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**Agrarian Distress and
Farmer Suicides in Kerala**

Ance Teresa Varghese

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AGRARIAN DISTRESS AND FARMER SUICIDES IN KERALA

Ance Teresa Varghese*

Abstract

Despite the introduction of various welfare schemes for the people who depend on agriculture, our country is far from providing a minimum standard of dignified life for the many who are solely dependent on it for their livelihood. There is still vulnerability, distress and dissatisfaction among the farming population of India. In this context, the aim of this paper is to understand the origin of the agrarian crisis in India and how it has manifested in different parts of the country, especially in Kerala, where the nature of the crisis shows some unique tendencies. For bringing out the uniqueness, the paper will be focusing on the Kerala model of development, placing the backwardness of the agrarian sector and the farmers' crisis within this framework. The Kerala model, glorified by many, has not done much in order to mitigate the crisis in the agrarian sector and as a production sector it needs to be strengthened. This paper is a part of an ongoing thesis. The study is review based.

Key Words: agrarian crisis, farmers, development, globalisation, periphery, agrarian movements, Kerala

Agrarian Crisis in India

Farmer suicides have turned into a crucial issue in policy analysis, academic narrative and in everyday discourse for the past few years. The issue received wide currency at a time when there was a shift from the mode of production debate of the 1960s to the growing crisis of the country's economy in the 1980s and the issue of farmer suicides in the recent period. There are mainly five important debates which attempt to look at farmer suicides differently. The first debate characterises it as a multiple crisis, ecological, economic and social (Assadi, 2010). Ecological crisis as a result of huge use of hybrid seeds, chemical fertilisers and pesticides causing the erosion of soil fertility and exacerbating crop susceptibility to pests and diseases. This perspective is mainly the contribution of A.R. Vasavi (1999). The heavy indebtedness leads to economic crisis. In the final analysis, she uses anthropological tools to understand the issue. The second one attributes the cause of the suicides to the negative growth of the agrarian economy, mainly argued by Vandana Shiva (2006) and in this regard she is closer to the Marxist critique, especially the arguments of Utsa Patnaik. According to this debate, the root cause is in liberalisation/neo-colonialism/ imperialist globalisation. The third debate identifies the reason as the adoption of the World Bank model of development or McKinsey model of development which generated space for industry driven agriculture which ultimately translated into agribusiness development including information technology. This led to the environmental issues and also obliterated the livelihood of millions. The fourth debate places the reason as indebtedness. As a result, there are attempts to locate the crisis in the wrong policies adopted by the central and state governments in recent times, which have no commendable investment in agriculture. The fifth debate is a discourse from the state, finds multiple issues as the causes namely constant floods, manipulation of prices by traders, supply of

* PhD Research Scholar, CPIGD, Institute for Social and Economic Change, Nagarabhavi, Bangalore - 560072. The author is grateful to Dr V Anil Kumar, PhD Supervisor; Professor Supriya RoyChowdhury, Professor Parmod Kumar, Dr Sobin George and Dr A V Manjunatha - Doctoral Committee Members; Professor N Sivanna and Professor Abdul Aziz - Panel Experts. She is also thankful to both the anonymous referees for their valuable comments and suggestions. E-mail: anceteresavarghese@isec.ac.in.

spurious pesticides and seeds, decline in the prices of agricultural products, rise in the cost of agricultural inputs and successive droughts (Assadi, 2010).

Major states which are receiving wide attention due to a large number of farmer suicides are Andhra Pradesh, Karnataka, Kerala, Punjab and Maharashtra (Mishra, 2006).

Erstwhile Andhra Pradesh

The erstwhile Andhra Pradesh is first among all the states in India which have reported a series of farmer suicides. Anantapur district of the state has been labelled as the 'suicide capital of India'. The first upsurge was in the mid-1980s and the second started in 1997, becoming a permanent feature of the state. Agriculture in the state has witnessed a profound change in terms of cropping pattern since the 1980s. As of now three crops, cotton, groundnut and rice, are the major crops of the state. The number of suicides is higher among the small and marginal farmers who moved from subsistence farming to the high value crops in the hope of improving their social and economic status (Galab, Revathi & Reddy, 2009). V. Sridhar (2006) points out one more category in the group of sufferers, the tenant cultivators, who did not even have claims over land and had to pay high rents to the landlords. The prevalence of oral tenancy added fuel to the fire.

Apart from the above mentioned causes, Rao and Suri (2006) specify certain aspects such as those who are engaged in agriculture having low economic status, and that a wide gap in the per capita income between people engaged in agriculture and non-agricultural activities, that seems to be the major reason. This is certainly a contributing factor, but not the only reason for suicides. Besides the economic factors, they identify certain social factors such as low literacy rate, breakdown of the joint family and the collapse of other social institutions.

