

**UNDERSTANDING AGRARIAN CRISIS AND FARMER SUICIDES: A STUDY
ON ITS CONSEQUENCES AND COPING MECHANISMS IN RURAL
TELANGANA**

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By

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CERTIFICATE

This is to certify that this dissertation titled **“Understanding Agrarian Crisis and Farmer Suicides: A Study on its Consequences and Coping Mechanisms in Rural Telangana”** submitted by Ms. **Kommalapati Charitha**, bearing Regd. No. 17SRHL01, in partial fulfilment of the requirements for the award of the degree of Master of Philosophy in Regional Studies, is a bonafide work carried out by her under my supervision and guidance, that is a plagiarism-free dissertation.

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DECLARATION

I, **Kommalapati Charitha** (17SRHL01), hereby declare that this dissertation titled, **“Understanding Agrarian Crisis and Farmer Suicides: A Study on its Consequences and Coping Mechanisms in Rural Telangana”** submitted by me under the guidance and supervision of Prof. Sheela Prasad, is a bonafide research work which is also free from plagiarism. I also declare that it has not been submitted previously in part or full to this or any other University or Institution for the award of any degree or diploma. I, hereby agree that my dissertation can be deposited in Shodganga/INFLIBNIT.

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ABSTRACT

The structural transition from an agriculture based economy to industrial / manufactured based economy changed the agrarian and capital relations, resulting in an agrarian crisis in India. As a crisis of such entirety (ie., affecting 50% of the nation's population) remains complex, there is a need to study its various facets. This research aims to conceptualize the consequences of agrarian crisis with a focus on farmer suicides while problematizing the category of a 'farmer' and a 'farmer suicide'. Mechanisms the farming community subscribes to as a way of coping with the crisis and the gender aspect of the crisis are also dealt with. Mahabubnagar and Medak districts of Telangana provide the context for this research. This study argues that the agrarian crisis has resulted in increasing exploitation, indebtedness, farmer suicides, a process closely resembling 'partial proletarianization', active participation of the farming community in non-farm sectors and feminization of agriculture. While small and medium farmers opt for 'coping mechanisms', big farmers are observed to exhibit 'resilience' in response to the crisis. This research emphasizes that the phenomenon of the feminization of agriculture has to be seen as a survival mechanism and not as an embodiment of women empowerment. This study concludes that structural changes are to be understood as the long-term solution to the persistent agrarian crisis, not mere economic support.

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Chapter 1: Introduction

1.1 Background

49% of Indian population is engaged in the agrarian sector. Factors that affect people who are involved in agriculture are natural factors that are largely beyond human control like drought, famine, repeated crop failure and factors that could be controlled but are left to private individuals under 'free and fair' market mechanisms like market pricing, (non availability of) agricultural credit facilities, (lack of) non-farm job opportunities. This has converted agriculture into a risky occupation with non-rewarding and uncertain returns. People who are into agriculture can primarily be divided into two categories - one, those who chose to take the risk and two, those who do not have this choice. For people belonging to Category I, agriculture is just 'another egg in their basket'¹. Post privatization of health and education, private schooling in rural areas has become a luxurious expense; as the quality of teaching fell in Govt. schools, there's also a visible push towards private education. In addition to that, growing unemployment reflects the inability of the Govt. in providing either education or alternative employment targeting this section of the population. This puts small and marginal farmers who make up 85% of the population involved in agriculture in a 'dependency trap' (Agricultural Census 2010-11). These constitute Category II. Rise in farmer suicides, predominantly by farmers belonging to Category II, could be understood as an outcome of the agrarian crisis (Sainath, 2011b).

Govt. policies announced with the aim to curb negative implications of the agrarian crisis are by and large targeting the symptoms and not the root / structural causes of the crisis. Additionally, withdrawal of the State from interfering with the 'free and fair' functioning of the market resulted in an exploitative informal credit market and an unregulated class of middlemen who benefit amidst the agrarian distress. Economic and structural reforms with respect to the existing agrarian relations could assist in arresting the crisis.

This chapter provides a basic understanding of the Indian agrarian crisis and farmer suicides. Agrarian crisis is briefed from a Marxian perspective keeping the mode of production and the

¹Risk diversification to minimize risk by not putting all the eggs in one basket.

transition of dependency from agriculture to manufacturing sector as focal points. Historical, economic, sociological and political aspects of agrarian crisis are later discussed to provide a background to the current situation of agricultural households in India.

1.2 Agrarian Crisis

The *structural transition* from an agrarian based economy to industrial / manufactured based economy changed the agrarian and capital relations. Marxian framework looks at this transformation as a mechanism to fasten and support capital accumulation in industry and service sectors. The unequal exchange relations among them gave birth to small and marginal farmers over exploiting themselves and failing to pocket his / her labour worth. In addition to that, it has also resulted in small and marginal farmers realizing a surplus value from non-farm sectors i.e., farmers are left without a choice but to depend on non-farm sectors for a stable income (Murthy et al, 2018). Accumulated capital that is directed towards agriculture is often restricted to activities like trading, finance and fertilizer dealership leaving actual farming to tenant, small and marginal farmers who end up taking risk associated with cultivation. The frenzy over capital accumulation (in non-farm sectors) led to self exploitation and de-peasantization of landless and small & marginal farmers thus ‘waging a losing battle’ - where quitting is not an option and participation meant losses (Summary of Henry Bernstein, 1996). This situation is understood by Marxists as a crisis in agrarian sector and is looked as an outcome of the transition.

The social transition from feudalism to capitalism in different countries took different paths. Transition in Britain is called ‘transition from below’ where middle tenant farmers emerged as capitalist farmers. Transition in France is ‘capitalism delayed’ where the landlord class showed no evidences of transformation into capitalist farmers / landlords until the peasant class waged a struggle to establish land rights in the late 90s. Transition in Prussia is called ‘transition from above’ where the ‘junkers’ / landlord nobility emerged as capitalist landlords. There is no *one* right path that could potentially act as a benchmark. But the transition all over the world has resulted in the capitalist mode of production taking over traditional mode, eventually moving the economy away from agriculture to other sectors like manufacturing and service. It is this transition that is held responsible by Marxian scholars for the progress of agrarian crisis. One

would now like to look at how India has transitioned from Feudalism to Capitalism to understand the emergence of agrarian crisis in India.

Before Independence, the British colonial invasion led to the distortion of existing material and social structures. India was structurally integrated with capitalist colonial systems that resulted in extraction of surplus labour and international division of labour with unequal terms of exchange (Bhambhri, 2013). It was engaged in primitive means of production that extracted social surplus with the help land revenue systems (*Zamindari / Ryotwari*) that were in practice then. The backward productive forces in agricultural and industrial sectors reflected a ‘feudal’ society with prevalent landlordism, bonded labour and labour intensive production methods involving closer to zero mechanized inputs. With the legal abolition of landlordism and development of industries post industrialization, the eventual coexistence of different forms of social relations aimed at transformation into a capitalist mode of production.

India during 1950 - 1970 had primarily transitioned into ‘semi-feudal’ mode of production with skewed land distribution (no more landlordism, at this point), sharecropping, usurious money lending, increasing tenancy rents and poor technological progress (Bidwai, 2015). Welfare programmes were implemented post 90s like fixing an MSP, subsidies for those engaged in agricultural activities only to legitimize the State power held by the capitalist classes. While Byres (2015) labels Indian mode of production post 1990s as semi-feudal, Bidwai calls it predominantly ‘capitalist’ in spite of the prevailing pre-capitalist features. Two prominent features of capitalism ie., capital accumulation clubbed with the exploitation of labour facilitated the growth of modern industrial / manufacturing sector at the cost of high rates of exploitation in traditional sectors like agriculture. Exploitation both ‘within’ and ‘without’ the peasant community combined with other classes of the society trying to profit and eventually accumulate capital to invest in non-farm sectors got intensified post early 2000s exhibiting characteristics predominantly resembling the ‘capitalistic’ mode. This gets us back to the claim initially made by Marxist academicians that it is the transition towards capitalist mode of production that resulted in the agrarian crisis in India.

Indian peasant community could be classified into 3 primary classes from a Marxian perspective (Ramachandran, 2011). One, landlord / capitalist farmer who do not cultivate themselves but rent it out or cultivate with the help of agricultural labour. They have easy access to higher education and modern employment and invest not just in agricultural sector but also in other sectors. Two, manual worker, who do not own any land and work for a daily wage. He does not restrict himself to just the agricultural sector but also works in manufacturing, construction etc hence called 'manual' not an 'agricultural' worker. A manual worker is said (by Marx) to have two kinds of freedom : freedom from ownership of means of productive and freedom to sell their labour to the employer of his choice² (differentiating him from a bonded labourer). Three, the peasant himself, who owns and cultivates his land. A peasant could further be divided into three sub categories as big, middle and small depending on the amount of land he owns and the work he does on field. While the capitalist farmer, big and medium peasants largely benefited from the transformation to capitalism, small peasants and the manual workers took the worst blow. "...*The peasant is a very substantial factor of ... production and of political power*" (Hammen, 1972, pp 698). Nationalization of landed property and not forceful collectivization is understood to be the solution to this crisis by Engles.

Agrarian crisis is predominantly understood in the academic and political discourse only in an economic sense as a production related crisis. Eventually special attention is given to the fall in agricultural income post 1991 which is largely understood to be the result of increasing input costs. Agricultural growth rate post 1990s is lower than the growth rate of agricultural workforce indicating falling incomes. While emphasizing on the economic aspect of the crisis, social structures which control the economic relations are largely disregarded. The second understanding of agrarian crisis is looking at it as a result of non sustainable capitalistic farming (Marxist understanding). The third perspective focuses on the political marginalization of farmers post 1991 due to various factors including the inability of small and marginal farmers to organize themselves (Kumar, 2017). Agrarian Crisis is not a single dimensional phenomenon and its various facets have to be unraveled to understand the nature of the crisis in its entirety. Formulated in simple terms, Agrarian Crisis describes times of agricultural recession, low prices

²Ramachandran (2011) for more.

and high structural costs that threaten the livelihoods of the cultivators³. An occupation would be economically benefiting only if it brings net (not gross) profits which also accounts for the persons labour, capital etc. With rising input costs and falling income in agriculture, surplus / profits remain highly uncertain thus becoming a risky 'job'. Factors that have contributed to and intensified this crisis, its historical, social, economic and political characteristics are discussed below.

1.2.1 Historical aspect

After the introduction of High Yielding Variety (HYV) seeds in India through Green Revolution in mid 1960s, yield per acre has significantly increased in the case of targeted crops (ie., primarily wheat and paddy). This helped in attaining the state of self sufficiency from food scarcity, while parallely increasing class and regional inequalities. Green revolution led to economic, environmental and social disasters in India that are often overlooked (Newman, 2015). Before the intensified use of HYV seeds, farmers used native seeds and manure for cultivation which involved minimal costs and a reasonable output. The introduction of HYV seeds did not ensure protection against crop failure in the Seed Bill (2010)⁴. Long term sustainability in agricultural sector was put at stake for the short term food security (Kang, 2016).

Contract farming, another consequence of green revolution, benefitted big farmers who are in an advantageous resource position to 'build on the best' - on preferably large scale fertile lands⁵. Small and marginal farms (of uneconomical sizes) with a shift towards hybrid cultivation involving a higher cost of seeds, fertilizers and pesticides and 'de-fertilized soil' ended up in a debt trap in the long run. For example, instead of 3 kg urea that was required for one hectare of paddy earlier, 300 kgs is now needed and a higher usage of NPK on soil extract available micronutrients over time, killing the soil slowly. Five villages in Punjab have put themselves on

³Crisis is any event that is expected to lead to an unstable and threatening situation affecting an individual or a group / community or society as a whole.

Recession is a business cycle contraction which results in a general slowdown in economic activity. Macroeconomic indicators such as GDP, investment spending, capacity utilization, household income and business profits fall, while bankruptcies and the unemployment rate rise.

⁴ For more, "From Green Revolution to Suicidal Farmers", The Journey begins, April 27, 2011.

Retrieved from :<https://friendaman.wordpress.com/tag/hyv/>, accessed on 19 March, 2019.

⁵ See Newman (2015) for more.

auction since 2001; Harkishanpura in Bathinda district is for sale for over five years, while Bhuttal Kalan in Sangrur district has mortgaged nearly eighty percent of its land to moneylenders, showing the ‘other’ side of the usually glorified green revolution with respect to Punjab, in specific, and all over, in general (Newman, 2015).

