

Globalization and distress suicides of farmers in Karnataka

(A study on farmers' suicides in Chitradurga, Davanagere and Tumkur districts of Karnataka)

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ABSTRACT

Suicide has emerged as public health problem in India over the last two decades, especially by the rise of Farmers' suicide rates in the rural areas. The globalization brought both opportunities and threats to those who participate in the economic activities that are globally connected. Globalization of agriculture has direct impact, both negative and positive on the welfare of the rural households and particularly those depend on agriculture for their livelihoods. Agriculture had been the first casualty in the LPG processes commencing with WTO and GATT agreements. Inputs such as fertilizers, insecticides, mechanical power and improved seeds occupy a prominent place in input structure. The purchases of inputs claim a large share of farmers' cash expenditure and forcing the farmers, particularly small and marginal farmers, to take loans from various sources. With the Institutionalized credit dwindling due to structural adjustments, farmers had to turn towards private money lenders who only squeezed them with exorbitant interest rates. With the failure of monsoons and the spurious nature of seeds and fertilizers, the farmers incurred losses for consecutive years pushed into debt trap. Besides the economic cause the loss of social esteem drove them to desperation and alienation from which they could extricate themselves only through suicide.

Key Words: Suicide: A self inflicted act willfully carried out by the victim himself, Globalization: Series of changes in economic and world trade world wide beginning in the 1990s, WTO: World Trade Organization, GATT: General Agreement on Trade and Tariffs.

INTRODUCTION

Suicide is a human act self inflicted, self intentioned and untimely cessation of life. It's a human act, with a conscious wish to be dead; his or her action carries out that wish. It implies that the motivation of the deceased

may have to be inferred and his behavior interpreted by others by suicide notes, spoken testimony or retrospective reconstruction of victim's intention, goal related to death rather than self injury, self mutilation or inimical self reducing behavior. It focuses on the concept the cessation of life.

Emile Durkheim published his monumental work, *Le Suicide* in the year 1912, wherein he explained suicide as a social fact inversely related to the degree of social cohesion. He brought forth a fourfold classification of suicides-Egoistic, Altruistic, Anomic and Fatalistic.

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(Received on 15.03.2010, Accepted on 19.07.2010)

Of these he felt that, the high incidence of suicides in Europe of his time were, of egoistic and anomic types. His argument was that the suicidogenic tendency runs in every individual like a current and it would propel the person impulsively towards suicide, when terrible isolation is experienced or when the societal norms crumble letting loose normlessness ending in suicides.

The cause of an individual suicide is invariably more complicated than a recent painful event such as the break-up of a relationship or the loss of a job. An individual suicide cannot be adequately explained as the understandable response to an individual's stressful occupation, or an individual's membership in a group encountering discrimination. Social conditions alone do not explain a suicide. People, who appear to become suicidal in response to such events, or in response to a physical illness, generally have significant underlying mental problems, though they may be well-hidden.

Suicide has emerged as an increasing public health problem in India over the last two decades, highlighted especially by the rise of male youth suicide rates in rural areas. According to National Crime Records Bureau's latest statistics, 1.22lakh suicides every year in India and Maharashtra tops among all other states of India. One more alarming fact is the growing number of family suicides as a result of suicide pacts among family members who decide to die as a family. Kerala ranks highest in family suicides in the country.

GLOBALIZATION

The globalization brought both opportunities and threats to those who participate in the economic activities that are globally connected. Here, it was stressed on a debate to come the phenomenon of globalization and how to make the best use of it for the benefits of the rural community. Globalization of agriculture has direct impact, both negative and positive on the welfare of

the rural households and particularly those depend on agriculture for their livelihoods.

It was pointed out that Indian agriculture had undergone some major structural changes in recent years, which, in turn, enhanced the marked-induced vulnerability of a section of rural population.