The introduction of economic liberalisation and the decline of institutional credit and adequate insurance forced the farmers to depend more on the private moneylenders and led to the squeezing of the peasantry. The crisis was mainly due to the failure of the state (V.Sridhar, 2006). The study by Sridhar covers some of the aspects with respect to the political regime, but certainly it is not an extensive analysis.

Rao and Suri (2006) discuss a paradox, that in a state where all the political representatives come from an agricultural background, the condition of farmers is no better. In the policy process, the space of the farmers is lessening as they are least organised and not able to lobby with the law makers. Adding to this, in the last 10-15 years, there was no agrarian movement in Andhra Pradesh. Even the political parties show little interest in mobilising them. It does not mean that the situation is hopeless. The defeat of the TDP, partly due to the negative vote by farmers and after that the campaign which the Congress Party carried out on the farmer issue and their victory in the elections, thereby bringing certain policies and programmes in favour of the agrarian sector, are factors which boost hope.

Telangana

The state which was formed with a lot of hope, after a prolonged struggle of six decades, is under threat, more specifically the agrarian sector of the state is at risk. Even after bifurcation, Telangana state is unable to cherish its dreams of plenitude in agriculture, with farmer suicides and severe

droughts still being haunting issues of the state. Telangana has become the state with the second highest number of suicides by farmers for the second consecutive year during 2015, after Maharashtra. The major reasons for suicide by farmers are illness, poverty, crop failures and indebtedness (Kumar C. P., 2016).

Karnataka

A state widely known for its aggressive reform policies (Deshpande, 2009), Karnataka received world attention due to advancement in the areas of information technology and bio-technology. But it suffers from many hidden issues that are actually causing a severe negative impact on the state. Karnataka's economy is highly dependent on the agricultural sector. Though the contribution of agricultural sector to the Gross State Domestic Product is declining, agriculture continues to be the largest employment generating activity (Economic Survey of Karnataka 2015-2016, 2016). The experience of the state is such that whenever the agricultural sector fails to perform well, the sustainable growth path of the state's economy faces issues. A vast area of the state is drought prone and with enormous patches of protective irrigation. A huge portion of the state's agricultural area is under rain-fed conditions with constraints of climate and resources (Deshpande, 2009).

During the 1980s, Karnataka witnessed severe stagnation in the agrarian sector and through policy initiatives, the problem was tackled and the sector witnessed its rebirth. But the current phase of liberalisation has again worsened the situation (Deshpande, 2002). The agrarian crisis in the state began in 1997 and reached its peak in 2002. Deshpande identifies the major challenges that arose during the five decades after attaining Independence. Firstly, the village as an institution and a support system got destroyed under the commercialisation of agriculture. Secondly, the introduction of land reforms brought about new challenges rather than solving the issues. The decline of public investment gradually happened in the following periods, and altogether exposed the average farmer to unavoidable risks and uncertainties. When the new initiatives in the economic field were introduced, they did not include measures to provide protection for the vulnerable sections. By analysing different sources, Deshpande summarises the major causes for the agrarian distress as frequent conditions of drought and failure of rainfall, especially in north Karnataka, loss of crops due to inferior quality of inputs, and non-availability of these inputs on time, introduction of new technology with inadequate knowledge and state support, sudden attack of pests and diseases, yield or productivity loss, volatility of market prices, non-availability of proper marketing infrastructure, imperfections in the market, increased credit burden and indebtedness that have led to financial non-viability, failure of extension services, counselling failure by the institutions and breakdown of village institutions (Deshpande, 2009). In another article, Deshpande (2002) classifies the causes as events, actors, stressors and triggers. Crop loss, failure of borewells, price crash, daughter's marriage, family problems and property disputes come under 'events'. These become the creators of stress when there is a combination of two or more such events. Illness of the individual or any of the family members and heavy borrowings come under the stressors. When it comes together with the events, it becomes fatal and leads to the extreme levels of vulnerability due to the actors/triggers such as the money lenders, bankers, spouses and close friends who create a sense of insecurity and insult to the person.

Vasavi (1999) argues that the causes for the tragedy of the farmers of Karnataka can be classified under three categories viz. ecological, economic and social. Karnataka is predominantly a semi- arid region and the introduction of commercial agriculture with a huge increase in the use of hybrid seeds, chemical fertilisers and pesticides have led to a negative impact. This culminated in the loss of importance of local crops, depletion of soil fertility and increased susceptibility of crops to pests and diseases. The uncertainty of rain along with other issues made the situation vulnerable. Commercial agriculture is based on the promotion of external inputs and in this case, the institutional facilities to purchase such inputs are limited, and available mostly to large land owners. Small and marginal farmers, for whom institutional support was a distant reality, had to rely on informal sources which comes with high interest rate, and continuously battered the farmers without giving them a chance to rise back. The introduction of commercialised agriculture also affected the social fabric by destroying the local knowledge system, caste and kin ties. In such a situation, there are issues of dissemination of knowledge in terms of how to do agricultural activity and what measures could be taken when there is crop failure. Finally, she says that the root cause is in the failure of state policies and the subordination of cultivators to the market and capital forces. Such kind of a change led to the scarcity of foodgrains in the region.

