

Farmers suicides in Karnataka in light of Globalization

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Abstract

Agriculture is a largest economic sector and plays a significant role in the overall socio economic development of our country. More than 80 percent of the farmers working in this sector are marginal and small scale farmers. They depend on loan from private money lenders or from financial institutions for the cultivation of their land. They depend on agricultural income for their family expenses, education and marriage of the children. The agriculture in India is in crises and farmers of various states Karnataka in particular are in distress due to indebtedness, repeated failure of crops, increasing cost of production, poor quality of seeds, impact of globalization, exploitation by money lenders and businessmen and the other factors are the main causes for their distress which lead to suicides. Since 1997, the tragedies of suicides by farmers in Karnataka State have caught the attention of the state government, state legislators and the press.

Over the past three years, the incidence of farmers' suicides in the state has shown an alarming increase. It is now widely acknowledged in the state that there is a deepening and complex economic and social crisis in rural areas that has not been adequately addressed by any state government over the past ten years. While it is difficult to pin-point precise numbers, press reports indicate that at least 3000 farmers had taken their lives between the year 2000 and August, 2003. Through the year 2003, regional and local press reported an average of about four farmer suicides per week. These trends have continued into 2004, although reports of suicides have somewhat diminished over the past month. It is not known whether this is because suicides themselves have decreased, or whether they have simply gone unreported and thereby unnoticed by the press.

The State Government and Legislature have not been unresponsive to the tragedy of increasing farmer suicides. Following the directions of the State Legislature in August, 2001, the Government of Karnataka commissioned an Expert Committee to conduct a scientific study of farmer's suicides in the state. The Commission completed and presented its report in April, 2002. Recommendations of the Committee include a range of measures to instill self-reliance and self-respect among farmers, such as the creation of a farmers' welfare fund, a nodal department for welfare of farmers, social security measures, diversification of farm activities, rationalization of credit, regular supply of electricity for agriculture purposes, enhancing irrigation facilities, amendments to the land reforms act, facilities for health care and creating awareness of the harmful effects of alcohol.

Key words: Agriculture, Crops, Distress, Economy, Farmer, Marginal, Suicide. Globalization

Introduction

India is an agricultural country with agriculture as a predominant occupation of two third of working population living the rural area. Agriculture is not only an important occupation of our people, but also a way of life, culture and custom. Most of the Indian customs and festivals are observed in consonance with agriculture seasons, activities and products. The rural Indians are dependent on agriculture as a main source of livelihood. It is supplemented with animal husbandry and rearing live stock. Women are engaged in quite a few creative and tailoring works. Agriculture influences almost every sphere of life in rural areas. Those who are engaged in non agricultural activities are indirectly connected with agriculture. Agriculture not only provides food but also provides raw material to the manufacturing industries. The most important source of loan in terms of percentage of outstanding loan amount from the banks was 36 percent and from the moneylenders 26 percent.

The World Trade Organization (WTO) has a negative impact on the Indian farmers. The prices of agricultural products before the WTO agreement in India were lower than the international prices. But as a result of heavy subsidization of agricultural products by developed countries, the situation has changed. The prices of International Agricultural Products have become lower than the Indian agricultural prices. This has resulted in the growing unrest among the farmers in different states and pushed them in to hopeless condition. Some thinkers have drawn the attention of the government about the sad plight of the Indian farmers due to the WTO obligations. Expressing his opinion on international trade agreements, Vyas V. S. (2002) points out that “the international agreements particularly under World Trade Organization have not helped the developing countries as was professed at the time of the establishment of WTO”. The policy of trade liberalization resulted in the falling of prices of farm commodities especially from mid-90s onwards. Due to the lack of remunerative prices for their products the farmers dump their products like tomato, onion etc in the fields. Some of the products were thrown on the road in protest. The thinkers who have studied the farmers’ distress and anguish identified the following causes for the distress and suicides.

Objective:

This paper seeks to study farmer suicides in the light of globalization especially in Karnataka State

WHY DO FARMERS TAKE THEIR LIVES?

