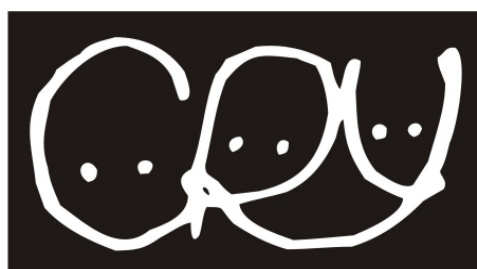


Inheritors of debt burden and distress

- By Jaideep Hardikar



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- 1 - Preface
- 2 - End of innocence
- 3 - An agrarian volcano
- 4 - Suicides, the ultimate tragedy
- 5 - Suicide sociology
- 6 - Stories (case studies)
- 7 - Recommendations/possible interventions



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PREFACE:

At least 16 different organizations and teams have studied the agrarian crisis at the state and national levels. Not a single one deals, even remotely, with its impact on children. In neither of these studies can one find any study of the impact on children by suicides by their farmer parents. This was a disabling factor for my study. Lack of any kind of expertise in Vidarbha was another.

As discussed in the first sharing meeting in April of 2008, I selected 20 children – ten girls and ten boys – as a sample size. In some cases siblings too.

However, I wrote only five-six stories (articles, as called in journalistic parlance), during 2008-09. These, point to broader issues most children face. I did not do the percentage calculations – meaning what percent of children took to farming; how many children have dropped out...for a simple reason that when the total farm suicides in the country now stand around 2 lakh, this sample size is miserably small to study a gigantic problem. On the other hand, the time, resources and training I have are incapable to take a larger sample size scattered over Vidarbha that comprises 11 districts. This was the basic shortcoming of this study.

The kids I selected for my study are from Wardha, Amravati, Akola and Yavatmal, four districts where the suicide mortality rate (SMR) among farmers, is significantly higher than the state or national average, as found of the IGIDR and TISS studies initiated by the Government of Maharashtra in 2005.

How did I choose the families/children? Randomly. Some of the children are from the families that I have been tracking for some years as part of a long-term follow-up – as a journalist, not as an academic or social researcher.

This study therefore is the first to look at the impact of an agrarian crisis on the children of farmers who committed suicide in Vidarbha, but it suffers from several anomalies. In that, I am untrained in linking the trends that I saw to the broad social-psychological-economical and political theories.

For instance: whether a teenage girl's suicide is a case of Altruistic suicide or egotistic suicide or is it a result of chronic economic anomie or a combination of one or more factors that Emile Durkhiem suggests in his work, 'Suicide.' Or, whether the trend of children taking to farming at young age is a normal or abnormal phenomenon. And what are the consequences it comes with?

Families losing their breadwinners do not open to outsiders' quests. Much less to journalists or researchers. Children, I found were not articulate in speaking. And so, the first problem that I encountered – still do – is how do you make children in such households speak? How do you make their mothers speak? And if they don't, how do you get answers to your principle query – what are the issues that confront children in these households? What questions do you ask them?



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There's other problem as well: Barring the M S Swaminathan Research Foundation, there is no social, political or civil society organization that is working among children whose parents have committed suicide in rural Vidarbha owing to this complex crisis. There's hardly any work to refer to.

Unlike the methodical approach that is essential in conducting any empirical research, my study as a journalist therefore was to bring to fore the basic issues children in suicide-hit families face - and to bring to the public attention in the first place an urgent need to focus on the impact suicides have on children, in terms of short term and long term consequences. The previous research papers by TISS, IGIDR and YASHADA, don't tell you children are taking to farming at a young age. When I first noticed this as a prevalent trend in 2008, I reported it.

It is extremely difficult - ethically and otherwise - to interview a family hit by a farmer's suicide. Far more difficult is to interact with children.

My effort therefore was to choose families I already knew and had some contact with. The other was to choose from the past suicide cases and not the fresh ones.

Rather than asking questions, my approach was to spend time with children over and over and sense the transformation he or she is going through.

For instance, one of the children I looked at, Bhushan's behaviour makes him look and sound like an adult. Any amount of questioning would not have given me this sense. But once I had got this sense, asking his mother, grandmother and neighbours if he behaves like an adult gave me a confirmation that he does.

That is when he also revealed how he is bent on proving that his father was not wrong in farming the way he did and that he would prove it by working harder - an indication that the unusual reason of his father's death is shaping him. And that within his own wisdom, he's trying to cope with it by trying to disprove the farming community that farming is non-profitable and replete with problems.
(See the story)

Of course, I asked some very basic questions to each of the families: How much land? The reasons, they thought, why the farmer committed suicide? Do they have irrigation facilities? How long was the man who took his own life farming? What were the major crops - cotton, soybean? Any allied earning options? Source of loan - private or banks? How much debt? Income standards? Caste equations in the village? Education standards of each of the family members? Are the children going to school? Support systems - are relatives helpful, are villagers helpful? What are the major problems; what are the major expenses? How have children been coping with the loss of their fathers?

It is unfortunate that even the farm activists are not tracking the impact of this tragedy on children. Broader issues are now in political and economic debate. But there is no understanding of the farm suicide's economic-psycho-sociological



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ramifications for children. There has been no effort to study the farm suicides' impact on children from purely mental health or psychological standpoint.

The study came with an ethical question: Was it proper for me to seek probing questions to a family bereaved and devastated by the loss of their dear one? The answer was both yes and no. Yes, because the issue needs to be brought into the public and political discourse. No, because it reopens the psychological wounds. I went with the former option, with a care not to be an intrusion.

I don't intend to draw any conclusions based on my observations, which in turn are based on the time I spent with the families and children.

The spirals of suicide and life beyond that for the families are complex. With each family, there are issues that are beyond one's comprehension. But there are certainly some strong indications that I have listed in the recommendations that need to be looked into as disturbing trends, which are adversely impacting childhood in the region and particularly in the suicide-affected families.



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1 - End of innocence

Four years ago when we first met Madhav Agose, a tribal child whose farmer father had committed suicide because of his mounting debts, we were uncertain what the future would hold for the boy and his two sisters, equally disturbed.

Indeed, the nervous 12-year-old looked like a shadow of himself, silent victim of a policy-driven deprivation that has assumed calamitous proportions across the eastern region of Vidarbha in Maharashtra.

Alas, he was only one among thousands others who had lost their parents to the agrarian crisis sweeping the entire country.

To put the issue in the perspective, the National Crime Records Bureau (NCRB) figures reveal, over 1.8 lakh farmers have taken their own lives in India between 1997 and 2007, most of them in the post-2002 period. So Madhav isn't alone.

In our first visit to this household in Malvagad village of Yavatmal district it was difficult for us to look into his eyes, which mutely revealed more than the boy could. At his age most kids seek a new toy every day in prosperous families. But Madhav looked set to enter a grind, which would snatch his childhood from him. And snatch it did. The boy matured as an adult when he was barely 13. He'd help his mother Rukmabai eke out a living, while his sisters attended to domestic chores. Two years ago, in 2007, he helped his mother marry off his elder sister.

His sisters and two younger brothers were silent sufferers too, but being the eldest of Rukmabai's five children, Madhav became the *de facto* head.

Meanwhile, Digambar Rathod, 11, is on his way to joining the baccha-kisans of Vidarbha like Madhav. Digambar's father, Jaideep Rathod, a Banjara community farmer, committed suicide in December 2008 in Tiwsala village of Yavatmal. The boy, who can barely express himself, won't go to the school, says his mother.

A few miles away, farm-widow Kavita Kudmethe's two daughters toil with her as farm labourers. Anemic and emotionally shattered, the girls are likely to be married off early. May be when they are 14 or 15.

Roshani Shete, 13, is a big help to her mother already in Pimpalkhuta village of Amravati district ever since her landless father took his own life, having run into debts trying to farm a leased land. But she's still in the school thankfully.

Several children in suicide-affected households look acutely hungry. Indeed the domestic food security of the suicide households has remarkably diminished, a fact that several government and non-government studies have acknowledged.

The girls look anemic and vulnerable. In household after households, suicide has compounded the miseries of impoverishment, certainly the hunger. In Vidarbha, class and, more importantly, the caste distinctions aggravate these problems.



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Although we visited Madhav often after that, we rarely found him home. He was either tilling his fields or working the farm of the lender to whom his family owed money. At an age when most children in urban India are concerned with their studies, Madhav sets off for work in order to repay his father's debts. He cultivates his three-acre patch much the same way his father Digambar did when he was alive. Question, then, is would the boy meet the same fate as his father?

