

Agrarian Distress and Farmers' Suicides in Karnataka: Strategy for Prevention

*Purnanand Nagappa Sangalad, Malakajappa Gyanappa Huddar

Karnatak University's, Department of Criminology and Forensic Science, Karnatak Science College, Dharwad Karnataka, India

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.

Various steps have been taken by the Union and the State Governments by giving concessions to farming community. The Union Government has waived of the loan of marginal and small –scale farmers, steps have taken to supply fertilizers at highly subsidized rates. The State Government has given the loan facility at 3 percent interest. Free supply of electricity is given to the farmers pump sets. All these measures have helped farmers to some extent. In spite of the various measures taken by Central and the State Governments the suicide by farmers is still continued. The concerted efforts are to be made by all those concerned to bring happiness on the face of the farmers.

Keywords: Agriculture, Crops, Distress, Economy, Farmer, Marginal, Suicide.

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. According to Union Finance Minister the GDP from agriculture, forestry and fishing for the year 2008-09 was 16 per cent. Despite a steady decline of its share in G D P, agriculture is still the largest economic sector and plays a

significant role in the overall socio-economic development of the country. It is the main source food to the growing population of our country. Our country could achieve the self sufficiency of food grains in few decades of its political emancipation. The food production in India reached to 213 million tonnes in 2001-02. It was increased to 231 million tonnes in 2007-08 and there was a decrease of the same by one million tonnes (230 million tonnes) in 2008-09 due drought in some states, flood in some other states, and also due to agricultural crisis in some other states. Consequently per capita availability of food grains is steadily declining. Per capita availability of food grains in 2003 was 27 kgs less than what it was in 1991(Guruswamy M et al 2008).

Farmers indebtedness one of the main causes of distress in the agriculture sector. Almost half (49 percent) India's farmer households are indebted. The small and marginal farmers get the loan at a higher rate of interest from private money lenders due to non availability of institutional credit. As a result they are unable to clear of the loan of the private money lenders the farmers enter in to vicious debt trap. As per the information presented in the Lok Sabha in 2005 the estimated numbers of indebted farmer house holds in Karnataka were 24897 and the farmer households indebted are 61.6 percent (Guruswamy M et al 2008).

With the Invention of state-of-art agricultural implements, HYV seeds, effective pesticides and chemical fertilizers and with the ever increasing demand for a agricultural products farmers showed lot of interest in incorporating new methods of cultivation. They started cultivating cash crops, like

Received: April 10, 2011; Revised May 29, 2011; Accepted May 29, 2011.

*Corresponding Author, Tel: +91-8362770423
Email: sangaladkcd@gmail.com

Copyright © 2011 Authors. This is an online open access article published by *ScholarJournals* of Society for Scientific Research, and is distributed under the Creative Commons Attribution License, which permits unrestricted use, distribution, and reproduction in any medium, provided the original work is properly cited.

sugarcane, ground nut, tobacco which can fetch them more income. They are investing too much on HYV seeds, chemical fertilizers and pesticides and also on agriculture implements like harvesters, tractors etc. This is how labour intensive farming transformed itself into intensive capital farming. The procedure of getting loans has been simplified. Consequently, the present farming community is at the risk of falling in debt trap than ever before.

The seed sector of India was opened to global corporations like Cargill, Monsanto, and Syngenta due to the World Bank's structural adjustment policies. 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). The corporate globalization of seed sector resulted in the increase in indebtedness.

According to the Situation Assessment Survey of Farmers Indebtedness of Farmer Households by National Sample Survey (NSS) 59th Round (January-December 2003) points out that at national level, on an average, 29 out of 100 indebted households borrowed from 'agricultural/professional money lender'. Marriages and ceremonies accounted for 111 rupees per 1000 rupees of outstanding loans of farmer households. 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.

Thinkers Views on Farmers Suicides

- Prof. K Nagaraj of Madras Institute of Development Studies (MIDS) points out that "from the mid-90s onwards prices and farm incomes crashed. As costs rose- even as bank credit dried up-so did indebtedness. Even as subsidies for corporate farmers in the west rose, we cut our few, very minimal life supports and subsidies to our own farmers. The collapse of investment in agriculture also meant it was and is most difficult to get out of this trap" (P. Sainath, 2007).

