

Suicides and the making of India's agrarian distress

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Reviewing data from five states of India, where suicides by agriculturists reached epidemic levels, this paper provides a sociological commentary to the issue. Linking macro and micro economic factors to social structural and symbolic meanings, the article highlights the ways in which the Green Revolution, as a model of modern agriculture, acts as a trap and induces a range of risks in the lives of agriculturists. Such conditions of distress are compounded by the social structuring of commercial agriculture that has led to 'agricultural individualisation' and the spread of new social demands. These trends combine with the larger context of a neo-liberal political economy where agricultural issues and agriculturists are in a state of 'advanced marginality', and account for the making of a crisis in which large numbers of agriculturists have taken their lives.

Keywords: Sociological commentary, agrarian distress, advanced marginality, agricultural individualisation.

Introduction

Between the years 1998 and 2000, news of suicides among agriculturists trickled through some newspapers and television channels. By 2004, the suicides became the index of a crisis in India's agriculture and led to widespread debates and reports. Even as the suicides in Maharashtra gained momentum between 2005-6, forcing the Prime Minister to visit the region and declare 'monetary packages', the nature of the suicides gained another dimension. In Mysore, four agriculturists attempted to commit suicide in the Deputy Commissioner's office grounds, and several of those committing suicide in the Vidharbha region of Maharashtra wrote notes addressed to the government¹. From being silent, individual acts

1. This paper was originally written for the seminar "Agrarian Distress and Farmers' Suicides in India" organized by the Governance and Policy Spaces Project (GAPS) of the Centre for Economic and Social Studies, Hyderabad and held at Acharya Nagarjuna University, Guntur, Andhra Pradesh (24 to 26th February 2005). My thanks are to Prof. K. Suri and Prof. K. Srinivasulu for organizing the meet and for bearing with the long delay in developing the paper. Over the two years, I have closely followed all the reports and discussions related to the suicides and have attempted to provide an updated overview of the trends. Lee Schlesinger, Rachel Schurman, Carol Upadhy, and Pulapre Balakrishnan provided detailed comments and suggestions and I thank them all for helping me review my position and qualify much of the data. This essay draws from a longer book length manuscript that is in progress.

For reports from Mysore, *The Hindu* (August 18, 2006) and *Vijaya Times* (August 18, 2006), for details about Vidharbha see article by P. Sainath, "Striking a note of dissent", in *The Hindu* (Jan 27, 2007).

of desperation, suicides are becoming political acts by which despondent agriculturists seek to highlight and protest their degraded conditions.

Given the spread and frequency of suicides among agriculturists², it would be easy to identify the recent agrarian distress as an 'epidemic of suicides'. Yet identifying these suicides as an epidemic would be to naturalise the incidents and to be as dismissive of the suicides as have been the many governments, most policy makers, and the media. To go beyond the simplistic and dismissive diagnoses that most government-nominated committees have made, it is imperative that we see the incidents of suicide by agriculturists as signaling 'distress' in as much the problems which have triggered such a response are widespread and affect a large number of rural citizens³. Contextualising these suicides on a larger terrain and canvas, we also need to critically review this spate of suicides and provide "a politicized orientation to our respective dead" (Hudson 2002: 26).

Several studies and non-government reports on the suicides have identified the larger and broader factors that account for the onset of such distress. Some of the key structural issues that have been identified are: the impact of neo-liberal economic policies, including the integration of Indian agriculture into the world market (Shiva and Jafri 1998; Patnaik 2004, 2006), increasing costs of production (Vyas 2004, Mohanty and Shroff 2004); inadequate institutional support including lack of availability of credit, deceleration in rural growth (Dev 2004, Rao and Gopalappa 2004, Ghosh 2004); decline in wages, growing indebtedness and unemployment (Patnaik 2004; Dev 2004; Sarma 2004), frequent loss of production, and as the results of a triple crisis of economy, society, and ecology (Vasavi 1999). While all the above reports and studies have flagged a range of issues, in this essay I draw on the reports and studies⁴ that provide details of agriculturists' suicides from the states of Andhra Pradesh, Karnataka, Kerala, Maharashtra and Punjab, where most of the suicides have occurred between the periods of 1998 and 2006, to provide a sociological commentary to the distress. In delineating details from the lives of the suicide victims, I reconstruct the conditions and factors which led to the making of these distress conditions

