Path of Development and Politics in Karnataka

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For the past couple of years, farmers’ suicides have become a major issue in academic narratives, policy analyses and in everyday discourses. The issue came at a time when the debate on the agrarian economy was shifting from the debate on the mode of production of the 1960s (Gough 1980; Thorner 1982) to the growing crisis of the economy in the 1980s and to the farmers’ suicides in recent years. However the beginning of the agrarian crisis requires to be located much earlier to the beginning of events of suicide, which goes back to the 1980s when the terms of trade were going against agriculture (Balagopal 1988; Bose 1981; Rudra 1982), urban-biased policies (Lipton 1980) were dominating the state policies and farming was becoming a losing proposition. Nonetheless, the crisis of agrarian economy during the 1980s was expressed in different forms: one of the major forms was to oppose the state policies through long marches, rallies, fasts unto death, chakka jam, prohibiting the entry of bureaucrats and so on. (Assadi 1994, 1997). It was largely led by the farmers’ movements in different parts of India, such as Shetkari Sanghathana in Maharashtra, Vyavasāyīgal Sangam in Tamil Nadu and Rajya Raitha Sangh in Karnataka. Nowhere did their protests culminate
into a form of suicide, because the organisational form of the farmers’ struggle or movement provided them with a sense of identity and belongingness. It also brought newer areas of discourses to the farmers to deal with. In the process, the opposition was translated into vibrant discourses on major issues such as the development paradigm that the Indian state was following, the politics of denial, third world development, the urban-biased policies, marginalisation of peasantry/farmers’ and so on. However, a shift in the discourse appeared during the time when the Indian state was succumbing to the pressure of global capital. Here too, no farmers’ movement advocated suicide as a form of tactics to oppose or confront the global capital. In fact, during the current decade, the farmers’ movement was also losing its tempo. Thus, it is in the midst of the failure or the declining tempo of the farmers’ movement that one can locate the suicide becoming a fact (Assadi 2004). Interestingly during the decade of globalisation, no activist from the Indian side committed suicide protesting against globalisation. Lee Kyung-Hae, a South Korean farmer and lawmaker in Cancun who was holding a banner that read, ‘WTO Kills Farmers’, committed the first suicide against globalisation. Lee was the former president of the Korean National Future Farmers’ and Fisherman’s Association, an agricultural lobbying group.

Thus, one could discern that farmers’ suicides were the result of sharpening agrarian crisis emanating from the capitalist development in agriculture, although there are five important debates, which attempt to look at the issue of suicide differently.

DEBATES ON SUICIDE

The first debate tries to locate suicides as part of multiple crises. The crises are ecological, economic and social, each inter-linked with the other. The ecological crisis is the result of intense use of hybrid seeds, chemical fertilisers and pesticides, causing the erosion of soil fertility and increasing crop-susceptibility to pests and diseases. Heavy indebtedness led to the economic crisis. In the final analysis, this debate attempts to understand suicide through anthropological tools (Vasavi 1999).

The second debate attempts to locate the crisis or the suicides to the negative growth of the agrarian economy in the recent past as argued by Vandana Shiva. She comes closer to the Marxist critique particularly
the arguments of Patnaik (2006) wherein the latter locates the reasons in the liberalisation/neo-colonialism or imperialist globalisation. Patnaik argues:

The deeply disturbing feature of the current thrust for liberalizing trade is that it has been taking place within an investment-reducing deflationary regime. As soon as trade was liberalised from 1991, within a few years 8 million hectares of food-growing land was converted to exportable crops leading to fall in per head food grains output.

The argument of Vandana Shiva is also to understand the larger linkages emanating from globalisation, which has created a crisis for agriculture and produced a negative economy.

Corollary to this argument, the third debate attempts to locate the reasons for the suicide in adapting the World Bank model of agriculture or what is called the McKinsey Model of development that created spaces for industry-driven agriculture which ultimately translated into agri-business development including Information Technology. This model of development has not only exacerbated the crisis leading to an environmental catastrophe but also destroyed millions of rural livelihoods.

The fourth is the discourse which attempts to locate the suicides exclusively to one phenomenon, that is, the increasing indebtedness (Deshpande and Prabhu 2005) or the debt trap. As a corollary, one more discourse attempts to locate suicide in the wrong policies pursued by the central as well as the state governments over the past two decades, where there is hardly any substantial investment in agriculture.

The final discourse which came from the state attempts to locate the reasons in multiple issues, such as the incessant floods, manipulation of prices by traders, supply of spurious pesticides and seeds, decline in prices of agricultural produce, increase in the cost of agricultural inputs and successive drought in recent years (Asia Times 2004).

Nonetheless, one can argue that this crisis has to be analysed in the larger context of the ambiguous path of capitalist development that the Indian states, including Karnataka, have pursued over the past couple of decades. This is the reason why the crisis is apparent both at the level of the individual, as well as of the communities and also at the level of the agrarian economy. Another fact is that in the Indian context, agrarian capitalism was introduced or juxtaposed on the existing social structure. In the process, it allowed different social structures to coexist, that is, the presence of different social structures along with agrarian capitalism. This does not mean that state intervention was limited; its intervention
was conditioned by such other factors such as increasing productivity, interlinking the local with the international market, bringing in large amounts of land under capitalist development, removing the social categories who were a ‘drag on the economy’ and finally creating new social categories such as rich peasantry who can partake in the capitalist development. This has been done by using different methods—one of the methods was by introducing the Green Revolution, which created surplus food but allowed global capitalism to enter into the domain of agriculture through the means of seeds, fertilisers and so on. Second, it was done through the means of land reforms. However, it was only partially successful and that too only in some states including Karnataka. This helped in bringing new social categories into the market and also created spaces for them to operate at the local/regional/national level. Finally, it was done through introducing co-operatives and other financial institutions. However, they tended to cater to the needs of large farmers, especially those who had land and other properties. However, the intervention of the state in the capitalist development of agriculture, including the ambiguous path that it resorted to, ultimately led to larger consequences on agriculture. Here lies the failure of Indian State too.

