



## Economic Distress and Farmer Suicides in Karnataka

Dr.A.N.Gayathri

Assistant Professor, Dept. of Sociology, FMKMC College,  
Madikeri, Karnataka

## ABSTRACT

*Suicide is one of the most selfish, cowardly and irresponsible acts that a person can commit with the possible exception of extreme distraction or mental illness, only a person completely consumed with selfishness and living to please him or herself would voluntarily end their own life.*

*Farmers' suicide in India is a phenomenon that emerged as a sequel to globalization and other economic reforms. According to National Crime Records Bureau, between 1997-2007, 1, 82,936 farmers have committed suicide. Of these, two thirds suicides have occurred in Maharashtra, Karnataka, Andhra Pradesh, Madhya Pradesh and Chhattisgarh.*

*During 1999- 2001, it was estimated that 110 farmers committed suicide in Karnataka. Report by the Crime Branch of Karnataka, the number of suicide under the heading "farming and agricultural activity" comes to 15804 between 1998 and 2002.*

## KEYWORDS :

## Introduction

Suicides are not the acts of people who hate themselves, but who love themselves inordinately and cannot bear to see themselves in pain, shamed, dishonored or rejected because of the enormity of their pride and the immenseness of their self love.

Farmers' suicide in India is a phenomenon that emerged as a sequel to globalization and other economic reforms. According to National Crime Records Bureau, between 1997-2007, 1, 82,936 farmers have committed suicide. Of these, two thirds suicides have occurred in Maharashtra, Karnataka, Andhra Pradesh, Madhya Pradesh and Chhattisgarh.

During 1999- 2001, it was estimated that 110 farmers committed suicide in Karnataka. According to one estimate, 3,000 farmers committed suicide in Karnataka between 1998 and 2006. (Muzaffer Assadi: 1998 & 2005). Nonetheless, if we take the report prepared by the Crime Branch of Karnataka, the number of suicide under the heading "farming and agricultural activity" comes to 15804 between 1998 and 2002. The year 2000 saw the maximum number of suicide 2630 followed by year 2001 – these are the years when agriculture saw the negative growth. Interestingly, as per the crime branch report, between 1996 and 2002, 12889 male farmers and 2841 female farmers committed suicide.

## Objectives:

The specific objectives of the present research study are:

- 1) To examine the incidence of Farmers Suicides in Karnataka with special reference to Tumkur, Chithradurga and Davanagere districts of Bangalore division of Karnataka State during the period 2001-07.
- 2) To portray the socio- economic profile of the farmers who had committed suicide.
- 3) To suggest suitable policy interventions.

## Methodology:

The sample for the present study was drawn from among the list of farmers' households by using purposive sampling method. The 227 units were chosen purposefully as the households, where suicide of the head of the household had taken place.

**Table No. 01**  
Distribution of farmers by Income

Sl. NO	Income	No. of farmers	Per cent
1	<Rs.20,000	37	16.30
2	20,000 to 25,000	62	27.31
3	25,000 to 50,000	84	37.00

Sl. NO	Income	No. of farmers	Per cent
4	50,000 to 75,000	19	8.37
5	75,000 to 1 lakh	14	6.17
6	>1 lakh	11	4.85
	Total	227	100.00

Majority of the farmers were small farmers, their income level was very low corresponding to it, is the standard of living. Earlier, the cost of living used to be manageable except for medical and other emergency requirements. After globalization the cost of cultivation soared and they were unable to meet even daily expenses and were burdened by their family expenses like marriages of their daughters etc. On the other hand some farmers who had more than 5 acres regularly invested for the production of the crop but due to the drought situations they too faced loss every year. Their returns were very less when compared to their investment.

The situation is same even with the other farmers who had more than 10 acres. They invested more on to the various types of input. As they had large land holdings they tried to go in for scientific farming, which was more systematic and costly. They hoped to get good returns from each crop but in the process fell into the debt trap, to a point of no return.

**Table No. 02**  
Distribution of farmers based on the Crops grown

Sl. No.	Crops grown	No. of farmers	Percent
1	Sunflower	6	2.64
2	Ground Nut	202	88.99
3	Others	19	8.37
	Total	227	100.00

In Davanagere district farmers basically grow sugarcane, coconut, ground nut etc. In Chithradurga district farmers grow onion, cotton, ground nut, maize etc. In Tumkur district farmers grow sunflower, groundnut and rice etc.

Most of the farmers being illiterates, they were unaware of the merits of rotation of crops. As such from times immemorial they were accustomed to grow ground nut only. This had almost transformed their lands into barren pieces. Naturally the production had come down considerably due to mono cropping. This alone is the prominent factor that upholds the phenomenon of spurt in the rate of farmers' suicide. Accordingly the helpless and frustrated farmers commit suicide.

**Table No. 03**  
**Distribution of farmers by the amount of debt**

Sl. No.	Debt	No. of farmers	Percent
1	< 1 Lakh	87	38.33
2	1 – 2 Lakhs	88	38.76
3	2 – 3 Lakhs	26	11.45
4	3 -4 Lakhs	11	4.85
5	> 4 Lakhs	15	6.61
	Total	227	100.00

Majority of the victims, it is heard, borrowed loans from the private money lenders who exact high and unimaginable rates of interest. The major reasons behind approaching the private money lenders for loans is that, the banks were reluctant to extend loans to small and marginal farmers as part of structural adjustment. The loans so procured at higher rate of interest were invested on buying pesticides, seeds and fertilizers. But the traders have exploited the illiterate farmers by selling spurious seeds, pesticides and fertilizers. Failure of monsoons, depleting ground water level and resultant drying of bore wells has affected the agriculture badly. The end result of this was diminishing returns in agriculture, with which they could hardly make both ends meet. As the farmers had no other source to generate income, their position worsened further. It thus, forced them to consider 'loans and loans alone' as the only means, even to meet the basic needs of life.

