

Farmers' Suicides in India as an Socio-Economical Phenomenon: A Study of Karnataka State

Purnanand N. Sangalad¹

Abstract

Agriculture is the largest economic sector and plays a significant role in the overall socio economic development of India. 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. Karnataka is the eight largest state of India having severed agrarian distress since many years. It was in 1997 that the first case of farmers' suicide due to crop/market failure was reported in Karnataka State. The present study focus on the Socio-Economic profile its impact on suicidal tendencies among farmers of Karnataka State who have committed suicide. This also indicates that the victims tended to suffer within themselves the problems whether economic or social in nature.

Introduction

Mahatma Gandhi said that '*India lives in villages*' while signing a visitors Book of the National Dairy Research Institute (NDRI) Bangalore in 1927, he also said that '*I preferred to be known as a farmer*' (Swaminathan, M. S. 2007). It is true that majority of our people live in the villages engaged mainly in agriculture and allied activities as the main source of their income. As a key to Indian economy agriculture plays a significant role in the socio-economic development of the country and socio-cultural life of our people. The contribution of agriculture to Indian economy in terms of Gross Domestic Product (GDP) is declining steadily year by year due to the process of Industrialization and the economic growth gathered momentum in different five year plans with the manufacturing and service sectors growing rapidly and agriculture limping along, the percentage share of agriculture in GDP reached a level of 17.8 percent in 2007-08 (Ruddar Datt and Sundaram: 2010). According to Union Finance Minister the GDP from agriculture, forestry and fishing for the year 2008-09 was 16 percent. Despite a steady decline of its share in GDP, agriculture is still the largest economic sector and plays a significant role in the overall socio-economic development of our country. It is the main source of food to the growing population. 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 tons in 2001-02. It was increased to 231 million tonnes in 2007-08 and in 2008-09 it 230 million tons which was one million tonne less than that of 2007-08 due to

¹ Department of Criminology and Forensic Science, Karnatak University, Karnatak Science College, Dharwad Karnataka State, India, sangaladkcd@gmail.com

drought in some states, flood in some other states, and also due to agricultural crises in the country as a whole. The most tragic part of our country is the report of more suicidal deaths among the farming community.

India has the total geographical area of 328.7 million hectares, of which net sown area 141 million hectares 92.6 million hectares area is dependent on natural rainfall and the remaining is the irrigated area. This shows that the dry land area farming to the Indian farmer is inevitable. The crops that are grown in the dry land farming are Jowar, pulses, oilseeds, cotton etc. The Indian farmer is mainly dependent on timely rainfall i.e., on '*bounties of nature*'. The rainfall in India is unpredictable. Failure of monsoon results in the failure of crops. Due to which Indian agriculture is termed as '*Gamble of Monsoon*' (Tyagi 1984).

The suicidal tendency among the farming community owes its origin from Telangana region of Andhra Pradesh and also the Vidharbha region of Maharashtra since the end of 1990. This disturbing phenomenon has been observed since 1997 in four Indian states: Punjab, Maharashtra, Karnataka and Andhra Pradesh after India undertook liberalization of its economy and opened its markets to direct foreign investment (Hodge, J. M. 2007). The pesticides used by farmers failed to control the pests due to adulteration which resulted in the loss of crops. In some parts, the farming communities were supplied with inferior quality seeds, loss of crops and the debt brought frustration among them. The disgusted farmers committed suicide. The '*suicidal current*' gradually spread to other states. According to the National Crime Records Bureau (NCRB 2007) 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 farmer's 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*' (NCRB 2008) points out that 1,99,132 farmers have committed suicide since 1997 to 2008. The statistics regarding suicides given by the Directorate of Agriculture, Government of Karnataka reveal that, of 846 reported cases of suicides in 2003-04, among them 809 suicides were of the farmers.

The '*suicidal current*' gradually spread to other states, but it is more in Maharashtra, Karnataka, Andhra Pradesh, Madhya Pradesh, and Chattisgarh states. These states altogether have one third of the country's population but two-thirds of farmers' suicides. The rate at which farmers are killing themselves in these states is far higher than suicide rates among non-farmers (Sainath, P. 2009). Karnataka is one of the 8th largest states having severe agrarian distress since many years. But it had no history of farmers committing suicide when crops or market failed, although there were agitations of farmers in the past (Assadi, 1998). The first incidence of farmers' suicide which attracted considerable attention of media and public, was reported on 12th December 1997, Mr. Shivaraj Mainalle of Siddeshwar village in Bidar District committed suicide (Veeresh Committee, 2002). The studies on farmer's suicide for the first time in Karnataka were undertaken by Shetty and Vasavi (Shetty. 1999 and Vasavi. 1999). Out of the last nine years, the state has experienced drought for seven years, this is one of the major reasons for farmers taking extreme step of suicide. A large number of farmers committed suicide during the drought period from 2000-01 to 2003-04. Union Government sources (during the question hour in the Rajya Sabha) point out that there are 9642 suicidal deaths of farmers between 2000-2001 to 2008-2009 in Karnataka State. In the same as 969 suicidal deaths of farmers between 2007-08 to 2009-10 in Karnataka State.