Over a period of a time, Indian agriculture has been progressively acquiring the "small farm" character and more number of small and marginal farmers has emerged than ever before. By 1995-96, nearly 36 percent of the cultivated area was operated by small and marginal farmers an increase from the 29 percent in 1985-86. It is assumed that over 40 percent of the land is now operated by small and marginal farmers; such a tilt towards small farmers could be observed particularly in all parts of the country. Such a small farm operations may not be able to withstand any external risks like failure of rains and crops, and may easily become victim of indebtedness. Such distress conditions may ultimately force them to commit suicides.

Similar changes are taking place in the inputs that are mostly influenced by the modern technology. Inputs such as fertilizers, insecticides, mechanical power and improved seeds occupy a prominent place in input structure. They have substituted organic manure, animal power and farm-retained seeds, which are traditional agricultural practices in India.

The purchases of inputs claim a large share of farmers' cash expenditure and forcing the farmers, particularly small and marginal farmers, to take loans from various sources. It was stated that whatever more "progressive" agriculture is practiced, e.g., GM cotton, the proportion of inputs, which was Rs. 55,401/- cores in 1993-94, rose to 103,555 cores in 1999-2000, i.e., by two times.

Agricultural economists felt that in view of the striking changes that had taken place in the cropping pattern and productivity of crops between 1980-81 and 1998-99, the shift in the area under crops had a bearing on the livelihood pattern of the people who were depending on agriculture. Instead of growing staples to cover at least family's consumption

Table 1. Age wise distribution of Farmers who had committed suicides

Sl. No.	Age	No. of farmers	Per cent
1	< 30	15	6.61
2	31 - 40	58	25.55
3	41 - 50	77	33.93
4	51 - 60	51	22.46
5	60 >	26	11.45
	Total	227	100.00

Table 2. Caste wise distribution of Suicide Victims

Sl. No.	Sub-Caste	No. of farmers	Percent
1	Scheduled Castes	18	7.93
2	Scheduled Tribes	07	3.08
3	Other Backward Classes Category-1	30	13.22
4	Category-2a	28	12.33
5	Category-2b	02	0.88
6	Category-3a	52	22.91
7	Category-3b	90	39.65
	Total	227	100.00

needs, even small and marginal farmers have been shifting to commercial crops ignoring the needs of primary consumption.

Farmers' suicide in India is a phenomenon that emerged as a sequel to globalization and other economic reforms that were initiated thereafter. According to National Crime

Records Bureau, between 1997-2007, 1, 82,936 farmers have committed suicides in India.

During 1999- 2001, it was estimated that 110 farmers committed suicide in Karnataka. According to one estimate, 3,000 farmers committed suicide in Karnataka between 1998 and 2006 (Muzzaffar Assadi: 1998 & 2005). Nonetheless, if we take the report prepared

by the Crime Branch of Karnataka, the number of suicide under the heading "farming and agricultural activity" comes to 15804 between 1998 and 2002. The year 2000 saw the maximum number of suicide 2630 followed by year 2001 - these are the years when agriculture saw the negative growth. Interestingly, as per the crime branch report, between 1996 and 2002, 12889 male farmers and 2841 female farmers committed suicide.

The beginning of the Farmer's suicides can be traced back to the year 1998, when two farmers in Bidar, who were involved in cultivating Tur Dal, a market-oriented agricultural crop committed suicide. In the

initial Davanagere, Koppal and even Chickmagalur, Kodagu and it also covered ground water region, (Belgaum) assured rain fall region (Haveri), Sugar Cane and Cauvery Irrigation Belt (Mandya). However, in the coastal belt, the number of suicides reported was less. Two years, farmer suicides were largely concentrated in the drought-prone districts in north Karnataka, or confined to economically backward, drought-prone regions such as Gulbarga and Bidar. However, after 2000, the phenomenon shifted to relatively advanced agricultural regions, particularly Mandya, Hassan, Shimoga.

