



## Farm Suicides in the Neo-Liberal Era: An Empirical Study

### KEYWORDS

Agriculture, Farmer suicides, WTO, Financial institutions, Kerala

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### ABSTRACT

*The adage that Indian farmers are born in debt, lives in debt and bequeaths in debts is as old as history. Though the state of affairs mentioned above has lessened in the bygone years through the affirmative actions of government and other agencies, the plight of the farmers are precarious. The conditions of farmers in all the countries have worsened during the period of neo-liberal era. The day-to-day news papers carry the death stories of Indian farmers. The market mechanism decides the prosperity of the producers, including agricultural entrepreneurs. The new economic policies conditioned by the ethos of globalization and liberalization have pauperized the Indian farmers. The story is not different in a small state like Kerala. It is in this context we have undertaken a study analyse the causes of farmers suicides and distress in small state of Kerala.*

### Introduction

India is one of the fastest growing economies in the world. Agriculture forms the backbone of the Indian economy and, despite concerted industrialization in the last six decades agriculture offers livelihood to about 58 per cent of the population of the total workforce and it has been the source of supply of raw materials to many agro-based industries in our country. Agriculture contributes a significant proportion to the foreign exchange earnings. The agricultural sector's exports account for about 10 per cent of India's total exports. Even in the era of liberalized trade regime, agriculture continues to be the mainstay of the Indian economy and has helped the nation to tide over serious economic crises. But after the advent of globalization policies, especially the World Trade Organization's (WTO's) Agreement on Agriculture has not only affected Indian agriculture and the food security of the nation but also the economic position of millions of farm families. One of the striking problems arising out of this unrest in the new millennium is the increasing farmer suicides across the country.

The current spate of farmer suicides across the Indian states is an accurate indicator of problems afflicting the rural economy and society. To go by reports of the National Crime Record Bureau (various issues of *Accidental Deaths and Suicides in India*), close to 150, 000 Indian farmers committed suicide in the nine years from 1997 to 2005. In fact, these suicides point to a crisis in the agrarian system as a whole and raise questions about the state of conditions of millions of farmers and the landless agricultural labourers in the sub-continent. Hence a comprehensive study on the problem assumes importance, as it is an issue of major policy concern. Recently social scientists of diverse intellectual persuasions have increasingly paid attention to this problem and one sees a flood of writings indicating causes of these suicides and policy prescriptions. Besides, several commissions, committees and study teams have also been appointed to look into the problem and provide feedback for suitable measures. However, as regards the causes of these suicides and the policy prescriptions, there are divergent views and arguments. While one group attributes these suicides to the agro-economic problems namely crop failure, rising cost of cultivation and indebtedness, the second strand points to the failure of

the state and its economic policy which is influenced by the process of economic liberalization. Yet another group of scholars argue that these suicides are caused by a complex set of social factors.

The incidences of farmer suicides have attracted nation wide attention in 1997 and initially states like Maharashtra, Andhra Pradesh, Karnataka and Punjab were known for these suicides. However, as per the data furnished by the National Crime Record Bureau, almost all the major Indian states report farmer suicides from 1997. While some witness rising trend of suicides, others indicate complex trends. In this paper an attempt is made to analyse the trends of suicides in a south-Indian State, viz., Kerala through a micro level intensive probing.

### Agriculture in Kerala

Kerala has been hailed as a model of development and has been widely studied world wide. The main tenets of the Model have been the progressive developments which the state has showcased at a time when the Indian economy was witnessing an underdeveloped economic base. Some of the notable development with respect to Kerala are: (i) Kerala is a pioneer in land and labour reforms, (ii) un-touchability has been eradicated, (iii) absolute poverty has been reduced, (iv) it has shown success in family planning and workers education and may have zero population growth by 2035, and (v) average monthly per capita consumption expenditure in Kerala is the highest in India.

There was a time when Kerala was a net exporter of agricultural products, especially, its staple food, viz., rice. But, over the last two decades, the state has become a net importer of food grains. The food security of the state is in crisis. This has been contributed by several factors including the changes in the land use pattern. The net sown area of the state is about 56 per cent. The Forest constitutes 28 per cent. Non-agricultural land use is 10.52 per cent. However, the food crops comprises only 13.6 per cent of gross cropped area. Similarly, only 13.6 per cent of net cropped area is under irrigation.