Objectives of the Study

The present study was undertaken with the objective to study the social-economical status of the (farmers' suicides) victims' and control families of Karnataka State.

Methodology

The respondents in this sample mainly include the farm victim’s family members/the persons who attempted for suicide in the 30 Districts of Karnataka state. As per the Government source total 2457 farmer’s suicide cases was came to light from 2003-2004 to 2009-2010 in the state. In order to study socio-economic and psychological characteristics, extent and pattern of indebtedness of farmers, source and pattern of capital use by farmers for the agricultural and non-agricultural purposes, 150 households of suicide victims were chosen and 150 control cases neighboring these households in the same village were selected randomly for comparison. The total sample size was three hundred (N=300).

Results and Discussion

Table 1: Particulars of Compensation Paid to Victims Families from 2003-2010
(No of cases)

Karnataka State	Total
Report Cases	2457
Reject Cases	1353
Except Cases (Compensation Paid)	1052
Investigation Cases	52

Karnataka State has recorded 2457 cases of farm suicides from 2003 - 2010. Of the 2457 farm victims’ compensation is paid only in 1052 cases on the bases of thorough enquiry made by the committee. The detail of the compensation paid to the families of victims of Karnataka State is given in table 1. After due thorough enquiry the committee report compensation is paid in 1052 cases. Compensation has not been recommended in 1353 cases. The committee felt that 1353 cases do not fall in the guidelines given for the recommendation of compensation. Out of 2457 suicide cases, 1052 farmer families have received one lakh Rs (1lakh) compensation.

Table 2: Type of the Family belongs to the victim and Control farmer

Types Family	Control farmers	Suicide case
Nuclear	80	90
Joint	70	60
Total	150	150

Table 2 shows the type of family holding by the farm victims and Control farm family. Of the 150 victims 90 farm victims were belonging to nuclear families as well as same have 80 control farmers and only 60 cases were living in the joint families and same of the 70 cases of control farmers. There is an emotional and physical security to each of the members in the joint family system. More number of farm suicides in nuclear families is an indication that the nuclear family system has failed to provide the necessary security to its members in the fight against the personal destruction. The sense of insecurity drives the farmers’ to suicide.

Table 3: Reasons of Suicides as given by the Victim's Family Members
(Percent)

SN	Reasons	Percent (%)	
		Control farmers	Suicide case
1	Failure of Crops	25.66	27.64
2	Debt Burden	15.49	17.40
3	Loss in Agriculture Activities	17.13	14.91
4	Family Problems	9.67	11.48
5	Price Crash	13.56	9.19
6	Marriage of daughters/Son	6.71	8.76
7	Failure of Bore wells	7.68	6.29
8	Various habits like alcohol, gambling, etc.	4.10	4.33
Total percent (%)		100	100
Average Reasons		5.96	

The causes for farm suicides as given by the victims and control family members have been given in table 3. Eight causes have been broadly listed for suicide. Based on the causes listed; the victim's and control family members were asked to list out the possible causes which drove the farmer to suicides. Out of the 150 victim's cases, compare to the control farm family majority of respondents (27.64 Percent) opined that failure of the crops is the main reason for suicides. Failures of crops have due to drought or due flood or other calamities. However, the failure of crops was reported by the victims' families were more to control farm. It is difficult to take this observation on its face value as there were Control farmers from the same village and locality who did not report total crop failure. In depends on the victim's history and therefore the incidents in the life of the victim are analysed above table.

Table 4: Particulars of Credit Outstanding: Victims' and Control Households

(In Rs. Per household)

Size-class of land	Control Farmers		Suicide Cases	
	Institutional	Non- institutional	Institutional	Non- institutional
Up to 1 acre	14257	11500	5130	13960
1 to 2 acres	22743	29190	49590	65622
2 to 4 acres	20286	27990	25950	52205
4 to 10 acres	31950	30420	35950	49480
Above 10 acres	585000	34688	46560	129679
All	116880	29880	35848	59970

Note: Institutional sources include all banks and co-operative institutions. Non-institutional sources include moneylenders, relatives, neighbours, relative ect. The cases where the respondents could not distinguish between institutional and non-institutional sources are not included here.

The families of the victims have reported money borrowed by the victims from various source of credits. There were four major sources that are usually availed by the farmers. The Commercial Banks, Co-operative Banks, Regional Rural Banks and Moneylenders. Among these, the most preferred source of credit is the Regional Rural Banks followed by Moneylender and Commercial Banks. It can be seen from table 3 that the victims' families borrowed more amount from the Money lenders than that of the Control group. More than that the amount borrowed by the victims' families was much higher as compared to the Control group. It can be seen from the table that the moneylenders (including relatives) emerge as main credit providers to the victim families. It is surprising that the preference of the victims' families is more towards borrowing from the moneylenders and informal sources, despite the fact that moneylenders charge exorbitant rates of interest (3 to 4 percent month). This can either be attributed to the cumbersome procedure followed by the formal credit institutions or their process of repayment. In other words, the preference to borrow from moneylenders when compared with the formal institutions clearly reflects that the opportunity cost of going through the process is equal to the difference between the rates of interest between formal and informal lenders. It was noted that even though the formal credit institutions have monthly installment, the pressure of repayment only emerges by the end of the financial year. Incidentally this coincides with the fact that farmer would have spent most of his earnings by then or confronting various social or family obligations. Marriage seasons and (Ugadi) New Year also come around that time. This increases the stress in the family and inevitable outcome is to reach the money lender.