This is also the reason why the crisis began to emerge within one or two decades of the introduction of the Green Revolution, when a series of farmers’ movements came to emerge in different parts of India. Their demand mainly centred on the issues of remunerative prices or support prices, writing off loans, declaring agriculture as an industry, increased subsidies to agriculture produce and so on. Thus, the crisis brought the Indian State, including the Indian industrial classes into focus. While analysing the crisis, losing the class identity of the farmers’ movements also assumed the centrality of debate. Further, the farmers’ movements employed newer theoretical discourses. It was best conceptualised by Sharad Joshi’s famous, ‘India versus Bharat’ debate, the former representing industrialised India, which can be located both in the agrarian economy, as well as in the metropolitan/cosmopolitan cities while the latter, Bharat wholly representing the agrarian India. It is also conceptualised as Halli Mattu Pattana. Furthermore, the whole crisis was analysed in such popular discourses as ‘We milk the cow, who drinks the milk?’, ‘We rear the chickens but who eats the eggs?’, ‘India is Bharat, Bharat is India’, ‘We are the owners of India, but who rules us’; and so on.

However, what added to the crisis of the capitalist path of development in recent years is when India became a part of globalisation. Although it created spaces for autonomous categories to enter into the
domain of markets—local to larger markets—it did not check autonomous categories from the ‘fear of losing distinct social identity’. When the market peaking was becoming volatile and the crisis was due to this, then in the 1990’s the reasons for the crisis were externalised. Capitalism mediating through the process of globalisation became the immediate reason for the deepening of the crisis. However, this too did not carry a new agenda for overcoming the ambiguous path that the Indian State all these years pursued, nor did it attempt to create absolutely autonomous categories, which are not dependent on global capital. Rather, global capital tried to trap the social categories through the methods of new seed technology such as ‘Golden Rice or Bt. Cotton’ or even through the methods of cultural industries or through signs, symbols and so on. It is in this context that losing the identity becomes most important at a time when the situation was becoming serious. Second, the loss of identity emanated from the fact that new autonomous categories who derived their identity through leasing in land or market, began to view the crisis engulfing their own identity. To retain their distinct identity as ‘Market Oriented Autonomous Farmer’ (MOAF), suicide became the last resort. It is here that the attempt to retain the identity; as well as to protest against the growing crisis needs to be located.

GROWING CRISIS AND SUICIDE

The growing crisis is not only the result of the ambiguous path of capitalist development that the Indian state pursued over the past couple of years, but also due to global capitalism pursuing the same path. It is also due to the way global capitalism brought in or introduced new methodologies to link the autonomous farmers or the social categories with the larger market.

The path of development has increased the disparity between the urban and rural areas. It is true that the poverty percentage over the past two decades has declined considerably between the urban and rural areas, while the disparity has increased or widened. NSSO has counted that from 1977–78 to 1999–2000, the percentage of people living below the poverty line has declined from 51.3 percent to 26.1 percent, while in absolute numbers it has declined from 328.9 million to 260.3 million. This does not mean that urban–rural disparity has declined; rather it has increased. In fact the
rural poverty ratio is still relatively high in Orissa, Bihar and the North Eastern States. The combined rural and urban poor make up 47.15 percent of Orissa and 42.60 percent of Bihar. For the states of Madhya Pradesh, Sikkim, Arunachal Pradesh and Assam, the combined poverty ratios in 1999–2000 were in the range of 33.47 to 37.43 percent (India Budget 2001–02).

Second, it has not made the farmers a debt-free category; rather it has trapped the farmers in the vicious circle of debt-trap. There is no farmer who is not indebted to financial institutions, co-operatives and so on. In Karnataka, the farmers borrow Rs 18,135 on an average which is very close to that of the Andhra Pradesh farmers. The failure of co-operative institutions has furthered large number of farmers to fall back on the moneylenders who charge exorbitant rates of interest. The rate of interest charged varies from 36 percent to 60 percent. Interestingly, two kinds of moneylenders have emerged in those areas where farmers have committed suicide. One type of moneylender comes from within the rural side, who are either big farmers or capitalist farmers and the second type comes from the urban areas. In both cases, the moneylenders use different techniques to extract a high rate of interest. Unlike earlier decades, the moneylenders in the globalisation era are not interested in appropriating the land in the event of the farmers failing to repay the loan. This is because of uncertainty involved in the agrarian economy; second, an agrarian economy requires the physical presence or physical labour of the moneylenders, which the latter always sought to avoid. This is the reason why the moneylender demands a high rate of interest rather than attaching the property (Assadi 1998). He also uses other techniques like advancing the loan so that the farmers submit their agricultural produce to them. During this process, the prices of agricultural commodities are pegged to the lowest level. Interestingly, it is true that the indebtedness of rural household has not completely come to an end in recent years. The latest NSSO (59th round) has made the following observation that

