Some of the policy options are suggested by the study report through Policy Paper to change the overall scenario to prevent the suicidal tendency by farmers in distress prone districts of Vidarbha (Anon., 2010a). These are: the farm credit policy reforms to ensure easy access to credit through institutional sources allowing re-borrowing as per need to prevent them borrowing from non-institutional sources. To create a system for ensuring remunerative prices based on local conditions. Crop insurance for all crops with affordable premium operated at Village *Panchayat* level. Support to create water resource and irrigation facilities at farm level. Easy credit access to initiate farm based enterprises. Capacity building of farmers for adoption of low cost sustainable farm technology (LCSFT). Counseling centers at Panchayat level to overcome introvertness and impulsiveness. Policy reforms to support NGO's mandated for socializing with farmers to change the mind set, enhance social support, remove alcoholic tendency, resolve family disputes and help organizing marriages at low cost. Continuously involve and encourage the most distressed

group of farmers identifiable through ongoing extension programmes, in regular conferencing activities involving extension personnel, *Krishi Doots*, KVK Scientists and other progressive farmers, so as to promote openness to appropriate technology options.

#### **National Commission on Farmers recommendations**

The measures suggested by National Commission on Farmers (NCF) (Anon., 2006) include: set up a state Farmer's Commission with representation of farmers for ensuring dynamic government response to farmer's problems. A Market Price Stabilization Fund should be established jointly by Central and State Governments and financial institutions to protect farmers during periods of violent fluctuations in prices. Restructure microfinance policies to serve as Livelihood Finance, *i.e.*, credit coupled with support services in the areas of technology, management and markets. Promotion of commodity-based farmer's organizations such as Small Cotton Farmer's Estates to combine decentralized production with centralized services such as post-harvest management, value addition and marketing, for leveraging institutional support and facilitating direct farmer-consumer linkage. Improvement in implementation of Minimum Support Price (MSP). Arrangements for MSP need to be put in place for crops other than paddy and wheat. Also, millets and other nutritious cereals should be permanently included in the public distribution system. MSP should be at least 50 per cent more than the weighted average cost of production. Availability of data about spot and future prices of commodities through the Multi Commodity Exchange (MCD), National Commodity & Derivatives Exchange Limited (NCDEX) and the APMC electronic networks covering 93 commodities through 6000 terminals and 430 towns and cities.

State Agriculture Produce Marketing Committee Acts [APMC Acts] relating to marketing, storage and processing of agriculture produce need to shift to one that promotes grading, branding, packaging and development of domestic and international markets for local produce, and move towards a Single Indian Market. Provide affordable health insurance and revitalize primary healthcare centres. The National Rural Health Mission should be extended to suicide hotspot locations on priority basis. Cover all crops by crop insurance with the village and not block as the unit for assessment. Provide for a Social Security net with provision for old age support and health insurance. Promote aquifer recharge and rain water conservation. Decentralize water use planning and every village should aim at Jal Swaraj with Gram Sabhas serving as Pani Panchayats. Ensure availability of quality seed and other inputs at affordable costs and at the right time and place. Recommend low risk and low cost technologies which can help to provide maximum income to farmers because they cannot cope with the shock of crop failure, particularly those associated with high cost technologies like Bt cotton. Need swift action on import duties to protect farmers from international price. Set up Village Knowledge Centres (VKCs) or Gyan Chaupals in the farmer's distress hotspots. These can provide dynamic and demand driven information on all aspects of agricultural and non-farm livelihoods and also serve as guidance centres. Public

awareness campaigns to make people identify early signs of suicidal behaviour.

## Conclusion

The condition of agriculture in general and Indian farmer in particular is still very pathetic. The indebtedness and its attendant

economic distress is the main reason behind suicide by farmers. The root cause behind the suicides is the fact that farming in distress districts has no longer remained financially viable. The State and Central Government should take proper initiative to improve the terms of trade of agriculture and farmer's livelihood.

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