Maharashtra

Maharashtra is one of the richest states in India with the paradox of having high incidence of farmer suicides on the one hand and a high growth of the non-agricultural sector on the other. This has in fact resulted in a further polarisation of urban-rural disparities. The most affected region of the state is Vidarbha. Srijit Mishra (2009) writes that even at the turn of the century, 55 percent of all workers and 80 percent of rural workers in Maharashtra are still dependent on agriculture.

In another article of Srijit Mishra (2006), he points out that in most of the highly affected districts of Maharashtra, traditionally cotton has been the cash crop for farmers. Over a period of time, profitability from cotton has come down. Some of the reasons for such a situation were high subsidies by the US leading to price distortion, low import tariffs in India and the failure of MCPS (Monopoly Cotton Procurement Scheme) which is in operation in the state since 1972-73, meant to stabilise prices but the cumulative losses have led it to be non-functional. He cites some other major reasons also. The withdrawal of the state is clear from the decreasing investment in the agricultural sector. Along with such a change, the poor government agricultural extension service and the decreasing role of the formal institutions in the rural financial market aggravated the situation. This led the farmer to be highly dependent on informal credit which finally led to the suicides of many farmers. On the basis of a survey, from peoples' perspective, he identifies indebtedness (86%) as the major reason along with other factors such as fall of economic position, lack of discussion of the problem with family members or others, crop failure, change in social status, inability to conduct the marriages of the women members of the family, consumption of alcohol, personal health problems and suicide history in the family. A point to be noted here is that in 79 per cent of the cases, suicides were committed by consuming pesticides due to the easy availability of such means in the farming households. A hospital in most of

the affected regions of Maharashtra, where such emergencies can be treated, is on an average 20 kilometers away, more than one hour of reach.

Mishra does suggest the need for intervention of the state and the involvement of civil society but that is not leading to a discussion regarding in what ways the involvement of civil society can be ensured.

Siddhartha Mitra and Sangeeta Shroff (2007) argue that the opening up of the Indian agricultural economy in the mid-1990s and thereby the loss of competitiveness of the Indian farmers was the major reason for the crisis. In a closed economy, farmers were mainly affected by yield risk and if there was any crop loss, it could be compensated by an increase in domestic prices. In an open economy, farmers were also thrown open to both yield and price risk. They mainly talk about three factors which are responsible for the vulnerability of the farmers, low yield exposed to the lower international prices after the adoption of new reforms, a lack of dynamism in cotton yield per hectare in a dynamic world and a high cost of cultivation. The increased use of costly BT cotton seeds had led to an increase in the cost of cultivation.

Punjab

Punjab is known as the grain bowl of India, the forerunner in the green revolution and contributor of a major chunk of wheat and rice to the central pool, but it is also not free of agrarian issues. The economy of Punjab was mainly agrarian, especially after the ushering of the Green Revolution. Along with the agricultural sector, the manufacturing sector also witnessed a rising trend but the latter's growth remained meagre when compared with the agricultural sector. But in the 1990s, these two sectors witnessed a decline in their contribution to the state income but the dependence of the workforce on the agricultural sector is still high, which clearly shows that the state is still predominantly agrarian. The change from an agricultural economy to a non- agricultural economy has been seen as a progressive step in the economic development literature (Gill, 2010).

The state has been passing through a difficult stage in its history since 1997. This is mainly due to the failure in the productivity of cotton that put the entire cotton belt under stress. Another major cause is the freezing of the Minimum Support Price for paddy and wheat due to falling international prices between 2000-01 and 2004-05. This aggravated the distress of the farmers in the state and culminated in the suicide of many, most of them belonging to small and marginal farmers category and being resource poor (Sidhu, Singh and Bhullar, 2011).

Anita Gill (2010) writes, in the wave of new reforms, there was a sudden increase in the cost of cultivation, declining productivity and thereby shrinking income, which have all led the farmers to borrow heavily from any and every source. Borrowing itself is not an issue, but losing the capacity to repay definitely is. The non-institutional source of credit percentage is almost similar to the institutional source of credit in Punjab. This clearly indicates the insufficient institutional set-up to meet the needs of the agrarian sector. On the basis of a survey, she identifies high cost of the inputs and implements and low price of the farm products accompanied by low yield (80%) as the major reasons for the crisis. There are other reasons such as excessive expenditure on social ceremonies and alcohol consumption.

Almost 89 per cent of the farm households of Punjab are indebted. This can be seen as a result of the inadequate institutional lending which forced the farmer to rely on the informal sources, and led to the squeezing of the farmers. Besides this, the decrease in farm productivity, increase in non-farm expenditure in rural areas such as house construction, improving and maintaining living standards and social obligations being met beyond means are the reasons for farmers' indebtedness in Punjab (Singh, Kaur and Kingra, 2008).