...an Indian farmer’s household has an average debt of Rs 12,585. The Punjab farmers top the list with Rs 41,575 followed by Kerala with Rs 33,907, Haryana Rs 26,007, Andhra Rs 21,965 and Tamil Nadu Rs 21,963. (Shiva and Jalees 2006: 58)

In fact, Andhra Pradesh witnessed the highest percentage of farmers under indebtedness (82 percent) followed by Tamil Nadu (74.5 percent) and Punjab (65.4 percent). In Karnataka, about 61.6 percent of farmers are
now indebted (Shiva and Jalees 2006: 57). Nonetheless NSSO has made one more observation: the more the land, the higher will be the average loan outstanding. However, the NSSO data further clarified that the percent of indebted farmers taking loans from money lenders is highest (29 percent), followed by banks (27 percent), co-operative society (26 percent) and finally from government (3 percent) (Shiva and Jalees 2006: 58).

Third, it has not brought down the cost of production; rather it has increased it without a corresponding increase in the prices of agricultural produce. The increase in the cost of input prices lies in such issues as ‘withdrawal of subsidy’ whether it is given for power or for fertilisers. This is nothing but the reinforcement of the argument that the terms of trade have gone once again against agriculture. This has created a situation of negative growth in the agricultural sector. In the process, the farmers lost heavily. Incidentally at the all India level, the agricultural growth declined from 3.4 percent in the 1980s to 3 percent in the 1990s (GOK 2006: 8). During the post-reform period it declined further. A similar trend is discernible in Karnataka. Karnataka is one of the fastest growing states in which the agricultural sector contributes about 25 percent of the Gross State Domestic Product (GSDP) and employs more than 70 percent of the rural population. While its real growth rate was consistently higher than that of the national average in all the three sectors during the 1990s, the first few years of this millennium saw a deceleration, due to the negative growth in agriculture. This is apparent from the following facts: the average real GDP rate in different sectors between the period 1995–96 and 2002–03 was 5.86; however, for agriculture it was 1.87 percent, for industry 5.93 percent and for the service sector 8.18 percent. Interestingly, the agriculture sector witnessed a negative growth rate in 1995–96 (−0.9), 1997–98 (−2.4), 2001–02 (−0.4) and 2002–03 (−3.1) (Shiva 2006: 66). A similar trend is discernible in Karnataka too. The average

real GSDP growth in the second half of the nineties was about 5.2 percent in the primary sector, 8.6 percent in the secondary sector and 10 percent in the tertiary sector, while in the first four years of 2000 the average growth has been (3, 6, 6 and 8.6 per cent) respectively (GOK 2003).

Even in the case of the Human Development Index over the years, Karnataka has slipped from sixth to seventh place.

Fourth, negative growth has further accentuated the distress of people living below the poverty line. It has not been able to create any job opportunities in the agricultural sector. It is further fragmenting the land,
as well as increasing the people living below the poverty line. During the post-reform period the number of people living below the poverty line was a staggering 193 million in rural and 67 million in urban India, a total of 260 million are still poor. This is true even in the case of Karnataka. Despite the growth, the poverty ratio in Karnataka is more than the all-India level. For example, rural poverty in Karnataka has declined from 37.9 percent in 1993–94 to 30.7 percent; however, it is still higher than the all-India level; during the same period rural poverty at the all-India level has declined from 33 percent to 26 percent (Murgai and Suryanarayana, 2010).

Fifth, this crisis has been further fuelled by the external linkages, particularly the way the global capitalists resort to the strategy of subsidising the commodities at the cost of Indian farmers. They pursue a policy of duplicity: subsidising their domestic economy on the one hand, forcing the third world to withdraw the subsidies and in the process forcing the farmers to pay the accumulated debt to the regimes concerned. In fact, the US has increased the subsidies to agriculture from 73.5 billion dollars to 180 billion dollars during the period when global capitalism began to dominate the world. These subsidies have benefited the Multi-National Corporations (MNCs) rather than the Indian farmers. Second, the MNCs also adopt other techniques to control the third world, including Indian agriculture. One such method is to create a monoculture through new technology such as seed technology or patent regimes. Monsanto, for example, introduced Bt. Cotton in 2002, in the process of which, the Indian farmers lost Rs 1 billion due to crop failure. This has not been compensated, nor the loss.

**KARNATAKA AGRICULTURE**

The characteristics of Karnataka agriculture have changed over the past couple of years—it has changed from the non-capitalist path to the capitalist path. Karnataka agriculture needs to be located within the larger framework of uneven capitalist development. Although some sort of capitalist development was introduced long back during the colonial period, agrarian capitalism received a boost with the introduction of the Green Revolution, implementation of land reforms and the establishment of institutions such as cooperatives during the post-independence period. Interestingly, this path of development also allowed a large number
of new categories to emerge and enter into the larger domain of agrarian capitalism. It can be viewed in the increasing use of new technology—seed or fertiliser, fragmentation of lands, increase in the landlessness of the labouring class, linkage of local with the national/international market and so on.