2. The question of the extent to which the suicides are statistically significant and are not 'normal' and represent a sharp increase over other periods has been frequently raised. Data for most of the regions/states in which they have occurred indicate a higher than average number of suicides by agriculturists for each of the districts in which they have occurred. The 2007 data from the National Crime Records Bureau indicates a higher than normal number of suicides by agriculturists but the reliability of the data has been questioned.
3. Some scholars have considered it inappropriate to see the ongoing suicides as merely as a 'crisis' and argue for linking it to the larger structural changes that are taking place in Indian agriculture (see Jodhka 2005). I associate the suicides with distress as they represent an intense form of difficulty that many agriculturists are unable to overcome and that threatens the social reproduction of the agrarian world.
4. Official or government appointed committee-based reports are available only for Punjab (IDC 1998), Karnataka (Government of Karnataka 2002), Andhra Pradesh (Commission on Farmers' Welfare 2005), and the one for Maharashtra by TISS (2005). The others are studies by various commissions set up by independent agriculturists groups (eg for Andhra Pradesh the ones by the Citizens Report 1998 and the Farmers Commission of Experts 2002) and by independent scholars (eg Mishra 2006). A comprehensive study with a focus on Andhra was commissioned by Christian Aid (Christian Aid 2005).

and contextualise the contemporary predicament of agriculturists⁵ in the nation's current neo-liberal context. In as much as suicides among agriculturists have gained a newfound cultural legitimacy, hitherto unrecorded in the history of India⁶, they have become significant acts by which agriculturists signal not merely their own degraded condition but also the very state of agriculture and their altered sense of agency and life.

Profiles of the victims

In the predominantly economic reasons that have been identified for the onset of distress, all the reports from the five states indicate that most of the victims were undertaking commercial agriculture⁷ and were struggling with a range of new risks (of production, credit, marketing, knowledge, and climate) associated with commercial agriculture. Although marginal cultivators (those who own/cultivate less than one hectare plots) form a significant proportion of cultivators in the nation⁸, it is the entry into and practice of Green Revolution (henceforth GR) agriculture by such cultivators that brings them into the ambit of multiple risks. In cultivating these commercial crops, most of the victims lacked the economic and social wherewithal to be strong players in the GR game. All the reports indicate that most of the victims from the different states were marginal⁹ (less than 1 hectare) and small (1 to 2 hectares) cultivators, followed by semi-medium (2 to 4 hectares) cultivators. Compounding such economic marginality is the fact that a significant proportion of the victims were from Backward Classes¹⁰ or from lower ranked caste groups. In Andhra Pradesh, two-thirds of the victims in Warangal were from the Backward Class groups of Yadava, Chakali, Telaga, Wadla, Mangali, Padmashali and Lambada (Citizens'

5. By 'agriculturists' I refer to all cultivators irrespective of their holding size or relation to the land or market. Typically, literature on agrarian issues refers to 'peasants' as those who cultivate primarily for subsistence, and to 'farmers' as those who engage with the market and who undertake commercial cultivation. In preferring to use the term agriculturist, I seek to encapsulate and represent all cultivators who either engage in production for subsistence and or for the market and can be either owners, tenants or a combination of both.
6. Despite a history associated with frequent agriculture-related distress in pre-colonial and colonial India, there are no records of wide-spread suicides which in any way can be compared to those that have occurred since 1998. The only record of suicides related to agricultural distress is from the Bundelkhand region of Uttar Pradesh which were linked to the on-going crisis of indebtedness and loss of crops (see Siddiqi 1973). A recent essay by Rana (2006) indicates that the agrarian crisis of the 17th and 18th centuries in North India led to the abandonment of agriculture, migration, and even desertion of whole villages. But no mention of agriculturists resorting to suicide is made.
7. Much of the distress can be associated with the subscription to the model of the Green Revolution that is promoted in the country. A more detailed description of this is has been made in my work (Vasavi 1999a).
8. Data from the 2003 surveys indicates that the average size of land holding is 1.06 hectares and most cultivators are marginal. Currently, small and marginal cultivators account for 80 percent of the rural population and operate on about 40 percent of the land (Bhalla 2007).
9. Each of the reports uses different criteria and the measurement is often in acres. Converting acres into hectares (2.5 acres = 1 hectare), I have standardised the landholding patterns from all the reports to arrive at a comparative picture.