Table 5: Distribution of the Victims' Families by Size Class of Volume of Credit

No of cases

Size-class of land	Up to Rs.25000 thousand		Rs. 25 thousand to Rs. 50, 000		Rs. 50 thousand to Rs. 1 lakh		Above Rs. 1 lakh	
	Inst	Pvt	Inst	Pvt	Inst	Pvt	Inst	Pvt
Up to 1 acre	7	6	0	2	0	0	0	0
1 to 2 acres	11	8	9	6	7	0	3	1
2 to 4 acres	11	2	6	6	4	4	5	1
4 to 10 acres	9	2	7	4	3	1	4	3
Above 10 acres	1	1	3	1	5	2	5	0
Total	39	19	25	19	19	7	17	5

Table 6: Distribution of the Control Households by Size Class of Volume of Credit

No of cases

Size-class of land	Up to Rs.25000 thousand		Rs. 25 thousand to Rs. 50, 000		Rs. 50 thousand to Rs. 1 lakh		Above Rs. 1 lakh	
	Inst	Pvt	Inst	Pvt	Inst	Pvt	Inst	Pvt
Up to 1 acre	6	5	0	2	0	0	0	0
1 to 2 acres	12	7	8	5	3	4	3	2
2 to 4 acres	10	3	7	6	3	5	6	1
4 to 10 acres	7	4	4	4	6	1	5	4
Above 10 acres	0	2	2	1	6	2	5	0
Total	35	21	21	18	18	12	19	7

The difference between the suicide and Control group come out clearly when the volume of the credit is compared (see table 5 and 6). In the distribution of the households by the ranges of credit availed the difference are very sharp. It is true that some of the victim families have exaggerated the credit amount and at times it is hard to believe that a farmer with holding size of less than 1 acre can borrow more than 1 lakh from non-institutional sources. There are cases where a farmer has borrowed Rs. 3. lakhs from non-institutional sources in addition to Rs. 90 thousand from the institutional sources. Interestingly, such cases are so frequent among control farmers. Finally, it seems that the victims' families had borrowed in excess of their financial viability perhaps for the non-agricultural purposes.

Among the institutions from which the farmers borrow, the Regional Rural Banks are more preferred as against the Commercial Banks or Co-operative Banks. More often farmers borrow from multiple sources and as a result end up in deteriorating their aggregate economic viability of borrowing. The process goes somewhat like this. Initially the farmer borrows from one of the credit institutions and when he plans a further investment, he approaches the second one in the place where service area concept is not prevalent. Neither of the credit institutions will be aware of the borrowing from the other source. In order to pay back to one of the institutions, he prefers to borrow from a third source (informal source) at the rate of interest dictated by such lender'.

Conclusion

It was observed that suicide is an act that snowballs over the life of the victim through different '*events*', '*actions*', and '*triggers*'. Therefore, there are multiple reasons for an individual to commit suicide by farmers. Many times these reasons transcend between social- economic, behavioral and personal factors. As far as the socio-economic environment of the victim and control families of farmer is concerned, above synthesis brings out a few crucial factors as for as social and economical background is concerned. The breaking of joint family has reduced the moral and physical support that they derived in its existence. Family tensions and discords with spouse happened to be one of the important causes to victim's farm families, and more often this originates from the break away of the joint family. Societal support and public participation always averts such incidence because of the assurance that an individual derives from the society. Similarly, the intra-family close knit relationship also instills confidence in the individual and dissuades the person from talking such is an extreme step. Therefore, socio-economic profile of the victims and control families household tells a lot of about the circumstance under which the individual lived and interacted with the society. This also helps to draw inference about the failure of the traditional institutional as well as the mindset of the individual at the time of the victim incidence. A large number of family members of the victims have reported the introvert characteristics of the victims. This also indicates that the victims tended to suffer within themselves the problems whether economic or social in nature. In the absence of these supporting institutions and individuals the deep unguarded feeling ulcerated with the increased economic problem which in itself is a cause for the abnormal trend of culmination of the distress in to self-destruction. And large scale farmers had much land without others help they used to get fertilizers and seeds in advance from the familiar shops and used to plough the land, sow the seeds. The low annual income has caused more distress and has resulted farmers' distress. They are unable to meet the family demands and social and economical commitments. This causes frustration in the concerned farming community.

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 over come their difficulties through their own skills and capabilities. The Government needs to come up with pro-active solutions and the nation has to realize that farmer suicides are not minor issues happening in remote parts of a few states, it is a reflection of the true state of the basis of our economy.

The various measures taken both by union and state governments have not completely stopped farmers from suicide. The reports of suicides by farmers are still coming from different states. The following measures have been suggested to effectively 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.

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