However, the beginning of the agrarian crisis once again required to be located during the 1980s, when issues of terms of trade going against the agriculture were taken up. They are also manifested in such issues as unremunerative prices, urban biased policy, declaring agriculture as an industry, writing off loans and so on. The crisis was also manifested in the form of farmers taking out long marches, bundhs, and rallies under the banner of farmers’ movements. During all these years no farmer committed suicide nor did the farmers’ movement advocate such tactics.

Likewise, at the all-India level, the beginning of the crisis in recent past can be located in the larger politics of the rolling back of the state. There are specific issues that further aggravated the agrarian crisis. One important issue is the way the World Bank was able to dictate terms to the Karnataka government which has gone against the interest of the farmers. This is apparent when the Karnataka government for example, went for the World Bank loan, which granted Economic Restructuring in 2001. This loan came along with a condition that the government should withdraw from the power sector as regulator and distributor of power. This led to the bifurcation of the Electricity Board and the subsequent creation of a Corporation and partial withdrawal of subsidy given to the farmers or to agriculture. In the latter case; the power given free to agriculture was withdrawn and also the fact that it increased the power tariff drastically.

This was followed by the failure of the cooperative sector in Karnataka, which could have helped the farmers in overcoming their debts. The Karnataka government was not able to check the growth of money lenders on the one hand and at the same time it failed to make the cooperative movement a success. In Karnataka, although there are 32,382 cooperative societies at the village level, almost 40 percent of them are running heavy losses while nearly 20 percent of them are either defunct or liquidated. This failure has helped in trapping the farmers in the vicious circle of exploitation by the moneylenders.

Second, the agrarian crisis was accentuated with the growing introduction of new technology in agriculture. This is apparent in the politics of bio-technology. The Karnataka government is one of the first governments to allow the field trials of Bt. Cotton. In fact, farmers in the
State protested twice, but failed due to growing forces of corporatisation of agriculture and new technology. The Monsanto seeds in many places completely ruined the agricultural production—as they became spurious, as well as the fact that the claim of surplus production was never realised; in the process the farmers lost heavily.

The agrarian crisis was further accentuated with the severe drought in different parts of the state. In 2002 alone, 143 talukas (Deccan Herald, 2002), which went up to 159 in the subsequent year, out of 176 talukas in the state, were declared as drought areas. Earlier 67 talukas in Karnataka faced ‘acute’ drought and 60 a ‘moderate’ drought. In total 29,193 villages faced drought, out of which 4499 villages come under the category of ‘acute drought’ and 2712 under ‘moderate drought’ (Menon 2001). In some districts the drought was the reaction or the consequence of political inactivity, or the apathy. This is apparent in the canal areas, where the tail-enders would be the ones highly affected. For example in the case of Mandya district, the absence of judicious distribution of water for the tail-enders ultimately ended up in a situation of drought and consequently a couple of farmers committed suicide due to ‘man-made drought’. The severity of the drought was reflected and manifested in different forms: peasants went for long marches demanding relief (Prajavani July 27, 2001), large scale migration of peasants from Karnataka to other neighbouring states (Prajavani July 26, 2001) and distress sale of domestic animals, including the fact that many of the farmers chopped or cut down the plantations grown on their land.

In the current agrarian crisis one should not overlook the fact that it provided the spaces for new social categories to intervene in the larger market. These categories came from different social backgrounds: they came from the section of Other Backward Classes, partly Dalits and the dominant caste as well. In fact land reforms, which coincided with introduction of the green revolution, transformed the hitherto retrenched social categories into owner-cultivators. However, these social categories cannot be treated nor reduced to ‘gentleman farmers’ as once described by Daniel Thorner. Rather they are a new entrepreneurial category that would not only like to partake in the larger market operation but also in the capitalist development. They are not averse to taking risks, as well as trying to enlist themselves as capitalist farmers—their involvement in the agricultural production is also complete. For them the land becomes most important, as the latter provides not only a new identity as farmers, but also a base to enter into the larger domain of capitalism—both local
as well as international. What changed the character of the categories in recent years is the entry of global capitalism into the agrarian domain on a large scale, particularly through the means of seeds, fertilisers and so on. Its entry not only created new identities but also created conditions for a volatile economy; it is here the larger threat of losing ‘identity’ is not only perceived but slowly becoming a fact. Suicide is an attempt to retain their identity as distinct social categories particularly as rural farmers, as well as ‘Market Oriented Autonomous Farmers’ (MOAF). Agrarian Capitalism which once brought new identities and euphoria now changed agriculture into a sphere of suicide. Here lies the paradox of the path of development and the agrarian capitalism.

AGRARIAN CRISIS AND SUICIDES IN KARNATAKA

The exact number of farmers committing suicide is not available. In fact, suicides even led to the National Human Rights Commission (NHRC) to intervene. This happened in the case of Kerala where the NHRC asked the State Government to prepare a dossier of the number of suicides. Suicide has been viewed differently: Farmers’ movements, particularly of Maharashtra for example would argue that it is gangrene due to wounds inflicted by the government over the years (Tehelka 2010). In Punjab, where agrarian capitalism has deep roots, the estimate about the farmers committing suicide has varied. A recent ‘suicide census’ conducted by the Movement against State Repression has estimated that 40,000 have committed suicide between 1997 and 2005 (Kailash 2006). This number might be slightly exaggerated. The government estimated that in total 2116 farmers committed suicide between 1998 and 2005. However the recent reports say that,

close to 150,000 Indian farmers committed suicide in nine years from 1997 to 2005. While farm suicides have occurred in many states, nearly two-thirds of these deaths are concentrated in five states—Maharashtra, Karnataka, AP, Madhya Pradesh and Kerala—where just a third of the country’s population lives.” (Sainath 2007)