The large number of suicides among the farmers of Punjab has to be understood in the background of the crisis of agrarian transformation which has encroached into the lives of the rural poor. It is not merely an agrarian crisis, but rather an overall stagnation in the economy characterised by decline in peasant movements, retrogressive social practices and conspicuous consumption, rising unemployment and the inequalities (Kumar and Sharma, 1998).

Kerala

The Kerala model of development

Kerala has resurrected itself from the clutches of caste, class rigidities, high birth, infant mortality and population growth rates. It was in fact a poor state transformed into a social democratic state with low birth, infant mortality and population growth rates and a high level of literacy. The notion which has been spread by the neo-classical development theory, that economic growth is a precondition in order to achieve social development, has been proved wrong by Kerala through its new way of achieving social development without economic growth. All these achievements without much damage to the ecological balance make it a unique model, which is able to cope up with the widely held concept of sustainable development (Parayil, 2000).

The Kerala model development can be considered as a unique case within the third world as it offers a good quality of life and security to its inhabitants. It has done exceptionally better than the rest of the states of India and the third world in terms of social indicators and in that case, it holds an equal position with many of the developed countries. Kerala has achieved this greatness without any help of industrial, red, green or any such kind of revolutions; this is the paradox which led many to do research on this unique case of Kerala (Tharamangalam, 2006).

Vinod Thomas (2006) identifies the accomplishments in the reduction of population growth as the result of redistributive social programmes which the state embraced and thereby a commendable performance in equalising income distribution and the upliftment of the condition of women. The achievements are also the result of the historical conditions and political action in Kerala. The early expansion of education in Kerala along with the lessening of social and economic inequalities led the state into progress. Also, the efforts to mitigate poverty are praiseworthy. A high elasticity of poverty reduction with respect to growth can be found in the case of Kerala. This means if there is an increase in the growth rate, it has a greater impact on poverty reduction. In other parts of India, they witness an opposite trend.

T K Oommen (2009) lists out nine specificities which enabled Kerala to achieve outstanding results in human development indices. The spread of school education was possible due to the homogeneous language which is Malayalam. But in the case of religion, it possesses heterogeneity, but

is differently characterised than the rest of India. Here, Christianity is pre-colonial and Islam is pre-conquest. This helped them to participate in the developmental process and reap benefits. There is no such religious divide in the state. The establishment of educational and health institutions long back by the Christian missionaries in reality encouraged other communities such as Nairs, Izhavas and Muslims to start such institutions. This competition helped to achieve secular goals. Every group, irrespective of their religious status, has an equal opportunity in the field of trade and commerce. This equal access is due to the absence of the Vaishya element in the Varna system of Kerala. Many of the Keralites have settled in different parts of the world, but at the same time did not give up the habit of repatriating one's savings back home. This is truly a great source of capital for Kerala. Media, drama, literature, cinema all have played a major role in Kerala's social transformation. Having two firm secular political blocks, the Left Democratic Front (LDF) and the United Democratic Front (UDF), also was of great help. And finally, he says that the most important aspect is that Kerala is characterised by a movement society, the movements of political, social, cultural and environmental importance. They were mobilised for spreading land reforms, democracy, literacy, scientific temper and so on. This shows that Kerala has such a vibrant society and was indeed a major factor in promoting Kerala's social development.

The transformations which took place in the social, political and economic realm made Kerala achieve what has been praised by many today. All these came true as a result of the spread of literacy, change in agrarian relations, the transformation that happened in the lives of people of lower castes, societal attitudes towards girls and women and the policies and interventions by the government. Even though the state is backward in terms of economic growth and faces the challenge of high unemployment rates, it has done amazingly well in the field of social development. This can be replicated in other states of India. India can learn some of the lessons from Kerala, where Kerala has achieved better success than many of the high growth economies (Ramachandran, 1997).

The Globalisation Thesis and the Challenges

The twin sectors of health and education, which M.A. Oommen (2008) calls as the two pillars of the Kerala model, have of late been commercialised after opening up the economy to the neo-liberal regime damaged the equity aspect of the Kerala model. There took place a mushroom growth of private schools and colleges, especially of self-financing colleges, which were not a prominent feature earlier, with the coming of the liberalisation policies. This created further inequality as only those who can afford it were able to go to these schools and colleges and also for the better medical treatments. Due to the poor facilities of healthcare in the public sector, even the low income categories are relying more on the private sector, which is leading to the deep indebtedness of the poor. It has also disturbed the ecological balance of the region due to the growing building construction boom. All these have resulted in the destruction of the hydrological cycle, forests, river systems, wet lands and such other resources (a society highly dependent on Ayurveda and traditional methods is naturally highly affected by this). More than this, a growing consumerist tendency resulting in habits of careless disposal of heavy solid, liquid and medical wastes is leading to health issues.