Green Revolution has shown some great results in short run. However, if one analyzes the impact of Green Revolution in great detail, fertilizer requirement of HYV seeds has increased considerably... Due to excessive use of fertilizers and irrigation, soil has become saline in many parts of India...A study sponsored by three United Nations agencies (FAO, UNDP and UNEP) reports that the cost of degradation of the soil due to salinization is close to \$1.5 billion...*Small and marginal farmers are still skeptical about the overall benefits of the HYV of crops.* (“From Green Revolution to Suicidal Farmers”, 2009). (Emphasis - mine).

Economic liberalization initiated in 1991, led to a strong Liberalization, Privatization, Globalization (LPG) model adoption through the structural adjustment procedure to attain international integration. The liberal import-export policy let into our country mechanically produced cheap agricultural products. Cutback of subsidies, with the aim to reduce fiscal deficit, further led to increasing costs of production. While US subsidizes cotton producers to the extent of 4.7 billion (470 crores) dollars to produce 3.9 billion (390 crores) dollars worth outcome, Commission for Agricultural Costs and Prices (CACP) deliberately keeps cotton prices less by 20%, to subsidize the textile industry (Sharma 2015). Thus, hinting at the *structural transition* (where agricultural surplus is re-directed to non agricultural sectors for higher profits) in India with no State support to the agricultural sector. Post 1998, MNCs with germination rate of 65% started charging 100% - for 100 seeds, only 65 yield the crop but farmers pay for all 100 - leading to high input prices and low quality seeds (Sainath, 2004). Only a small section of capitalist landlords, rich peasants benefited through the neo-liberal policies (Athreya, 2012). Liberalization also relaxed the conditions that were once rigid to start a foreign bank in India.

While domestic commercial banks must lend 40% of their deposits to priority sectors as demanded by Reserve Bank of India (RBI), with 18% of the total targeted to agriculture. Foreign banks have a lower target of 32% reserved for priority sectors with no specific target for agricultural sector (Merriott, 2017). This further pushes the farming community away from the formal credit sources into the clutches of informal money lenders.

Rural India was consciously ‘left out’ of the LPG process (Ghosh, 2005). Agriculture constituted 56% of Gross Domestic Product (GDP) in 1950–1951 and it fell to 16% by 2016–2017 while there has only been a marginal fall in the proportion of population involved in Agriculture ie., 58% to 49%. This indicates a net fall in average income clubbed with a higher dependency on agriculture and a shift towards industry and service sectors which make up most of the GDP. Increase in the cost of inputs is growing at a rate faster than the increase in yields with the usage of High Yielding Variety (HYV) seeds, making agriculture a non-rewarding activity. Higher participation of middlemen at different levels of production-storage-sale, falling share of institutional credit for agricultural purposes (Biru, Barpujari 2007), higher cost of pesticides and fertilizers (which recorded a fourfold increase since 1992 - Nemana, 2012), declining share of agriculture in GDP (Posani, 2009) resemble a crisis. Liberalization led to a ‘capitalist development without a proper agrarian transition’ (Lerche, 2010). And this crisis is attributed to the liberalized policies and deflationary economic reforms that are aimed to strengthen the Capitalist relations (Patnaik, 2005).

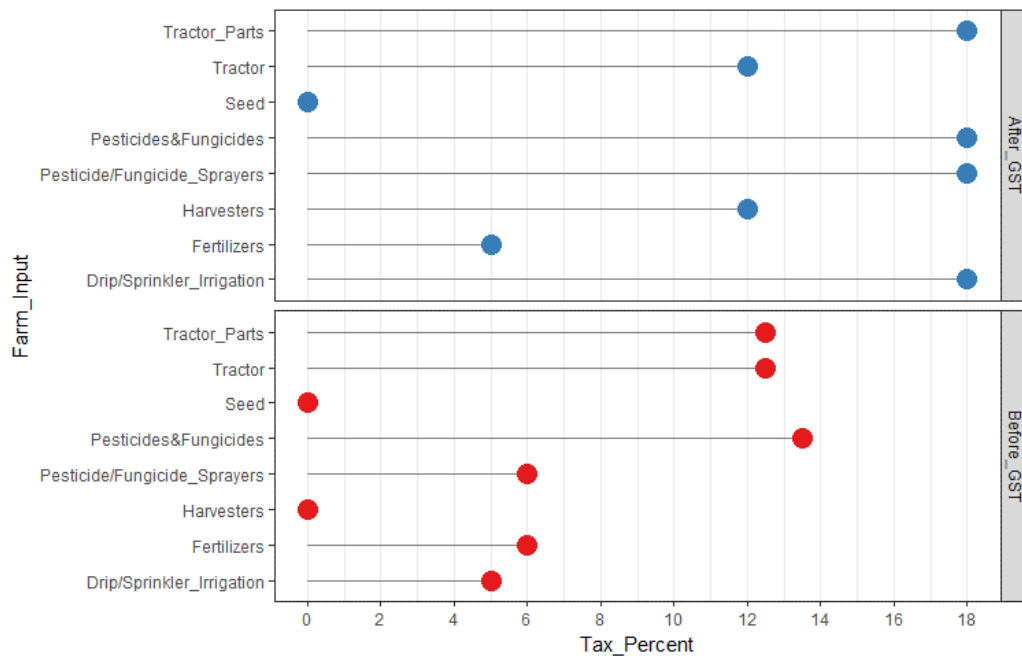
1.2.2 Economic aspect

Availability of water resources / monsoon patterns have seen significant changes over time. 266 districts spread over 11 states in India were declared to be Drought Hit Areas (DHAs) in 2016. While the local climate is fluctuating rapidly, the cropping choices and patterns are not adapting at the required pace (Swaminathan, 2016). Groundwater levels have fallen at an unusual rate in the past few decades. Water inadequacy increases the risk of crop failure. This led to increasing investment on borewells by farmers, although the success rate is not very high. It is continuous crop failure and risky investments made by farmers that push them into a debt trap, which can be looked at as another (indirect) outcome of the crisis.

Productivity of many crops has increased with the advent of advanced research and hybrid varieties. Although productivity has increased over time, India has a relatively lower yield per acre when compared to China, USA et al. The progeny of hybrid seeds aka 'terminator seeds', cannot be saved as the next generation would give a lesser yield, demanding farmers to purchase seeds for every crop further increasing their input costs (Shiva, 2016). Farmer saved seeds account for 65 - 70% of total seed consumption but there is a visible shift or rather a deliberate push toward hybrid cultivation since 1960s (green revolution) in India (Deshpande, 2017). While farmers can develop certain varieties of seeds from the crops harvested on their land, HYV seeds have to be purchased from the market at a higher cost. Govt. run centers that provide agricultural inputs (seeds, fertilizers etc) are not adequately equipped thereby exposing the farming community to private sellers. The entry of international companies like Monsanto, Cargill, Dupont into our country further pushed the farming community into a vulnerable situation. With patented seeds, these companies were given the authority to sue farmers who were found using their seed without purchasing it from them and Govt., the authority to sue them on the grounds that the native seed is not tested (Shiva, 2012). In open and continuous fields like India, it is not possible to entirely eliminate cross pollination considering the wild wind that blows during certain times of the year.

Before the commercialization of agricultural sector, farmers primarily cultivated food crops. In the worst case (of untimely rainfall or fluctuations in market prices), they had access to the sustainable levels of food. While commercialization of agriculture pushed the farming community to cultivate cash crops, liberal economic policies cut back the support (including the fund allocation for PDS) further intensifying their lack of access to sustainable levels of food. Starvation deaths among farmers recorded in India post reforms demonstrate the impact commercialization of agriculture has on the small and marginal farming community - a person cultivating food having to die of hunger (Patnaik, 2003)!

Figure 1(a), Effect of GST on Agriculture.



Source: Lakkakula (2017).

Free and fair market, which in theory responds efficiently to the changes in demand and supply factors, is now under ‘control’ by the chain of middlemen. The power of ‘market’ over individuals is a prerequisite for any form of exploitation. Interactions between supply (producer) and demand (consumer) in the market no longer determine the price. Neither the producer nor the consumer benefits out of such transactions as producers receive less though consumers pay a higher price. The growing class of middlemen exploits producers and consumers simultaneously with an objective to maximize profits and accumulate capital. Regulation of the ‘market’ to control exploitation could only be performed effectively under such coercion by the State. Minimum Support Price (MSP) - a state funded pricing mechanism - ensures a minimum price for the farmer's output, with an aim to put a ceiling to the level of exploitation. Failure of the Govt. in implementing MS Swaminathan suggested MSP (offering price to be 50% over the cost of production) is an embodiment of the weak understanding of the distress at hand. In addition to the non-regulation of exploitation by multiple actors, taxes on farm implements increased with the introduction of GST in 2017. Sprinklers and drippers which were taxed at 5% are now put under 18% slab. Tractor parts which were earlier taxed at 5% are now being taxed in the interval of 12 to 28% depending on the model (Figure 1(a)). GST has introduced another round of input

price rise further intensifying the distress (Ramkumar, 2018). Cost of agricultural equipment, including fungicide and pesticide sprayers, pesticides, harvesters, labour, transportation (due to increasing oil prices) and storage have recorded a noticeable increase in the last two decades.

Govt. procurement centers are not successful in reaching out to the farming community at the right time, forcing them to sell the output to private buyers / middlemen who in turn pocket lion's share of the profit. Agriculture is not anymore an economically rewarding profession for majority of the small and marginal farmers with rising input costs, falling incomes and increasing risk.

1.2.3 Sociological aspect

Farming has become stressful as majority of the factors affecting agricultural production are beyond the control of the cultivators (Rosmann, 2010). Hence farmers stopped being risk averse like they were few decades ago and started taking risks (Kumar, 2017). Risk taking behaviour in choosing the type of farming (organic / inorganic), fertilizers, credit, and investment in uncertain agricultural activities is normalized and is considered to be essential for survival. Credit taken by agricultural households is not entirely used for agricultural purposes. It in turn becomes a source of finance for marriage, education and health, which are beyond the reach of small and marginal farmers post privatization followed by poor facilities in Govt. institutions. Small and marginal farmers in Haryana use 20.7% and 23.7% of their loan amount, respectively, to finance social obligations like ceremonies and marriages (Chhikara and Kodan, 2013). It is not easy to demarcate family expenses from agricultural expenses (agricultural loans, primarily) as farmers repay them with money they get by selling the crop which includes in it the value of their 'family labour' (Rao & Suri, 2006).

Historically, farming as an occupation is socially and culturally associated with a higher 'social prestige'. While a section of the farming community 'chooses' cultivation as they consider providing food to the nation 'prestigious'. There exists another section which would move away from agriculture if given a 'choice', but is stuck in the 'dependency trap' due to lack of required non-farm skills and / or alternative employment opportunities targeting this section of the population. This 'dependency trap' encourages the farmer to be risk loving with respect to the

investment he / she makes in agriculture leading to increasing indebtedness, eventually pushing the farmer into a debt trap.

As the agricultural surplus consistently remained negative, farmers (primarily men) started looking at unskilled non-farm jobs as means to generate a stable income. Due to which, women are pushed into agriculture which resulted in ‘feminization’ of agricultural sector. Patriarchy, by invisibilizing women provided them with a cushion, which ‘protected’ them from fully experiencing the distress. With the changing roles and increasing feminization, women are now exposed to risks that they were earlier ‘protected’ from and women belonging to the marginalized castes experience additional constraints while attempting to face the crisis. Though increasing women participation emerged as a survival mechanism, it upgraded their social visibility which shall not be confused with ‘women empowerment’ as they do not hold the power of decision making (Pattnaik et al 2017). Agrarian crisis resulted in increasing social visibility of women with unchallenged power structures.

1.2.4 Political aspect

Addressing the agrarian crisis and issues concerning the farming community’s welfare has become a prime agenda for political parties before elections, which include doubling farmers income by 2022 (announced by Union Finance Minister Arun Jaitley in Union Budget 2016-17) and implementing Swaminathan's suggestion of increasing MSP to be over 50% of the cost of production (by BJP's Prime Ministerial candidate in 2014 election rallies). Farmers from Tamil Nadu, Punjab, Rajasthan, Karnataka, Maharashtra, Haryana, Assam, Madhya Pradesh, and Uttar Pradesh took the protest to streets in 2017, demanding a higher MSP and an effective loan waiver. Though they could both be understood as short term or temporary solutions, loan waiver releases the farmer from debt trap and a higher MSP ensures subsistence level of income. Union Budget 2018-19 mentions that MSP has indeed been increased to 50% over cost of production - this holds true by changing the parameters (ie., C2 to A2+FL) to calculate net returns⁶ (Kumar, 2018). The demand set out was not in regard to redefining the existing parameters but to arrest the crisis which could be done by allocating a fair portion of the budget towards policies that aim

⁶ A2+FL = Cost of inputs such as seeds, fertilizers, pesticides, hired labour + family labour.