The National Social Watch Coalition (NCWC) says that at least 11,387 farmers have committed suicide between 2001 and 2006. Christian Aid estimated that in 2004, 2115 farmers killed themselves, which comes to around 4378 since-1998. There are others who estimated that between 1997 and January 2006, over 9000 peasants took their lives. In one case
it is estimated that within one year (May 2004 to September 2005) 2157 farmers committed suicide. In fact, the Indira Gandhi Institute for Development Research in Mumbai, which was commissioned to investigate the rural crisis in Maharashtra in its report, *Suicides of Farmers in Maharashtra*, pinpointed that the Suicide Mortality Rate (SMR) for male farmers had increased three-fold from 17 per 100,000 in 1995 to 53 in 2004. This is four times more than the national average. The Indian state now acknowledges the fact that between 1993 and 2003, 100,248 farmers committed suicide in India (*Financial Express* 19 May 2006). The most important factor is debt. Suicide is not confined to Karnataka alone. It has been reported among the sugarcane growers of UP, cotton growers of Andhra Pradesh and spice/coffee growers of Kerala. It has been reported from Orissa and West Bengal as well (Shiva and Jalees 2006). Incidentally, suicide is more acute in Andhra Pradesh than in Karnataka (Reddy and Galab 2006).

Karnataka has no history of farmers committing suicide even during the situation of acute agrarian crisis. Even the unorganised farmers would resort to other tactics such as throwing agricultural commodities on the roads, burning their crops and so on. Andhra became the harbinger for such a trend in Karnataka. However, suicide was an attempt to retain the identity as a distinct social category within the larger economy. This is the reason why suicide in Karnataka was first reported in the northern parts of the State the border areas of Andhra Pradesh.

The beginning of the suicides can be traced back to the year 1998, when two farmers in Bidar, who were involved in cultivating *tur dal*, a market-oriented agricultural crop committed suicide. In the initial two years, farmer suicides were largely concentrated in the drought-prone districts in north Karnataka, or confined to economically backward, drought-prone regions such as Gulbarga and Bidar. However, after 2000, the phenomenon shifted to relatively advanced agricultural regions, particularly Mandya, Hassan, Shimoga, Davanagara, Koppal and even Chickmagalur and Kodagu; it also covered the ground water region (Belgaum), assured rain fall region (Haveri) and the sugar cane and Cauvery Irrigation Belt (Mandya). However, in the coastal belt, the number of suicides reported was less.

In fact, one cannot be sure about the precise number of suicides, as the number of suicides accounted by the state was different from that of the civil society groups. This discrepancy came about as the state refused to admit that the reason for suicide was capitalist development. Rather it tried to link the suicides to personal matters, including the fact that it would dismiss the suicide on flimsy grounds. During 1999–2001, it was
estimated that 110 farmers committed suicide in Karnataka. According to one estimate, 3000 farmers committed suicide in Karnataka between 1998 and 2006 (Assadi 1998, 2004). Nonetheless, if we take the report prepared by the Crime Branch of Karnataka, the number of suicides under the heading ‘farming and agricultural activity’ comes to 15,804 between 1998 and 2002, (see Table 5.1). The year 2000 saw the maximum number of suicides (2630) followed by the year 2001—these are the years when agriculture saw negative growth. Interestingly, as per the crime branch report, between 1996 and 2002, 12,889 male farmers committed suicide followed by 2841 female farmers. However, this estimate has problems. One of the problems is the fact that the Crime Branch report also includes suicides committed in cosmopolitan cities, such as Bangalore or Mysore under ‘farming and agricultural activity’. Second, in districts such as Dakshina Kannada, suicide is the reflection of another form of capitalism—the crisis of metropolitan/cosmopolitan or Middle-Eastern capitalism rather than an agrarian one. Clubbing such issues would make the counting or numbering of the farmers’ suicides difficult.

In this context, the report of the Agricultural Department, Government of Karnataka is important, although it does not give a complete picture. According to the Department, between 2003 and 2007 (up to 1 January 2007) a total of 1193 farmers committed suicide (Table 5.2). On the contrary, the Central Government claimed that from 2000–01 to 2005–06, around 8600 farmers committed suicide—which is the highest figure when compared to any other state—in fact Maharashtra is relegated to third position in the suicide rate. However if we calculate the statistics provided by the Veeresh Committee report, including other press reports one can estimate the number of suicides is more than 5000.

Table 5.1

Suicide Cases Reported under Farming and Agricultural Activity,

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<th>Year</th>
<th>Men</th>
<th>Women</th>
<th>No. of Suicides</th>
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<tr>
<td>1996</td>
<td>1548</td>
<td>531</td>
<td>2079</td>
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<tr>
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</tr>
<tr>
<td>2002</td>
<td>2008</td>
<td>258</td>
<td>2340</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Total</td>
<td>12889</td>
<td>2841</td>
<td>15804</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Source: From the files of the Police Department.
Region-wise the highest suicide rate was reported from the Old Mysore areas, followed by the Old Bombay Presidency areas and the Old Hyderabad region. The Old Madras Presidency area, as well as Coorg also reported suicides, however their number is less. In fact, Old Mysore and Old Bombay Presidency areas are better known for canal irrigation. Here the suicides reflect the failure of the state to distribute water judiciously. Most of those who committed suicide lived near the tail-end of the canal.

