

Farm Suicides in India, The Result of Profit Driven “Free Market” Reforms

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Global Research, April 07, 2007

The Hindu 7 April 2007

Region: [Asia](#)

Theme: [Biotechnology and GMO](#), [Global Economy](#)

And Meanwhile in Vidharbha

There have been some 250 farm suicides in just the first three months of this year. Things could be a lot worse after June. And, as always, the farm suicides are a symptom of the crisis, not its cause.

Farm Suicides in Maharashtra rose by over 354 per cent between 1995 and 2003. That's if the data of the National Crime Records Bureau are anything to go by. Strictly speaking they are not, being gross under-estimates. They draw from local machinery, which from region to region leaves out thousands from the lists of farm suicides. Yet, they still present a clear trend — a painful one. Even these twisted numbers show that farm suicides went up from 1,083 in 1995 to 3,836 eight years later.

For one thing, these figures are for all of Maharashtra. Which means if we were looking at just Vidharbha or Marathwada, the rise would be more horrendous. For another, these regions saw their greatest spurt in farm suicides after 2003 — where the last available NCRB data stops. The government of Maharashtra admits to 1,447 farm suicides in 2006 alone. And that's in only six districts of Vidharbha. So just these six districts saw far more suicides in 2006 than the whole State did in 1995. That's if we give credence to official readings of the data.

Events on the ground confirm the trend, if not the accuracy of the data. Nine women turned widows on International Women's Day in Vidharbha. That's how many farmers took their lives on March 8. The highest on a single day in the region's recent history. Till two weeks later, when it happened again. There have been some 250 farm suicides in just the first three months of this year. Things could be a lot worse after June. And, as always, the farm suicides are a symptom of the crisis, not its cause. They are its outcome, not its engine.

Just months from now, Vidharbha could see its first 100 per cent Bt cotton season. Bt cotton accounted for over 60 per cent of acreage last season. As acreage under it rises, so do the risks taken by the farmer. The Maharashtra government admits Bt cotton has fared very poorly in rain-fed regions. And it's clear that the seed companies might market much less of hybrid varieties in the coming season, if they do that at all. Why sell hybrid when there's more money to be made in Bt cotton? So even as many, including the National Commission on Farmers, call for making Vidharbha “an organic farming zone,” the reverse process is in full swing. Even apart from its report, the NCF chairperson, Dr. M.S. Swaminathan, pressed the government of Maharashtra on the notion of an organic zone. But the State's own seed corporation is a major distributor for Bt cotton.

This gets more worrying when you look at the record of the last few years. The government began the last season's harvest with boasts of a "record" 350 lakh quintal "bumper crop." The claim was made by the State's Minister of Marketing, Harshvardhan Patil. And this grand success was swiftly credited to Bt cotton in some media reports. As the run of events punctured these claims, the figure was scaled down more than once. This is further confirmed by how little of cotton the official agencies have procured. For all of them together, the figure has not crossed 70 lakh quintals. And private traders are believed to have picked up around 110 lakh quintals.

In short, less than 180 lakh quintals. And this in a time of distress when the numbers should have been much higher, when farmers would have been desperate to sell. It means production could not have topped 220 lakh quintals, and could well have been less. Consider that in the 'non-Bt cotton year' of 2003, procurement alone was over 210 lakh quintals. Production was far higher, at close to 250 lakh quintals.

This equation shows how high the risks are in the coming season. Vidharbha did better in a 'non-Bt cotton year' than during one in which more than 60 per cent of the acreage was under Bt cotton. The State government's own report informs us that in preceding seasons too, "In rain-fed conditions, Bt cotton has not paid good returns." And 97 per cent of cotton grown in Maharashtra is unirrigated. Here's the nub: a poor monsoon could make the earlier crisis seasons look like the good old times.

There's more irony to the vanished 'bumper crop.' It has in fact been so hard to find that cotton prices are better than we've seen in a long time. In some places, they are as high as Rs.2,400 a quintal. At Rs.1,500 a quintal, soybean too is getting a better deal than before. Well, go easy on the cheers. It means that most farmers will go back to these crops again. The present prices, though still not good enough for cotton, will prove tempting. True, some people have turned to other crops. And it would be a good thing, further, if even cotton growers reserved an acre of their lands for jowar. That would give their families some security. But this is not happening on any large scale.

When they return to cotton months from now, it will be to a Bt cotton-saturated season. Input prices will be higher. And yes, they will still use lots of pesticides. And the credit crunch will be far worse. Farmers are already figuring out the high cost of low interest loans. To begin with, very few had access to these six per cent interest loans. Those not repaying their sums by March 31 are out of the loop. Since not more than 20 per cent of them can do that, it means that farmers will be facing the old, higher rates again, very soon.

Since there has been no loan waiver, most will be unable to access the credit they need from the banks. So it's back to the new loan sharks: the input dealers, the sellers of seed, the fake finance companies. The more this happens, the more the dealers will determine the inputs the farmers use. And, as an official report put it, for Bt cotton, "the yields have been unstable." (The Hindu , November 25, 2006). "When farmers invest heavily in purchasing seeds and other inputs, the net return has often been negative."

What's more, there is nothing to suggest that the present cotton prices will rule next season. Not a step has been taken towards a price stabilisation fund. That would have made a big difference. But it's another NCF recce that bites the dust.

With things that serious, you'd expect a sense of urgency in the government. True, a

handful of officers have on their own made efforts to study and measure the crisis. As a government — not a thing has changed. The Prime Minister's package is a shambles. The Chief Minister's efforts consist of contacting more Babas and Ammas for the spiritual salvation of the Vidharbha farmer. Salvation comes at a price. Which could translate into a number of these godmen being gifted prime pieces of real estate worth crores of rupees in due course. Their agents are already out scouting for the best locations, which they will then ask the government for. The business end of spirituality has always been deeply rooted in terra firma.

If anything in this mess occupies the government's mind at all, it is the mounting numbers of suicides. These do not constitute the crisis in itself. But they are a great tragedy and bad publicity. And a huge embarrassment to the extent this government can experience that emotion at all. So the state get ever more creative.

The number of suicides in six Vidharbha districts gets worse. So how do we bring them down? By upping the `rejection rate' of such suicides. Surely we are the only country in the world that has a category called `eligible suicides.' (As distinct, say, from eligible bachelors or the like.) This term refers to those cases the state deems are `real' farmers suicides. This means the affected families will get some compensation. It does not matter that the rest — the ineligible — are just as dead. Or that their families suffer no less.

One government report records that the "number of cases reported" in the six districts in 2002 was 105. In 2006, that number was 1,447. That's an increase in farm suicides of over 1,300 per cent in cases reported in five years. But while 69 per cent of the cases in 2002 were found `eligible' for compensation, just 40 per cent of last year's cases were found `eligible.' So more and more farmers are killing themselves. But fewer of these deaths will be counted as `farmers suicides.' In 2006, this rejection rate rose sharply almost every month of the year. For instance, 60 suicides were found `not eligible' in January last year. In October the same year, the rejected cases were 120. Ever growing numbers are rejected in this desperate bid to dilute the bad news.

Simply put, what's rising fastest in Maharashtra is self-delusion. We could see big trouble from May-June onwards. Which could be terrible by Diwali time if the monsoon emulates the State and Central governments in its functioning.

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