Being a school dropout, the child-farmer has no skills in the vocation that has become a nightmare for tens of thousands of peasants, particularly those who practice subsistence (marginal) and rain-fed farming.

Most children from Vidarbha's suicide-ravaged households are forced to take up farming at a young age, embracing the very system that swallowed up their parents. What, then, is the future of Vidarbha? Indeed, the whole of rural India? Bleak, very bleak, if the state of children in the countryside is any indication.

While they ensure that we get food on our plates, most farmers can barely afford a meal for their own children today. Girls are the worst sufferers; many live with the guilt that one of the factors that contribute to their father's woes is their marriage. Either apprehension about it or the huge burden of debt they incur when it is done. In rural Amravati, an 18-year-old girl committed suicide in 2005. Why? As she explained in neatly written suicide note, if it weren't her, it would most certainly be her father. She knew she was attaining marriageable age and her parents were already worrying about it. And she had two younger sisters.

As poet-farmer Srikrishna Kalamb, who killed himself in 2007 in his village of Babhulgaon in Akola district, wrote: "*Amhi vasare vasare, muki upasi vasare* (we are calves, dumb hungry calves), *gaya panhavato amhi, chor kalatat dhar* (we tend to the cows, thieves walk away with the milk and cream), *tapa tapa gham unarato, unarato bhuivar* (we sweat and sweat on our land), *moti pikavato amhi, tari upasi lekare* (we cultivate pearls, but our children remain hungry)..."

With several political and social initiatives coming to naught, the past decade has seen Vidarbha's farmers slide from bad to worse on every count: income, farm techniques, diversity, food security, healthcare, social status, etc.

The past four years have seen thousands of farmer suicides in Vidarbha; those holding on have very little hope of surviving the tragedy. As farmer leader and agriculture expert Vijay Jawandhia puts it: "The farmers who are living are living only because they are not dying."

And the situation is worsening, with a majority of the region's 3 million farmers in severe debt, input costs soaring, state intervention steadily declining, and patience waning. Till 2003, suicides were reported from the state's cotton belt; today, even farmers in paddy-producing areas are following the trend that reflects the past decade's policy of liberalisation.



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Despite some government interventions, in the form of relief packages or loan waivers, the structural and policy anomalies have never been addressed. Nor have the human dimensions of the agrarian crisis been properly understood.

NCRB data shows that Maharashtra witnessed over 40,000 farmer suicides between 1995 and 2007. This means that the number of children affected could easily run into a few thousands.

Across Vidarbha, the birth weight of children is falling sharply as women eat less and become physically weaker. Declining food intake among farmer-families impacts women especially. Young mothers who are physically underweight often deliver babies that weigh less than 2 kg, delivery records with the primary health centres reflect. This is not limited to tribal areas; malnutrition is spreading in non-tribal and semi-urban areas as well.

“Dropping birth weight should be a big concern as it has ramifications for future generations,” says Dr Satish Gogulwar of the NGO Amhi Amchya Arogyasathi in Gadchiroli. “There is a sharp decline in the birth weight of children in the region. This could be due to a sustained fall in the income standards of farmers.”

Further, countless children are dropping out of school, many migrating with their parents to escape the distress back home.

Many are silently suffering from psychological and emotional trauma that would show up in them as behavioural problems with advancing age.

Seen in the context of child rights, the spiral unfolding on the tots of Vidarbha’s dusty countryside begs for one question: How do you uphold the child rights – to survival, protection, development and participation – when the problem has not been even acknowledged.

When Rahul Gandhi toured Vidarbha for a day, he asked a boy about his dream. A farmer told the leader, don’t ask them to dream; ask them to confront realities; they have no right to dream. A stunned Gandhi politely suggested the farmer not to be so pessimistic, but the farmer cynically insisted it’s better to confront realities than to dream; the former would make you understand the problems and eventually help you overcome those.

The devastation the agrarian tragedy has wrought on farming families is beyond one’s comprehension. Alas suicide is only one of the several sickening processes. There’s been a steep decline in income standards of farmers, which has led to a drop in their social status, a factor that drives despair.

Children in rural parts have lesser opportunities in education and employment sectors. In the crisis, which aggravated post-liberalisation, rural children have suffered in more ways than one.



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In Buldana, in Akola, in Wardha where Mahatma Gandhi spent many years, in Washim and in other parts of Vidarbha, young boys and girls are now into a grind that seems unending. They are also among the cheap labourers.

Is this the future of rural Vidarbha, nay rural India? For, Vidarbha is not the only farm-suicide hotspot today. It's happening in Punjab, in Karnataka, in Kerala, in Andhra and in the rest of the country as well. The future generations of rural India are being raised amidst the policy-driven distress. And it's important to hear their stories. It's important to understand the world as they see it. It's crucial to understand their aspirations and ambitions and how they are coping with the situation they are in. Astonishing if somewhat disturbing in the rights context theirs is a story of an unparalleled resilience. And it's only just begun to unfold...



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2 – An agrarian volcano:

Vidarbha, the cotton bowl of Maharashtra, is an agrarian volcano today. Though cotton farmers are ending themselves at a frightening rate, the agrarian crisis of the region itself goes far beyond the suicides. The green fields are transforming into killing fields. The distress is devouring the region at a much greater pace in the wake of open markets. And ironically there is no respite from any quarter.

Just take this: Past four years have seen close to 5000 farmers end themselves in a region rich in cotton, paddy, soybean and oranges. In the last five months, over 500 farmers' suicides have been registered (a suicide almost every six hours or may be even less) – all of them a result of ruthless policies of the past decade that pushed them to brim. And those holding on have very little hope of lifting themselves out of the crisis, unless the state hikes its investments in agriculture sector and takes corrective steps on policy-front. So far, the government hasn't shown signs of improving the situation any further. It remains heartless.

Unfortunately, even the people's initiatives have come to a naught. The last decade indeed saw the Vidarbha farmer slide from bad to worse and further worse on all the counts – income, farm techniques, food security, health care etc.

As farmers' leader and expert on agriculture in Wardha, Vijay Jawandhia, puts it: "The farmers, who are living, are living only just, because they are not dying."

While the region also grows pulses, rice and oranges, its mainstay crop is cotton, which punctuates its economy as well. With cotton in peril and orange orchards drying up, the region's cash crops are in danger. So are its near 3-mn farmers.

The malady is only getting worse, with a majority of farmers under rising debts, input costs soaring, state-run monopoly cotton procurement scheme folding up, and imports rising. Till 2003, suicides were reported from the cotton belt. Now peasants from a much better plateau – the one producing paddy – are following a trend that reflects the past decade of liberalization policies have pushed the peasantry to a point of no return. The crisis needs an immediate attention.

Drought is just one contributory factor for the biting distress, not the only. The region receives over 800 mm of average rainfall annually. And statistics obtained from the Indian Meteorological Department, Nagpur regional office, show that the rainfall variation in Vidarbha over the last hundred years has been plus or minus 30%. Which means, in rainfall deficit years the region still received close to 580 mm rainfall, and in better years, it recorded more than a thousand mm. In that rainfall, you can grow grapes, if the water is harnessed in a planned way.

In perspective, India has more land under cotton than any other country in the world, but just about the lowest yields. Vidarbha's worse: 97% of its 14-lakh



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hectare land under cotton is rainfed (Non Irrigated). Its productivity is meager 146 kg lint/hectare, compared to the national average of 440 kg and 220 kg of the state. Farmers reap only one crop. And borrow from moneylenders to dig wells.

Over the years, the inputs industry has burgeoned. These companies outshine the funds-starved public sector efforts in introducing new seeds and newer pest-control chemicals, fueling the production cost. The productivity hasn't risen.

Complete collapse of agriculture extension in the region has proved disastrous too. The agriculture universities and the government's agriculture extension, even the Chief Minister of Maharashtra Vilasrao Deshmukh admits, are in peril. That has affected the public research on inputs, particularly seeds of cotton.

There's also the issue of regional imbalance, with Vidarbha being stifled of funds by the successive governments, dominated by the western Maharashtra leaders.

Primarily, the disparity in the annual budgetary allocations by the successive state governments and lack of a strong political lobby for cotton farmers diverted maximum funds to the western Maharashtra, which helped that region build over its infrastructure, resources and a strong cooperative movement. But the regions like Vidarbha and Marathwada suffered, starved of funds for almost all the sectors – irrigation, off-and-on farm activities, and agriculture infrastructure. This also led to more investments in all these sectors by private and public sector financial institutions in western Maharashtra, especially the sugar belt. There, the funds flowed freely. And in Vidarbha, irrigation projects were dragged for ages.