**Table 5.2**

Farmers’ Suicide between 1 April 2003 and 1 January 2007

in Karnataka

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<td>Gadag</td>
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<tr>
<td>Total</td>
<td>708</td>
<td>171</td>
<td>124</td>
<td>187</td>
<td>1193</td>
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*Source: Statistics from the Department of Agriculture, Government of Karnataka.

*Note: *Dakshina Kannada.
The acuteness of the agrarian crisis is apparent in the year 2003, as it was a year when Karnataka experienced severe drought in more than thirteen districts. In fact, the state could have easily checked the drought. Table 5.2 reflects the acute agrarian crisis during 2003–04, when 708 farmers committed suicide. Next year saw a dwindling number of suicides. The number once again dwindled in the year 2005–06. It came down to 124.

The total number of farmers who committed suicide from 1 April 2003 to 1 January 2007 comes to 1193. It is stated that between January and May 2007, nearly 40 farmers growing sugarcane committed suicide in Bidar alone. Most interesting is the fact that Kodagu, a coffee growing area witnessed a stable number of suicides for three consecutive years—to be precise, 12 in each year. This obviously shows that the suicides are no more confined to a single crop, rather it has engulfed different crops, different regions and different categories too. This obviously proves that suicide is fairly spread out across the regions. However, farmers’ committing suicide has not come to an end—which obviously means that the agrarian crisis is not over.

DEBT AND THE FARMERS’ SUICIDE

The debt of the farmers who committed suicide was not uniform. It varied between Rs 5,000 and Rs 50,000. Many of them had taken loan on a short-term basis. Debt is due to multiple reasons, although in the larger context, it needs to be located in the path of capitalist development that the state initiated. Interestingly, the government would attribute the increasing debts to personal reasons such as marriage, gambling, illicit relations, festivals and so on. However, the reasons for the rural indebtedness may be located elsewhere, such as the cumulative crop losses or inadequate rainfall, drying up of institutional credit, increase in the cost of production, declining prices of agricultural commodities and exclusion of large numbers of farmers from the safety net, as well as from the public distribution system. Significantly, most of those committing suicide had borrowed money from moneylenders, who would charge an interest at a rate of anything between 36 percent and 60 percent per annum. This shows that the institutionalised credit system has failed to address the issues of rural indebtedness.
SUICIDE IN THE UNORGANISED SECTOR

A large number of suicides were reported from the unorganised sector, although the agrarian crisis equally affected all the sectors irrespective of social categories or class positions. The important sectors belonging to the agrarian economy, which remained steadfast at least to some extent when compared to other sectors are tobacco, coffee and areca nut. This is because of the fact that planters are an organised lot, even though the others too were once organised under the farmers’ movement; however, the dwindling bases of the farmers’ movement over the past decade rendered the latter unresponsive to the growing number of suicides. Interestingly, the farmers’ movement over the past one decade or so has been concerned about the agrarian crisis emanating from globalisation rather than on the issue of suicide. This is where the failure of the farmer’s movement is discernible.

Second, the interest of the state government to rescue the coffee or plantation economy at the time of crisis is apparent from the number of concessions it declared as well as gave—and also from its seeking of concessions from the central government to overcome the crisis—in other words, a close nexus has developed between the regime, as well as the different economies, particularly coffee and tobacco. At this time, the state government included two districts, particularly Chickmagalur and Kodagu as the regions facing an acute agrarian crisis and in the process overlooking other regions wherein the agrarian crisis was also acute.

GENDER, AGE AND THE SUICIDE

Although the number of women farmers committing suicide was less when compared to their male counterparts, who usually own the property; nonetheless suicide has further increased the gender bias, multiplied the oppression—oppression not only by the family but also by the market—because the crisis has not only enveloped the individual but also the whole household. In some cases the agrarian crisis has transformed peasant or farmers’ women into agricultural labourers. In the final analysis women had to bear multiple burdens: pay their husband’s debts, look after the household, face the market forces and so on.
The most striking aspect of the crisis, however, is that large number of farmers committing suicide largely came from the age group between 25 and 35, even though there are exceptions to it—one or two suicide cases were in the age group 60 to 70 years. These young farmers constitute the ‘new farmers’ who are not only deriving their identity from the market opportunities but also through the land. They would be personally involved in land-related issues—they would decide about the production, crop planting, market opportunities, as well as new linkages with the larger market. Meanwhile, they are the ones who take risks in the market opportunities or linkages. For them, the market is the site of new identities, of competition, of negotiation, of rights as well as a new site of freedom. These categories try to create their own space or identity by leasing out land as well as taking loans from non-institutions. When the crisis increases, the fear of losing everything leads them to commit suicide. It is here that they want to retain their identity, as the identity of ‘new farmers’ is visible as well as acute.