Report 1998). In Anantapur district most of the victims were from the non-agricultural castes of Sale, Besta and Uppara, although there were some from the traditional cultivating castes such as the Reddy and Baliga. In Amravati and Yavatmal districts, most were also from the middle or non-cultivating castes of Telis, Beldars and Banjara or from the Scheduled communities of Mahar, Nav-Buddha, Matang, Chamar, and Dhangar (Mohanty 2005). For the Vidharbha and Marathwada region, the TISS report (2005) identifies a spread across the caste groups but a predominant number were from the Other Backward Classes¹¹ (OBC 27 percent) and the other non-scheduled caste groups (36 percent).

The significance of the number of traditionally non-cultivating caste members represented in the suicide cases must be noted. What the cases indicate is the attempt by members of such non-cultivating groups to gain a foothold in agriculture. Such livelihood strategies have been necessitated by the loss of their traditional occupation with the integration of agriculture into the market economy and the displacement of rural products by industrial products. Members of artisan, service and craft groups such as potters, wheel-makers, smiths, basket makers and others have been particularly affected by such trends. Until recently, such groups have had perforce to resort to becoming agricultural labourers or migrating to urban areas. Members of artisan caste groups who have taken to agriculture face problems as they are unable to practise agriculture without incurring large losses. While several studies have indicated the increasing pauperisation and de-peasantisation processes which impact on small and medium cultivators¹², these cases of suicide underscore the ways in which families from the low-ranked caste strata are attempting to stall or overcome conditions of impoverishment or are attempting to enhance their incomes and standards of living. In their attempts to sustain or enhance their livelihoods, many of these marginal agriculturists attempt to shift from predominantly non-commercial cultivation and gain entry into commercial production with a focus on marketing their produce.

Although there is recognition in all the reports that widespread and high indebtedness among agriculturists was considered by most of the families to be the key reason for the distress experienced by the victims and which led to their suicide¹³, the social bases of such indebtedness and its implications have not been recognised. Since the key sources of non-institutional credit have been agri-business agencies, who provide both inputs at

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10. The 'Backward Classes' refers to the official identification of those caste groups who are not from the scheduled communities (castes and tribes) and as those also experiencing social and economic disadvantages. Identification of such groups is done through commissions set up by various states and the criteria often vary, although economic, social, educational and political disadvantage are considered key. In most cases, those identified as Backward Classes come from the non-cultivating caste groups and are predominantly former pastoralists, and a wide range of artisan and service caste groups.
 11. The 'Other Backward Classes' (OBC) refers to a further official identification of disadvantaged caste groups to include those not recognized in either the Scheduled Communities list or that of the Backward Classes list. Although identification and official recognition are contentious, in most cases the OBC are represented by groups such as itinerant workers, special service caste groups and those once listed by British colonial policy as 'robbers', etc.
 12. Several studies note the increasing pauperization and displacement of small and medium cultivators. For some recent studies see Rao (2001), Patnaik (2003, 2004).

deferred credit to agriculturists and loans, and the new money lenders and creditors¹⁴, including relatives and friends who draw on their urban salaries, these debts pose a double burden on agriculturists. For one thing, interest rates are exorbitant (ranging from 24 to 45 percent per annum) and secondly, loans are linked to their personal and social networks. Inability to pay is often met with ridicule, ostracism or public humiliation. As several reports and case studies highlight, many of those who committed suicide did so after experiencing such humiliation or facing threats of dispossession of their assets.

Agricultural knowledge dissonance:

Amid this range of risks of resource and credit availability and the unreliable quality of seeds, there is also the problem of agricultural knowledge and the increasing dissonance among agriculturists as to what knowledge is to be drawn on to use their land. Local agricultural patterns and practices drew from a shared repository of knowledge, much of which was transmitted and reproduced through the social and cultural structures of agricultural transactions and practices. However, the new agricultural regimes, from the Green Revolution model's use of hybrid seeds and external inputs to the new regime of using genetically modified (GM) seeds¹⁵, induce increasing dissonance in knowledge and know-how. Such a dissonance indicates a significant shift from not only the locally focused knowledge systems or the combining of both local and 'modern' methods (Gupta 1999) in even the GR model. In the context of increasing commercialization of agriculture, the intensity of competition among agri-business players and the growing distance of State extension service have meant that agricultural practices are increasingly drawn from market-led fads. The result is intense competition among agriculturists to out-compete others by using new commercial varieties of seeds, fertilizers, and pesticides, which has also led to increasing 'agricultural deskilling' (Stone 2007: 84).