Development and policy experts have cited a number of reasons for why farmers take their lives, from heavy debt burdens to alcoholism and depression. Some have suggested that the compensation of Rs. 1 lakh (Rs. 100,000, or approximately US\$2,000) offered to the families of farmers who have committed suicide could be a reason why farmers in distress see suicide as a way out for their families. A few have suggested that because of the compensation amount, suicides for other personal reasons are likely to be reported as distress suicides by family members in order to claim the compensation. But few are willing to accept that the state’s economic and financial policy trends have significantly contributed to the economic stress on the state’s rural population. The reasons most commonly cited by farmers’ and agricultural workers’ organisations, state and local level social justice groups, journalists, and independent researchers who have followed the issues closely include:

- Crop failures resulting from drought, scant or no rainfall, and pest attacks;
- Increasing prices of chemical fertilizers and other essential inputs;
- Poor quality of seeds, fertilisers and pesticides;
- Failed bore-wells and all-around scarcity of water for agriculture and household use;
- Poor or non-existent power supply;
- Collapse of prices of agriculture commodities, accompanied by inadequate or non-existent crop insurance;
- Mounting household expenses related to health, marriages and deaths of family members;
- Heavy debt burdens, including debt to money lenders and banks;
- Loss of lands and/or distress sale of lands resulting from an inability to repay debts and meet financial obligations;
- Unequal distribution of risk between share-croppers and marginal farmers o-n o-ne hand, and wealthier land owners and seed companies o-n the other hand;
- Lack of comprehensive agricultural policy in the state and in the country.

These groups argue that the State and Central Governments have failed rural populations; in their rush to attract high-end foreign investment, information technology companies and other rapid growth industries, the governments have neglected the needs and aspirations of farming communities. Implementation of the Commission's recommendations by the State Government has been slow. Other development institutions in the Karnataka State have also conducted studies o-n the issue and made recommendations. However, according to some independent experts deeply involved in the agriculture sector, the findings and recommendations of these studies do not adequately reach the heart of the problem, i.e., the impacts of the severe agricultural crisis faced by farmers—specially small-hold and marginal farmers, and agricultural workers—and the complex triggers that impel farmers to take their lives. In the meantime, farmers' suicides have continued more or less unabated.

KARNATAKA: AT THE FOREFRONT OF GLOBALISATION

The tragedy of farmers' suicides, and the severe economic stress that small-hold and marginal farming families face need to be understood in the context of broader economic and policy trends in the state. Perhaps more than any other state, Karnataka has been at the forefront of the liberalization of agriculture for almost ten years. Karnataka was the first state to implement the new agriculture policy in 1996, which ushered in corporate dominated agriculture including floriculture, aquaculture and also the production of special gherkins for export. The state has amended land reform laws to facilitate corporate agriculture and has systematically opened up its agricultural markets, thus exposing its farmers to unregulated competition from outside. Of the 1500 items for which the Indian Government removed Quantitative Restrictions to fulfill its obligations in World Trade Organisation (WTO) regime, most agricultural commodities are produced solely in Karnataka. These include rosewood, sandalwood, gherkin, coffee and ragi (a cereal grass).

Also, in addition to attempting to establish itself as an Information Technology (IT) Centre, Karnataka is also actively trying to establish itself as India's biotechnology centre. Monsanto already has a research centre in Bangalore and the past ten-odd years have seen a mushrooming of biotechnology research initiatives in the state through university programmes and private centres. Most recently, IT and biotechnology companies have displayed interest in collaborative efforts to expand their operations and scope of services. The State Government has continued to actively facilitate the

expansion of these two sectors by assisting them in land acquisition and power and water supply, and providing other economic incentives to private companies in these sectors. These facilities have proved to be extremely expensive to farmers in general and small and marginal farmers in particular, who have been confronted with water and power scarcities, loss of lands, mounting debts and a near absence of economic and financial supports.

The tragedy of farmers' distress and suicides has been politicised by various political parties and their candidates. In the May 2004 state and national elections, electoral candidates from all parties invoked the issue in their electoral campaigns, and in turn accused both, the State Congress Government as well as the national BJP Government of advancing elite interests at the cost of the poor, particularly farming communities. At the same time, however, none of the electoral candidates outlined a clear plan of action to address the economic crisis that has resulted in the tragedy of the suicides.

The new coalition government in Karnataka has declared some urgent measures to provide relief to farmers in distress. These measures include improving irrigation in dry areas, restructuring of farm credit, a temporary moratorium on all debt repayments to banks and money-lenders, and enhanced access to seed. The early onset of the South-West monsoons offers significant hope that drought conditions in the state will abate. However, the entrenched agricultural crisis in the state will require more far-reaching and deeper policy shifts by the state government, which are not yet in evidence.

Such policy shifts will not likely be achieved without wider conscientisation and mobilisation of society to rally around the needs and priorities of the state's farmers, who produce bulk of the food and agricultural products consumed by rural and urban populations, as well as industry. Society needs to hear the voices of the farmers, and to appreciate what would have stopped farmers from taking their own lives, and what will stop these tragedies in the future. When a farmer takes his or her life, the economic and social distress of the entire family deepens. The compensation offered by the Government does not assure the family long-term relief or means of meeting livelihood needs. Past trends show deepening rural poverty and distress migration to urban centres where jobs are scarce and insecure, thus entrenching a downward spiral of poverty, hunger and despair. The tragedy of farmers' suicides is society's tragedy, and society must start to show collective responsibility to address it.