In another article, which is a response to the works of Achin Chakroborty and K.P. Kannan as they talk about a turnaround in the Kerala economy, M.A.Oommen (2005) says that the real turnaround

will happen only when these sectors improve in quality along with the improvement of other sectors. After the introduction of neo-liberal reforms, there has been a negative growth in the agricultural sector and even the secondary sector also showed a slower growth rate. The only sector which registered a significant growth is the tertiary sector and a turnaround cannot be seen in terms of the growth of only one sector.

K J Joseph and K N Harilal (2006) write that liberalised policies could be an obstacle to the growth prospects of the region's economy. They also express a similar view that the standpoint of liberalisation of trade and investment policies regarding the minimal role of the state led to the withdrawal of the state from economic decision making in most developing countries including India. As a result, special policy packages for the backward areas and the outliers have become a part of history. In the last two decades, the state has been facing a severe crisis such as the stagnation of commodity producing sectors, especially agriculture and allied sectors and industries. There are other severe crises such as growing unemployment, degeneration of the service sector and worsening of the fiscal situation. All these crises are the result of the stagnation of the commodity producing sectors. All this can take a toll on social life. They attribute the increasing number of crimes, communal tensions, suicides and violence against women to these crises. The argument which they make is that the new policy regime has accentuated the development crisis of Kerala. The liberalisation regime has led to the situation where more developed states with better infrastructure, agglomeration advantages and market attraction receive the major chunk of private sector industrial investment. In that case, Kerala is in a very disadvantageous position as it is based on traditional industries with very few government sponsored modern industries. Kerala's cash crop sector has registered an outstanding growth under the protectionist regime, but could not sustain it when the economy got connected with the world economy as most of these crops are under threat because of import competition.

Similar kind of a view regarding the agricultural sector in the aftermath of the new regime, even though he does not attribute that directly to the globalisation perspective, can be seen in the writings of P.M. Thomas (1999). After a period of retarded growth, the agricultural sector was resurrected during the 1980s but again fell down in the 1990s.

The two changes that happened in the 1990s have affected social democracy in Kerala. One is the disintegration of the Soviet Union and the other is the adoption of an open economy. The first change created a moral-psychological dilemma rather than a material one but the latter one pushed the state into a very vulnerable situation. The rising middle class and a growing consumerist society is a feature of the changes brought by the opening up of the economy. The author writes that the arguments that the adoption of the reforms has not damaged social democracy seems unacceptable. There are evidences to deny this claim; the gap between the socio-economic categories has increased, there is a reduction in public sector spending for health and education and also growing commercialisation of these sectors, the collapse of the agricultural sector and the distress that it caused to the peasantry all show that it has severely affected the course of social democracy. Even the communist ideology witnessed a transformation in terms of its content and practice. Still, a critical mass follows the ideals and ethical values of socialism in Kerala. For the communist parties in Kerala, the change from revolutionary parties to parliamentary parties has made them just vote-seeking machines.

The party members are mostly the middle class now and still holding on to the ideas of proletarian dictatorship is really a contradiction in itself. Individual power struggles and corruption charges are haunting the party morally. It is true that earlier leaders had an ascetic personality but the new generation has changed totally in its composition. And the party's effort to control the civil society organisations is against the concept of synergy that is between the state and civil society. The party that was once at the vanguard of change has changed itself dramatically. All this will have serious implications for deepening democracy. (Mannathukkaren, 2012).

The Periphery within the Kerala State

Kerala has not able to deal with the issues of poverty and deprivation in an equal manner everywhere (Parayil, Preface 2000). Even within the arguments of a high quality life, there exists a periphery which John Kurien (2000) calls as the outliers, not touched enough by the concept of public action. Drawing from Dreze and Sen, on the concept of capability building he further carries his argument in favour of the outliers. For such kind of groups, no such paradox, as in the case of the whole of Kerala, high quality of life with low economic growth does not exist; rather, they face deprivation in both the cases. Fisheries sector, one of the most disadvantaged communities, proves the disparities in social development. Being much into superstitions, they accept and live with the burdens as if those were the results of what fate has carried into their lives. Another community which is equally disadvantaged are the tribes who live in the hilly areas and fully depend on the forest for their livelihood. In the case of the marine community, it is the sea. Both have something in common as these two communities live in the geographic margins of the land.

The marginalisation of the Adivasis (tribals), especially after the linking up of the domestic economy to the world market, raises certain issues such as whether competition in the world market should have more weight than the wellbeing of the people. One more aspect to note here is that many Adivasi groups want to keep themselves aloof from the state and sometimes it is not the mistake of the state too. There are many cases of starvation deaths among the Adivasis and this led to movements and struggles by Adivasis. They are still in the margins (Steur, 2012).

Even from the time of the formation of Kerala state in 1956, different regions grew at a different pace, Malabar being the most backward region. Even though Kerala has shown performance in social indicators much better than other states of India, the case of Kasargod and Kollam in terms of poverty and Malappuram in terms of Net National Product shows that there are areas of deprivation (Chakraborty, 2009).