CASTE AND FARMERS’ SUICIDE

In Karnataka, the large number of farmers who committed suicide also came from the other backward classes (OBCs), though there are also cases of farmers committing suicide hailing from dominant castes such as Lingayats and Vokkaligas. This is true of the other parts of India. In fact, it is the farmers from the OBCs who borrowed large amounts of money from moneylenders. The growth of OBCs has to be viewed or located in the way the Indian state or the government of Karnataka has created over the years—spaces for them to emerge or grow as an autonomous social category. Their emergence however also coincided with the implementation of different land reforms acts in Karnataka, which date back to the period of the 1970s and 1980s. They emerged as a new social category who believed in linking themselves with the larger market. The market that they operated or mirrored is not limited to locality alone; rather it is linked globally. The suicide of sugarcane growers and others who involve themselves with the larger market indicate the problems of globalisation.
POLITICAL IMPLICATIONS AND
THE PARADIGM SHIFT

The agrarian crisis is also a political crisis. In the case of the state, it has helped in the routing of the then ruling party with a split or fractured verdict. For the first time in the history of Karnataka, a coalition government of the Congress and Janata Dal (S) came into being. In fact, the fractured verdict represents two important discourses in the state: the discourse of globalisation/metropolitanism; and the discourse on sub-alternity (Assadi 2004). The Congress represented the first discourse and the Janata Dal (S) represented the second discourse. Incidentally, the then political regimes also talked about the necessity of a ‘paradigm shift from agriculture to agribusiness’.

However, there are times when the state or the regime accepted the fact that the path of capitalist development has not been able to overcome the crisis that agriculture is facing. This was apparent when the state or the regime argued that, ‘Karnataka agriculture has seen low level of public investment, not all farmers have been able to access credit, modern technology, irrigation and markets’ (GOK 2003). This is the reason why the state began to argue in favour of a ‘paradigm shift’.

A beginning of the ‘paradigm shift’ could be discerned during the 1990s when the state government introduced an amendment to the land reforms litigation, which earlier had transformed the agrarian relations—it created new autonomous categories in the country-side, as well as new social categories who later became not only owner—cultivators but also Market Oriented Autonomous Farmers (MOAF). Nonetheless, a shift towards ‘corporate landlordism’ (Assadi 1996) is visible in the amendment act—this act would allow anybody to purchase any amount of land in the name of public ‘interest’. This has gone against the farmers, who have lost thousands of acres to big companies and corridor projects.

The paradigm shift needs to be observed when the government seriously supported bio-technology through a series of concessions to it. Interestingly, it came out with the ‘Millennium Bio-Technology Policy’. Towards this end it declared a series of concessions such as tax exemption for three to four years, exemption from the payment of entry tax on all inputs as well as capital goods including captive generation sets, during the implementation stage which can be up to five years or during the construction period, whichever is earlier and so on. The captive generation
enjoyed ‘total exemption from electricity tax for a period of five years if
the companies create employment, ‘of more than 100 in Bangalore and
50 in other areas in the State during the first year, they were made eligible
for rebate either on the stamp-duty or rebate on the cost of the land’. Most
importantly women were allowed to work at night towards supporting
the private sector. Interestingly, new bio-technology products such as
‘golden rice, or the Bt. Cotton’ and others, accentuated the growing
agrarian crisis in Karnataka.

Nonetheless, Karnataka State is slowly but steadily inviting global
capital to the rural economy. The World Bank has already financed three
major projects affecting the rural economy. These include the Water
Shed Project, Tank Management Project and Rural Water Supply Project.
These projects have remained not only incomplete but finances are not
fully utilised.

While dealing with the agrarian crisis four forms of politics that the
Karnataka government resorted to are visible: (a) politics of concessions;
(b) politics of commissions; (c) politics of denial; and (d) politics of
selectivity for ‘package’ concessions. In the first case, the state government
once or twice accepted the fact that the agrarian crisis was aggravated by
multiple factors: negative growth of economy, delivery system and so on.
Towards this end, it declared a series of concessions. The co-operative
credit institutions which were charging the farmers rate of interest of
12.5 percent and 13.5 percent for crop and long term loans respectively
brought down the interest to 6 percent and waived compound interest and
penal interest on crop loans in 2004. Earlier, it waived the interest amount
on short-term and long-term loans, electricity charges, land revenue and
water charges, seed and input subsidy and gave compensation for failed
wells. These steps have been treated as ‘radical steps’ ignoring the fact that
co-operative lending is related to such factors as land owning and so on.
Further it also declared drought relief packages which included interest
waivers on cooperative bank loans, input subsidies for seeds and planting
material, price support for select crops and the waiver of outstanding power
dues on agricultural pump sets. The state government has also issued
the Karnataka Prohibition of Charging Exorbitant Interest Ordinance.
There are other measures that the state undertook to stabilise the market
prices. The state or the government introduced the Price Stabilisation
Fund, Comprehensive Programme for the development of dry land
on a watershed basis mainly to conserve, develop and sustain soil and
water resources including enhancing agricultural productivity. The
most important programme that the Karnataka state introduced was the
Yashaswini Co-operative Health Care Scheme—this is a unique health
care insurance programme launched for the first time in the world for the benefit of farmers who are the members of cooperative societies. This programme was launched in 2003. Its success rate, although high, has not arrested the spate of suicides in Karnataka.

The state government appointed a couple of commissions or committees to study the agrarian issues. One commission was popularly known as the Dwarakanath Committee which had studies like ‘Testing Bt. Cotton in Karnataka’, ‘Agricultural Bio-Technology’, ‘Role of Hybrid Rice’ and finally ‘Enrichment of Farm Telecast’. Interestingly, this commission supported field trials of Bt. Cotton and thereby supported Bi-Technology in Karnataka. It is here that the Commission thinks that, ‘Indian agriculture is irrevocably integrated with the larger economy’ (KAC 2000: 1).