Agriculture has become an unrewarding proposition in the State due to several reasons. The foremost among

them is the uneconomic holdings. It is seen that about 94 per cent are small holdings of 0.15 hectare against national average of 0.40 and it has been a major constraint for adopting the New Agricultural Strategy. Secondly, much of Kerala is under plantation crops, leading to food deficit. Rice is staple diet, but the State produce much less leading to heavy imports. The fast disappearance of paddy fields is a usual scene across the State. However, there is expansion of area under cash crops. Kerala accounts for 92 per cent of Indian rubber, 70 per cent of coconut, 60 per cent of tapioca and almost 100 per cent of lemon grass oil. Agriculture growth is declining – from 45 per cent of GDP in 1950s to 11 per cent by now. The situation has become all the more worse on the onslaught of fall in the prices of agricultural products leading to increasing farmer suicides. The table is a clear exposition of the gravity of the issue of farmer suicides in the State. Among 14 districts of the State, Wayanad has witnessed the highest toll of suicides.

**Table 1**  
**Number of Suicides of Farmers in Kerala / Wayanad (1999-2007)**

Sl. No.	Agency	Period	Number	Kerala/Wayanad
1	Government of Kerala	2001-06	841	Kerala
2	NABARD	Since 1999 Jan. 1	803	Kerala
3	Director of Agriculture	1999-2006	371	Wayanad
4	Director of Agriculture	May 2006	46	Wayanad
5	*KSFDRS	2001-06	528	Wayanad

\* Kerala State Farmers Debt Relief Commission

In this context, it is of interest to understand the nature and extent of farmer suicides in a South Indian State, viz., Kerala. The state of Kerala, known world wide for its unique model of development, has witnessed chronic farmer distress and farm suicides in the recent years. Despite its achievements in social and political milue, the gravity of farm distress and farmer suicides makes a black mark in its development paradigms. The incident of farmer suicides continues. The piecemeal efforts of the authorities seldom found effective in controlling the malaise. It warrants a careful study to unearth the real players in this social issue and this study is a usual outcome of such a need.

### Objective of the Study

The exclusive objective of the study is to examine the causes behind the increasing farmer suicides in the state of Kerala.

### Methodology

To study the objective set for the study, we have carried out a sample survey among the surviving households of the suicide farmer during 2011. A total of 100 such households have been selected at random from the district of Wayanad, the worst hit district as far as farmer suicides is concerned. In addition, secondary data have also been used to make the study more realistic.

### Findings

Regarding the mode of suicide, poisoning and hanging were the two major ways selected by the victims for suicide. The asset position of the victims pointed out that 69 per cent had land holding less than 1 acre. The

cropping pattern in the area revealed that 75 per cent had been concentrated on coffee and pepper, the two perennial crops suited for the agro-climatic conditions of the district. Actually, these are the two crops which are worst hit by price fall in the recent past.

The policy of the financial institutions has also contributed to the hype. The renewal of an old loan by a new loan is a custom followed by all the formal financial systems in the district. This has created a situation of perpetual indebtedness among the farmer households. In the wake of fall in the prices of their long awaited crops, they could not repay their loans. This has really prompted the farmers to commit suicide.

Crop loss due to crop diseases has also prominently been highlighted by the sample households as a prime reason for suicide. Most of the crops were affected by fungal and other deceases, ultimately resulted in crop failure and loss in the economic proposition.

As a socio-psychological contributor to the issue, loss of social status has also come up as a major reason for farmer suicides. Due to the crop failure as well as fall in prices and consequent loss of income has resulted in default in repayment of loan taken and the corresponding legal actions on the part of the financial institutions has affected the social status of the farmer borrower. Several households had cited this reason prominently.

The socio-cultural characteristics of the rural society have undergone tremendous changes under the impact liberalization. The caste relations, joint family and kinship ties, which was the predominant feature of agrarian economy has witnessed significant changes with the spread of urban values, education, etc. The disintegration of community and kinship support system, and rise of some kind of individualistic orientation are reported as the emerging characteristics of the rural society. In the study area, it was found that 78 per cent of the households who are victims of suicide were living in nuclear families and it has reduced the scope for sharing their thoughts with a larger audience.

### Conclusion

The overall performance of the agricultural sector of the state of Kerala leaves much to be desired. Kerala presents a very unsteady and unsustainable picture, as far as her food security and continued dependence on market forces are concerned. Kerala recorded a very high rate of farm suicide between 1997 and 2005; although she could manage to recover from the malaise, since 2004. Since farmer suicides have become a burning issue, proper solutions are also demanding. The foremost suggestions in this context are that the farmer should be assured of stable prices to his products. The intervention by the governments in the form of support prices is highly required. Secondly, the attitude of financial institutions should change. They should take farmer friendly policies in times of such unrest. Thirdly, the multi-lateral agricultural agreements should not be at the cost of rural farmers of the developing countries. Finally, crop insurance is the need of the day. The government has not applied much thought on evolving a comprehensive crop insurance scheme in the State.