P Sivanandan (1976) writes that social and economic opportunities are distributed in a highly unequal manner in Kerala society, especially between the Dalits and the rest of the population. Dalits are backward in terms of their income earning opportunities because of their disadvantaged position in terms of land holdings, employment and education. The pattern of uneven development as in the case of many parts of the world is also present in the case of Kerala where the growth rate of the well-off is much higher, while it is much lower in the case of the deprived sections. In spite of many of the policies and programmes of the government in order to protect them, these have not helped it to overcome the socio-economic backwardness of the Dalits. He also points to the fact that the heavily tribal inhabited

areas also remain poor and rank at the top in terms of backwardness. More than a quarter of the tribal population lives in Wayanad district. They live in the dense forests, completely cut off from the rest of the society. They are scattered in a wide area and this has made the development policies ineffective. A total 65% of the workers among the tribal population in Wayanad are agricultural workers and 17 % are cultivators. For the entire tribal population, it is difficult to meet the minimum subsistence level. Some of them own land, but they entrust their land to others and work as labourers, thereby receiving only low wages. This leads to debt, compelling them to sell their lands.

All these are clearly mismatching with the findings of the Kerala human development report of 2005, which states that there is a big reduction in intra-state disparities and gender differentials in many social indicators of different social groups (Human Development Report 2005 Kerala 2005).

Agrarian Sector in Kerala

The Kerala economy is undergoing a profound change with an explicit decline of the agriculture sector, in terms of both income and employment and there is an emergence of the service sector (Harilal and Eswaran, 2015).

Table 1: Sectoral Distribution of Gsdp at Constant Prices

Sectors	Sectoral Shares							
	1960-61	1970-71	1980-81	1993-94	2000-01	2009-10	2010-11	2011-12
Primary	56	49.4	39.23	32.23	25.3	12	11.06	9.48
Secondary	15.2	16.3	24.37	20.32	19.5	20.7	20.13	20.22
Tertiary	28.8	34.2	36.4	47.45	55.2	67.3	68.81	70.3
Total	100	100	100	100	100	100	100	100

Source: Department of Economics and Statistics

Cited From: (Kerala Economy 2011)

The table clearly shows that over the years, the importance of the primary sector has drastically come down and there is a gradual ascendancy of the service sector.

The agricultural sector in Kerala is distinctive when compare with the other states of India as the land utilisation and cropping pattern shows some kind of uniqueness. It heavily relies on the commercial crops and is thereby highly dependent on the world market. Geographically, the state has been divided into three, low lands, mid lands and high lands. Low lands are mainly having cultivation of rice and mid lands with a variety of crops like rice, coconut, pepper, cashew, ginger, tapioca and rubber. High lands are mainly characterised by mountains and dense forests and have major plantation crops like tea, cardamom, coffee and pepper. Land use pattern also shows an increased use of land for non-agricultural activities. This kind of a drastic change from subsistence crops to commercial crops and the increased use of land for non-agricultural activities have resulted in problems which agriculture is facing today (Kerala Development Report,2008).

The crisis is not just the relative decline of agriculture, but it is also reflected in absolute decline of the employment, production and income generated in the sector, problems with food security and growing indebtedness and distress of the peasants and agricultural labourers. The crisis has

affected the eco system and there are issues in the allied activities also. The crisis mainly affected the non plantation crops which equally felt in all parts of the state. Vegetable cultivation was also highly affected by this trend and the state is now heavily relying on the neighbouring states for the same (Harilal and Eswaran, 2015) even though the state has initiated policies towards organic farming.

Agrarian Movements in Kerala

Kerala is considered to be an important example of a place where the relationship between the dominant and the subordinate class witnessed a profound change. The worldwide theories regarding peasant movements are not sufficient to give an accurate account of what is happening in India. The reason behind this inefficiency is that Indian society is not only ensconced in economic inequalities but also in caste rigidities. Caste-based inequalities are more prevalent in the rural areas where the upper caste agricultural labourers treat the lower castes in a humiliating way and even within the lower castes, there are sub castes and discriminations. In this situation, it is difficult to form organisations of labourers and tenants. But in the case of south India, where most of the agricultural labourers belong to the Dalit community, things are easier than in the other parts of India. A clear-cut caste-based hierarchical relationship existed in the pre-colonial period which was reflected in terms of religious practices, family structure, food habits and clothing, and the main economic activity was agriculture. Even before the coming of the British, there existed a rigid pattern of social and economic differentiation in south India. In Kerala, the pre-colonial agrarian relations were characterised by the existence of landlords who belonged to the upper castes and they farmed their lands with the agrarian serfs and slaves who belonged to the lower castes. The small land holders belonged to the middle level of the caste system. There was an unequal relationship between the superior and inferior classes and a more unequal relationship was manifested in the case of farmers and the labourers, because the labourers belong to the 'niche jatis'(in Malayalam) which means lowest castes, lowest among the lowest castes. Their condition was much similar to that of the slaves; in fact, they were the slaves of the pre-colonial times. Even though this was the kind of humiliating life they experienced, there is no evidence regarding protests and revolts. But the coming of the colonial masters and the measures which were taken by them brought about changes in the relations. One of the most important initiatives was the banning of slave trade. Introduction of rule of law, the bureaucratic system and other initiatives such as extension of communication and transport all weakened traditional ways of social control. The missionaries gave a new lift to the lives of the lower castes, especially by starting schools for them (Alexander, 1989).