Monoculture contributing to farm distress

The shift from farm saved seed to corporate monopolies of the seed supply is also a shift from biodiversity to monocultures in agriculture. The District of Warangal in Andhra Pradesh used to grow diverse legumes, millets, oilseeds. Seed monopolies created crop monocultures of cotton, leading to disappearance of millions of nature's evolution and farmers breeding. Monocultures and uniformity increase the risks of crop failure as diverse seeds adapted to diverse ecosystems are replaced by rushed introduction of unadapted and often untested seeds into the market. When Monsanto first introduced Bt Cotton in India in 2002, the farmers lost Rs. 1 billion due to crop failure. Instead of 1,500 Kg/acre as promised by the company, the harvest was as low as 200 kg. Instead of increased incomes of Rs. 10,000/acre, farmers ran into losses of Rs. 6,400/acre.

In the state of Bihar, when farm saved corn seed was displaced by Monsanto's hybrid corn, the entire crop failed creating Rs. 4 billion losses and hence increased poverty for desperately poor farmers. Poor peasants of the South cannot survive seed monopolies. And the crisis of suicides shows how the survival of small farmers is incompatible with the seed monopolies of global corporations. The second pressure Indian farmers are facing is the dramatic fall in prices of farm

produce as a result of free trade policies of the WTO. The WTO rules for trade in agriculture are in essence rules for dumping. They have allowed an increase in agribusiness subsidies while preventing countries from protecting their farmers from the dumping of artificially cheap produce

Impact of Suicide

The impact of suicide by the bread earner is experienced by all members of the family and also those who had close acquaintances with him/her. The sudden, unexpected death of a close person often shocks his family, friends and other known people. The act of suicide is over for the person who dies, but survivors are left with many questions. With suicide, the problem, pain, suffering and trauma is merely transferred to those who survive and is experienced by everyone in the society (Gururaj and Isaac, 2003).

Govt in denial

An example of this denial is a Government of Karnataka report on “Farmers suicide in Karnataka – A scientific analysis.” The report while claiming to be “scientific,” makes unscientific reductionist claims that the farm suicides have only psychological causes, not economic ones, and identifies alcoholism as the root cause of suicides. Therefore, instead of proposing changes in agricultural policy, the report recommends that farmers require to boost up their self respect (swabhiman) and self-reliance (swavalambam). And ironically, its recommendations for farmers self-reliance are changes in the Karnataka Land Reforms Act to allow larger land holdings and leasing.

These are steps towards the further decimation of small farmers who have been protected by land “ceilings” (an upper limit on land ownership) and policies that only allow peasants and agriculturalists to own agricultural land (part of the land to the tiller policies of the Devraj Urs government). While the “expert committee” report identified “alcoholism” as the main cause for suicides, the figures of this “scientific” claim are inconsistent and do not reflect the survey. On page 10, the report states in one place that 68 per cent of the suicide victims were alcoholics. Five lines later it states that 17 per cent were “alcohol and illicit drinkers.” It also states that the majority of suicide victims were small and marginal farmers and the majority had high levels of indebtedness.

Yet debt is not identified as a factor leading to suicide. On page 32 of the report it is stated that of the 105 cases studied among the 3544 suicides which had occurred in five districts during 2000–01, 93 had debts, and 54 per cent victims had borrowed from private sources and money lenders. More than 90 per cent suicide victims were in debt. Yet a table on page 63 has mysteriously reduced debt as a reason for suicide to 2.6 per cent, and equally mysteriously, “suicide victims having a bad habit” has emerged as the primary cause of farmers suicides.

Preventive Strategy

When reports of farmers’ suicide started appearing on the headlines of the news papers some of the political parties paid some money to the victim’s family and tried to take the political mileage out of it. The Government of Karnataka also paid some amount as compensation in the beginning and also took some strategic measures to bring down the suicides among the farming community. A Joint House Committee was appointed in the year 1999 under the Chairmanship of Sri G.B. Shivakumar to study the farmers' problems with reference to suicides in detail and submit a report regarding measures to be taken by the government. Accordingly, the committee studied sixty reported cases of suicidal deaths of farmers. Of the reported 60 cases examined by the committee only one found to have had crop loss

and the committee recommended for payment of compensation for the loss of crops and non-payment of loan. For the remaining cases the committee opined that the suicides were on account of personal and domestic problems. The Committee also made certain recommendations to ameliorate the conditions leading to distress.