C2 = cost of inputs, imputed family labour + imputed rent of owned land and interest on owned capital.

at upliftment of the living standards of the farming community. MSP has to be understood by the State administration and policy makers as the 'last resort'. Mere change in parameters neither helps the farming community nor would it assist in arresting the crisis. Increasing MSP should be complementary to increasing procurements centers in rural India, which requires a decent investment on warehouses and storage houses.

NREGA, started in 2006, is aimed to provide an alternative employment but has seen no increase in allocated fund in the recent years. In the recent Pradhan Mantri Fasal Bima Yojana (PMFBY) - 13 private insurance companies like ICICI alongside 5 public sector insurance companies have taken responsibility of dealing with the agricultural insurance claims in case of crop losses due to natural calamities. They collected a gross premium of 16600 crores in 2015 - 16 which shot up to 19510 crores in 2016 - 17 (average of 41000 per farmer increased to 57000) while the claims paid fell down from 10284 crores (98% of the total claims) to 9629 crores (64% of the total claims) (Chandrasekhar, 2018). The amount spent on insurance claims by the private insurance companies was only a section of the gross premium collected by them and the rest of undistributed premium is converted into profits 'earned'. In addition to not fulfilling the claims, this policy failed to make a positive impact, like it intended to, as a vast majority of the farming community was not informed about such a policy. 43% of paddy, 41% of arhar and 49% of groundnut cultivating agricultural households have not heard of PMFBY (Economic Survey 2017-18 Volume 2). It is not lack of fund that India experiences, but its effective usage.

41% of Agricultural loans are < 2 lakhs, while 15% are > 1 crore, and it is important to note that 1/3rds of the 'agricultural loans' are given from its urban branches and 40% of total agricultural loans given are not in Kharif / Rabi season but in Feb / March, right before the financial year ends - to meet the requirement of 18% of the bank loans that must go to agricultural sector as directed by RBI. Also to what extent the agricultural loans taken in urban centres and agricultural loans of 1 crore are actually invested in agriculture is again questionable. Banks are reluctant in giving loans to farmers stating non repayment - this gives more power to local money lenders who charge exorbitant interest rates. *"Farmers do not have a system where they can throw up their hands, declare insolvency and happily sit back, instead they have pestering money lenders*

and banks that are unwilling to lend”, (“Veeresham Committee”, 2015⁷). Government support with respect to agrarian crisis has been inadequate. It is focused on credit and loan rather than income, productivity and farmer prosperity (Parvathamma, 2016).

A Committee of 13 people headed by Jayati Ghosh, appointed by AP Govt. in 2004, to comment on Agrarian crisis has made a few suggestions that remain relevant to this day:

1. to intensify Public Sector Research on farming techniques,
2. to increase the expenditure on agriculture and farmers’ welfare to 5% of GSDP,
3. State Govt. to be the primary supplier of inputs (to eliminate exploitation by middlemen).

The National Commission on Farmers (NCF) under the chairmanship of Prof. M.S.Swaminathan (known as the father of Indian Green Revolution) submitted its report in 2006 with the following suggestions:

1. Enhancing the quality and cost competitiveness of farm commodities to make them globally competitive.
2. Empowering elected local bodies to effectively conserve and improve the ecological foundations for sustainable agriculture.
3. Special programmes for dry land farming for farmers in the arid and semi-arid regions, as well as for farmers in hilly and coastal areas.

Modifications made to policies under the name of ‘efficiency’ intending to curb the intensity of the crisis further magnified it. For example, ‘public distribution system’ modified to ‘targeted public distribution system’ excluded people without BPL cards. This exclusion of people having a ration card but not a BPL card, further added to their distress. An official Govt. report (in MP) held responsible ‘bhoot aur pret’ (ghosts and spirits) for causing farmer suicides⁸. Ramkrishna Kusmaria, state agricultural minister blamed Unidentified Flying Objects (UFOs) for crop failures in Damoh district of MP⁹. Had the Govt. taken up the issue of agrarian crisis with

⁷ 2015. Veeresh committee: prescription for a landlord path of capitalism, April 3. Retrieved from <http://cpiml.org/publications-english/hervest-of-death/appendix-hervest-of-death/veeresh-committee-prescription-for-a-landlord-path-of-capitalism/>. Accessed on 12 April, 2019.

⁸ Singh, Mahim, Pratap (2011). Minister's remark sparks row in Madhya Pradesh. *The Hindu*, January 14.

⁹ Gupta, Suchandana (2016). Government blames ‘Ghosts’ for farmer suicides in Madhya Pradesh. *Times of India*, July 20.

complete acknowledgement of its magnitude instead of downplaying it, the situation of small, marginal and landless farmers would not have gone worse after a decade since the above mentioned commissions made their suggestions.

Political parties turn to farmers who act as major vote banks during elections (as they constitute approx. 50% of Indian population) and frame their agendas highlighting the crisis and the possible steps to be taken to arrest its growth. Is the farming community protesting against these unattended promises? It is, in many pockets of Punjab, Haryana, Rajasthan, Karnataka, Maharashtra and Tamil Nadu there have been protests after the demonetization of 500 and 1000 rupee notes on November 8, 2017 which worsened the situation of small and marginal farmers whose savings for the Rabi crop were tampered with the imposition of note ban. There have been protests separately in various states like Rajasthan, Maharashtra, Assam, Telangana and few other states demanding a loan waiver and implementation of MSP to be 50% over the cost of production in 2018. There are multiple actors that farmers would have to fight against - there's no one common enemy like they had during the struggle for Independence when the peasant movements were indeed strong. United protest by farmers from states all over India is catching the momentum with the Kisan-Mazdoor long march that took place on September 5, 2018 (on the same day India has given the slogan 'Quit India' with regard to the British Govt. and in the present day scenario to Modi's anti-farmer Govt.). The movement identifies the anti farmer policies as the common enemy that they have to strongly resist to make agriculture economically and environmentally sustainable.

1.3 Farmer Suicides

Suicide is applied to all cases of death resulting directly or indirectly from a positive or negative act carried out by the victim himself, which he knows will produce this result. (Durkheim, 1897, pp xii)

A suicide, according to Durkheim, is categorized into four types: anomic, egoistic, altruistic and fatalistic. A farmer suicide is understood as anomic + egoistic by Mohanty (2013) and as

altruistic by Munster (2015) and Sharma & Mohanakumar (2006)¹⁰. When the suicide rate of a particular section of population is higher than suicide rate of the society as a whole, it indicates a crisis situation. According to NCRB data, average suicide rate in India is 11.2 per 100000 people in 2013, while that of farmers is 15.8 which is roughly 50% higher than the general suicide rate indicating a crisis of agrarian nature (Nagraj, 2014). Sri Lanka, USA, Canada, England and Australia have identified farming as a profession with higher stress that is associated with higher suicide rate than the general population, revealing the global trend of a higher farmer suicide rate (Parvathamma, 2016).

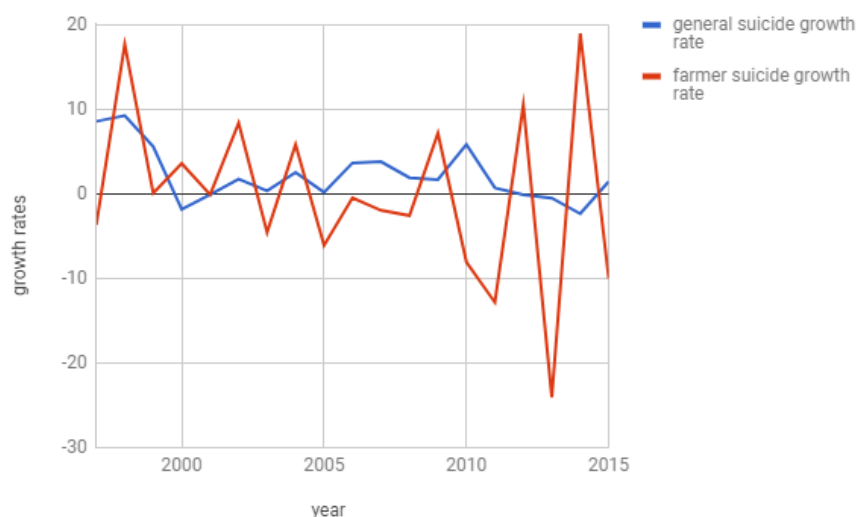
Over 2.5 lakh farmers have committed suicide in India in the previous 15 years (NCRB reports 1995-2010), with an average of 16000 farmer suicides per year. Actual farmer suicide rate might be higher than published statistics as a section of farmer suicides are reported under ‘farm accidents’ because of the taboo attached to suicides (as a result of understanding suicides as ‘bad’ or ‘unnatural’ deaths) (Rosmann, 2010). In addition to unreported deaths, there are also increasing number of suicide attempts by agricultural households. Official data on farmer suicides gets undermined due to many reasons - political / families not reporting / police not identifying it as a *genuine* farmer suicide etcetera. While this is the case with the suicide itself, suicide attempts often go unreported. And considering how few states reported zero farmer suicides, like Chhattisgarh in the years 2011, 2013 and West Bengal in 2012, 2013 - this statistic could be a gross understatement. Attempts by the State to conceal the magnitude of the crisis (the dip in 2013 which is a direct outcome of data slaughtering) instead of arresting its growth is undisguisable (Figure 1(b)). While the general suicide rate remains stable to an extent, farmer suicide rate is seen to fluctuate aggressively.

¹⁰Anomic - due to the break down of social equilibrium (less regulation).

Egoistic - due to loosening of social ties ie., isolation and alienation (less integration).

Altruistic - due to high integration.

Figure 1(b), Comparing the growth rates of general suicides and farmer suicides.



Source: NCRB reports.

As far as the agrarian crisis is concerned, farmer suicide is a symptom (Padhi, 2013). Increasing Farmer Suicides is looked at as ‘an outcome or a consequence of the Agrarian Crisis’ (Sainath, 2011 (a)). Higher Debt accumulation, rising input costs, serious water crisis, price volatility, crop failure (Sainath, 2014) and mental tension, pressure mounted up by money lenders, family issues (Kumar, 2017) were among the many factors that led to farmer suicides. Majority of those who committed suicide are from Backward Castes (BC) who are either landless or small and marginal farmers with an average debt of 4 lakhs¹¹.

Far from being only a crisis of transition from subsistence to commercial agriculture or signaling the pathetic psychological state of agriculturists, the suicides encapsulate the multiple tensions which mark the biography of the nation in its neo-liberal phase: in the privileging of urban over the rural; the promotion of the market and the individual over the collective; in the erosion of long-evolved and locally embedded knowledge; and in the spread of new risks that compound entrenched disadvantages. (Vasavi, 2013, pp2)

¹¹Insights from my MA thesis on ‘Aftermath of Farmer Suicides in Andhra Pradesh’.

Initiatives taken by the Govt. to deal with agrarian crisis and farmer suicides ended up being mere political strategies to calm the angry rural voters. In regard to any banking or economic or financial crisis, one can observe an active Govt. intervention to make things 'normal' at the earliest eg., public sector banks writing off NPAs amounting to Rs. 59,547 crores in 2016 to avoid a credit crunch situation (while they are reluctant to provide loan facility to agricultural households) or the Govt. intervention during the 2008 economic crisis. Present case is not where the Govt. doesn't understand the intensity of the agrarian crisis, but of one where it chose to consciously ignore it. Only if the Govt. acknowledges the need to address root causes ie., structural factors which eventually led to the crisis and act accordingly with the intention of curbing the crisis, can we overcome it.