Kerala history shows that aspirations and movements by the lower castes and communities received a positive response from the rulers and this gave inspiration for the further formation of more secular movements along class lines among the peasants and workers. These movements were led by a group of radicals who had leanings towards the left. After the formation of the state, in continuation with the previous efforts, the government brought progressive public action measures in the agrarian sector such as land reforms, abolition of tenancy, granting of homestead rights, ensuring minimum wages and the improvement of working conditions. All these initiatives gave a new dimension to the lives of the agricultural labourers, especially the small peasants, by boosting their self respect. The

agricultural labour movements influenced other occupational groupings of agriculture and traditional industry. These efforts made a positive transformation in their socio-economic position of the poor. All these pressures from below compelled the state to undertake different kinds of protectionist measures and thereby improved the conditions of the poor. The movements also helped to create awareness against exploitative socio-economic factors and protected their occupation and existence. It also extended the social services which helped them to meet their basic needs. The higher quality of life which Kerala is enjoying today is not just because of the provisioning of services by the state like schools, health centres and such other facilities, but also because of the awareness among the people and their collective efforts to ensure the smooth functioning of these facilities (Kurien, 2000).

Among the movements, the notable one was that of the Izhavas, who, though they were untouchables, were in a better social and economic position and demanded a total change. Lower than the Izhavas, the Pulayas who constituted the major chunk of the scheduled castes in Kerala, facing utter negligence, demanded an end to the oppression and led protests by the end of the nineteenth century by boycotting agricultural work in the fields under the leadership of Ayyankali. This was the case in Travancore. The condition of Malabar was much more chaotic at the time the British became the rulers. In Malabar, the Muslim peasants led the protest against the exploitation of the landlords. By the middle of the 1930s, the Indian National Congress launched ideological education in Kerala and in Tamil-speaking areas of Madras Presidency which introduced the study of Marxism into communal organisations. They took initiatives to form organisations and many organisations such as the Malabar Tillers Association, Travancore Agricultural Labourers Union etc were formed. As a response to this, farmers also formed organisations in order to protect their interests, in the same centres where the labourers' organisations were formed. These organisations were under the leadership of rich and educated farmers. They also included the small and marginal farmers from the middle and upper castes who were the majority in the farming population. Their economic condition was much similar to the agricultural labourers. But their identity was a barrier for them to join hands with the Dalits in order to form an organisation of the poor. But the communist activities led to the secularisation of values and beliefs. But this kind of a change which happened in Kerala did not occur in many other parts due to the fact that the socio structural characteristics of other areas were not that favorable (Alexander, 1989).

Even when there are claims that the agrarian relations have changed, Mohankumar in his article written in 2008 shows that the condition of the agricultural labourers are still miserable. They are left out of the farm sector relief packages. The agrarian crisis-led farmers' suicides are much prevalent in Wayanad, Idukki and Palakkad. Among these districts, Wayanad has the highest number of tribes and most of them are agricultural labourers and small farmers. The policy for the agricultural labourers as implemented through the agricultural workers' welfare fund board did not make any basic changes in the conditions of the agricultural labourers. The farm crisis hit both the farmers and agricultural labourers alike, the latter being highly neglected by the central and state governments. Even the big farmers hesitated to donate to the fund for the workers until the government made it compulsory. The administration of the policies went wrong and the hard-earned money which the workers deposited also went in vain. All this shows the neoliberal stand that in the process of development, the weaker deserve to be out of the box (Mohankumar, 2008) .

Commonalities and Differences: Kerala and Other States

The major aim of this section is to have a comparative study between Kerala and other distressed states, the similarities and also the uniqueness of Kerala which makes it to stand apart. The first step in such an attempt is to have an overall picture of the Kerala agrarian economy and the suicide specific aspects.

S Mohankumar and R K Sharma (2006) discuss about certain specificities of Kerala economy. Approximately 25 per cent of the state Net Domestic Product is accounted for by remittances from abroad, while the agriculture dependent population (cultivators and agricultural labourers) constitute only 23 per cent of the total workforce, and contribution of the agricultural sector to Net State Domestic Product is very low (15%), export oriented cash crops including natural rubber cover nearly 30 percent of the gross cropped area of the state.