The most important Commission that tried to view the agrarian crisis differently was the Veeresh Committee. This committee report has been criticised for simplifying the suicides and the agrarian crisis as well as for its analysis. It tried to link suicides to psychological or personal reasons rather than to the larger issues or reasons. These include alcohol, gambling, spend thriftiness (20.35 percent), failure of crop (16.81 percent), chit funds (15.04 percent), family problems either with spouse or others (13.27 percent), chronic illness (9.73 percent), marriage of daughters (5.31 percent), political affiliations (4.42 percent), property disputes (2.65 percent), debt burden (2.65 percent), price crash (2.65 percent), borrowing beyond paying capacity, house construction and so on (2.65 percent), loss in non-agricultural activities (1.77 percent) and finally failure of bore wells (0.88 percent) (GOK 2002). Although it came out with a series of recommendations such as the creation of farmers’ welfare fund, establishment of nodal department for the welfare of farmers, social security measures and so on, they have not helped in overcoming the crisis.

The state government also resorted to the politics of denial: denial of the suicides taking place due to the crisis, denial of issues of suicide. In fact, it is here that the attempt lies to avoid giving compensation to the family of the deceased—many a time they are denied on flimsy grounds such as being underage, death due to other reasons such as electric shock, absence of any ‘patta land’, the incident happening before the issuance of government orders, natural death such as death due to a heart attack, loan taken for other reasons such as for the purpose of family leasing land, children’s marriage, and so on. At the same time the conditions that the state government imposed to disburse compensation also went against them. This is apparent as the farmer who commits suicide
should have agricultural land in his name; that he should have an agricultural loan in his name; that loan should be from recognised credit sponsoring institutions, that the loan borrowed should be for agricultural purposes; that the incidence of suicide should be due to inability to bear the burden of loan borrowed from the recognised credit sponsoring institutions (Commissionerate of Agriculture 2006). Many of the conditions have gone against the farmers, for example farmers who lease land or take loans from private moneylenders and so on, benefit little from such policies. This is apparent from the following table (Table 5.3).

### Table 5.3

**Number of Suicide Cases Reported and Rejected by the State Government**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Year</th>
<th>No. of Suicide Reported</th>
<th>No. of Cases Rejected by the State Government</th>
<th>No. of Cases Cleared and Cheque Issued</th>
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<tr>
<td>2003–04</td>
<td>708</td>
<td>503</td>
<td>205</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2004–05</td>
<td>271</td>
<td>154</td>
<td>113</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2005–06</td>
<td>124</td>
<td>37</td>
<td>65</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

*Source:* From the files of Agricultural Department, Government of Karnataka.

This is the reason why the state government has not been able to bring a halt to the growing agrarian crisis.

Finally, the state while seeking ‘packages’ for the farmers in distress resorted to the politics of ‘selectivity’ on the grounds that the incidences of suicides are much more in some districts. In fact while advancing the case before the central government in recent years when the former declared a package for the Vidharbha region in Maharashtra, it claimed that in six districts of Karnataka the incidents are much higher—Belgaum, Chickmagalur, Chitradurga, Hassan, Kodagu and Shimoga (GOK n.d.). In this list, two districts are known for a plantation economy—Chickmagalur and Kodagu. It is here that the inbuilt biases regarding area and crops of the state is discernible.

The crisis is now manifested in different ways: non-remunerative prices, volatile economy, absence of a protective market, and so on. The agrarian crisis is also manifested in the form of burning sugarcane fields, throwing agricultural produce on the roads, and so on. It is true that forms of suicide are slowly changing; earlier it was confined to swallowing pesticide, hanging or even jumping into wells. However, a shift has taken place where farmers are now committing suicide by jumping into a fire
on the fields. It is strange that suicide has been a major issue in Andhra Pradesh, Punjab, Maharashtra and Kerala. Why are such tactics not being adopted in BIMARU states such as Bihar, Madhya Pradesh, Rajasthan and Uttar Pradesh? Are they not part of the larger market? In fact, the BIMARU states are yet to integrate more completely with the larger market than those states where the suicide rates are much higher. This also shows that those states, which have integrated with the larger market, have been the victims of growing crisis. Karnataka is not an exception to it. This is the reason why the crisis in Karnataka will continue to remain and manifest itself either in the form of suicide or in the form of a rejuvenated farmers’ movement.

NOTES

1. It is in this suicide that (Sharma 2004) saw the failure of the Naidu Model of Development.

2. For example, earlier in 1991 in Karnataka, the factories used to buy sugarcane from the farmers at Rs 1,700 per 100 Kg, the same prices came down to Rs 1,100 in 2004.


4. This is apparent from the following news item:

   On June 1, Shankare Gowda, a 32-year-old farmer from Arechakanahalli village, Maddur Taluk, who committed suicide on September 9, received a bill from the power distribution company for arrears of Rs 48,000.

   Menon (2003).


REFERENCES


Sharma, Devinder (2004) ‘India’s Agrarian Crisis, No End to Farmer’s Suicide’. Available online at http://www.zmag.org/content/showarticle.cfm?SectionID=32&ItemID=5790 (last accessed on 28.06.2010).