1.4 Significance of the Study

During mid 1960s, India has seen Green Revolution that changed the future of agriculture irrevocably. Liberal trade and economic reforms further deepened what is otherwise called an agrarian crisis. 70 years after Independence, Indian farmers (making up to approx 50% of the population) are fighting to get a decent MSP and over 3000 farmers have committed suicide. From being silent, individual acts of desperation, suicides have become political acts to highlight and protest their degraded conditions (Vasavi, 2009). With respect to agrarian crisis, factors responsible for farmer suicides are a widely researched area. Consequences (including aftermath of farmer suicides) in regard to agrarian crisis is one aspect that had been explored by only few and farmers' coping mechanisms by even less number of academicians and researchers¹². It becomes important now, more than ever, to document the consequences and the coping mechanisms employed with respect to agrarian crisis to understand the forceful structural transition where investment is diverted towards industry and manufacturing sectors with an irrational need to increase GDP while risking livelihoods of half the Indian population.

¹²The aftermath of farmer suicides was intensively researched predominantly by only two - Ranjana Padhi (in Punjab) and Kota Neelima (in Maharashtra, Vidarbha to be precise).

1.5 Research Problem and Study Area

Agrarian crisis led to an unstable situation among the farming community by threatening their livelihoods - with uncertain income and rising costs. While it affects the farming community at multiple levels, this study is an attempt to understand agrarian crisis from the farmers point of view with special focus on farmer suicides, and to document how they are coping with it. This study attempts to problematize the definition of ‘farmer’ and ‘farmer suicide’, and focuses on how the farming community ie., small, marginal, big and landless farmers responds to the crisis. Gender aspect of the agrarian crisis is also looked at.

Research questions mainly are:

1. How is the farming community affected by the crisis and what is being done in response to it?
2. How does the crisis affect men and women within the farming community?

This research is set:

1. To conceptualize the consequences of agrarian crisis from a Marxian perspective with special focus on farmer suicides in Telangana, using the empirical data.
2. To document mechanisms the farming community subscribes to as a way of coping with agrarian crisis.
3. To understand the gender aspect of the agrarian crisis.

The composition of a region ie., the cropping patterns, water availability, mode of production etc, determine the intensity of the crisis, hence region, here, becomes a vantage point in understanding the above mentioned research questions.

1.6 Methodology and Data Sources

This study is primarily set to explore the above mentioned research problem using a Marxian framework: Marxian Political Economy (MPE). MPE essentially draws on economy, society and politics while taking into consideration the interdependence that evolved historically. It assumes that the interactions between productive forces (technology, infrastructure), relations of production and the mode of production (feudal / capitalist / socialist) determine the society’s

organization / development. MPE is neither inductive nor deductive as it takes into consideration multiple casualties where parts constitute the whole and the whole influence parts. Hence, making it a suitable methodology to study agrarian crisis where market and the State constantly interact and mode of production plays a key role in determining the intensity of the crisis. Qualitative research methods are further used to probe deeper into the problem.

Table 1.1, Villages (with mandals and districts) considered for this study.

Village	Mandal	District (new)	District (old)
Gudlanarva	Bijinepalli	Mahabubnagar	Mahabubnagar
Lattupalli	Bijinepalli	Mahabubnagar	Mahabubnagar
Nandi Vaddeman	Nagarkurnool	Nagarkurnool	Mahabubnagar
Velkicharla	Bhoothpur	Mahabubnagar	Mahabubnagar
Patha Molkara	Bhoothpur	Mahabubnagar	Mahabubnagar
Kothapally	Papannapeta	Sangareddy	Medak
Aarepally	Papannapeta	Sangareddy	Medak
Yellapur	Papannapeta	Sangareddy	Medak
Laxminagar	Papannapeta	Sangareddy	Medak
Aurangabad	Medak	Sangareddy	Medak
Paathuru	Medak	Sangareddy	Medak
Kunchanpally	Medak	Sangareddy	Medak
Timakkapalli	Doultabad	Siddipet	Medak
Mallareddypalli	Wargal	Siddipet	Medak
Nentur	Wargal	Siddipet	Medak
Thupran	Thupran	Siddipet	Medak

Source: Author compilation.

As Telangana is a newly formed state (with little research done on the aspect on agrarian crisis post bifurcation), it is chosen to be the research canvas to work on. After looking at data pertinent to farmer suicides, cropping patterns and water availability, two districts - Mahabubnagar (with 95 farmer suicides from 2014 to the first quarter of 2018) and Medak (with 163 farmer suicides from 2014 to the first quarter of 2018) were chosen. Both Medak and Mahabubnagar are dry farming regions, predominantly cultivating rice, cotton, red gram, groundnut, sunflower and corn. There is a visible shift from sunflower and groundnut to cotton and soybean in the recent years (similar cropping patterns in these districts is one of the criteria

for their selection). 16 villages which exhibited a higher farmer suicide rate, spread over 8 mandals in these two districts were selected (Table 1.1).

Required data was collected from All India Kisan Sabha (AIKS) and Rythu Swarajya Vedika (RSV) which collects data on farmers who have committed suicide at district level in all states. After collecting the list of farmer suicides - district wise, random sampling method is used to select the families that are to be interviewed. Interviewing the families of suicide victims is not restricted to the obtained list alone; snowball sampling also was used, whenever needed and possible. 25 big farmers, 25 small and medium farmers and 25 families of farmers who have committed suicide were interviewed using unstructured questionnaire, case oriented study and in-depth interview methods. Due to the non responsiveness, only 20 in each sub category were included for further analysis. In addition to interacting with the farming community (small, marginal, medium and big farmers), pesticide sellers were also interviewed to understand how agrarian crisis affects people involved in farming. Data is later categorized based on caste, land ownership, gender and age to get a dynamic view of how farmers are experiencing (the consequences) and coping with the agrarian crisis.

1.7 Chapterization

The study has been organized into following chapters:

Chapter 1: Introduction

Introduces the idea of agrarian crisis from a Marxian framework. Historical, sociological, economic and political aspects of the crisis are outlined. This chapter also looks at farmer suicides as a consequence of agrarian crisis and states the research problem, data sources and the methodology used.

Chapter 2: Revisiting Farmer Suicides

This section unpacks and presents the intersectionality involved within the category of a ‘farmer’ and using this as a vantage point it is set to understand farmer suicides in Durkheim's and Munster’s framework. This section also looks into the media discourse on farmer suicides and problematizes the category ‘farmer suicides’.

Chapter 3: Understanding agrarian crisis in Telangana

Gives an overview of Telangana (drought and cropping patterns) and then maps farmer suicides in the newly formed state taking into consideration all the contributive factors. It also provides the rationale for why Mahabubnagar and Medak are chosen for this study.

Chapter 4: The consequences and coping mechanisms of agrarian crisis in Medak and Mahabubnagar

This chapter maps the consequences of the agrarian crisis as evident from farmers suicides, from a Marxian perspective by taking insights from the field data. It also looks at the mechanisms devised by the farming community (small, medium and big farmers) to withstand the crisis and the gender aspect of the crisis as a whole.

Chapter 5: Conclusion

Summarizes the major findings of the study and suggests areas that could be further researched.

1.8 Limitations of the study

Since the study mainly focuses on farmer suicides (as one of the consequences), which is under reported by Govt. and non Govt. sources, the extent / intensity of the crisis remains under represented, though the revealed numbers by themselves speak a lot. Because of the under-reported / under-recorded data, snowball sampling was used while interacting with families of farmers who committed suicide - to look beyond the 'recorded' data. This primarily helped in 'finding' unreported (women) farmer suicides.

The farming community did not wish to provide information to an 'outsider' limiting the data that could be retrieved. There were multiple instances of the interviewed farmers making contradictory statements, making it difficult to make sense of the data obtained. The limited data which might have been manipulated by the respondents, (only to not put themselves in a vulnerable position) 'might' have resulted in errors in getting at conclusions. Since this is inevitable in qualitative research involving personal information, conscious efforts were put to know the ground reality by cross questioning as long as it did not make them uncomfortable.

1.9 Summary

India has been witnessing a crisis in its agricultural sector since early 1990s. We have seen falling groundwater levels, rising costs, increasing risky investment, higher debt all along uncertain incomes and rising unemployment. The agrarian crisis affecting 49% of the population has not seen any significant measures that have been implemented to protect their livelihoods and / or provides them with alternative employment. The State instead has taken a retrogressive stand by cutting down the support. Capitalistic economies like America and Thailand have implemented policies that safeguard interests of farmers. United States Department of Agriculture (USDA) spends 25 b \$ per annum on farm subsidies (Edwards, 2016). Thailand has been executing a policy to buy un-milled rice directly from farmers at twice the market rate since 2011. A Socialist economy China increased its farm subsidies to 32 b \$ in 2013. 70 years after Independence, the average monthly income of an Indian farmer from all sources is Rs 6426 (70th round NSSO data) and climate change might reduce farm incomes by up to 20-25% in the short run (Economic Survey 2017-18 Volume 1). With 9.6% of the global net cropland area, India has a potential for crop diversification and to make farming a sustainable and profitable economic activity (Economic Survey 2016-17). The shift to commercial agriculture has increased inequalities and turned out to be exploitative. Subsistence and co-operative agriculture with regulated markets and land reforms might be a way out of the crisis. Policies which are economically rewarding and ecologically stabilizing must be put into action to counter the crisis.

Chapter 2: Revisiting Farmers Suicides

Take agriculture away from WTO... Uncontrolled multinational corporations and small number of big WTO members are leading an undesirable Globalization that is inhumane, environmentally degrading, farmer killing and undemocratic. It should be stopped immediately.

- Lee Kyung Hae (2003), leader of Korean Federation of Advanced Farmers.

Lee, a farmer and a leader, committed suicide by stabbing himself in the chest while protesting outside WTO Ministerial in Mexico in 2003, demonstrating the destructive impact liberalization has on farmers globally. WTO permits developed countries / members to subsidize over 50% (to the extent of 100%) of value of production, while developing countries are not allowed to go beyond 10% (IANS, 2017). This creates an asymmetry in the rules on agricultural trade while it simultaneously claims ‘to establish a *fairer* trading system that will increase market access and *improve* the livelihoods of farmers around the world’¹³. Integrating agriculture to the world market works under assumptions (or pre-requisites) of existence of access to credit market, required infrastructure and absence of legal impediments. India, a developing economy primarily based on agricultural sector could not meet the requirements as the medium, small and marginal farmers who constitute majority of the farming community have little or no access to institutional credit and lack required infrastructural facilities. Higher international prices are attractive but they are not sufficient to make a case in support of agricultural market integration as the existing infrastructure (go downs, transportation etc) is inadequate. In addition to that, the State support is not at par with developed countries. When adverse effects of development outweigh benefits, there is a need to rethink the discourse this ‘development’ would bring in. One needs to move beyond understanding the sectoral integration as a strategy to increase agricultural exports or revenue when livelihoods of the majority involved are at risk.

¹³ Source: https://www.wto.org/english/tratop_e/agric_e/agric_e.htm.

Agrarian crisis is more likely to be persistent, as long as policies of similar nature (ie., neoliberal nature) are implemented. Deflationary policies by cutting back subsidies given to farmers to 'reduce the fiscal deficit' would result in reverse multiplier kicking into the economy resulting in a larger cut in investment than intended, leading to a deflationary spiral. This reduces demand for goods thereby increasing unemployment in an economy which already experiences a high rate of unemployment. As long as the economy has un / under-utilized resources and persistent unemployment, reducing the fiscal deficit does not have to be the primary objective. Economists like Kahn have suggested expansionary expenditure policies to deal with such crisis as it directly increases per head 'real' income and provides employment opportunities. Developed economies with resources used up to the full extent, could use deflationary policies to protect the economy from entering an inflationary spiral. But the assumption of optimal resource usage cannot be applied to a developing economy where unused resources (man and natural) still exist. *"Economists were fallaciously using an argument that required the implicit assumption of full employment in order to oppose measures to combat unemployment"* (Patnaik, 2003, pp 44). This led to starvation deaths, rise in prostitution and beggary, pressure to fight debt, increased (illegal) sale of bodily organs for transplant purposes, distress sale of children to adoption agencies and agrarian distress leading to a rise in farmer suicides¹⁴¹⁵. Farmer suicides with this background could be understood as state sponsored deaths. It is essential for developing economies to push for 'expansionary' policies to avoid further deterioration of living conditions of the marginalized and to provide them with decent income, health, education, employment and living conditions.