Ironically, the state government has built cotton complexes in the sugar belt of western Maharashtra, not in Vidarbha where cotton is actually grown. Here, it is promoting sugar cultivation, despite a clear warning by the National Bureau of Soil Survey and Land Use Planning (NBSS&LUP) that Vidarbha's climate is not conducive for sugarcane cultivation; it will be disastrous for farmers to grow it.

There is also another reason why farmers must stay away from sugarcane – there is no water for this water-intensive crop. All the sugar mills in Vidarbha, save one, have collapsed, closed down or defunct. And there is no hope for them to be revived. Had the government set up cotton complexes – where raw cotton is weaved into raw yarn – in Vidarbha, it would have seen the monopoly cotton procurement scheme make profits and helped the cotton cultivators gain in marketability and good returns. The region had – and still has – a potential to become India's textile hub, but the government has to shift to the policies that support such a regional development. In contrast to the western Maharashtra, which is sugar, and also wine hub, now, Vidarbha and Marathwada could have together pulled up the state's exchequer through one of the most paying sectors of textile, and the center could have protected this sector from global markets.

Coming back to cotton farmers' woes:



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In the past few years, the cost of cultivation has increased sharply but income has dwindled dramatically. This is the region, which has adopted high cost Bt seeds, without adequate research on its viability. In spite of this, productivity has not gone up – in 2005, Maharashtra with roughly three million ha of land under cotton, produced 4.6 million bales. Its yield was 271 kg per ha, the lowest in the country and a pittance as compared to 600-700 kg per ha of Punjab, Gujarat and Tamil Nadu. This fact points to a key technological challenge, as the region needs varieties suitable for rainfed conditions. This system survived to an extent due to the government procurement policies, which bought the cotton from farmers at a premium. But now, the government wants farmers to survive in open market. Unfortunately, even public research and public agencies have failed farmers, who are now finding it difficult to cope with these changed circumstances. Each year, a new reason and factor exacerbates the crisis, accelerating the suicide rate.

In 2005-06, the crisis was aggravated because the state government withdrew the advance bonus (Rs 500) that it gave its farmers over and above the minimum support price through the monopoly cotton procurement scheme at a time, when farmers went for more loans investing in more expensive seeds, which promised them bumper crops. But the risk did not pay off – productivity of their crops on rainfed areas did not increase substantially, but costs of inputs spiralled. As much as 50 per cent of the BT seeds were sold in rainfed Maharashtra in that year. Also, the democratic front government comprising Congress and National Congress Party returned to power with a promise to pay Rs 2700/quintal to cotton, a word never kept. The Congress high command and the state leadership passed this off merely as a “printing mistake” in its election manifesto.

Across the country, the average cost of cultivation in cotton is around Rs 16,000-22,000 per ha. With an average productivity of 460 kg per ha, it costs between Rs 35 to Rs 48 per kg to grow cotton. In Vidarbha, the cost of cultivation could go well beyond Rs 20,000 per ha and if marketing cost is added it crosses Rs 22,000. But the productivity is only 270 kg per ha. In other words, the cost per kg is almost double – well over Rs 70 per kg. This fact is confirmed by the Commission for Agricultural Costs and Pricing, which finds that in Maharashtra, the cost of growing cotton increased from Rs 17,234 per ha in 2001-02 to Rs 20,859 per ha in 2002-03, a CSE report states. In Maharashtra, the input costs of all components are higher than the more productive regions of the country.

An official document of the Maharashtra Government – ‘Farmers’ suicides in Maharashtra, an Overview’ – says that the current support prices for cotton are 30% less than the production cost. Leave alone profits, you can’t recover capital.

Four years ago, during the NDA regime, India boasted of its mounting foodgrain stocks, while countless millions of her farmers couldn’t buy food. At the end of last fiscal, the agriculture employment rate had dwindled below 1%. It now



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stands in minus, meaning farmers want to give up farming and migrate to some other source of income, or simply starve. In a country where 60% (over 600 million) people depend on agriculture for their living, that rate of employment in the farm-sector sounds no good. Also, as Utsa Patnaik, a leading economist, points out in her essay 'Republic of Hunger' (2004): The average Indian family of four members is absorbing 77kg less of food grains annually than a mere six years ago and since in urban India absorption has risen, it is the rural family which is absorbing much less. This abnormal fall is because of the loss of purchasing power for several reasons, and it got reflected in massive building of unsold public food stocks, reaching 63 million tonnes by July 2002, nearly 40 million tonnes in excess of the normal food stocks for that time of year, she says. But, the then NDA government got rid of over 17 million tonnes of foodgrain by exporting out of stocks with subsidy, and – what – it went mainly to feed European cattle and Japanese pigs. A poor Indian farmer continued to starve.

So, while the governments expedited the integration of global markets with the fragile and unprotected local markets, rural India naturally took the stick.

The devaluation of rupee nationally meant that even as the standard of life increased, the rural population was forced to live in the same low cost economy.

Evidently, the crisis has hit the farmers in more than one way. The Per Capita debt borrowed from private sources has grown phenomenally (In rural India you can end up paying up to 300% interest to your lender in a season). To elaborate on just one crucial factor fuelling this phenomenon is the rising input prices and declining output prices.

As Kishor Tiwari, leader of Vidarbha Jan Andolan Samiti in Yavatmal points out, "The farmers are at loss on the day they start sowing. The more they do intense farming, the more they end up with losses. Today, every one is in the same boat – small and marginal farmers, and those with big holdings."

Concurrently, in many families food intake has dwindled. Two years ago, tens of Kolam tribal farming families in western Vidarbha's three districts starved to death. That prompted the Bombay High Court to take note of it and direct the government to supply food free of cost to the starving families. By 2006, the problem of starvation was checked in that community, but in others like dalits or backward classes, people are still rotting their hunger by observing fasts.

A rural family has no budget for health. That makes families more vulnerable to even a routine viral fever because they can't see a doctor. The usury is rampant, and cornering of resources by the rich and powerful too. Those who have small land holdings are losing even that piece to unscrupulous moneylenders.

The reasons are economic, and political, and not social, as many thinkers feel. Gross fixed capital formation in agriculture in proportion to GDP declined from



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3.1% during late eighties to 1.6% during the last part of the ninth plan, according to the planning commission reports. Percentage of Plan expenditure against total plan expenditure also declined nationally from 13.1% to 7.4%. In Maharashtra, this decline was to 4.5% from 6.1% for the same period, the reports indicate.

These years have seen a spurt in the suicides, and indebtedness grew among cotton farmers of Vidarbha. Largely also because the state governments and the Centre have steadily lifted whatever little protection marginal farmers had. Folding up of rural credit, rising input costs and a total shift from food crops to cash crops like cotton and soybean belted the farmers. Add to the crisis, the dumping of imports that result in decline in local cotton prices; and the government's steady withdrawal from the water and energy sectors.

As the mainstream agriculture suffered, other allied activities too collapsed – like dairy, poultry and animal husbandry. Fishing activities also went out of the hands of communities, as the state government privatized tanks and awarded the contracts to big hoteliers of the region, or corporate rich. Over 300 tanks in the region are now with one hotel chain of Nagpur. But thousands of locals can't fish in their own water. This fall in income was not by decay; it was by design.

There was another important factor, which went unnoticed: The fall of a strong farmers' movement in the decline of the Shetkari Sanghatna. The neo-liberal czars penetrated the movement that mobilized the peasantry in the region. They managed to knock the struggle down by, what Jawandhia says, buying the leader into believing that neo-liberal policies and globalisation were good for farmers. Sharad Joshi, who fought for the farmers, toed the line of globalisation, and then went on to shift sides ideologically and politically through the 90s. He now sits in the Rajya Sabha on a Shiv Sena ticket, while the farmers in Vidarbha who rallied behind him in late seventies and eighties with a dream of establishing a 'Bali Rajya' (peasants' state) in Vidarbha were dumped.

The decline of the movement saw an end to the political struggle of the agrarian masses in the region forever.

In Vidarbha's dusty countryside – it's for everyone to see – festivals are a passé. The village bonds are crumbling. Farmers' confidence lays shattered, resilience stands tested and patience is pushed to the brim. There's no ray of hope, no light. For, even the polity has lost the focus. So has the ebullient media industry.

Not that this is an exception. Vidarbha is just one of the broken pearls. It is now happening elsewhere in the agrarian country of ours.