The Government of Karnataka commissioned an Expert Committee' in August 2001, under the Chairmanship of Dr. G. K. Veeresh, Former Vice-Chancellor of the University of Agricultural Sciences, Bangalore to study the recommendations of Joint House Committee and other committees and submit a report on the socio-economic and other causes for farmers suicides and suggest remedial measures. The `Expert Committee, involved academicians drawn from various disciplines namely Economics, Sociology, Psychiatry and Agricultural sciences. The task before the Committee was to examine 55th and 56th recommendations made by Joint Legislative Council relating to the payment of compensation and confidence building measures to be taken by the government in the interest of the farming community. The 'Expert Committee' studied 130 cases of suicides throughout the state and submitted a detailed report to the government in April 2003. The committee made certain recommendations and also fully agreed with the 55th and 56th recommendations of the Joint House Committee about payment of compensation. Consequent to the recommendations of the expert committee The Government of Karnataka took some immediate measure.

Package of Karnataka Government

Consequent to the recommendations of the Expert Committee the Government of Karnataka announced the The farmers were exempted from the payment of interest on crop loans. Further they were exempted from the payment of water tax and land revenue. Arrangements were made to supply the seeds at the subsidized rates to the small and marginal farmers. The small scale and the marginal farmers were encouraged to grow horticultural crops.

To reach this objective the loan facility was extended. Support price was given for certain agricultural products. The farmers were exempted from the penalty for the non-payment of electricity bill used for the purpose of irrigation. The private money lending business was prohibited since 2002. Introduced Yashashwini Co-operative Health Care Scheme, in 2003 which is an insurance scheme launched for the first time in the world for the benefit of farmers who are members of the cooperative societies. Apart from the above concessions the state government has introduced some more schemes for the farming community like providing agricultural loan at 3% interest through co-operative institutions. Supply of free power for irrigation pump sets. The government is also gradually encouraging organic farming. About 50,000 farmers have registered as members of organic farming organization. To learn the new farming methods the government is sending the farmers to other agriculturally advanced countries. 663 farmers were sent to china in the 2009-10. Another batch of farmers has left to Israel on June 15, 2010. Special packages have been given to the six districts in the state namely Belgaum, Shimoga, Chikamagalur, Kodagu, Chitradurga and Hassan where a large number of farmers' suicides were reported in the past. The Union Government released the rehabilitation package of Rs.2689.64crore which included an interest waiver of Rs 209.81 crore. The package comprised loan rescheduling and interest waiver, and specific schemes for watershed development, seed replacement, horticulture and extension services, and subsidiary income through livestock, dairying and fisheries. The Union Government also has announced packages to farming community by waving the bank loan of 40 million small and Marginal farmers in the country.

Conclusion

The trend can be reversed through active participation of the Government in addressing the real issues of the farmers that are driving them to suicides. Social responsibility also goes a long way to help the farmers. The big land owners in most places do not lend a helping hand to struggling farmers, in most cases; they grab the benefits which are otherwise meant for the poor farmers. General public, NGOs, corporate and other organization too can play a part in helping farmers by adopting drought affected villages and families and helping them to rehabilitate. The solution to the farmer's plight should be directed towards enabling the farmers to help themselves and sustain on their own. Temporary through monetary relief would not be the solution.

The efforts should be targeted at improving the entire structure of the small farmers where in the relief is not given on a drought to drought basis, rather they are taught to overcome their difficulties through their own skills and capabilities. The Government needs to come up with proactive solutions and the nation has to realize that farmer suicides are not minor issues happening in remote parts of a few states, it is a reflection of the true state of the basis of our economy.

The various measures taken both by union and state governments have not completely stopped farmers from suicide. The reports of suicides by farmers are still coming from different states. The following measures have been suggested to effectively bring down the suicides among farming community. Farmers Counseling Centers should be established in the 'Grama Panchayat' level with the appointment of trained personnel comprising of a Social Worker, Psychologist, Agricultural scientist, Doctor and elected representative of Grama Panchayat. Proper training should be given to the farmers by Agricultural Assistants regarding use of pesticides and fertilizers. Awareness should be created among farmers regarding scientific farming of different crops to get better yield and good price for their products. An Advisory Council should be formed for the farmers' suicide prevention at the District and State level to advise and supervise the members of the Counseling Centers. Encourage the farmers to adopt the allied activities like dairy, poultry etc along with farming activities.

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