The trickle-down theory, as believed by Indian economists supporting liberalization, meant benefits trickling down to the lower economic stratum of the society as it develops. Failure of this theory in regard to the economic reforms post 1990s which integrated Indian agriculture to the world market, led to the widening of structural inequalities. The paradox of green revolution with a 'web of risks' ie., market, ecological, production, capital and social risks led to agrarian crisis which resulted in farmers committing suicides (Vasavi, 2013). Countries like Sri Lanka, USA, Canada, England, Australia and India have identified farming to be one of the dangerous occupations associated with a higher suicide rate than general population (Behere & Bhise,

¹⁴2018. Andhra Pradesh village where mothers sell daughters into prostitution for survival. *The New Indian Express*, April 30.

¹⁵Sridhar, V. (2004). Distress and kidney sale. *Frontline*, 21(13), June 19 - July 2.

2009). Farmer suicides have become a global phenomenon indicating the existence of a crisis at a larger level that needs to be addressed as they “*compel us to question not only the trajectory of ‘development’ that has been deployed in rural economy but also to highlight the multiple ways in which the lives of marginalized and disadvantaged have become fragile and untenable*” (Vasavi, 2013, pp 32). Farmer suicides could be considered to be the yardsticks or barometers in evaluating the distress conditions in rural India (CMS, 2006).

This chapter essentially challenges the existing definition of a farmer by bringing into discussion the diversity / heterogeneity involved within the category of a ‘farmer’. It later throws some light on the concept of a ‘farmer suicide’, drawing inferences from Durkheim and other understandings of death and suicide¹⁶. It also attempts to look at the media discourse on farmer suicides and problematizes the category of ‘farmer suicides’ in the last section.

2.1 Who is a ‘farmer’?

The census of India describes ‘farmer’ to be a person who earns more than 2/3rds (majority) of his total income from agriculture (with a cultivation period of minimum 180 days) and its allied activities. Meaning, a person whose occupation is farming and / or who is involved in activities related to it ie., rearing poultry, cattle, livestock etc. This definition provides a blurry outline of who a farmer is and is incomplete as it does not throw light on other (determining) factors, like whether the identity of a farmer is restricted to the land owning agricultural households or whether gender defines who a farmer is. The need to mention gender before this particular occupation, for example - a female farmer, brings into picture the argument of whether it is a male centered definition or a male centered occupation, though 60% of the work, according to Sainath, is done by women (Kedia, 2017). An agricultural labourer, on the other hand, is a person who works on others land on a contract or on a daily basis and gets wage income in return.

¹⁶Including Judith Butler, Daniel Munster, Mohanty, Nietzsche and Derrida. (Nietzsche and Derrida as understood by Butler in her work ‘On cruelty’).

Figure 2(a), NCRBs definition of a farmer and an agricultural labourer.

'Farmers/Cultivators' include persons whose profession is farming and who either cultivates his/her own land or who cultivate lease land with or without the assistance of agricultural labourers. **'Agricultural Labourers'** are those persons who primarily work in farming sector (agriculture/horticulture) and whose main source of income is from agricultural labour activities.

Source: <http://ncrb.gov.in/StatPublications/ADSI/ADSI2015/chapter-2A%20suicides%20in%20farming%20sector.pdf>

National Crime Records Bureau's (NCRB) definition is relatively more inclusive, as it explains and differentiates the concept of a 'landless farmer' from an 'agricultural labourer' (Figure 2(a)). Based on the land holding status, a farmer is further classified as marginal with <1 hectare land (1 hectare = 2.47 acres), small with 2 hectares, medium with 2-4 hectares and large with >4 hectares of land. However, NCRBs definition fails to take into consideration the proportion of non-farm income a farmer gets. A person with a stable non-farm professional job who owns a piece of land (cultivating it with the help of agricultural labourers) would be identified as a 'farmer' like Amitabh Bachchan, though he is primarily an actor¹⁷.

As these two definitions independently failed to provide a comprehensive description of the nature of a 'farmer', combining these two could be useful. A farmer is understood to be a person who either cultivates in his / her own land or who cultivates leased land with or without the assistance of agricultural labourers for at least 180 days and whose majority of the income (from all sources) is from agriculture and allied activities (which ensures dependency on agriculture). This understanding of a farmer could effectively be used to analyze the impact of the agrarian crisis on farmers. Since the Govt. policies understand and define a 'farmer' that excludes tenant farmers, absentee landlords gain out of schemes intended to benefit the actual cultivators. The definition of a farmer proposed above hence becomes relevant as it is more inclusive.

¹⁷ Gidwani, Deepak (2010). Amitabh Bachchan turns kisan : this is now official. *DNA*, july 21.

2.2 Of suicides and farmer suicides

The act of committing suicide “*is as old as human race, it is probably as old as murder and almost as old as natural death*” (Zilboorg quoted in Durkheim, 1897, pp xx). The term suicide is applied to “*all cases of death which resulting directly or indirectly from a positive or a negative act of the victim himself, which he knows will produce this result*” (Durkheim, 1897, pp xlii). Durkheim further argued that isolating the act of suicide and trying to look at it in its individual form would not let us form an association between suicide and the social concomitants (whole over parts); he understands suicide not as a manifestation of the agency of suicide itself but of other phenomena including the extent of social integration and regulation with respect to the victim.

Durkheim talks of four types of suicides:

1. *Egoistic*: lack of social integration.

Increasing individuality merged with the lack of the social support system leads to higher number of suicides.

2. *Altruistic*: higher social integration.

Where individuals life is rigorously governed by a custom or habit - lack of individuality. Individuals who are expected to meet the societal standards but do not and consequently committing a suicide.

3. *Anomic*: lack of social regulation.

Disrupted regulation during economic boom or depression.

4. *Fatalistic*: higher social regulation.

Individuals who feel they have no control over their own life are likely to commit suicide.

“*Social isolation, detachment from family and individualism in agriculture*” led to farmer suicides which could be identified as egoistic and anomic (Mohanty, 2013, pp 50). Breakdown of social ties (lack of social integration) led to individualist feelings which led to ambitious and speculative economic activities in turn led to the decline of their current socio-economic status and despair (lack of social regulation). Weaker social integration leads to weaker social regulation which results in suicides. Increasing individuality encourages farmers to undertake risk involving activities, leading to uncertain income. “*Individuated and isolated farmers set a*

high level of aspirations as the normative demands... Disappointment and despair of the suicide victims, associated with loss of agricultural income and indebtedness, had its origin in growing social isolation and individualism” (Mohanty, 2013, pp 52). Higher suicides are not because of lower income levels (ie., increasing poverty) but because of disturbance in the collective order (Durkheim, 1897).

Munster (2015) understands farmer suicides as ‘public deaths’ and ‘protest suicides’; not as quiet and uncomplaining but as public, loud and accusatory acts which resemble the altruistic nature of suicide that is the result of the structural violence of economic transformation. The resultant manifestations of ‘ecological, economic and moral’ crisis of commercialized agriculture is understood by Munster as necessary and sufficient explanations for these suicides. He rejected the view that farmer suicides are of egoistic nature as it is “*belittling the devastating impact of neoliberal policies on farming community*” by emphasizing individualism and undermining the structural economic causes (Munster, 2015 and Sharma, R.K., Mohanakumar, S., 2006, pp 1558). Mohanty (2013) blames the farmer for setting high aspirations as normative demands which lead to uncertain and risky investments giving way to a debt trap resulting in farming committing a suicide. He failed to look at why agriculture has failed to provide farmers a *stable and risk free* income. As a farmer suicide is understood as ‘scandal of the state’ by Munster (2015). Individualizing farmers suicides would deliberately shift the focus from holding the state responsible in the direction of victim blaming.

Either death had to be imposed by society as a duty, or some question of honour was involved, or at least some disagreeable occurrence had to lower the value of life in the victims’ eyes. (Durkheim, 1897, pp 181 on altruistic suicides).

Altruistic nature of a suicide ideally describes farmer suicides in a broader sense. Farmers are committing suicide to save their face, but what brought them to that point is the structural change in agrarian relations due to neoliberal policies that are imposed upon the farming community in an attempt to push for the capitalist mode of production. Higher individualism, as mentioned by few, is one of many side effects of the structural change enforced upon agricultural sector and

special emphasis on just this aspect undermines the larger impact it has on agricultural households (ie., parts over whole). The binary divide between these two aspects blurs down as a farmer ends his life and we can see the whole interacting with parts and parts influencing whole. *“Our freedom in death is somewhere between others, objects (used to self inflict death) and us”* (Munster, 2015 a, pp 197).

Derrida looks at death penalty as an equivalence relation set up *“between crime and punishment, between injury and price to be paid”* (Butler, 2014, pp 31). This can be extended to self inflicting death penalties where the person at hand comprehends suicide as the punishment for the ‘crime’ he had committed. Nietzsche, about cruelty, mentions of the possibility that it could be rationalized as morality - a moral duty to be performed (Butler, 2014). Drawing inferences from these two, a farmer suicide could be understood to be rationalized as the moral duty the farmer *has* to perform for the crime - of putting his family in a vulnerable situation - he had committed. However, understanding suicides (according to Durkheim) should go beyond analyzing individual choices (parts) towards identification of larger structural problems (whole) as our actions are always conditioned.

The frenzy towards risky investment to get a higher return is associated with the ‘waging masculine competing’ behavior (Kumar, 2017). Male farmers’ need to hold on to the image of an ‘ideal man’ by satisfying family’s needs and to provide them with additional comforts is not an agriculture specific phenomenon but is observed wherever patriarchy still has a strong hold. Blaming patriarchy for the risk taking behavior and de-linking it from agrarian crisis individualizes the distress. Focus should instead be on the non-positive agricultural surplus post 1990s for the vast majority of small and marginal farmers (on agriculture failing them). On a similar note, as the social, economic, political situation is taken care of by men in agricultural households, women remain ‘protected’ from the crisis that affects them. *“Women, as she lives outside of community existence more than man, she’s less penetrated by it”* - explaining the fewer instances of women committing suicide (Durkheim, 1897, pp174). Although increasing male out migration resulted in feminization of agriculture, exposing women to the social pressures, patriarchy manages to keep them out of social spaces men are predominantly a part of.

Farmer suicides could be understood as a passive way of resistance in a political undertone to the otherwise unheard or silenced voices. It is instead looked via the sociological point of view ie., increasing isolation and individualism where ‘victim blaming’ takes place as it understands suicide (part) with no regard to the social conditioning (whole) that led to the act. Cases of farmer suicides reported should be interpreted as symptoms of a larger crisis in agricultural sector affecting the small and marginal farmers the most (as they make up the majority of farmer suicides).

2.3 Post feudal agrarian relations: A cause for farmer suicides

As an agrarian economy transforms itself into an economy that is primarily manufacturing or industry based, the changing agrarian relations must be taken into consideration. Dealing with landlordism would be a major challenge a transforming economy would have to face in addition to creating conditions that increase productivity while ensuring sustainability (not profits alone). Attention should also be given to how the displaced labour in agrarian sector could be re-employed in non agrarian sectors in addition to offering the required skills to withstand the transition. As the economy moves away from agriculture it is essential to provide non-farm employment. Though India legally moved beyond landlord and feudal characteristics of agrarian relations, they re-surfaced in disguise.

Bonded labour emerged as ‘neo-bondage’ in agrarian sector ie., agrarian bondage between lower caste tenant farmers and upper caste landowners who are also active money lenders in a rural setting. Neo-bondage is different from bonded labour as it is less personal with shorter time periods and the transaction is more contractual and purely monetary (Bremar, 2010). Indebtedness acts as the connecting factor not a binding factor between the tenant and landowner; though the tenant is ‘free’ to work (which is similar to the second kind of freedom Marx talks of) on any land, he is bound to divert majority of his income to repay the debt. Though it exhibits a higher rate of exploitation, the labourer essentially retains the ‘freedom’ to choose his / her employer. It, in a way, represents ‘unfree labour’, although freedom in movement of labour is retained resembling ‘voluntary’ bondage. In the case of agricultural labourers, advance wages become the ‘binding’ factor restricting the movement of labour. Bondage starts with a debt and its inheritable nature ensures that the exploitation persists across

generations. No farmer who had committed suicide was debt free, thus dragging the next generation into the debt trap, demonstrating the ‘voluntary’ generational bondage that the debt carries.