- Stating about farmers indebtedness of Vandana Shiva (2009) points out that in 1998, the World Bank's structural adjustment policies forced India to open up its seed sector to global corporation. Farm saved seeds were replaced by corporate seeds. The poor peasants have to buy new seeds for every planting season and what was a traditionally a free resource, available by putting aside a small portion of the crop, becomes a commodity. This new expense increases poverty and leads to indebtedness.

- Mentioning the cause of farmers suicide Vaidyanathan, A (2006) says that "farmers suicides are associated with high level of indebtedness is popularly and even in some academic writings, seen as indicative of the Indian peasantry in general suffering from unbearable burden of debt and teetering on the brink of bankruptcy"

- Aruna Burte, Sangeeta Rege and Padma Deosthali (2008) opine that the farmers are unable to cope up with the sudden changes in cropping patterns, market fluctuations, and use of pesticides to increase the yield. These are direct results of agricultural policy driven by market forces. When the crops fail, they are in debt, which they have no means to repay. They are unable to perform the role of provider for the family. All these factors are to be taken in to consideration while understanding an individual farmer committing suicide.

- Emphasizing the importance of joint family Deshpande (2002:2601-2610) asserts that in joint family each member was secure. The joint families in olden days were extending moral support to its members at the time of all crises. The majority of victims who committed suicides were surprisingly came from nuclear families. Even Durkheim in his monumental contribution 'La Suicide' speaks of the co-relationship that exists between family size and incidence of suicides. According to him there exists an 'inverse relationship between family size and tendency towards suicides'. Durkheim (1952:355) writes: "A person is almost certainly well insured morally when isolated and left to him self than when constantly under beneficent discipline of family surroundings". Deshpande (2002: 2601-2610) also feels that failure of social institutions to instill and establish confidence among those who are on the verge of breakdown is one of the main factor responsible for the suicide among farmers.

Contributing Factors for Farmers Suicides

Apart from the views of the thinkers, mentioned above the following factors contribute to the suicides among farmers.

- Failure of Crops – Failure of crops due to the failure of rainfall, drought, destruction of crops due to pests and use of low quality seeds.

- Increasing prices – The prices of inputs such as seeds, fertilizers and pesticides have gone up and prices of crops have been pushed down to the extent even below the cost of production.

- Financial stress – The farming community experiences the financial stress due to price crash of agricultural products and as a result there is increase in the debt burden.

- Unwilling to adopt scientific practices in farming also make the farmers face the problems.

- Untreated mental illness – Lack of access to mental health services in rural areas and the stigma attached to treatment.

- Depression arising from exposure to agricultural chemicals/pesticides may increase the risk for mood disorders and ultimately suicide.

- Scarcity of water – due to failure of rainfall, failure of bore wells, sharp decrease in ground water table.

- Improper supply of electricity by different electrical companies' indifferent regions of the state results in the inability of the farmers to supply water to the fields.

- Inadequate services by the agricultural departments to provide proper counseling on farm technologies.

- Failure of the governmental institutions to meet out the needs and aspirations of the farming community.

Depicts year wise number of suicides by farmers in Karnataka State the period from 2000-01 to 2008-09 for nine years. Of the nine years the number farmers' suicide is higher for three years 2000-01, 2001-02 and 2002-03. In 2000-01 the number of suicides 2630 farmers committed suicides, in 2001-02 the total number of suicides by farmers were 2505 and in 2002-03, 2340 farmers have committed suicide. The state was reeling under severe drought during these three years. The state was also affected by drought during 2003-04 but number of farmers suicides were 708 due to the various confidence building measures like exemption of interest on crop loan, exemption of water tax and land revenue, supply of seeds at the subsidized rates to small and marginal farmers, support price for some agricultural products, introduction of Health Care Scheme by the Government of Karnataka have brought down the rate of farmers suicides to some extent.

According National Institute of Mental Health, United States of America, (www.nimh.nih.gov) "suicidal tendencies are caused by emotional disorders, chemical imbalances and genetic traits. Major psychiatric illness, including bipolar disorder, depression, schizophrenia and substance abuse, which increase the risk of suicide, are inherited" (Guruswami M et al, 2008). These neurobiological factors predispose one to suicide. Srijit Mishra (2006) opines that an adverse economic condition acts as the trigger for the act of suicide. He further points out that suicide is an interaction between neurobiological factors and socio-economic factors.