Joseph and Joseph (2005) point out that Kerala's agricultural sector has some special characteristics. It is characterised by highly fragmented and small sized holdings except in the plantation sector, homestead farming with mixed crops yielding high income, a larger area under commercial crops, export orientation of crops such as spices, cashew, rubber, coffee and tea, credit and hired labour intensive cultivation and higher indebtedness of farmers. Some of these features are actually causing trouble for the agriculture sector, especially after the adoption of liberalisation. The phase of liberalisation was characterised by a fall in the exports of agricultural products of the state and the rise in imports that led to a fall in the domestic prices for commodities. The state was already witnessing issues of high cost of cultivation and stagnant production.

The most affected districts of Kerala in terms of a high number of farmer suicides are Wayanad and Idukki districts. Since 2000, Wayanad has been troubled by a severe agrarian crisis. The case of Idukki is also almost the same, but somewhat better than Wayanad. The similarity between both the regions is in its geographical identity, both being highland areas. These are the two districts in the state which still retain pure agrarian characteristics. The main crops grown are plantation based, such as pepper, coffee, cardamom and tea. Causes of the distress can be seen under two categories, exogenous as well as endogenous. In the first category come trade liberalisation, other macroeconomic policy changes and weather related conditions. In the second category, local ecology, social structure and institutional arrangements can be included. The root cause is the adverse weather conditions in addition to the policy changes of trade liberalisation and declining state support to agricultural sector (Nair and Menon, 2009). The significant rise in loans issued by the formal financial institutions in the recent period, especially short term loans, increased the indebtedness. Farmer suicides are more in the states where cultivation is concentrated on the commercial crops, besides many of the farmers had borrowed from friends and relatives (Jeromi, 2007).

It is clear from the above set of literature that the cropping pattern (from subsistence farming to cash crops) is not exceptional in the case of Kerala. It is a general pattern which actually took place to meet the demands of the global market. Certain causes such as the introduction of neo- liberal policies, indebtedness due to large borrowings and climatic changes are of a general character.

There are commendable differences also. If we clearly analyse the literature, unlike in other states, the presence of informal money lenders is very less in Kerala. But the formal institutions cause

distress to the farmers. And also, when we consider the case of other states, it is the farmers who committed suicide, but in the case of Kerala, the suicides include a large number of agricultural labourers along with the farmers.

In an article titled 'Farmer suicides in Maharashtra', Siddhartha Mitra and Sangeeta Shroff say, "suicide rates are high only in states where cotton is an important crop" and they refer to Karnataka, Andhra Pradesh and Maharashtra (Mitra and Shroff, 2007). This statement is completely contradictory to the findings of other literature including newspaper reports. In one such article, the authors make an analysis of the SMR (Suicide Mortality Rate) of farmers and find that if we use a SMR ratio of 1 as a cut-off to identify the severe problem of farmer suicides, then Kerala (for all years) and Maharashtra (from 2001-2008) emerge as cases of concern. One obvious fact is that there is no cotton cultivation in Kerala. The major crops are export oriented ones such as coffee, tea, cardamom etc. This also distinguishes Kerala from other states, all of whom have a large amount of cotton cultivation and where the main victims are cotton cultivators.

Conclusion

Kerala has done well in the case of many social indicators such as literacy, health and such other aspects and it was mainly due to the public action and the initiatives of the state. A well informed population that aspired for a well equipped society along with a determined state was behind such a success story. But most of the literature shows that the success has been hampered by the introduction of neo-liberal reforms. The major attractions of the Kerala model, health and education, being highly commercialised destroys the equity concept behind the model. The performance of the agricultural sector is dull and it is an irony that a state which started its initiatives in the agrarian sector because of pressure from below, from the peasants and workers, is at a point of stagnation. There are certain pockets of the agrarian sector which are in a highly vulnerable situation where most of the people depend on agriculture such as Wayanad, Palakkad and Idukki. Most of these areas fall under the outlier category because of certain characteristics such as the geographical position (hilly areas), large number of Dalits who are deprived of basic facilities, backward in terms of human development indices. Studies shows a high level of farmers' distress in these areas and most of the studies are only till a period till 2010, after that there are not much discussions regarding what happened to the farmers and how effective were the policies adopted by the government at the time when a vast number of suicides happened. Even now, farmer suicides are an unabated issue in the state. This tendency of a large number in the periphery who are denied of even minimum facilities goes against the concept of justice propounded by John Rawls, where the discriminations should be for the benefit of the most disadvantaged. The present condition of the farmers gives a feeling that they lost the vigour for public action. As agriculture is the production sector and can affect other developments, it needs to be studied in depth. In this context, it is the need of the hour to study the agrarian sector issues and the role of the state in it. Most of the literature is not talking about the role of the state in mitigating the agrarian crisis in the state.

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Dr V K R V Rao Road, Nagarabhavi P.O., Bangalore - 560 072, India

Phone: 0091-80-23215468, 23215519, 23215592; Fax: 0091-80-23217008

E-mail: manjunath@isec.ac.in; Web: www.isec.ac.in