As farmers' leader Vijay Jawandhia puts it, "It is increasingly becoming difficult to farm in an agricultural country like India. It's an irony that food producers are starving, while the purchasers have stocks beyond their consumption limit."



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3 – Suicides, the ultimate tragedy:

Vidarbha has undoubtedly earned the dubious distinction of being the suicide country of India, of late. But this one's the region where prosperity flowed in abundance once, without any bar.

Politically, Vidarbha was a part of the erstwhile Central Provinces and Berar till it got ceded to Maharashtra in 1953, though the States Reorganisation Commission had strongly recommended the formation of a separate Vidarbha state. However, the erstwhile political leadership opposed the carving of a new state. The reason: One-language-one-state.

Administratively, today, Vidarbha is spread over 11 districts, Maharashtra's eastern part, and has a population of about 25 million.

Six districts – Nagpur, Wardha, Chandrapur, Gadchiroli, Bhandara and Gondia – fall in eastern Vidarbha division with headquarter at Nagpur, and five – Amravati, Akola, Washim, Buldana and Yavatmal – in western, with Amravati as the headquarter. The five western districts and one from Nagpur division – Wardha – comprise the cotton bowl of the region and the suicide-country. Nearly 70% of its 25-mn people depend on agriculture for living.

The region receives over 800 mm of average rainfall annually. And statistics obtained from the Indian Meteorological Department, Nagpur region office that the rainfall variation in Vidarbha over the last hundred years has been plus or minus 30%. Which means, in rainfall deficit years, the region still received close to 580 mm rainfall, and in better years, it recorded more than a thousand mm. In that rainfall, you can grow grapes, if the water is harnessed in a planned way.

Besides, Vidarbha is bordered by two major river basins – Godavari and Wainganga. A number of tributaries, water bodies and close to 30,000 water tanks places the region's eastern districts at advantageous position over the other regions in the water sector. But the suicides were reported even in the good monsoon years when the yield was good. Also some of farmers ending themselves were from better-irrigated paddy areas of Vidarbha. So the reasons for the deepening crisis are not just limited to lack of irrigation potential, but many other factors, including a paradigm shift in crop pattern.

Akola, Buldana and Washim on the Deccan plateau are more drought-prone and receive less rainfall – their average is half the region's average rainfall. A report on the 'constraints analysis of cotton in India' done by the Central Institute for Cotton Research (CICR) shows that the cotton productivity in the region is low and erratic due to the shallow and medium soils and lack of irrigation facilities.



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The number game...

Close to four and a half lakh households – about two million people – in western Vidarbha are in acute crisis, according to Maharashtra Government's own door-to-door survey – by far the most comprehensive data than any of the studies. And there have been quite a few; almost a dozen, some commissioned by governments and some done by independent inquirers. Another nine and half lakh households, the survey adds, are in moderate crisis. Only three lakh families are not in any crisis. Put in perspective, close to 75% of the 17.64 lakh households in the 8000-odd villages in six districts growing cotton are in trouble. They are the suicide-prone households. Nearly a hundred thousand families have people with serious ailments, but can't see a doctor. Nearly three lakh families have the daughters of marriageable age – all of them deep in worries over their fate.

When the issue hit the headlines and gained significance in political domain, the state government first instituted a study by Tata Institute of Social Sciences, and later by the Indira Gandhi Institute of Developmental Research (IGIDR), followed by a half a dozen more. None of the studies gave reports to soothe the government. Each report was more critical of the policies, and each pointed to the worsening situation in rural Vidarbha, especially the cotton growing areas.

The suicide figures differ though. Various lists maintained by independent agencies, farmers' movements and the government, however, agree to the fact that the suicides by farmers in this are much more than the national average.

Take for instance the report by IGIDR: "Maharashtra's suicide mortality rate (SMR, suicide death per 100000 people) has been higher than the all India situation. In 2001, age-adjusted SMR for males was 20.6 in Maharashtra compared to India's 14.0. Similarly, age-adjusted SMR for females was 12.6 in Maharashtra and 9.5 at the all India level. SMR for male farmers in Maharashtra trebled from 17 in 1995 to 53 in 2004. Whereas for the overall population, the age-adjusted SMR for males has stabilized in the range of 20-21 from 2001 and that for females has been declining after 1999.

Male SMRs jumped to a higher level around 2000 or 2001 in Amravati, Nagpur and Pune divisions and this is also evident in the selected districts of Wardha, Washim and Yavatmal. During 2001-4, age-specific, education wise and marital status wise patterns indicate that SMR for almost each and every sub-group in Amravati and Nagpur divisions and in the selected districts is greater than the corresponding SMR for Maharashtra. SMR for male farmers is the highest in Amravati division – annual average of 116 for the period 2001-4 and as high as 140 in 2004. Compared to the state average, Aurangabad and Nagpur divisions also show higher SMR for farmers.



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Distribution by method of committing suicide indicates the higher usage of pesticides (34 per cent males and 30 per cent females). It is much higher than the state average in Amravati and Aurangabad divisions and also in the selected districts of Wardha, Washim and Yavatmal.”

The analysis of 111 suicide cases indicates that the deceased were mostly males (91 per cent), currently married (80 per cent), below 50 years of age (71 per cent) and with more than 10 years of experience in farming (58 per cent).

In the past two years though, the studies have shown that the age of farmers who are committing suicide is declining. Between 2006 and 2008 end, the average age of farmers taking their own lives was between 25 and 45, a trend that shows that the age of widows and children left behind by the departed ones is also falling.

Present situation...

Two farm relief packages and at least 11 studies later, farm suicides in the state haven't abated. The 2007 data on suicides by the National Crime Records Bureau (NCRB), which is now public, shows Maharashtra topped the states in farm suicides third year in succession. 2007 witnessed 4238 farm-suicides in the state.

Across the country, 16,632 farmers committed suicide in 2007, marginally down from 17060 in 2006, taking the countrywide toll since 1997 to 182,936.

Maharashtra accounted for 38 per cent of farmers' suicides of all in 2007, while Andhra Pradesh, Karnataka, Madhya Pradesh and Chhattisgarh together accounted for two-thirds (11,026) of all suicides in India.

There's no separate figure for Vidarbha, but looking at the data from various other sources, it could be inferred that the region was the worst hit in the state.

In four years (2003-2007), Maharashtra breached the 4000-mark in the suicides by farmers thrice. Over 12,000 farmers committed suicide in the state in this period. In 2007, farm suicides (only of those with land holding) were only marginally down from 4453 the previous year in the state, even as the decadal trend showed no respite. The farm suicides data for the country is available from 1997, but Maharashtra started keeping that data from 1995. The state has seen 40,666 farmers take their lives since that year, with Vidarbha accounting for the most of the cases.

Suicides declined in Andhra and Madhya Pradesh in 2007, but rose in Karnataka and Chhattisgarh in the league of "big five".

Ironically, the farm suicides crossed the 4000-mark despite two relief packages worth Rs 5000 crore for Vidarbha.

Meanwhile, in 2008, the central government announced Rs 71,000-crore loan waiver and one time settlement scheme for the country indebted peasants, a



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move that has partly reduced the burden of unpaid loans. But the scheme, marred with discrimination between the irrigated and non-irrigated farmers, has not helped Vidarbha's over 50 per cent farmers who are out of the formal credit net (meaning those who don't get bank loans). They still reel under private debt.



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4 - Suicide sociology:

“Collective tendencies have an existence of their own; they are forces as real as cosmic forces, though of another sort; they, likewise, affect the individual from without...” (*Suicide, by Emile Durkheim, the father of sociology, 19th century*)

Suicide, Durkheim's third major work, is of great importance because it is his first serious effort to establish an empiricism in sociology, an empiricism that would provide a sociological explanation for a phenomenon traditionally regarded as exclusively psychological and individualistic. *Suicide* holds a critical insight to understand the phenomenon of suicides by the farmers in the country, though it is only one of the several symptoms of the agrarian crisis or rural malaise.

Durkheim proposed this definition of suicide: “The term suicide is applied to all cases of death resulting directly or indirectly from a positive or negative act of the victim himself, which he knows will produce this result”.

Durkheim used this definition to separate true suicides from accidental deaths. He then collected several European nations' suicide rate statistics, which proved to be relatively constant among those nations and among smaller demographics within those nations. Thus, a collective tendency towards suicide was discovered. Of equal importance to his methodology, he drew theoretical conclusions on the social causes of suicide.

The father of sociology proposed four types of suicide, based on the degrees of imbalance of two social forces: social integration and moral regulation.