The promotion of the new agricultural model is not matched with attendant systematic dissemination of information, knowledge and training of agriculturists. Data from the NSSO Survey no 499 (2005) indicates the absence of public agencies in rural India and the

13. The debts themselves were incurred for two primary reasons; predominantly that of supporting agricultural production costs and in some cases for social purposes or what some reports have identified as debts for 'non-productive' expenditures. In Andhra and Maharashtra most loans were taken for production purposes. In Karnataka and Punjab loans were often combined for both production and social purposes, including personal loans for marriages and house construction (Vasavi 2003; Experts' Committee Report 2002). The IDC report for Punjab considers non-productive loans to be significant and links such loans with the growth of consumerism. Loans for weddings, houses and consumer goods were the leading reasons for indebtedness.
14. The second source of credit in the rural areas, largely undocumented in most of the recent surveys and studies, is linked to the presence of a number of urban employed persons. Those who are residents of villages but are employed in departments of agricultural, electricity, education, etc. have sources and levels of income that are not only regular but also high in comparison to average rural income. Such income, including remittances from urban areas, is a new source of usury in the rural areas.
15. The introduction and use of genetically modified seeds in India is primarily related to the BT cotton variety. It is only recently that GM seeds of vegetables are sought to be introduced.

lack of knowledge dissemination to a significant proportion of people. Only 8.4% of agriculturists had accessed information from the *Krishi Vigyan Kendras* (Farmers Science Centres); 17% received information from other agriculturists and 13% from agricultural input dealers. Many of the reports (Citizens' Report 1998, Vasavi 1999, Mohanty 2005), also mention the inability of the cultivators to have used appropriate knowledge and skills of the new commercial inputs, especially that of pesticides as a reason for their problems in agriculture. Toxics Link's report (2002) on deaths from pesticide exposure describes the range of unsafe ways in which pesticides are applied and the ways in which pesticide containers are used for domestic and cooking purposes, thereby leading to a range of pesticide related health hazards and deaths. In addition, the lack of knowledge about the use of appropriate amounts of pesticide was a leading cause for increasing debts as agriculturists purchased and sprayed large amounts of pesticide on their fields.

In summary, the increasing commercialisation of agriculture, the subscription to the dominant Green Revolution model, the range of risks, and the knowledge dissonance indicate the impact of the Green Revolution for marginal areas and for marginalized agriculturists. Increasing indebtedness, lack of marketing support, unviable parcels of land and the inability to provide basic support to cater for the family's requirements mark the lives of those attempting to sustain themselves within this dominant model. This is especially the case for those who have inadequate capital, knowledge and support and who consider this to be the only route to enhancing their livelihoods, economic mobility and social status. Compounding such conditions and trends are the social and cultural contexts of the agrarian world in which the individual agriculturist's position in the world of risks is also linked to the social contexts, pressures and burdens s/he bears.

Agricultural individualisation

The increasing integration of agriculturists into the market economy has led to reordering the cultural basis of Indian agriculture¹⁶. Although it is well known and established that the agrarian system was largely hierarchical, with caste-based allocation of rights over land and its resources, agriculture was conducted on a pattern that was based on collectively shared knowledge forms and on a shared rhythm. By this, I refer to the practices by which agriculture was undertaken and practiced on region-specific patterns in which all agriculturists, irrespective of class and caste differences (and differences in size of holdings), conducted agriculture to suit local ecological conditions. Such agricultural patterns were also influenced by shared knowledge forms and linked to local cultural patterns. As other studies have elaborated, agriculture in the non-Western, non-commercial context was conducted on shared knowledge systems that included negotiating old and new agricultural knowhow, drawing on networks of kin and fellow workers and related to in terms that had cultural significance (Boehm 2003).

Subsequent to subscribing to the Green Revolution and commercial forms of agricul-

16. By emphasizing the cultural and not the social structural changes in rural, agrarian structures I wish to highlight the extent to which the social structural basis, drawn on the caste-based allocation of resources, is largely intact. Cultural changes are primarily in the arena of forms of practices of agriculture, and the meaning and significance of agricultural activities.

ture, as several studies¹⁷ have elaborated, the caste-based social bases of production have been largely retained, while the support and sustenance that could have been provided during times of crisis under the patron-client systems have disintegrated. As interdependence based on customary structures declines, dependence on external structures and agencies increases. While the disintegration of the customary forms of support has also liberated the working, low-ranked caste groups and enabled them to escape from caste prescribed subservience and debt servicing, the provisioning mechanisms of the moral economy have not been adequately replaced by State mechanisms of provisioning (Aurora 2004; Vasavi 1999). As Dev (2004) and Sarma (2004) have highlighted, most government programmes that seek to provision the poor with either food grains, housing or employment are also subject to rent-seeking behaviour which in the form of commissions, bribes and misallocation mean that the benefits barely reach the most deserving.