Another worth noting fact in the context of farmer suicides according to National Institute of Mental Health, USA is the relevance of 'suicide contagion'. Suicide contagion is the exposure to suicide or suicidal behaviors within one's family, one's peer group, or through media reports of suicide and result in an increase in suicide and suicidal behaviour. This kind of mass mentality attitude is undeniable. Sharad Joshi (2004) leader of the Farmers Movement in Maharashtra states that "the farmers are driven to suicide, first in trickles and then in waves, as suicide became a thinkable proposition".

According to the National Crime Records Bureau (NCRB) report on 'Accidental Deaths and Suicides in India 2007', 46 farmers commit suicide every day in India. In all as many as 16,632 farmers, including 2,369 women killed themselves in 2007 constituting 14.4 percent of the total number of suicides in the country. There is a slight drop in the number of farmers' suicide in 2007 as compared to 2006. The total number of farm suicides in 2006 was 17,060 and it is 16,632 in 2007. Further NCRB report on 'Accidental Deaths and Suicides in India 2008' points out that 1,99,132 farmers have committed suicide since 1997 to 2008.

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).

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 measures

REHABILITATION PACKAGES

i. Package of Karnataka Government

Consequent to the recommendations of the Expert Committee the Government of Karnataka announced the

package of Rs. 840 crores for the rehabilitation the farmers in distress and also payment compensation to the members of the victim's family. Apart from these following concessions were also announced.

- 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.

ii. Package of Central Government

- 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.

Suggestions

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 to bring down the suicides among farming community.

- Farmers Counseling Centers should be established in the 'Mandal Panchayat' level with the appointment of trained personnel comprising of a Social Worker, Psychologist, Agricultural scientist, Doctor and elected representative of Mandal 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.

- It should be made mandatory to the college level NSS units to organize camps in the villages and create awareness in the farming community about the effect of suicide and its impact on other members of the family.

- Encourage the farmers to adopt the allied activities like dairy, poultry etc along with farming activities.

- Encouragement of networks of relatives, friends, neighbours and members of the faith community to decrease isolation, which is one of the strongest risk factors for suicides.

ACKNOWLEDGEMENT

Authors acknowledge the award of fellowship to the first author and other financial support from Bureau of Police Research and Development (BPR&D), Ministry of Home Affairs, Government of India.

REFERENCES

- Aruna Burte, Rege sangeeta, Deosthali Padma (2008): Choosing to Live – Guidelines for Suicide Prevention Counseling in Domestic Violence, CEHAT Publications, Mumbai.
- Deshpande, R., S. (2002): Suicides by Farmers in Karnataka: Agrarian Distress and Alleviatory Steps, Economic and

- Political week June 29.
- Durkheim Emile. (1952): *Suicide – A Study in Sociology*, translated by John, A Spoulding and George Simpsons, Routledge and Kegan Paul, London.
- Gururaj, G., Isaac, M., K. (2003): *Suicide Prevention– Information for Media Professionals*, NIMHANS/EPI.Preven/Media.2003.
- Guruswamy, M., Isaac, D., K. Subhakrishna and R. Ranjani (2008): *The crises in Indian Agriculture-A Critical Study*, Hope India Publications, Gurgaon-122017.
- NCRB (2007): *Accidental Deaths & Suicides in India 2007*, NCRB, New Delhi
- Sainath P., (2009): *The Largest Wave of Suicides in History*, Centre Tricontinental – CETRI, <http://www.centre.be/spip.php?Article 1057>. Pp 1 to 3.
- Sharad Joshi. (2004): *Malady of Yavatmal-Cotton turns a killer*, Business Line, August 4
- Srijit Mishra. (2006): *Suicide of Farmers in Maharashtra*, IGIDR, Mumbai.
- Vaidyanathan, A. (2006): *Farmers’ Suicides and the Agrarian Crises*” Economic and Political Weekly, Vol. XLI NO 38 September 23, 2006
- Vandana Shiva. (2009): *why Are Indian Farmers Committing Suicide and How Can We Stop This Tragedy?* mhtml:file//H.
- Vyas, V., S. (2002): *Economic and Political Weekly* – (May 23-29, 2003) – *Globalization: Hopes and Realities and Coping Strategy*.