**Table No. 04**  
**Distribution of the farmers based on the source of loan borrowed**

Sl. No.	Source	No. of farmers	Percent
1	Friends	16	7.05
2	Relatives	51	22.47
3	Money Lenders	115	50.66
4	Bank	37	16.30
5	Others	8	3.52
	Total	227	100.00

As depicted in the table moneylenders play a vital role in extending loans to the needy farmers. To attract the illiterate and ignorant farmers the money lenders do not even require a single document to prove their capacity to repay the debts. Moreover, the easy accessibility of them had made the farmers increasingly dependent on them. On the other hand bureaucratic procedure lay down by the banks and their inaccessibility had made the ignorant farmers to move away from the banks and look at their relatives in their hour of crisis. In a nutshell, it can be inferred that majority of the farmers depended on the greedy moneylenders to borrow. But owing to their inability to repay the loans and exuberant interest in time, they resorted to suicide.

**Table No. 05**  
**Distribution of farmers based on the reasons for borrowing**

Sl. No.	Reasons for borrowing	No. of farmers	Percent
1	Children's Marriage	31	13.66
2	For Construction	15	6.61
3	Children's Education	13	5.73
4	Bore well	61	26.87
5	Agriculture	61	26.87
6	Others	46	20.26
	Total	227	100.00

In the light of the above statistics, it can be inferred that adverse climatic conditions have played havoc with the lives of the farmers. Bore wells dug as deep as 500 to 600 feet have dried up, not to speak of public wells. This has forced the farmers to borrow again and again to dig bore wells. When huge sums invested on bore wells failed to fetch returns these fellows became helpless. Being pressurized by the money lenders to repay the debts, ending their lives was thought of as the only choice.

The farmers who mired in utter poverty got upset by the turmoil in their lives. As an offshoot of this, they lost their physical as well as mental balance. Accordingly, their medical expenses boom ranged. As though this much was not enough, the farmers used to spend lavishly on social traditions. The unproductive spending precipitated accumulation of problems, after problems. Ultimately it led to suffocation. The end result was their untimely death.

**Table No. 06**  
**Distribution of the farmers by the main cause of committing suicide**

Sl. No.	Cause	No. of farmers	Percent
1	Economical	156	68.72
2	Physical	10	4.41
3	Social	61	26.87
	Total	227	100.00

The inference that could be drawn is that, the farmers failed miserably to balance both agricultural and household expenditure. They have left no stone unturned to tide over the crisis. One of these being opting commercial crops to subsistence crops. It is evident that the prospects of maximizing profits in the global market had lured them to do so. But the steady increase in the cost of agricultural inputs - whose prices were determined by giant national and Transnational corporations- coupled with a steep fall in the prices of agricultural produce both in the international and domestic markets, lack of institutional measures in financing the small and marginal farmers has badly let down the farmers. The role of exploitative and repressive private money lenders, replacement of traditional home grown seeds by high priced genetically modified seeds marketed by MNCs and total lack of any social safety net including crop and any other insurance cover have further worsened their problems. Thus they fell prey to the cruel and pitiless market forces over which they had no influence, not to say of any control. Whatever may be the cause, unbearable insult rendered it impossible for them to live any longer in dignity and social esteem. They conceived death as the only means to escape. The tragedy is that in their attempt to live happily, they embraced death.

**Table No. 07**  
**Distribution of farmers on the factors that were worrying them**

Sl. No.	Worries	No. of farmers	Percent
1	Water for crop	57	25.11
2	Failure of Crops	58	25.55
3	Indebtedness	109	48.02
4	Diseases of crops	3	1.32
	Total	227	100.00

It is evident that a few decades ago agriculturists aimed at local market economy. Importance was given to subsistence only. But after the green revolution, the local market oriented subsistence economy has transformed into input intensive agriculture economy, which is global market oriented. This has precipitated the use of hybrid seeds. It's a known fact that the hybrid crops demand huge capital investment. It, thus, has driven the farmers to seek loans. With banks slamming the doors on farmers by cutting down subsidies as part of structural adjustments, farmers went into the hands of the private money lenders, who readily gave loans at exorbitant interests.

#### **SUGGESTIONS:**

- Easy accessibility to institutional credit at low rates of interest with quick and liberalized processing.
- Provide over all compulsory Farm insurance.
- Fixation of minimum support prices should take into account the state of specific conditions of agriculture and cost of cultivation.
- Introduction of electronic scale and computerization of market transactions wherever possible, elimination of the role of middlemen or brokers and displaying the prevailing prices of the different commodities in the market yard etc, are the needs of the hour.

#### **Conclusion:**

The study sought to examine the incidence of farmers' suicide in the three districts of Karnataka state. The farmers' suicides and the displacement of the families of the farmers are the aftermath of the process of WTO agreement and the process of Globalization set in motion in the Nineties.

Enticed the new hybrid seeds varieties, costly agriculture inputs made the farmers to borrow money from private money lenders with hope of raising a bounteous crops. The failure of monsoon rains, depleting water resources had dashed their hopes in successive years landing them in debt trap. The economic debts had wiped away their social status. Pushing the small farmers into desperation alienation prior to their suicides. From the above discussion, it is crystal clear that the economic causes play a vital role as far as farmers' suicides are concerned. In other words it can be said that the suicides are directly related to economic causes followed by social and physical causes. Economic cause being the most vital and the social cause of status loss aggravated the alienation of farmers and drove them to suicide.

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