Further, as Jodhka has pointed out, the "autonomization from the 'traditional' rural economy and structures of patronage and loyalty" (2005: 22) and the continued prejudice of the upper castes against the former Untouchable groups increases the isolation of the low ranking, new agriculturists. If taking to the new agriculture led to knowledge dissonance, then for those taking to agriculture as a new occupation is doubly hazardous. Mohanty (2005) has highlighted, from his studies in the districts of Yavatwal and Amaravati in Maharashtra, that as new entrants into agriculture, members of low-ranked communities are marginalized and face hostility from the dominant landed castes. Not only is knowledge not shared by the upper castes with the new entrants, but there is also intense competition between agriculturists. This competition among themselves and the lack of adequate understanding of the new knowledge gleaned from marketing agencies has led to disastrous consequences. The details about agriculturists using excess fertilisers and pesticides in their fields and of not knowing how to deal with outbreaks of pests are indicative of this (Farmers' Commission of Experts Report 2002, Mohanty and Shroff 2004, Stone 2007).

Another social dimension that compounds the individualization of agriculture is that of the fissioning of joint families into nuclear households. In such contexts, the head of the household and in most cases a single person bears the burden of wanting to make a satisfactory livelihood. Bearing risks that arise from debts, growing new crops, or ensuring good sale prices are all burdens on a single individual. Many of the reports highlight this; young men who, having become heads of households, take to economic strategies on their own, and negotiate the demands of the market with little or no support. Individualized decisions made in the context of recently fissioned families place an unduly large burden on individuals, leading them to commit suicide in the face of large debts, loss of crops and loss of face. All of these, the separation of agriculturists from each other, the loss of a shared body of knowledge and practices, the onerous burden of risks that agriculturists bear without adequate support from institutions and State, the risks borne by heads of households and enterprising individuals and the double burdens of the low-ranked, new

17. Sociological and recently even economic literature has stressed the fact that there has been a retention of agrarian structures that lead to a coinciding of caste and class structures in rural India (see Harriss-White 2004).

agriculturists can be identified as leading to the individualization¹⁸ of agriculture. In the individualization of agriculture is the disembedding of the shared social and cultural basis of agriculture and the integration of the individual agriculturist as an individual player into the market economy.

What Beck and Beck-Gernsheim elaborate, in the context of the increasing individualization in the West, is also relevant here, where the stress now is on the 'do-it-yourself biography'. Such a biography "is always a risk biography, indeed a tightrope biography, a state of permanent (partly overt, partly concealed) endangerment" (2001: 3). And as they elucidate, the 'do-it yourself biography' does often become a 'breakdown biography'. Much of this is relevant for understanding how for individualized agriculturists the world of new agriculture (without adequate State support, with new, expensive and commercialised inputs, fluctuating markets and fluctuating weather conditions) brings with it a higher risk of this imminent breakdown. Withdrawn into their individualized households and families, agriculturists are often unable to gauge the risk involved in engaging with an unpredictable market, varying and unreliable climatic conditions, unreliable quality of seeds, fertilizers and pesticides, and unsure and untested forms of new agricultural practices. A marked impact of this is the inability of individual agriculturists to socially and psychologically bear the risks that come with such atomized practices of agriculture. Loss of production, especially in the context of the risks or burdens of debts involved, mean that the loss becomes a deeply personalized loss of self. The case studies of victims from the various states testify to this. Agriculturists with marginal landholdings had borrowed large sums at exorbitant interest rates to either purchase pumpsets, dig tubewells, or purchase seeds, fertilizers and pesticides. The loss of crops from either pests or diseases or the lack of remunerative prices and the inability to repay the debts compounded their conditions of desperation. And, in many cases, the humiliation in front of others when they were unable to repay the loans was the last straw that subsequently led to the act of committing suicide. The various reports provide poignant portrayals of such conditions. For Punjab, Iyer and Manick (2000) describe how Balwinder Singh, a Jat Singh had borrowed money from the agricultural commission agents and a cloth merchant to invest in a tube-well and fix a pump set¹⁹ in his land of three and a half acres. His failure to repay on time, as the market prices had not been remunerative, led to his being humiliated in front of others. After a period of restlessness and anxiety, he had consumed pesticides and died. Similarly, in Has-