Marxian social scientists understand capitalism as a system that would lead to proletarianization of farmers or depeasantization, but were challenged with the introduction of ‘partial proletarianization’. It represents a situation where farmers exhibit land ownership alongside excessive dependency on wage income for subsistence. “*The process of de-peasantization continues, but clearly it does not operate as a smooth, inexorable transition to the proletarian end of a continuum*” (Gates, 1981, pp 64). India practices a mix of de-peasantization and of partial proletarianization. Govt. providing land to the marginalized farming community via land reforms to silence the rural unrest exhibits features of partial proletarianization. But, the land owning farmers (small, marginal and medium) signing up for MGNREGA makes the case for the existence of partial proletarianization. Since agriculture failed to provide a stable income, there is an increasing dependency on non-agricultural sectors in addition to working on their land for survival and it poses a serious threat as its extent cannot be studied. But as the agrarian crisis due to the increasing debt resulted in the disposal of land by agricultural households, it resembles depeasantization.

“*Unregulated exploitation of landlords and big farmers... combined with falling non farm work, income deflating policies and export thrust had devastating effects on the livelihoods of the poor*” (Patnaik, 2003, pp 62). In the last decade, due to the withdrawal of State and its drive towards privatization in fields of education and health, out-of-pocket expenditure has increased - which alone accounts for 60% of the income of rural India (Narkar, 2018). Uncertainty in agricultural income is a result of multiple layers of exploitation and majority of it being used to repay the debt keeping in view increasing expenses (ie., neo-bondage) adds another layer to it. After realizing that there is no way out of this ‘crisis’ that the State has promptly sponsored while privileging urban over rural, suicide is understood as the only alternative. Farmer suicides are seen as the outcome of these layered complications - partial proletarianization, neo bondage, exploitation with withdrawal of state support. A farmer suicide is a product of imposition of

neoliberal policies in a society where conservative (semi feudal and patriarchal) and exploitative (capitalistic) practices still hold a place.

2.4 Problematizing farmer suicides

The question of what makes farmer suicides problematic and what differentiates the same from a suicide in general is addressed in this section. According to the NCRB data, average suicide rate in India is 11.2 per 100000 people in 2013, while that of farmers is 15.8 which is roughly 50% higher than the general suicide rate (Nagraj, 2014). When the suicide rate of a section of population is higher than the suicide rate of society as a whole, it indicates a crisis situation (of agrarian nature, in this case). Farmer suicides solely could not explain the intensity of the crisis but they highlight the ‘production of desperate conditions’ that resulted in more than 3 lakh (NCRB figures) farmers committing suicide (Vasavi, 2013). When structural patterns of neoliberal policies (Patnaik, 2003), green revolution paradox (Roberts, 2013), growing inequalities (ie., failed trickle-down theory) and growing unemployment (at 7.97% - Shah, 2017) can be traced with respect to agrarian crisis where farmer suicides is one of the symptoms (Padhi, 2013 & Sainath, 2000). Any society - capitalistic or socialistic or mixed - has it in the human nature to maintain a stable suicide rate in the long run (Durkheim, 1897). There is a need to problematize and further look into it if it exceeds the ‘normal’ rate, which is the case with the ‘farmer suicide’ rate that is approximately 50% over the general suicide rate.

Farmer suicides are identified as ‘preventable deaths’ by Kumar (2006) and ‘state sponsored deaths’ by Padhi (2013), accentuating on how it is not ‘normal’, but is normalized eventually. Understanding the rise in farmer suicides against the projected image of a ‘developing India’ requires viewing it as structural violence imposed upon the rural economy. Corporatization of agriculture, functioning of a ‘free and fair’ market and the notion of development are challenged by increasing farmer suicides (Newman, 2015). The question that remained unaddressed is identifying the type of agriculture that is sustainable and rewarding for India in the post-reform period (Vij, 2006). Privileging the urban while marginalizing the rural in a rush towards ‘development’, resulted in farmers self-inflicting death. Isolating it from factors that led to ‘the act’ (ie., a suicide) is an attempt to belittle the intensity of the crisis.

2.5 Genuine and fake farmer suicides

NCRB identifies poverty, property dispute, marriage related issues (dowry, divorce, extramarital), family problems, farming related (failure of crops, inability to sell), illness, drug abuse / alcohol addiction, fall in social reputation, bankruptcy / indebtedness (financial institution, non financial institution, both), unknown causes and others (death of a dear person, physical abuse - rape) as the causes for farmers suicides. Genuine farmer suicides are differentiated from fake ‘farm related suicides’ for compensation to be declared by the Govt. post farmers death only if it is genuine (Kumar, 2017). Genuine farmer suicides are understood to be the result of production based vulnerabilities ie., repeated crop failure due to irregular monsoon and failure of pesticides, indebtedness while a fake farmer suicide is due to familial or inter-family disputes, alcohol addiction, sickness, status enhancing and marriage expenditure (including dowry).

Indebtedness is explained by ‘scissors crisis’ in agricultural sector which is rising input costs without increase in output prices resulting in debt trap over a period of time. As cultivation has become non-profitable, inadequate non-farm employment in addition to insecurity created by involuntary displacement of labour within agriculture has created a reserve army of over exploited labour (including landless and small and marginal land owning farmers) in agricultural sector who earn below subsistence level¹⁸. Unstable agricultural income is the primary source for indebtedness - from informal sources. Green revolution and capitalistic or commercial farming techniques, in a way, benefitted large farmers while it deteriorated the conditions for marginal land owning farming community as it requires heavy investment - on pesticides, seeds.

Micro or nuclear families increased individuality within the farming community. The binary of success / failure manifests the need to ‘prove’ their rural identity, resulting in a preference towards risky agricultural investment via a new loan, if required. It is not debt by itself but the debt trap that acts as a barrier in proving his / her abilities. “*Indebtedness is not new to rural India, while suicides due to indebtedness are*” (Rao, Narasimha & Suri, K.C., 2006, pp 1546). Indebtedness combined with scissors crisis (ie., extent of debt with the *loss of hope* in repayment) results in farmer suicides. While it is primarily borrowed to meet farm expenses,

¹⁸ 2015. ‘Agriculture in crisis’, *Frontline*, April 17.

majority of the farmers also use it to meet both farm and non-farm expenditures. *“It is not possible to distinguish family expenses from agricultural expenses, as farmers would pay back the debt when they sell their crop that includes the value of family labour”* (Rao, Narasimha & Suri, K.C., 2006, pp 1551). A farmer might use a part of his loan on health and education or in improving his living conditions (via building a house, electronic gadgets, motor vehicles etc) or on their family members’ marriage (including dowry, which is practiced all over India). Calling it a fake ‘farm related suicide’ dismisses the intensity of agrarian distress - which also resulted in starvation deaths, distress kidney sales, forced prostitution in addition to farmer suicides in rural India.

The category of a ‘fake farmer suicide’ is a result of absentee landlords or non-farmers benefiting from Govt. schemes targeting cultivating farmers. If problematizing a non-farmer suicide is recognized to be a necessity, it could instead be addressed as a ‘suicide’. The attempt to differentiate a non cultivator / non farmer suicide from a farmer suicide by associating it with a ‘fake’ farmer suicide invisibilizes the distress conditions in rural India. The probability of a non-farmer benefiting from a scheme intended to benefit farmers is not high or alarming. Since categorizing it as a ‘fake’ farmer suicide by itself does not address the issue, attention could instead be given while formulating a policy to avoid such instances. The scope and coverage of compensation scheme with respect to a farmer suicide has been narrowed down over time in the name of genuineness and transparency.

2.6 Media and Govt. on farmer suicides

Media's portrayal of events is manifested into ‘socially formalized versions of reality’ thus it becomes important to understand the representation of the agrarian crisis by the media outlets (Vij, 2006). Agrarian crisis or farmer suicides are marginally represented or underrepresented by Indian media. Though it directly affects 50% of the Indian population, providing no context for the farmers’ struggles, their protests are re-narrated by media focusing on the spectacles and the violence created by the farmers and also strategically keeping readers uninformed about their own stake in the agrarian crisis (Shah, Anushka & Aneez, Zeenab, 2018) - the issue of Tamil Nadu farmers protesting in Delhi, 2017 was brought into light not via the core demands they put forward but by the ways they tried to attract media and Prime Minister’s attention. The average

national daily's five-year average when it comes to stories relating to rural India is 0.67% while the population residing in rural India is 69% (Sainath in an interview with *The Hindu*¹⁹). It reflects how rural India which is mainly agriculture based is marginally represented in the mainstream media.

Media ... reduces it (farmers protests) to demands for a 'loan waiver.' In recent days, they've recognised the minimum support price (MSP) demand of farmers - Cost of Production (CoP 2) + 50 per cent. But media does not challenge the government's claims of already having implemented this demand. Nor do they mention that the National Commission on Farmers (NCF; popularly known as the Swaminathan Commission) flagged a bunch of other, equally serious issues... Also, while denouncing loan waiver appeals, it won't mention that corporates and businessmen account for the bulk of the non-performing assets drowning the banks.

- Sainath, 2018. A long march of the dispossessed to Delhi.

National Crime Records Bureau (NCRB), a government agency that collects and analyzes crime data with respect to Indian Penal Code (IPC), lists farmers suicides under a broader heading of 'Accidental Deaths and Suicides' (ADSI). In the NCRB records, states like Chhattisgarh in the years 2011, 2013 and West Bengal in 2012, 2013 reported zero farmer suicides. It was interpreted as a fall in the number of farmers suicides, but looking at the parallel increase in 'others' column (accommodating 'self-employed' with a subsection of 'farmers') in records, data fabrication employed to undermine the intensity of the crisis is evident (Sainath, 2015). Govt. data undermines the number of farmer suicides due to political reasons (of having lesser farmer suicides in their regime) and administrative perspective which tries to minimize the fund allotted as the compensation (Sridhar, 2015). NCRB, which has been publishing data since 1967 has

¹⁹ 2017. Media failed to document Agrarian Crisis. *The Hindu*, September 8.

stopped posting after 2014. 2015 and 2016 reports were published independently and not on its official website and 2016s came with a delay of 4 months with the missing section of ‘suicides’, without any explanation for the missing data on one of the aspects (farmer suicides) that brought a political turmoil in the recent times²⁰. The reports of 2017 and 2018 are not released yet.

Who or what is responsible for a farmer suicide? A blame game can be observed in the media discourse. By blaming the middle men, dowry - affairs - impotence, banks (*not* money lenders), congress policies, Narendra Modi and farmers themselves (victim blaming), media is re-framing the root causes in the minds of a viewer²¹²²²³²⁴²⁵. Farmer suicides are recognized as a result of a personal crisis that has to be addressed at a local level instead of tracing its patterns at a macro level. Media, by disengaging farmer suicides from the larger structural agrarian framework - by trying to shift the focus from ‘whole’ to ‘parts’ - is under-reporting the intensity of the crisis. State agricultural minister (Madhya Pradesh) Ramkrishna Kusmaria states that “*farmers are paying for their past sins of making fertile land barren by excessive use of fertilizers and pesticides*” and earlier that year he had blamed Unidentified Flying Objects (UFOs) for crop failures in Damoh district of MP (Singh, 2011). An official Govt. report in Madhya Pradesh blamed ‘bhoot aur pret’ (ghosts and spirits) for causing farmer suicides (Gupta, 2016). There were reports reducing farmers suicide to a fetish to appear on TV for a day and farmer suicides which were reported as ‘accidents’ by police²⁶²⁷. Structural transformation post neoliberal reforms meant privileging urban and marginalization of rural leading to farmer suicides, which are later individualized disregarding the context by both media and Govt.

Victim blaming is another trend that has emerged among the media houses and Govt. officials. Instead of critically analyzing the social, economic, political, cultural and ecological dimensions of the crisis and arriving at a way out of it, victim blaming is understood as a quick fix.

²⁰ Kumar, Aishwarya (2017). NCRB Delays Data on Suicides in 2016, Opposition Sees BJP Hand. *News 18*, December 10.

²¹ 2017. Experts blames middlemen for farmer suicides. *Times of India*, August 20.

²² 2015. Farmer suicides, blames on dowry, affairs and impotence. *India West*, July 28.

²³ 2017. Media failed to document Agrarian Crisis. *The Hindu*, September 8.

²⁴ 2016. Gadkari blames Congress’ policies for farmer suicides. *First Post*, April 11.

²⁵ Gupta, Saurabh (2018). Farmer Commits Suicide, Blames Modi Government For His Situation. *NDTV*, April 12.

²⁶ Mitra, Sumit (2015). Are farmers suicides in India hyped to divert funds, attract attention?. *First Post*, April 26.

²⁷ 2015. Gajendra Singh’s ‘suicide’ maybe an accident, say Delhi cops: Revive questions about AAP. *First Post*, April 28.

