

5. A Study on Causes and Remedies for Farmers' Distress in Karnataka

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Among the important matters of concern to the state economy, reports of distress among farmers coming from most of the districts of the State cause deep concern. The ugly climax of such distress is in the form of suicides reported in the state. The major policy concern here is whether the suicides could be related to economic distress and, if so, how such a situation can be averted. Media reports on the distress indicate loss of crops, price crash, heavy debt burden and inability to meet the family requirements as the main reasons. Distress is caused by many prevailing constraints, but its culmination into suicides needs to be carefully understood. There is clear evidence that similar distressful spans were not infrequent in the history of agriculture, but suicides were not so common. Thus, an uneasy question crops up calling for an explanation for the recent spate of suicides. The reasons have to be carefully investigated, but more importantly, the policy has to be directed towards meeting the distress. The present study focuses on this very aspect.

It is essential to understand a few changes that have occurred in rural India in the span of the last five decades. First of all, the village as an institution has crumbled under the pressure of commercialisation, whereby the 'weak' in the villages are left to fend for themselves, and the village institutions which hitherto took care of the distressed have slowly receded and vanished. The pressure of commercialisation has not only fuelled the weakening process of village institutions but also compartmentalised the classes and even impacted the technology or information transfer. Second, the process of land reforms has created more distortions than it has solved. The trends in marginalisation of landholding are frightening and have increasingly made an average farmer non-viable. The demographic pressures have added to this process creating marginalisation of landholding, thereby affecting the economic viability across the farm groups.

Against this background and in view of the spate of suicides taking place in the State, it was felt that an in-depth study of the situation is warranted. The study mainly focusses on locating the remedial measures to avert future incidence of suicides. Our focus, therefore, is not on exclusively locating the causes of suicides that have taken place but more on learning lessons from them so as to derive a proper policy framework.

Karnataka is one of five states reporting a large number of suicides across all the professions. Though there is a definite increase in the rate of suicides, one cannot point to an increasing trend. We looked into the district-level data in suicide rates during these five years, but could not locate any consistent pattern across districts in the State where suicides have predominated. Therefore, there is a possibility of considering that they occur randomly across regions as well as professions.

As far as the social environment of the victim's family is concerned, we could not find any substantial difference between them and the control families. Our synthesis

brought out a few crucial factors as far as social background is concerned. The joint family tradition is breaking and the majority of the victims had a nucleus family. This has reduced the moral and physical support that they derived in a joint family system. This corroborates Durkheim's theory of inverse relationship between family size and tendency towards suicides. Family tensions and discord with spouse happened to be one of the important causes, and more often this originated from the breakaway of the joint family. What emerges clearly from the social analysis conducted here is the failure of social institutions to instil and establish confidence among those who are on the verge of a breakdown. Failure of 'family' and 'friends' as institutions to instil confidence among the victims was observed. A large number of family members of the victims have reported the 'introvert' characteristics of the victims. In quite a few cases the family members stated that the victim was not talking to them or anybody freely about the problems, and this trait indicates 'self-seclusion' of the victims prior to the incident. This also indicates that the victims tended to suffer 'within themselves' the problems whether economic or social in nature. All this points towards the failure of the social institutions, be it a family, relatives, village, village panchayat (of the olden type), village elders as advisers, friends, co-workers and other family members. In the absence of these supporting institutions and individuals, the deep unguarded feeling ulcerated as economic problems worsened, which in itself is a cause for the abnormal culmination of the distress into self-destruction.

A clear analysis of the causes of suicides will require these to be grouped into 'events', 'stressors' and triggers. Durkheim categorises suicides from a different perspective, namely maniacal, melancholic, obsessive or impulsive. This categorisation stems from the mental set-up of the victims. But we prefer to look at the problem from the 'events', stressors framework. Among the 'events', crop loss, failure of borewell, price crash, daughters' marriage, family problems, property disputes get included. These become 'stressors' (stress creators) when two or more such 'events' get together. Specifically, illness of the individual or of any of the family members, heavy borrowings, continued disputes in the family or land-related problems usually act as 'stressors'. These become lethal in combination with the 'events' but further ignition happens due to 'actors/catalysts' and 'trigger' incidence. The third component is 'actors/catalysts'. These are personalities which create a sense of 'insecurity' or 'insult' to the person. They include the moneylender, banker, spouse, relatives and close friends. Most often among relatives the 'actors/catalysts' belong to the opposite sex of that of the victim. In the background of the 'events' and 'stressors' the 'actors/catalysts' fire the final shot by forcing an occasion to be the 'trigger' for the unfortunate incident. The complex nature of the phenomenon makes it difficult to pinpoint a particular reason for suicide.