18. I first used the phrase, 'individualization of agriculture', in 1999 after a review of suicides by agriculturists in Bidar (see Vasavi 1999b). I was unaware of the specific usage of the term 'individualisation' by Ulrich Beck and Elizabeth Beck-Gernsheim and now note that it was used in 2002 (first in the year 2001 [in German] and in 2002 in the English edition). In an interview in the same book, Ulrich Beck qualifies the meaning of individualisation by noting that it refers to 'the transformation of work; the decline of public authority and increasing personal isolation; a greater emphasis on individuality and self-reliance ...' (pg 202). He goes on to note that individualisation encapsulates "the sociological transformation of social institutions and the relationship of the individual to society." While much of this with reference to the West and its phase of second modernity, I note the relevance of some of this in the context of the commercialisation of agriculture and the entry of the neo-liberal market in rural India.

19. Tube-wells, with pump sets, now form one of the major ways of irrigating land and require considerable expense and external expertise.

san district of Karnataka, I recorded the suicide of an enterprising middle-aged agriculturist, who in an effort to give up his caste occupation of toddy tapping had taken to agriculture. The declining water table and the drought in 2003 had laid his fields barren and the amounts he had borrowed to sink a well on his land had grown in compound rates. Unable to bear the periodic visits of his creditors to his village and home and their taunts and demands, he hanged himself on a tree in his land²⁰.

Individualised and isolated, the practice of agriculture is then no longer either a 'social performance' (Richards 1993: 61) conducted by drawing on social relations and networks or a 'planned set of strategies' (Batterbury 1996 *passim*) with which agriculturists make decisions, choices, and conduct activities²¹. As individual players, agriculturists must seek knowledge, credit, and access the market for the range of inputs on an individual basis, thereby individually bearing a larger burden of the risks than they would have in the context of agriculture as socially embedded. But the individualization of agriculture is not met with a concomitant individualization of the private, social sphere. Social obligations including new demands to subscribe to consumer defined life-styles and the increasing commercialisation of social lives, including life-cycle rituals, leaves many an agriculturist with multiple burdens. As most of the cases from the reports highlight, each person bears in the context of this dual burden of new economic pressures and risks, the social burdens of subscribing to pre-existing and new collective norms and obligations. Such social demands, including consumerism, are linked to the pervasive impact of sanskritisation²² and to the consolidation of rituals as lifestyles in even impoverished rural societies. Berking's observation of this contradiction where there is simultaneously "the individualization of life conduct and the pluralisation of life-forms" (1996: 191) has resonance here. In the larger cultural frame in which economic modernization is retained within an intensification of traditionalisation, the individual bears the load of both worlds; risk and isolation at the economic level, where s/he must act as an individual and yet must subscribe collectively to social pressure and stigma at the social and cultural level. The result is the intense stress in which suicide seems to be the way out.

'Advanced marginality' of the rural

India's agrarian crisis at the end of the twentieth century and marking the beginning of the new century encapsulates the social, economic and political position of agriculturists in which they remain vulnerable subjects and whose position and rights as citizens are recognised and reckoned with only during elections. The post-1991 period²³ has witnessed the

20. Field work in the Hassan and Mandya districts of Karnataka was conducted in April and May 2004. I interviewed and met with families of 17 agriculturists who had committed suicide in 2004.
21. As Stone (2007) notes, the swamping of the agricultural market with the new commercial agencies and their keen competition for new buyers and players has led to intense competition among agriculturists and to an erosion of both the social and symbolic performance and the planning and the mix and match which are described in earlier studies (see Vasavi 1999, Gupta 1999).
22. Sanskritisation refers to the process by which members of the low-ranked caste groups imitate the rituals and practices of the upper caste. The term was coined by M.N.Srinivas and is now widely used in the literature on social and cultural change in India.

growing marginalisation of agriculturists and of agrarian issues in the public sphere of the nation. No longer is even the lip service of 'farmers being the backbone of the economy', or 'villages being the microcosm of India' being made. The inability of the central and state governments, once considered to be 'an embodiment' of development and 'an engine of agricultural progress' (Ludden 1992: 273), to review the situation in a comprehensive manner and adequately address the problems linked to the recurring suicides testify to the marginal position that agriculturists now occupy in the nation's social sensibilities and political economy²⁴.