Alienation of the structural causes and individualizing farmer suicides is a way to shift the responsibility from the social structures onto the victims, blaming them (farmers / victims) for their actions. Victim blaming is not a solution to the crisis and it reflects the escapist nature of the State administration and its inability to provide a solution 70 years after the Independence. It is a reflection of Govt. apathy that the monthly average income from all sources of an agricultural household still remains at Rs. 6426 (NSSO round 70).

Media houses not reporting on the crisis situation affecting 50% of Indian population, questions their autonomy while highlighting the politics behind the nature of news that is produced / reported. Attempts to individualize and ridicule farmer suicides reflect media house's role in making the agrarian crisis appear redundant from a common man's point of view. At times when media can effectively bring a political uprising and can change Govts. (the recent case of Egyptian revolution, 2011), the coverage the Indian agrarian crisis and farmer suicides is receiving is restricting a possible farmer resistance to anti-farmer policies that are imposed upon them.

2.7 Conclusion

‘A spectre of agrarian distress’ is haunting India²⁸. Farmers now have to fight against naturally caused (agrarian) problems and policy driven pressures. Neoliberal policies, in a way, worsened the crisis. *“It is not correct to say that IMF and World Bank policies - which show a rise in unemployment, poverty, indebtedness and asset loss - have failed... on the contrary, they succeeded to a remarkable extent in what they were actually trying to do, namely deflate mass incomes and open developing economies in the interests of global finance capital”* (Patnaik, 2000, pp 38). Open and deflationary policies which are optimal for developed economies when implemented in under developed or developing economies leads to a distress situation like the one in rural India - among the farming community, in particular. Farmers moved away from mixed farming - cultivation and cattle rearing as it increases the cost of production, in the direction of cultivation and non-agricultural ‘stable’ wage income ie., partial proletarianization. Despite production and social instabilities, small and marginal farmers cultivating higher value agricultural commodities is a representation of ‘aggravated class, labour, capital dimensions’ of

²⁸2015. Agriculture in crisis. *Frontline*, April 17.

agrarian distress (Kumar, 2017). A chain of people are involved against farmers in this crisis - moneylenders, pesticide dealers, merchants who buy their produce and also workers who skim a kg or two while weighing (Kumar, 1998). Agrarian crisis goes beyond the crisis of production (ie., Agricultural crisis) towards the crisis of the producer and his / her livelihood. Farmer suicides have become an epidemic post neoliberal reforms in India (Vasavi, 2013). This chapter has mapped factors that directly and indirectly led to farmer suicides - one of the consequences of agrarian distress in India.

The increasing trend in suicides among farmers portrays the deteriorating conditions among them. It depicts the other side of development that is consciously being sidelined by our Govt.. A farmer committing suicide does not mark an end to the distress, but it results in further intensification of the existing distress to people dependent on him / her (immediate family). A three member team comprising of MRO, SI and AO visit the family post farmer's death to confirm if it is a 'genuine' farmer suicide. If it is identified to be a genuine farmer suicide, the family shall become 'eligible' for a compensation of 5 lakhs (since 2015- it was 2 lakhs earlier). On the grounds that the farmer does not own land or has not taken a loan from a formal source, it is identified as a 'farm related suicide' not a 'farmer suicide' and is exempted from giving a compensation. If the loan amount is primarily used for education and health and is not invested in agriculture, it is not recognized as a genuine farmer suicide. Privatization of education and health increased out of pocket expenditure on these sectors and a farmer suicide in this context is an outcome of state sponsored violence. It is instead categorized as a fake farmer suicide, for which the family receives zero compensation from the Govt..

Farmer suicides could only be reduced if the agrarian crisis is brought under control via expansionary policies in addition to adequate Govt. support to the farming community. This includes diverting Govt. funds towards agricultural research to improve productivity using sustainable methods. And also ensuring that farmers receive income in proportion to labour applied with inclusive institutional credit, crop insurance and damage relief to assure a decent income in the long run. Exploitative middlemen and moneylenders (who are both the same in some cases) play a role in further worsening the condition and both of which should be regulated by the Govt.. One needs to keep in view the vast majority of the farming community that is

vulnerable and open to risk while trying to maintain a 'free and fair market place' which the neo liberal policies promised but failed to deliver in the agrarian sector. Scissors crisis could also be controlled by guaranteeing a decent output price by eliminating the chain of middlemen and ensuring a positive income among the farming community. A large section of population experiencing a persistent distress through decades could be understood as a Governmental failure in two ways: one, by implementing policies that acted as agents in leading to a crisis and two, by failing to identify alternatives to counter the distress causing policies. One should be sensitive to not just the agrarian crisis but the 'rural crisis' as a whole - where the traditional sectors which produce commodities employing traditional modes of production like weaving, handicrafts etc are under distress.

Chapter 3: Understanding Agrarian Crisis in Telangana

Telangana emerged as a new state in 2014 as per Andhra Pradesh Reorganization Act (2014) with a total geographical area of 112.08 lakh hectares (Figure 3(a)). Of which, the area under forest cover constitutes 22.66%, cultivable land 37.25%, fallow land 14.08%, non-agricultural land 7.96% and barren and uncultivable land of 5.42%. With an average land holding of 1.12 hectares (2.76 acres) of which 62% are marginal holdings (< 1 hectare), agriculture has become uneconomical. The share of agriculture and allied activities in Gross State Domestic Product (GSDP) is 15.3% in 2015-16 at current prices (Statistical yearbook 2017, pp 103) and is observed to be less than the share of agriculture and allied (of all states on an average) in the Indian GDP which is 17 - 18%²⁹.

Figure 3(a), Locating the state of Telangana



This chapter aims to provide an overview of agriculture in the state of Telangana by focusing on agrarian crisis and farmer suicides in the state. Telangana ranks second in terms of farmers

²⁹ Sunder, Sushruth (2018). India economic survey 2018: Farmers gain as agriculture mechanisation speeds up, but more R&D needed. *Financial Express*, January 29.

suicides in India after Maharashtra³⁰. The chapter also looks at the plight of tenant farmers, impact of Govt. policies and its consequences on farmers.

While the demand for separation and formation of the new state of Telangana was based primarily, on backwardness with respect to agriculture, access to health, education etc., and the new state shows no development on those parameters. Pre-bifurcation, Andhra Pradesh ranked third (in 2013) all over India with respect to farmer suicides and post-bifurcation AP ranks sixth while Telangana stands second after Maharashtra (for three consecutive years 2014, 2015 and 2016), with more than 3500 farmer suicides from 2014 - 2017 (Figure 3(b)). Data is taken from NCRB reports for the years 1995 - 2015, RSV for 2016, 2017 for Telangana and other newspaper sources are used to get the number of farmer suicides in Andhra Pradesh in 2016, 2017, as the NCRB reports have not been released from 2016 onwards.

Figure 3(b), Farmer suicide rate in AP and Telangana.



Source: Author compilation based on the data from NCRB and RSV

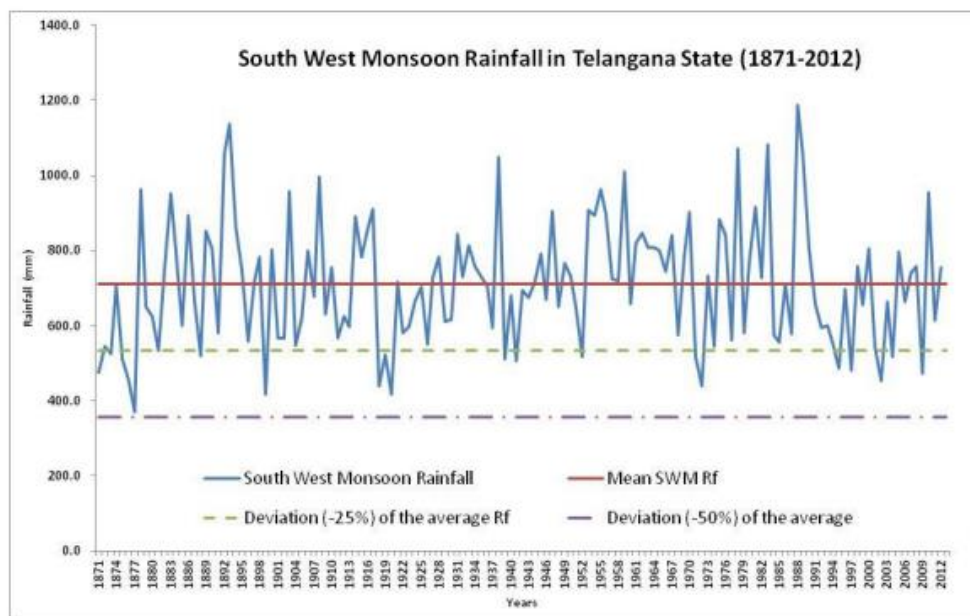
3.1 Of Inadequate Rainfall and Droughts

The newly formed state of Telangana is agriculture driven and is located in a semi arid region with rainfall as a major source of water. Around 38% of the total net sown area is irrigated and the rest is predominantly dependent on rainfall (Drought Management Manual for Telangana

³⁰ According to the NCRB data, highest number of farmer suicides in 2016 were reported in Maharashtra (3030), followed by Telangana (1358).

State, 2016). Telangana receives an average annual rainfall of 906.6 mm, as opposed to the national average of 1190 mm. The region-wise breakup is as follows: southern Telangana receives an average annual rainfall of less than 750 mm, eastern and extreme northern parts of Telangana receive an annual rainfall of over 1000 mm and central Telangana gets an annual rainfall between 750 to 1000 mm. Of the 906.6 mm, 715.1mm is due to South-west monsoon, 129.2 mm due to Northeast monsoon, 11.5 mm in winter and 50.8mm in summer. Farmers start sowing seeds during the south-west monsoon period (ie., kharif season) and a high variability (of 75 - 85%) in the rainfall coupled with no alternative water sources result in uncertain yields (Figure 3(c)). Persistent low levels of rainfall with a higher variability represents a drought like situation.

Figure 3(c), Variability in rainfall due to fluctuations in South West Monsoon.



Source: Drought Management Manual for Telangana State, 2016

According to the Manual for Drought Management (2016) released by Ministry of Agriculture, “drought... is a recurrent, yet sporadic feature of climate... Conditions of drought appear primarily, though not solely, on account of substantial rainfall deviation from the normal” (pp 16). National Commission on Agriculture in India classified three types of droughts:

1. *Meteorological*

Drought is a phenomenon associated to seasonal rainfall that is 25% less than its average value. It is classified as a moderate drought if it is less than 26–50% and a severe drought when the deficit exceeds 50% of the average.

2. *Agricultural*

Inadequate soil moisture causing extreme crop wilting and is usually triggered by a Meteorological drought. It is defined as a period of four consecutive weeks of severe meteorological drought with a rainfall deficiency of more than 50%.

3. *Hydrological*

Deficiencies in surface and subsurface water supplies leading to lack of water for normal and specific needs.

Drought in Telangana could be identified as ‘meteorological’, making agriculture an uneconomical occupation due to the absence of other irrigation methods. Table 3.1 presents the five criteria for deciding if an area is affected by drought. If at least 3 of the mentioned criteria are met, that mandal will be declared as drought hit area (DHA) and is eligible for special Govt. attention in terms of financial assistance (see Table 3.1).

Table 3.1, Criteria for ‘drought’ and ‘severe drought’ declaration.

Sl.No	Parameter to be considered	Criteria for drought affected Mandal	Criteria for Severely drought affected Mandal
1	SW Monsoon Rainfall (June to September)	Departure from normal by -25% to -49%	Departure from normal by more than -50%
2	Dry Spell	period of four consecutive weeks with weekly rain fall < 50% of the normal value during all the four weeks	period of four consecutive weeks with weekly rain fall without any rainy day of > 5mm or equal to 5mm in any of the weeks
3	Cropped Area	cropped area in the mandal is reduced by more 50 percent by 15 th of July	cropped area in the mandal is reduced by more 70 percent by 15 th of July
4	Moisture Adequacy Index	Between 0.50 to 0.26	< 0.25
5	Normalized Difference Vegetation Index (NDVI)	Departure from normal NDVI from -20 to -39%	Departure from normal NDVI by -40% or more

Source: Drought Management Manual for Telangana State, 2016.

Reduction in rainfall, dry spell and reduced net cropped area are commonly observed characteristics of a drought. Telangana which is primarily an agrarian based economy declared 153 out of 584 mandals to be DHAs (in October 2017) indicating that approximately one third of the state is water deprived³¹.