Table 3. Distribution of the farmers by extent of land owned

Sl. No.	Land owned	No. of farmers	Percent
1	0 - 5 Acres	173	76.22
2	6 - 10 Acres	41	18.06
3	11 - 15 Acres	8	3.52
4	16 - 20 Acres	2	0.88
5	21 - 25 Acres	1	0.44
6	31 > Acres	2	0.88
	Total	227	100.00

OBJECTIVES

- The paper seeks to examine the following:
1. To examine the incidence of suicides of farmers in these three districts of Karnataka-Chitradurga, Davanagere and Tumkur.
 2. To draw socio- economic profile of the farmers who are committed suicide in the three districts of Karnataka and to identify the causes there in.

METHOD OF STUDY

This paper is based on a study on 227 Farmers who committed suicides during the years 2001-2007 in Chitradurga, Davanagere and Tumkur district of Karnataka.

FINDINGS & DISCUSSION

1. It was found that 66per cent of the farmers who had committed suicide were less than 50 years of age. This means they

Table 3.5: Distribution of farmers by Income

Sl. NO	Income	No. of farmers	Per cent
1	<Rs.20,000	37	16.30
2	20,000 to 25,000	62	27.31
3	25,000 to 50,000	84	37.00
4	50,000 to 75,000	19	8.37
5	75,000 to 1 lakh	14	6.17
6	>1 lakh	11	4.85
	Total	227	100.00

Table 4. Distribution of farmers by the amount of debt

Sl. No.	Debt	No. of farmers	Percent
1	<1 Lakh	87	38.33
2	1 - 2 Lakhs	88	38.76
3	2 - 3 Lakhs	26	11.45
4	3 -4 Lakhs	11	4.85
5	> 4 Lakhs	15	6.61
	Total	227	100.00

have died at relatively young and at the most productive part of their lives.

It was found that 25.55 per cent of the farmers were in the age group of 31-40 years, whereas; 33.93 per cent farmers were in 41-50 age group. On the whole in a sample of 227 farmers, 66 per cent farmers committed suicide in the most productive part of their lives. The average age of the farmers who had committed suicide is 47.6 years. The younger generation of farmers who wanted to make

prosperous career in agriculture got buckled down caught up in debt trap. The cost of inputs, spurious fertilizers, poor quality seeds have added misery to the farmers. The frequent drought spells during 2001-07 have driven the farmers to desperation. Their hopes of recovery through a bumper crop got dashed against led to their fateful suicides. At the face of repeated crop failures, these contributory factors propelled them to a point of dejection and frustration ending up in their suicides at

relatively young and most productive part of their lives.

2. All the farmers who committed suicide belonged predominantly to backward communities 88.9 per cent and SCs and STs were 11.01 per cent.

Analyzing the victims by their castes, 39.65 per cent farmers belong to Lingayat community, which is a dominant backward community in both Chitradurga and Davanagere districts.

Even today this community owns huge land holdings in the State. Similarly, 22.90 per cent of farmers belong to category 3A that includes

dominant castes like Vokkaligas, Reddys, and Banajigas.

In Tumkur district large landholdings are in the hands of these communities. Coming to Chitradurga district after Lingayats, it is dominated by Reddys and Vokkaligas. To the surprise of the researcher farmers who committed suicides were from these dominant and relatively affluent communities. About 13.22 per cent belonged to category-1, which includes Yadavas (Golla), and Besthas etc. In all 12.34 per cent belonged to category 2 that consists of Idigas, Kurubas, Thigalas, Devangas. About 7.93 per cent Scheduled

Table 5. Distribution of the farmers by the main cause of committing suicide

Sl. No.	Cause	No. of farmers	Percent
1	Economical	156	68.72
2	Physical	10	4.41
3	Social	61	26.87
	Total	227	100.00

Table 6. Distribution of farmers' as to whether they were in depression

Sl. No.	Depression	No. of farmers	Percent
1	Yes	220	96.92
2	No	7	3.08
	Total	227	100.00

Caste farmers were found to have committed suicide.

3. The size of land holdings of the farmers is predominantly (76.22%) less than 5 acres. Very few have more than 11 acres. The average size of the land holdings on the

sample is around 4.28 acres. This means the farmers were predominantly small and marginal.