Egoistic suicide resulted from too little social integration. Those individuals who were not sufficiently bound to social groups (and therefore well-defined values, traditions, norms, and goals) were left with little social support or guidance, and therefore tended to commit suicide on an increased basis. An example Durkheim discovered was that of unmarried people, particularly males, who, with less to bind and connect them to stable social norms and goals, committed suicide at higher rates than married people.

The second type, *Altruistic suicide*, was a result of too much integration. It occurred at the opposite end of the integration scale as egoistic suicide.

Self-sacrifice was the defining trait, where individuals were so integrated into social groups that they lost sight of their individuality and became willing to sacrifice themselves to the group's interests, even if that sacrifice was their own life. The most common cases of altruistic suicide occurred among members of the military. In the case of Vidarbha, farmers' daughters are most likely to commit suicide as a means of self-sacrifice in what they perceive would save their parents from the burden of loans needed for their marriage, sociologists fear.



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On the second scale that of moral regulation lay the other two forms of suicide, the first of which is *Anomic suicide*, located on the low end. Anomic suicide was of particular interest to Durkheim, for he divided it into four categories: acute and chronic economic anomie, and acute and chronic domestic anomie. Each involved an imbalance of means and needs, where means were unable to fulfill needs. To understand the complex spiral of growing farm suicides in India, this chapter is particularly crucial as it explains the linkages with economic disparity.

Each category of anomic suicide can be described briefly as follows:

Acute economic anomie: sporadic decreases in the ability of traditional institutions (such as religion, guilds, pre-industrial social systems, etc.) to regulate and fulfill social needs.

Chronic economic anomie: long term diminution of social regulation. Durkheim identified this type with the ongoing industrial revolution, which eroded traditional social regulators and often failed to replace them. Industrial goals of wealth and property were insufficient in providing happiness, as was demonstrated by higher suicide rates among the wealthy than among the poor.

Acute domestic anomie: sudden changes on the microsocial level resulted in an inability to adapt and therefore higher suicide rates. Widowhood is a prime example of this type of anomie. (Indicator of the fact that farm widows are also vulnerable to suicides, given the factors, driving them to extreme step, are same.)

Chronic domestic anomie: referred to the way marriage as an institution regulated the sexual and behavioral means-needs balance among men and women.

Marriage provided different regulations for each, however. Bachelors tended to commit suicide at higher rates than married men because of a lack of regulation and established goals and expectations. On the other hand, marriage has traditionally served to *overregulate* the lives of women by further restricting their already limited opportunities and goals. Unmarried women, therefore, do not experience chronic domestic anomie nearly as often as do unmarried men.

The final type of suicide is *Fatalistic suicide*, "at the high extreme of the regulation continuum". This type Durkheim only briefly describes, seeing it as a rare phenomena in the real world. Examples include those with over regulated, unrewarding lives such as slaves, childless married women, and young husbands. Durkheim felt that his empirical study of suicide had discovered the structural forces that caused anomie and egoism, and these forces were natural results of the decline of mechanical solidarity and the slow rise of organic solidarity due to the division of labour and industrialism. Also of importance was his discovery that these forces affected *all* social classes, including peasantry.

Vidarbha's farming populations today reflect all that Durkheim explained in his work: There's steep decline in income standards; drop in social status; and there



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is growing economic inequality leading to social frictions; lack of opportunities. Not to be forgotten, the ongoing rural crisis has led to breaking of social bonds, a condition that could only seep into the generation next as it comes of age.

That a typical farm family isn't able to meet fulfill its basic needs and obligations towards its children is more than established. Most farm families can't afford a good meal for days, and meet education or health needs of children, forget their demands. Durkheim's work provide and insight into why farm suicides aren't abating despite the so-called relief packages and farm loan waivers.

Durkheim defined the term *anomie* as a condition where social and/or moral norms are confused, unclear, or simply not present. He felt that this lack of norms--or pre-accepted limits on behavior in a society--led to deviant behavior.

"The state of *anomie* is impossible whenever interdependent organs are in contact and sufficiently extensive. If they are close to each other, they are readily aware, in every situation, of the need which they have of one-another, and consequently they have an active and permanent feeling of mutual dependence."

Industrialization in particular, according to Durkheim, tended to dissolve restraints on the passions of humans.

Where traditional societies--primarily through religion--successfully taught people to control their desires and goals, modern industrial societies separate people and weaken social bonds as a result of increased complexity and the division of labor.

This is especially evident in modern society, where we are further separated and divided by computer technology, the Internet, increasing bureaucracy, and specialization in the workplace. Perhaps more than ever before, members of Western society are exposed to the risk of anomie.

Man is the more vulnerable to self-destruction the more he is detached from any collectivity, that is to say, the more he lives as an egoist, by that theory.

Psychiatrists don't go by this principle. Economists don't accept linkage between economic meltdown or downfall and the social fallout. That's why farm suicides have been branded as a social issue, rather than a political economy gone awry.

Most visible impacts of agrarian crisis, particularly farm suicides, on children:

- 1) **Drop in child birth-weight:** One of the most crucial factors of agrarian crisis is the loss of domestic food security among the farming households of Vidarbha. A massive shift to cash crops from food crops in the eighties and nineties has led to the farm families' dependence on markets and public distribution system for food and other eatables. As the farm



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incomes dwindled dramatically and money got devalued in an inflationary and more liberalized economy, the consumption patterns of the rural people took the hit severely, several studies have shown. It has impacted the food intake of children the most, in general, and the children in suicide-affected households in particular. Several studies and records show that the child birth-weight in rural Vidarbha is on a decline, and it's not limited to the tribal patches of Melghat or Gadchiroli; it is spreading to non-tribal areas as well. The birth weight in many cases is now hovering between 2 and 2.25 kg, almost 1 to .75 kg less than the global standards. It's got tremendous consequences. For, the nutritional deficiencies are rampant among children. Girls are anemic and most undernourished.

- 2) **School dropouts:** A majority of the children in suicide households can't continue with their studies. Most of them finish their primary schooling in the village schools, but are needed to work with their mothers. In tribal, dalit and OBC families, school dropouts are more common than in the dominant castes, such as the Marathas, Patils, Kunbis and Deshmukhs. The children can continue with studies if there's external support. Like, the maternal uncle supporting the education or a stipend to either the child or the mother. Higher education though is out of question.
- 3) **Child-farmers:** The premature death of parents forces the children to take to farming with their mothers at a tender age. This has several ramifications. Earning mode gives an instant gratification but is likely to leave a child intellectually under-developed with a bigger alter ego, as some of the child psychiatrists explain. Also, agriculture as a vocation is physically taxing and requires expertise, some thing that a child isn't able to cope with instantly. Most boys and girls in suicide-households take to farming and suffer from extreme emotional and physical stress.
- 4) **Post Suicide Traumatic Disease (PSTD):** Boys and particularly the girls silently suffer from the post-suicide-trauma in the households where one of parents have committed suicide. It shows up with behavioral disorders and stress-related illnesses among children, who can't cope with sudden responsibilities that fall upon them. Girls live with the guilt that one of the factors that drove their fathers to the extreme step was the worry of their marriage (In six cotton-cultivating districts of Vidarbha, over three lakh farm households have girls of marriageable age, and almost as many families with girls who've just entered the age of puberty.)
- 5) **Early marriages of girls:** Recent trend suggests that the widows marry off their daughters at an early age, this – in a desperate bid to get rid of their most important parental responsibility.



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1) The big small farmer of Ralegaon

Ralegaon (Yavatmal):

Ganesh Diliprao Kale zips out his cell phone and dials his friend to confirm their meeting at the local market. "We've to meet at 2," he reminds his buddy.

It is harvest time, and Ganesh has not much time for himself these days. You can make that out from his brisk walking and hectic conversations on cell-phone.

There're too many things to be done in time, he explains, as he smiles wryly: Crop needs to be cut and stocked before it's taken to the market; fields have to be prepared for the next crop; cows are to be fed, the list seems endless.

Then, there are social obligations too. He has to accompany his senior friend to the cotton procurement centre where he might perhaps have to spend the night. It takes 24 hours at least before the traders procure your cotton. "Good friends," he says, "help each other in the need. "He'll help me when I bring my crop into the market. This is a mutual understanding," he informs.

That's not all. Ganesh has to tend to the domestic chores also: From bringing daily ration to helping his mother tidy the house, he chips in uncomplainingly.

In between, if he finds time from his ever-burgeoning commitments he has to be in the school. Ganesh is an eighth standard student, and a diligent one.