Key issues that pertain to agriculturists; redistribution of resources, rights to basic education, health care and housing, policies that could provide remunerative prices, and State support in periods of crisis, are no longer central to the planning or budgetary agendas, and the poverty line is increasingly politically determined (Harriss-White 2004). Such neglect and oversight have in some cases led to situations where desperate village residents in the Punjab have gone to the extreme of putting up their whole villages for sale and have invited the President and Prime Minister of India to conduct a 'human market' for the sale of their kidneys (Sharma 2006: 1). The development and legitimization of Special Economic Zones, now emblematic in the contestations in West Bengal's Nandigram and Singur²⁵, in which the rural is sought to make way for new manufacturing sectors, or what is fashionably being referred to as India's second wave of industrialization, are only some cases in which agrarian issues are continuously bypassed. All this indicates the extent to which agriculturists are now in a state of 'advanced marginality' which Wacquant (1996: 116) has identified as the isolation of a group from the larger society and the oversight of their needs and rights by the State and the leading economic players.

In fact, many governments have attempted to understand the crisis as a sign of personal weakness among agriculturists or indicative of their dependency. Evidence of such a perspective is available from the Government of Karnataka's terms of reference to the Experts Committee which was expected to not only to enquire into the reasons for the high numbers of suicides among agriculturists, but to also "identify and recommend measures or programmes to instill self-respect (*swabhimana*) and self-reliance (*swavalambane*) among farmers" (2002: 2). More recently, the Maharashtra government has sought the help of popular, 'hugging guru' Amritanandamayi and other spiritual leaders, to assist in addressing the crisis in the Vidharbha region and to set up spiritual guidance and rehabilitation centres²⁶. Such strategies and discourses have only further legitimized the role of the

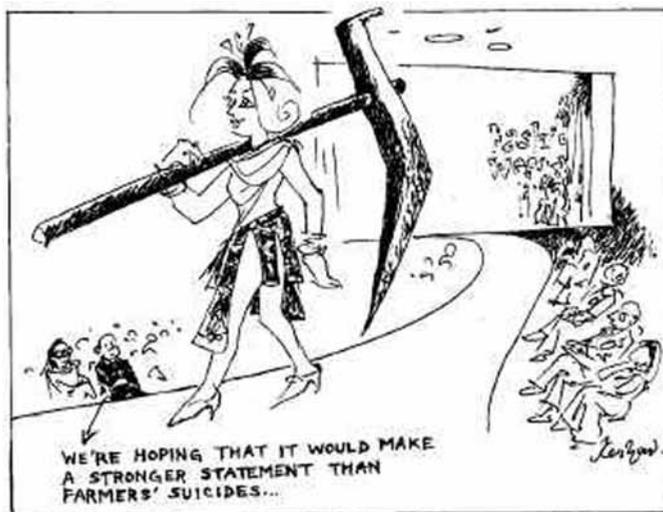
23. Although the Structural Adjustment phase was initiated in 1991, the subsequent liberalization of the economy, which meant decreasing expenditure on agricultural subsidies, were sharply implemented after 1997, and this largely accounts for the reason why the crisis set in since 1998.

24. It is only recently (2008) and in preparation for the 2009 parliamentary elections that the central government has initiated a large debt moratorium package for agriculturists.

25. Nandigram and Singur are the villages in which the Left government of the state of West Bengal sought to establish a factory for the industrial house of the Tatas. A section of the village residents refused to receive the official compensation and contested their forced eviction. Although the Tatas withdrew from Singur after protracted discussions and violence in the area, the continued violence and the debates around this issue highlight the oversight of the rights of agriculturists by even the Communist Party (Marxist).

market with an emphasis on entrepreneurship and productivity rather than on distribution, sustainable agriculture, and equity. Subsequently, the focus on the market and the individual legitimises blaming individuals for failure. All these forces and processes then coalesce against small and marginal agriculturists²⁷.

The oversight and negligence of agricultural issues by the State²⁸ is compounded by the invisibilisation of agricultural issues by the popular media. Despite the spread, frequency and gravity of the issues, many mainstream media have sought to shy away from providing detailed and on-going news of the suicides. As one critic has pointed out (Arvind 2006), at the height of an epidemic of suicides in the Vidharbha region in April 2006, much of the media preferred to attend the Lakme Fashion week in Mumbai rather than report on the emergency situation in the rural areas. At a time of celebrating and selling India as a new global player, it seems more important to camouflage the reports of the spate of suicides with the parade of beauty queens.



Courtesy: *The Hindu*

The inability or failure of agriculturists to mobilize around these issues and to demand and gain policies that could assure their sustenance and survival indicates the problem of political mobilization among agriculturists. Not even the populist and publicity garnering agrarian movements such as that of the Karnataka Rajya Raitha Sangha, Shetkari Sanghatana, or the Bharatiya Kisan Union (Gill 2004; Madsen 2001; Suri 2006) have been able to table and enforce a substantial alteration in agricultural policies in order to address such grievances.