In the study about 76.22 per cent of the farmers owned less than 5 acres of land. Nearly 18.06 per cent possessed 6 to 10 acres of land.

3.52 per cent of them had 11 to 15 acres of land. Only 0.88 per cent of the victims were large scale farmers. As majority of the land holdings being small, farming itself has become uneconomical. On the one hand scientific farming is not feasible and viable and on the other the small size of the land holdings come in the way of getting sufficient institutional credits and crop insurance. The greed of money lenders emerged powerful in the absence of Institutional credit and lure the small farmers into a debt trap. Hence the suicide rate is high only among those who possessed small pieces of land, who could neither manage the cost of cultivation nor stick to traditional agricultural practices.

4. The income levels of the farmers is predominately 80.61% of the farmers income level of less than Rs.50,000 per annum. It indicates their low level and corresponding levels of living and costs of cultivation.

Analyzing the income levels farmers - 37 per cent of the farmers' income was between Rs.25, 000 to Rs.50,000. About 27.31 per cent of the farmers' income ranged between

Rs.20,000 to 25,000. There was about 16.30 per cent of them having less than Rs.20,000 income. Around 8.37 per cent of the farmers' income was between 50,000 to 75,000. A small 6.17 per cent of them earn between 75,000 to 1 lakh. Only 4.87 per cent of the farmers' income is more than 1 lakh. Majority of the farmers were small farmers, their income level was very low corresponding to it, was the standard of living. Earlier, the cost of living used to be manageable except for medical and other emergency requirements. After globalization the cost of cultivation soared and they were unable to meet even daily expenses and were burdened by their family expenses like marriages of their daughters and festivals etc.

5. It was found that 77.08 per cent of the farmers had debt of less than Rs. 2 lakhs.

The amount of debt incurred by the farmers 38.33 per cent borrowed less than 1 lakh rupees and 38.76 per cent of the farmers borrowed loans ranging from Rs. 1-2 lakhs. About 11.45 per cent farmers borrowed Rs. 2-3 lakhs. Only a small proportion of 6.61 per cent farmers

Table 7. Distribution of farmers based on the feelings of loss of status

Sl. No.	Loss of status	No. of farmers	Percent
1	Yes	198	87.22
2	No	3	1.32
3	Can't Say	26	11.45
	Total	227	100.00

borrowed above Rs. 4 lakhs. In Karnataka banks provide loans at a meager rate of interest (4%). Despite this, majority of the victims, it is heard, borrowed loans from the private money lenders who except high and unimaginable rates of interest. The major reasons behind approaching the private money lenders for loans is that, the banks were reluctant to extend loans to small and marginal farmers as part of structural adjustment. The

loans so procured at higher rate of interest from private money lenders were invested on buying pesticides, seeds and fertilizers. But the traders and the lenders exploited the illiterate farmers by selling spurious seeds, pesticides and fertilizers. Failure of monsoons, depleting ground water level and resultant drying of bore wells has affected the agriculture badly.

The end result of this was diminishing returns in agriculture, with which they could

hardly make both ends, meet. As the farmers had no other source to generate income, their position worsened further. It thus, forced them to consider 'loans and loans alone' as the only means, even to meet the basic needs of life.

6. As per as main causes of suicides economic cause has been sighted by many 68.72% and followed by social reasons by 26.87 per cent by the farmers.

Discussion about the major reasons to the farmers committing suicide, above 68.72 per cent of farmers the seeds of committing suicides whirled around economic reasons. Around 26.87 per cent owed the cause behind their suicide to social factors and only 4.41 per cent to physical causes. The economic causes play a vital role as far as farmers' suicides are concerned. In other words it can be said that the suicides are directly related to economic causes followed by social and physical causes. Economic cause being the most vital and the social cause of status loss aggravated the alienation of farmers and drove them to suicide. The vagaries of nature over the years made it difficult to repay the debts. The vagaries of nature over the years made it difficult to repay the debts. When the debts started accumulating the owes of farmers. They were in fact labeled as 'defaulters'. Once they lost their status, they abstained themselves from visiting public functions. Virtually they were no more than mere pawns in the iron fists of the merciless money lenders. What happened there after culminated in their sad suicides.