At 13, a slim-but-energetic Ganesh is one in a growing tribe of Vidarbha's *bacchakisans*, child farmers, akin to an early maturing variety of crops.

From the sheltered parental cocoon, this boy and his younger sibling, Ashwini, are suddenly in the midst of responsibilities.

About 11, Ashwini is already her mother's helper in the kitchen, looking after the family's needs. No time for the make believe world of dolls for her, only the real list of everyday chores. "I've learnt to cook food on my own," she says.

A pained septuagenarian grandmother of Ganesh, Sumanbai, rues: "There is a big fall in our status over the last five decades. Today, we are unable to provide for the basic needs of my grandchildren: either for the body or the mind."

Five years ago, when Ganesh was barely eight, his father took his own life by consuming pesticide. "My father was a farmer," he says, before falling into a brooding silence.

Dilip Kale's debts kept mounting every year but his seven-acre land yielded no income for three successive years due to drought and crop failure. In October 2003, when the fields wore a barren look after the costly Bt-cotton seeds had come a cropper, he committed suicide. That was also the year when the state



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government had withdrawn the monopoly cotton procurement scheme; and massive cotton imports had brought about a crash in local prices. Cumulative effect was that the farmers' debt burden shot up, and suicides rose dramatically.

"The day he committed suicide, I had gone to my parental home with children for a function, where we received the news. He had finally wilted under the burden of debts," recalls Shalini. "He loved the children so much that it's difficult for me to believe that he could leave them like this. It has taken time for us to come to terms with the grueling reality."

There was no time for the two siblings to mourn their father's death; Ganesh had no choice but to take the plough and till the fields. He did it unflinchingly, even as his mother grappled with family finances.

Similar is the situation in almost every farm suicide-household of Vidarbha.

Ganesh is inheriting debt and distress in legacy, like most of the 10,000 children do in western Vidarbha's over 5000 suicide ravaged farm households.

Yet, he and his sister remain the most unseen faces of an agrarian tragedy that threatens to afflict generations irreparably now.

"My father could not repay loans and meet our domestic needs," says Ganesh, as he chews pan-masala belying the fact that he's into his early teens.

Tensions haven't started telling upon his face yet given his lack of understanding of the complexities. The innocence of a child, however, has long faded away.

"Farming is not easy," he says sagely, and goes on to enlist the woes of farming as if he were a seasoned elder. "It is not only physically demanding, but also very risky," Ganesh has found over two years of his experience in the vocation.

No wonder, his mother lovingly calls him the 'big man of house.' She says, "He's not demanding like a child, but some times he silently sulks that his father is not alive to stand by him, buy him clothes, tell him stories, celebrate Diwali with him, or teach him the nuances of farming."

That's the only time the family realizes that Ganesh is still a child.

"Last month, when some 40 children had assembled at a seven-day educational camp at Sevagram in Wardha, Ganesh would call his mother on his cell phone and grill her: had she fed the cows; what wages had she paid the helper; and things like that," remembers Charusheela Thakre, a field volunteer with M S Swaminathan Research Foundation's Wardha project. Ganesh seemed more concerned about his farm than his studies, she says. "If I don't, who'll feed us," retorts Ganesh.

"He does all the work in the fields. Yes, we can now say, he's a farmer," says his mother, who is standing firm in the face of an unprecedented predicament.



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The emergency in this household is unnerving. A year before his father's suicide, Ganesh' elder uncle, Ashok, had killed himself. Ashok's wife has since moved to her parents. Tragedy struck the family again, when Ganesh's last surviving uncle and the youngest of the three brothers, Suresh, committed suicide in 2007.

"He was tense and sleepless over the outstanding loans and fresh debts," says his widow, Anita, who has very little formal education. She has two children, Akanksha, 3, and Nitin, a little over a year old. Ganesh's mother supports Anita, who is not strong enough to work in farms and eke out a living.

Wrinkle-faced Sumanbai has no idea why all her sons killed themselves. "My husband was a very good farmer, and he had imparted the basic training to all the children, still, God knows what has gone wrong." Worried about her most favourite grand-son, she rues Ganesh is left with no mentor for farming.

"I've got an extended family now," smiles the big man of the house, meanwhile. He knows his aunt and his two younger cousins are part of it.

It'd be some years before Nitin grows up as a baccha-kisan, but Ganesh already realizes his massive responsibilities. We've to know, he's still a kid.



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2) Growing up as the father of the family

Umri (Wardha):

“He’s 19,” says 75-year-old Gangubai Solav. But Bhushan doesn’t appear that old. May be, he’s just about 16 or 17. “No, no, he’s 19,” insists Gangubai, his grandmother, firmly. Bhushan’s mother, Chanda, is confused. “I don’t remember how old he is, but he has been our bread-winner for more than five years now.”

Bhushan’s mother and grandmother are in a hurry that the boy grew quickly. As it is, he’s been maturing faster from the day he turned 13. He still does.

The boy himself has lost the count. “I have no idea how old I am,” he quips.

In 2003, soon after his father’s suicide in Wardha’s Umri village, Bhushan had to quit his school in the sixth class and take over the reigns of the family. “I was the eldest, and my two brothers were very small. I had to take up the responsibility.”

Bhushan was a kid himself when he matured as an adult, but that’s an old story. “My heart bleeds for this boy,” says his grandmother. “He would till our 4-acre farm with his tender hands, sweating in that heat. I could not see this boy getting sucked in the soil at that age, but he did it uncomplainingly,” she recollects.

“From morning 6 to evening 6, Bhushan toils on his farm and thinks nothing. For him there is no holiday, no entertainment and no other life,” says Gangubai.

Bhushan is embedded into farming. He’s sunk in his soil, unlike his younger brother, Mangesh, who, at 16, is carefree and works on daily wages in town. That he too had to drop out of school to contribute to his family’s earning is sad.

Their mother, who works as ‘anganwadi’ assistant in Wardha, laments she could not educate her children after the death of her husband. “He (her husband) wanted the two sons to go to school and grow up as some professionals.” Alas, it was only a dream, which, in rural Vidarbha, hardly ever comes to realization.

Evidently, the two brothers are paradoxical in their nature and so, they have reacted differently to their family’s crisis, post their father’s untimely death.

Having taken to farming at 12 or 13, Bhushan hasn’t lived his childhood. Neither has his younger sibling. The two turned adults all of a sudden in their childhood.

But while the elder one is aware of his responsibilities, the younger one is uncharacteristic in enjoying freedom without accountability.

“Bhushan,” says Chanda, “is a good boy; he has that realization in him about our hardships and his own too, and therefore does everything keeping in mind family’s interests. But Mangesh is a spoiled brat. He can’t figure out what’s in his best interest. He gets carried away by the outsiders’ interests very easily.”



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“For us Bhushan is the father of the family,” says Gangubai, who cares for her grandson so much so that she’s his constant companion and guide when it comes to tending to the five-acre farm. That’s the reason she’s nicknamed him ‘Baba’ (meaning the father), as is so often the case in Maharashtrian households. The eldest son is always nicknamed as Baba; the youngest is called, ‘Chotu’.

Bhushan is subdued, silent, has no friends, but has turned very hard at heart. He wants to prove a point but chances are his isolation would turn him sour.

“I’ll prove my father wasn’t wrong when he took to farming, but better him. I’ll bring my family out of debt,” says a determined Bhushan, who has no formal training or skills in agriculture. This year he began going to banks for credit.

“I wanted to study, but after my father’s death, there was no one to look after our farm, and run the family,” says Bhushan. “Now,” he adds calmly, “It is very difficult to go back to school.” Perhaps a crash and informal training in agriculture would be greater use to him, he thinks.

Father’s suicide has made an indelible impact on the two brothers, physically as well as intellectually, but the way they have reacted to the situation provides for a stark contrast.

Sociologists say two different individuals perceive the situation differently. The post suicide trauma could shape them in just the opposite ways. But in the absence of education, both could end up sulking silently.

In this case, the years, post- suicide of their father, are shaping the two brothers’ mindset, which ultimately would define their personalities. Bhushan is growing up with an impression that he’s to bail his family out; while Mangesh thinks he’s his own master and would use the freedom without being accountable to himself or his family. In either case, the mindsets are far removed from the realities.

The boys have lost their quintessential childhood that chisels one’s personality. Both have, visibly, a very low self-esteem that may never recuperate.

For now, it’s the bread that matters more to them than the food for thought.