26. *Deccan Herald*, Sunday, March 18th, 2007.

27. These elaborations are owed to Rachel Schurman, who astutely noted and made the link between the discourse and the impact on marginal agriculturists.

28. The negligence of agricultural issues by the State, especially since the period of economic liberalisation, has been highlighted by many scholars (see Patnaik 2004, Sharma 2006, Harriss-White 2004).

Mobilisation, if any, in most rural areas continues to be centred around the interests of the dominant caste or richer farmers who do not recognize the heterogeneity of agriculturists and hence do not often represent the interest of the small and medium agriculturists. Although recently the All India Kisan Sabha, linked to the Communist Party of India (Marxist), has led rallies to address the crisis, a substantial presence of such parties in the rural areas is absent. As astutely noted and critiqued by Brass (1995), the left political parties, which should be addressing or considering the plight of agriculturists, continue to neglect them on the basis of critiquing agriculturists for their fragmented and questionable class identity, and thereby continue to overlook them as key political actors.

The result of such neglect is widespread disenchantment with agriculture as a livelihood and as a way of life. Contrary to even recent expressions of the close bonding between agriculturists and the land and of the village as a way of life, many rural residents seek alternative livelihoods that are distant from that of agriculture (Gupta 2004). The need to be out of agricultural and caste-based occupations is linked to both: the largely unremunerative bases of agriculture and the sense of deep futility and frustration it seems to bring. In now becoming widespread acts, by either emulating others or as meaningful acts in which to state their frustration and disappointment, suicides are indexical of this disenchantment with agriculture.

The significance of the suicides

The suicides are not merely a response to changes in the economic and social world of agriculturists. Rather, the very entrenched structure of agriculture, that is iniquitous and which is now compounded by multiple risks that the marginalised face, accounts for the *denouement* of this tragedy. Agriculture, long embedded within the caste system and the key source of its social reproduction, is now the site of economic modernity, bringing with it the individualisation of actors, the introduction of new technologies, marketisation, and alien knowledge. For those economically and socially marginal in the system, the games of the new agricultural modernity induce and induct them into new risks. But, the individualized economic actor remains embedded within the social and cultural fabric of his or her society and is therefore circumscribed by its norms and values of honour, shame, and responsibility. What results is the working of two differing sets of cultural logics: that of the new economic regime that privileges the individual acting for his or her own economic benefit and the cultural pressure of the social world that enforces them to subscribe to its dictums and priorities.

In the seminal introduction to his classic *Pig Earth*, John Berger provides a sharp critique of the destruction of the peasantries of the world and highlights how "His (the peasant's) conditions of living, the degree of his exploitation and his suffering may be desperate, but he cannot contemplate the disappearance of what gives meaning to everything he knows, which is, precisely, his will to survive" (1979/1992: xx). The predicament of most of India's agriculturists seems to be precisely this, the "disappearance of what gives meaning to everything" they know. The current predicament is one of intense *anomie*, which in true Durkheimian form is represented in the conditions of loss of meaning, confusion and disorientation among marginal cultivators. That most victims choose to

end their lives by consuming pesticides symbolizes the key source of distress; agriculture itself and its new inputs, engaging with which has led to their ruination. As one of the women from a family that had lost its sole earning member to suicide told me, "Agriculture is a noose around our necks."

The shifting nature of the suicides, from individual acts conducted largely within the anonymity of their families to the current trends where suicide notes address the government and beseech support and remunerative prices, are representative of the new twist to the trend; the deployment of suicides as the last act of the desperate to speak in a political voice. In gaining epidemic proportions, the suicides have become both private and public acts that seek to call attention to the intense distress of the marginal and marginalised agriculturist. If such trends continue, unaddressed and seen as part of the inevitable 'grand transformation' that India must make to become a post-agricultural nation, then perhaps what Eric Hobsbawm (1994) noted as the most significant change of the twentieth century, that of the passing of peasants, will in India be played out fully in the twenty-first century, with the beginning of the death of its myriad forms of agriculture. Embedded in an unsustainable model of production, in which the significant symbols and meanings of agriculture and land itself are fast altering, and in which the State remains a distant actor, the mass of rural subjects, marginalised and overlooked, will probably provide the labour on which the nation will march towards its urban shift. And in this, agriculturists will be largely unremunerated and unremembered.

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