7. It was reported by the widows of 96.91 per cent of farmers that they were into depression prior to committing suicides.

Most of the farmers were hard workers, who used to work in the farms from dawn to dusk. Hither to they had a sound mind in a sound body and never complained of ailment of any sort. But due to one problem or the other they were rendered restless. They felt, they pawned the lives of their families and felt guilty for all the mess up. This mounted their stress and put enormous strain on mind. 96.92 per cent of the farmers were reported to be in deep depression. Just 3.08 per cent of the farmers were devoid of depression what so

ever. Gradually they slipped into depression. Failure of crops, pressure exerted by the money lenders, diminishing returns in agriculture etc., were the prime reasons behind their depression.

8. It was found that 87.23 per cent of the farmers were experiencing the feeling of status loss due to their debt ridden status. They experienced the feeling of alienation due to this.

The responses given by the widows of the farmers, which indicate that, 87.22 per cent of farmers were believed to have the feeling of status loss. This status conscious small farmers' felt deprived and dejected due to the debts that drove them to the walls to a point of utter bankrupt stage from which they could not bail out themselves and they felt they ruined the lives of their families and hence sought solace in suicide. The victims most of whom hailed from dominant castes used to wield political power in the village. They were in fact respected by the entire village. But as the situation went out of control and help from no corner forth coming, the farmers found themselves as butts of public gossip. Unable to withstand this shame, they chose to take away their lives in despair.

Enticed by the new hybrid seed varieties, farmers borrowed from private money lenders with a hope of raising a bounteous crop. The failure of monsoon rains, depleting water resources have dashed their hopes in successive years thus landing them into debt trap. The sense of insurmountable economic debts and the concomitant loss of social status it resulted to drove them to a point of desperation, alienation and depression prior to their suicides.

CONCLUSION

Globalization has created new Institutional frame work in which the seed companies have emerged as the key players wresting control over production from the farmers dictating terms. Government was made to occupy the role of facilitator and thus moved away from the scene. The farming community without

the needed know how and the social back up attempted agrarian practices with the scanty and depleting water resources with hope of raising a bounteous crop. The failure of monsoon rains, depleting water resources have dashed their hopes in successive years thus landing them into a debt trap. The sense of insurmountable economic debts and the concomitant loss of social status and esteem it resulted, drove them to a point of desperation resulting in their, alienation and depression prior to their suicides.

The farming community, particularly the small and marginal farmers were the first casualties of globalization and the concomitant changes it necessitated engulfing the traditional agricultural societies in a state of gloom. The distress in which the Indian agriculture is entangled now, is the result of the imbalance created by forces of globalization on the traditional agrarian structure. The traditional agrarian societies like India are staggering under the forces of globalization. It is going to engulf the whole range traditional activities like farming, weaving, trading and drift the societies into a state of alienation and into the control by neo colonial forces.

Though the predominant section of the population is involved in agriculture, the government has not so far evolved a comprehensive social security scheme to cover the farmers, who are food suppliers to the nation. We cannot simply be blind to their plight leaving them to die in despair. Its time the government wakes up to stem the impending catastrophe by evolving suitable policy interventions to counteract forces of neo colonialism. Let the government remind itself of the talisman given by the Father of the Nation, Mahatma Gandhiji to 'wipe away tear from every eye' as the underlying principle to save the farming community from distress suicides.

ACKNOWLEDGEMENT

This article is based on the Doctoral thesis submitted by Dr. A.N Gayathri to the

Department of Sociology, SriKrishnadevaraya University, Anantapur, A.P. under the supervision of Prof. Amaranth.R.Das, Chairman, Board of Sociology, and was since awarded Doctor of Philosophy in Sociology in June 2010.

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