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3) Growing up overnight

Nandgaon (Amravati):

It's been only a few days into mourning. But 15-year-old Deepak Bramhanwade is yet to understand the tragedy that besieges him after the suicide by his farmer father, Devidas. Suddenly, the teenager finds himself heading his family.

"I'll be looking after our farm henceforth," an unsure Deepak says in a husky, somewhat reluctant, voice, even as his mother, Prabha, sits engulfed by a ghostly silence. His younger sibling, Gayatri, a frail shadow of herself, holds his hand, in what is an indication of a sense of insecurity that has befallen the widow and her two sons. In a world of growing individualism, there's no one to fall back on.

"How do I take care of my daughter and grandchildren when I am in the same situation that my son-in-law was in," wonders Prabha's father Tularam Belkhade, who's a paddy farmer in eastern Vidarbha's Gondia district.

A month before he killed himself, Devidas had sent Deepak as an emissary to Tularam in his village in Gondia district to fetch some money, if he could. "For two years I've been farming with my father," informs the boy. "I learnt a few basic things from him and tended to a pair of our bullocks," he adds.

"This boy had told me that his father was disturbed. When I asked him the reason, he revealed to me that he was in huge debt and had of late taken to drinking. I showed him my completely devastated farm; I could not have helped him any bit," the old man laments. "This has been the year of worst drought."

Ironically, Devidas' four brothers had also snapped all ties with him. "He would drink too much and then blame us for all his problems," recounts Bhagwant, the youngest of the Bramhanwade siblings, who stays next door.

The Jain-Kalar community, to which the Bramhanwades belong, is among the forward castes traditionally dealing in liquor business. The family has been in farming and small village enterprises. Bhagwant started a small restaurant in Nandgaon town, a tehsil-headquarter on Amravati-Yavatmal state highway. "I have secondary sources for earning," he says, "but Devidas did not have any allied source to add to his income."

"We could never make out that he had grown desperate to this extent that he'd take his own life," rues Bhagwant, stopping short of accepting that the brothers failed to support Devidas in the time of his need.

The entire night running up to the early hours of December 31, 2008, he kept awake, though drunk, telling his wife and kids that the coffers were all empty



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and debtors were seeking back their money. At 6 am, the first day of the New Year, Devidas took his own life, having consumed a litre of deadly pesticide.

In a small suicide note, he wrote he had debts and was committing suicide because he could not repay the money. This year, the family was staring again at huge losses following crop failure and drought-like situation in the region.

An eighth class dropout, Deepak has carefully preserved his father's suicide note, and is aware of the financial problems that his family is grappling with. Devidas would love him and his sister, but behave roughly with them due to tension in his last days, reveals the 15-year-old.

Devidas has an unpaid private loan of Rs 70,000 and outstanding cooperative bank loan of Rs 37,000. Ironically, he could not avail of the benefit of the centre's loan waiver scheme of 2008 due to the five-acre ceiling. He could have got the benefit of one-time-settlement up to Rs 20,000 had he paid Rs 17,000 in three installments, as per the scheme. Alas, he did not have Rs 3,700 to pay the first installment and claim the benefit of waiver, Bhagwant claims.

Devidas Bramhanwade is a symbol of the centre's discriminatory waiver policy that equates rain-dependent farmers with the ones having protected irrigation. So, the five acre ceiling excludes by a whisker (only half an acre more really) the crisis-ridden farmers like Devidas with less than Rs 50,000 as an outstanding loan, but waives in lakhs the loans of irrigated farmers with small holdings.

What's more tragic, the outstanding loan burden of Devidas is the legacy that Deepak inherits, apart from the gigantic responsibilities. He's to ensure that Gayatri continues her schooling, which, she says, she would. He's to take care of his mother, who's still in a deep shock. Deepak is aware of the uncertainties, but says he would overcome the problems slowly.

"It will help," says the grandfather with concern, "if the government takes a sympathetic view of the suicide-affected families and waives their loans completely without discrimination." Otherwise, how would this boy, he asks, shoulder at this age the burden that killed his father?

Devidas had got his share of five-and-a-half acres of farm from his father, all of which is rain-fed. He grew cotton and soybean on it, says Prabha.

The financial problems began when the Bramhanwade's youngest child, Gendlal, was detected with brain tumour five years ago. The boy was in the fourth standard when he died. "We spent over Rs 2 lakh, all borrowed from private sources, on his treatment, but could not save him," informs a devastated Prabha. "He took to drinking after that episode," she informs. The debt kept mounting, as the income from their farm kept dwindling dramatically.



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Tularam, who's spent half a century farming his paddy land, says it's not easy to do agriculture. "I am concerned how this boy will till his land, do the weeding, look after finances and market his yield; all this needs training and backing. I am quite old to teach or train him, and his father is no longer alive to back him," he says, holding Deepak's hand gently. "This one's big, big crisis."



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4) Oscillating between aggression and subversion

Wardha, Akola:

Prasheet Pethkar, 14, is vehemently angry with her mother Ujjwala, 35. He thinks she is responsible for his father Prabhakar's suicide. "I'll never pardon her," says the teenager, who dropped out of the school because he wanted to see his mother sulk and grieve and feel hurt. These days he works as a labourer on the other villagers' fields, than helping his mother with their own farm. What's more, he hardly talks to his mother. If he ever does, it's full of hatred and outbursts at her.

Ujjwala has a big problem in her hands and she has no idea what to do. Prasheet, she believed, was her support after her husband Prabhakar committed suicide in the face of rising debt in August 2008 in Kurzadi village of Wardha district. He is instead turning out to be her worst nightmare, she says with a worried look.

Actually, Prasheet could himself be suffering from emotional upheavals that go unheeded among children in most of the suicide-ravaged farming households.

In their growing age, children tend to catch good and bad things quickly. In this case, Prasheet has developed bad impression about her mother, mostly from the close relatives, who have unwittingly fuelled his angst from a very tender age.

"My husband's close relatives want me to leave the village and give up my claim to land, so they speak badly about me; they've even fuelled Prasheet against me and he feels I am responsible for all the problems in the house," laments Ujjwala.

Across Vidarbha, in many households hit by suicides, widows are facing grudge of their adolescent children, mainly boys, and very rarely, daughters.

Her husband left two kids, elder Vrushali, and younger Prasheet, and the unpaid debts. "I paid in parts all the loans from private banks," says the widow, who is courageously braving the odds, raising her children and cultivating her land.

Now cut to six-year-old Ekta Deshmukh in Katyar village of Akola district. The girl is extremely possessive about her only cousin, Hemant, and fears for his life.

"Don't jump, you may die," she shouts, as 16-year-old Hemant prepared to jump from stairs while playing with her. "You are the only one left to play with me; if you die, who will play with me?" the girl asks him, turning a playful ambience tense. The Deshmukhs have seen three suicides over the past five years.

First to go was the children's grandfather, Purushottam (2003), then it was the turn of Ekta's father Sunil (2004), followed by Hemant's father (Santosh) (2007).

"My father-in-law, brother-in-law and husband ended themselves one by one, due to huge debts," says Hemant's mother, Jyoti, who now tends to the 22 acres



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of family farm. She also looks after Arti, the widow of her brother-in-law Sunil, and their daughter Ekta. The trauma of the three suicides is unimaginable. Jyoti has shifted Hemant to her parents in Khamgaon in Buldana for higher studies, aware of the fact that his career and life would be disturbed if he stayed with her in the village. Arti has shifted to her parental village with Ekta, unsure of future. She reveals that her daughter is extremely fearful of everything; she's quite submissive. That's partly because Arti has been insecure mentally after Sunil's death.

Evidently, Prasheet and Ekta present the two emotional extremes that children in farm-households coping with suicide by their breadwinners go through.

Says the renowned psychiatrist, Dr Shailesh Pangaonkar: "Early maturing of children, who haven't had time to mourn the loss of their fathers, could lead to a subtle depression throughout their lives. Earning mode will give them instant gratification, but their alter ego would continue to grow dangerously with time."

Dr Pangaonkar, who is an expert in child psychology, says suicide by a father brings about a trauma and has a lasting impression on a young and growing mind. "Such a child must get three things - education, cultural involvement and economic stability. If he or she doesn't get these three things, one can see in them signs of post-traumatic stress disorder, traits of suicidal tendencies, paranoia, and delusions (which are unshakeable many beliefs)."

Prasheet has dropped out of the school; Ekta is still continuing with primary schooling but is likely to drop out in the absence of any support to her mother, while Hemant would finish his studies and grow as a normal kid because he has the support of his grandparents and maternal uncle. He's lucky in that sense.

The sufferings of farmers' children, particularly of the girls, go unheeded in the farm crisis debate and reportage. They are among the worst hit, and yet the most unacknowledged silent victims of the agrarian crisis sweeping the rural India.

Dr Pangaonkar observes that children of farmers who have committed suicide may oscillate between two emotional extremes: Subversion and aggression. But all of them suffer from the same thing: post suicide traumatic disease (PSTD).

If the children fail to get enough food for emotional, physical and intellectual growth, they would meet a disastrous fate, says another psychiatrist in Akola Dr Sujay Patil. "We need interventions that factors in their emotional needs."

Dr Patil has been rendering free treatment to the farmers suffering from acute to moderate depression in rural Akola. He says dramatic economic slide took lives of farmers who were in their late fifties and early sixties in the late nineties, but of late the age of farmers committing suicide in Vidarbha has seen a decline.

"Now more and more young farmers are committing suicide," he says. That is not unusual, given that farming is seeing a generational shift in the region.



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5) Pre-mature death of budding aspiration

Aasra (Amravati):

"My family can't make even a thousand rupees a month. And I have two younger sisters. My parents can't bear the burden of our marriages when we don't have enough to eat. So, I am ending my life. Nobody should be held accountable, or blamed, for it," wrote Neeta Pundalikrao Bhopat, 19, in her suicide note, minutes before she took the extreme step in November 2005.

Though Neeta was a first year B.A. student in Aasra village of Amravati district, she must have carried the thoughts of suicides from her late childhood, during her formative age, according to the child psychologists. The villagers say she was a bright girl and had lots of aspirations, but silently resented her abject poverty.

Things had slowly come to a boil. She believed that if she didn't remove herself her father would die of worries about her marriage very certainly. After her, the family had her two younger sisters also to be married off. Her early-life impression and fear for the life of her father and elder brother did her in.

This student of Mahatma Jyotiba Phule College, Bhatkuli consumed pesticide on that fateful day at home and bade good-bye to the world.

The suicide note written in a neat handwriting speaks much more than those four lines though. It insists that the agrarian crisis has ripped apart the farming households in rural Vidarbha. And beyond the headman, it has pierced the fabric of a family to ensnare its every member - infants, young and old, alike.

A grown up Neeta ended herself because she saw her parents getting worried, with each passing year, about her marriage. She was rushed to the government hospital at Amravati where she breathed her last, before getting the first aid.

Says Kishor Tiwari, the leader of Vidarbha Jan Andolan Samiti: "It isn't a suicide by a debt-ridden farmer, and therefore the government would not consider it as a suicide linked to agriculture reasons, but Neeta's suicide is much greater an indication of dramatically falling conditions of farmers in Vidarbha."

Neeta's father owns four acres of land in the village. He doesn't have any irrigation facility, like over 90% of the farmers of this region. Kholapur police, in whose jurisdiction the village falls, argue the girl did not make any mention of agriculture reason for her suicide in the dying note. But a shocked uncle of Neeta, Vitthalrao Bhopat, insists that the girl knew of the declining earnings of her father from agriculture. "She was intelligent and could see that it was becoming difficult for her family, which depended only on agriculture, to make both ends meet," he says. Neeta's only brother farmed on their land since Pundalikrao could not work like he did in his youth. Vitthalrao reveals that his brother has outstanding private and bank loans. "He's in a debt trap," he adds.



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The depressing poverty at home, and the grim situation ahead, probably proved too much for Neeta. So, over her own aspirations, she preferred death.

Suicides by teens are not new to urban or rural India. But Neeta's suicide could be rare. Going by the state government data, there have been only 17 cases of the suicides by children from farming families in the six worst affected districts. And Neeta's could be one of them. Yet, the extreme pressures that consumed Neeta's life affect thousands of children, which may show up in later stage of adulthood.

Neeta's suicide was a rare case in rural Vidarbha. Pre-mature death of budding aspirations is though not a usual phenomenon now.

List of children tracked:

- 1 - Ganesh Kale - OBC (Yavatmal)
- 2 - Bhushan Solav - OBC (Wardha)
- 3 - Roshani, Saroj, Digambar, and Mahesh Rathod - Banjara (NT) (Yavatmal)
- 4 - Madhav Agose (Tribal), (Yavatmal)
- 5 - Deepak, and Gayatri, Bramhanwade - Jain Kalar (Amravati)
- 6 - Sagar and Swati Thote - Kosurla village - Dalit (Wardha)
- 7 - Hemant Santosh Deshmukh and Ekta Suresh Deshmukh (Akola)
- 8 - Mangala and Bhagyashree Kudmethe (Pradhan tribal)(Yavatmal)
- 9- Roshani Shete (Kunbi Patil) - (Amravati)
- 10 - Nita Pudalikrao Bhopat - OBC (Amravati)
- 11- Rani and Samruddhi Malikar (OBC) - (Yavatmal)
- 12- Mangesh, Nakul, and Archana Rameshwar Suroshe (Maratha) (Yavatmal)



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7 - Recommendations/possible interventions:

Children in Vidarbha's rural areas are even otherwise at a disadvantage – with regard to many factors, such as access to education; its quality; income etc. – when compared with opportunities available in urban areas.

In the event of suicide by a farmer, the odds before family members, especially children, aggravate. From the qualitative understanding of the children tracked during this study, in almost all the households where farmers committed suicide, the incident brought sudden economic, emotional, and social pressures on their families, and children in particular.

In almost every case, children (in impressionable age of 8-15 years) seem to confront huge difficulties in coping with the trauma of losing parents. This has left an indelible impact and lasting impression.

So far, there's no empirical study that looks at the impact of agrarian distress on children. For the young widows, raising toddlers after the suicide by their farmer husbands gets difficult. Meeting their basic growing needs gets daunting.

Inter-personal relations (between children and relatives; neighbours; friends) get severely affected, as seen in the case of the children here.

In the context of child rights, farm suicides due to distress deprives the children of the affected families a normal and tension-free childhood, equal opportunities in education, economic prosperity and overall better life.

The study found, most children have mental health issues – from anxieties to depression. Akola-based Psychiatrist Dr Sujay Patil who gives mental health care to such families free of cost says if untended the problems can spiral with advancing age of the children.

Agrarian distress generally is leading to a steep decline in food intake in rural households, as several studies show. In suicide households it is acute.

All the children tracked in this study were forced due to circumstances to take to farming at a very early age; each one of them entered an early adulthood; each one silently suffered from inexplicable and unexpressed emotional trauma: depression, social taboo, post-traumatic suicide syndrome, inferiority complex, loss of confidence; all of them express a loss of role models that lead to a void; interruption in education – most children in suicide households drop out of schools to support mothers at farm or work themselves. Overall uncertainties and insecurities abound their lives with the early and traumatic loss of parents.

Almost all the households studied here had unpaid debts; children are inheriting the burden of debts from their parents.



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Farmers' suicides seem to bring economic, intellectual, physical and emotional impoverishment to the children. Presently, there is no system or intervention to reduce the trauma being faced by children in Vidarbha.

Against this backdrop, two major interventions could help the children cope with the trauma of loss and lead a better life: emotional/intellectual support and economic support.

Based on his years of experience of working with the affected households in the region, Dr Sujay Patil fears that the children in the suicide households may develop suicidal tendencies if the circumstances continue to remain the same.

Continuation of education must be ensured at any cost. In addition to that, if the children get vocational training without any costs, it might aid them in long run.

An experiment in November 2008 by the MS Swaminathan Research Foundation in Wardha district yielded very good results. The Foundation, which is working in the crisis-ridden areas of the region, started a monthly education scholarship programme for children of suicide-hit households: Rs 500 per head. It supports the children up to the secondary school certificate or tenth class.

In addition, the foundation has woven another programme to support their mothers who are farming after the death of their husbands.

In November 2008, the Foundation hosted about 25 children from suicide-hit families in Wardha. It was a five-day workshop cum get-together that gave them a much-needed emotional, societal, educational support (in their testimonies, children said they craved for such support).

The programme has since been continued every year. More such programmes and events that bring together children from suicide-affected households could be useful in building a support network that blends emotional and educational support children sorely covet.

School drop-outs – like Bhushan – covet vocational training. “I’ll be good if I get some training in farming,” he told me in one of our interactions. It’d make difference to these young farmers if they are imparted basic agriculture training from time to time through tailor-made courses. It will be good if children like Bhushan could get a hands-on training in agriculture practices from the state-run or any other public-funded institution as a continuous agriculture education.



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