According to the Drought Management Manual, 2016, drought has the following affects, at a broader level:

1. *Economic:*

Production in agriculture and related sectors is negatively affected by the lack of rainfall as it causes loss of income and purchasing power among all farmers, most vulnerable being the landless, small and marginal farmers and rural population dependent on agriculture (ie., agricultural labour). In addition to that, industries dependent upon agriculture and allied sectors for their raw materials would also suffer losses.

2. *Environmental:*

Lower water levels in reservoirs, lakes and ponds would lead to reduction in availability of water for regular usage (both agricultural and other wise).

3. *Social:*

Out migration by those dependent on agriculture, due to reduced employment (and income) in DHAs, indebtedness, malnutrition and in extreme cases starvation deaths and / or farmer suicides.

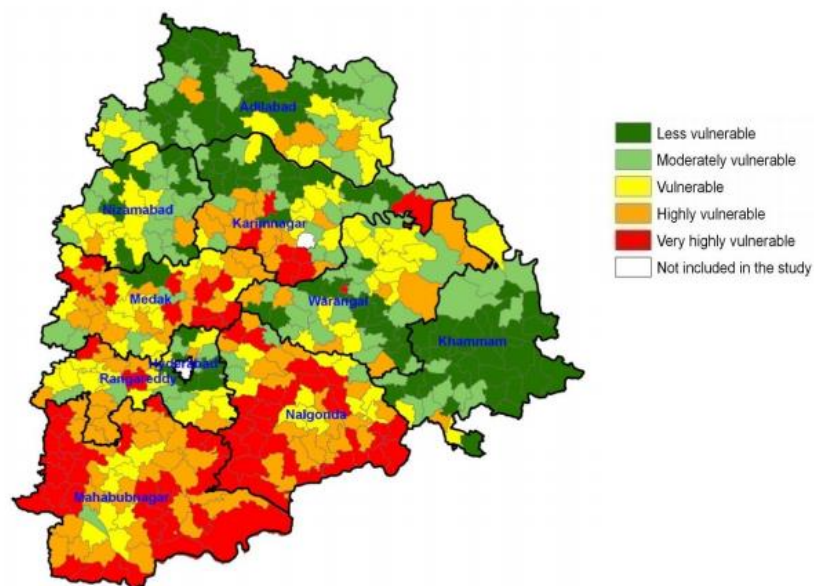
The agricultural drought vulnerability index (ADVI)³² in Telangana reports 87 mandals as less vulnerable, 90 mandals as moderately vulnerable, 91 mandals as vulnerable, 98 mandals as highly vulnerable and 76 mandals as very highly vulnerable. 60% of Telangana is either vulnerable or highly vulnerable or very highly vulnerable (Figure 3(d)). Mandals with high and very high vulnerability are concentrated in Nalgonda and Mahabubnagar districts followed by Ranga Reddy, Medak and Karimnagar districts. Based on this Index, Medak and Mahabubnagar districts have been selected for this study, as they exhibit similar cropping patterns with high

³¹ 2017. 153 mandals to be declared drought-hit in Telangana. *Hans India*, October 26.

³²ADVI is generated from 3 parameters ie., sensitivity, exposure and adaptive capabilities with regard to irrigation, soil, crop, weather and land holdings.

vulnerability towards the occurrence of an agricultural drought (as they receive deficit rainfall) and higher instances of farmer suicides.

Figure 3(d), Vulnerability with respect to drought in the districts of Telangana.



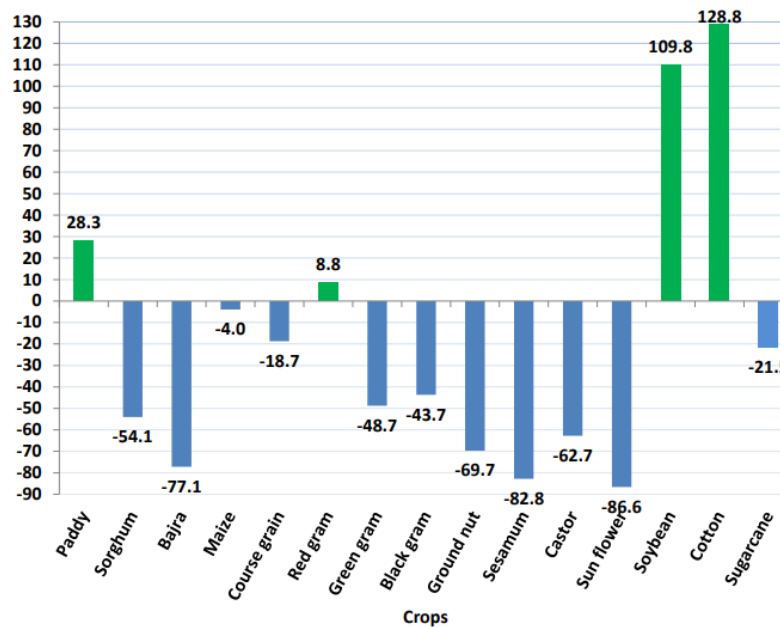
Source: Drought Management Manual for Telangana State, 2016.

The State Govt. constitutes a committee to examine and issue a notification identifying mandals as ‘drought affected’. Only after identifying a drought affected area and declaring it as DHA, would it be eligible to receive the required assistance from state. Data on preliminary crop damages is collected from districts and is reported. A consolidated beneficiary list is then prepared by the revenue department incorporating details of bank account, Aadhar number, survey number etc. Such a list would exclude those farmers who do not have a bank account, Aadhar card and land *pattas*. The contingency plan drawn up by the Govt. that aims to counter the drought covers the following: 1) arranging seeds for alternate crops on subsidy; availability of seeds could be assured by stocking seed banks regularly, 2) arranging fertilizers (organic) and bio pesticides on subsidy, and 3) uninterrupted power supply to be ensured (Drought Management Manual for Telangana State, 2016). A provision is made to reschedule agricultural term loans, crop loans and other short term loans in addition to granting fresh crop loans, to ensure that farmers do not fall in a debt trap due to recurrent droughts. This state assistance is aimed to ensure a minimum income flow for families affected by droughts.

3.2 Contextualizing Farmer Suicides in Telangana

Telangana primarily produces paddy, chilly, sugar cane, mango, tobacco, cotton, red gram, sunflower and peanuts. This is a result of the shift in cultivation from food crops to commercial crops in the last few decades (Figure 3(e)).

Figure 3(e), Change in crop patterns in Telangana during 2007 to 2015.



Source: niti.gov.in/writereaddata/files/Telangana_Presentation_1.pdf.

Telangana has 56 lakh cultivators (of whom 14 lakh cultivators are ‘tenant farmers’) and the state ranks second, in both rural indebtedness with 86% after AP (93%) and farmer suicides after Maharashtra as reported by NCRB in 2014 and 2015³³. As the Central Government (NCRB) stopped publishing data on suicides since 2016, Rythu Swarajya Vedika (RSV) and All India Kisan Sabha (AIKS) were approached to get the required data on farmer suicides in Telangana. Since its formation in 2014, in Telangana more than 3624 farmers had committed suicide: 792 in 2014, 1147 in 2015, 784 in 2016, 676 in 2017. The Govt. ‘hiding’ suicide statistics, in this context, could be understood as a deliberate attempt to play down the impact of the crisis, by keeping the public uninformed about its intensifying nature. In a study conducted by RSV (2018), 95% of farmers who committed suicide were landless, small and marginal farmers and,

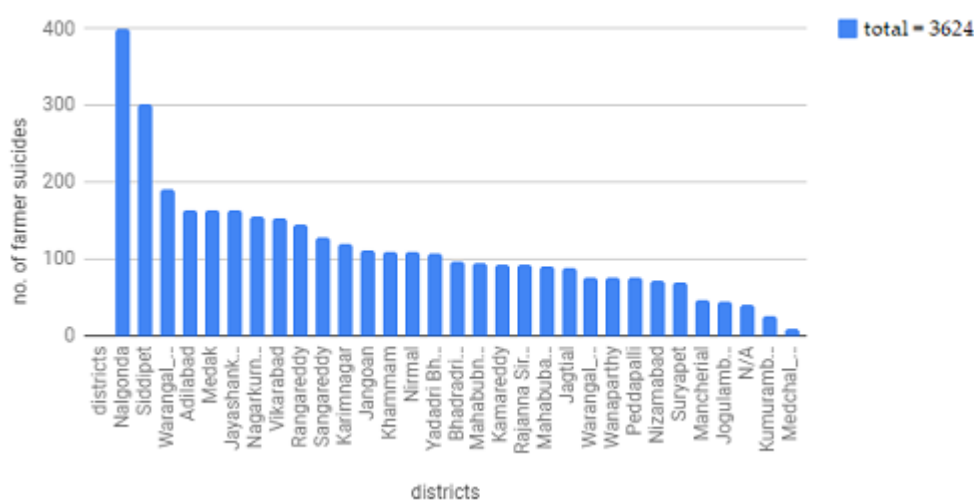
³³ Refer Manjunatha, Ramappa (2017), for more on indebtedness.

75% of them were tenant farmers to whom the absentee landlords did not ‘pass on’ the financial assistance of various Govt. schemes, thereby suggesting the failure of the ‘trickle down’ theory³⁴.

3.2.1 Mapping Farmer suicides in the 29th state

Commercial agriculture is the dominant cropping pattern in Telangana. Non-remunerative output prices when coupled with increasing input and tenancy costs resulted in indebtedness and consequently, a debt trap in the case of landless, small and marginal farmers. Middlemen pocket a major share of profits generated in agricultural sector, next to big agriculturists owning large land holdings (who also invest or participate in non agricultural activities) where there is a scope for innovation and technology and where per acre costs are relatively low. More than 3500 farmers have committed suicide since the formation of the state in 2014, making Telangana stand second with respect to farmer suicides in India (Figure 3(f)).

Figure 3(f), Farmer suicides in Telangana from 2014 to 2017.



Source: Rythu Swarajya Vedika (RSV)

Rise in the land value after bifurcation resulted in increasing tenancy costs that affected the landless, tenant, small and marginal farmers the most. Agriculture in Telangana is primarily rainfed and the irregularities with respect to rainfall resulted in increasing dependency on borewells (also implying a higher financial burden). It is estimated that there are approximately 2

³⁴ The study by RSV is titled ‘Farmer suicides, Land Ownership, Tenant Farmers and Rythu Bandhu’ with a sample of 692 farmer suicides (from 2014 to the first quarter of 2018) spread over the 23 districts of Telangana.

million functional borewells in Telangana in 2015³⁵. As the average cost of setting up a borewell is Rs 60000, aggregate investment on borewells alone in the state amounts to Rs 12,000 crores. To minimize the financial burden, Mission Kakatiya with an estimated annual outlay of Rs 45000 crore (starting from 2016) is aimed to make the state farmer 'suicide free' by 2020 by restoring minor irrigation tanks and lakes. But the private investment on borewells went up in the following years indicating the failure of such schemes in reaching out to the farming community. Additionally, no subsidy is provided by the Telangana Govt. in regard to borewell installation like it is provided in other states (AP, Karnataka, Gujarat, Maharashtra and Odisha).

Spurious seeds (with < 10% returns on investment), unseasonal rains and pests resulted in crop failures in many parts of the state³⁶. Farmers, on the other hand, are not equipped with sufficient power supply from the state. Although 7 hour free electricity was promised by the state Govt., only 3 - 4 hours of free electricity is the reality in many districts in Telangana (as observed from the field data). Meanwhile, farmers were directed by the state to produce certain cash crops - like chilly in 2016. But, as the supply of chilly in market went up, its price fell, pushing farmers into further losses (under guidance of the Govt. ironically). This reflects how the state Govt. understands and deals with the issue of agrarian crisis and farmer suicides. Loss of income due to all the above mentioned factors intensifies the agrarian crisis and eventually results in farmer suicides. 3500 farmer suicides in the state of Telangana, implies that at least 2 farmers have ended their lives due to agrarian crisis every day since the last four years. Without adequate institutional credit facility, input subsidies, loan waiver and land re-distribution there cannot be an improvement in living conditions of the farming community.

3.2.2 Tenant farmers and Govt. policies in Telangana

Telangana exhibits a lower operational holding of size 2.72 acres on an average. As it is not economical, tenancy is higher in Telangana (consequently, higher tenancy costs are witnessed). Tenant farmers - making 25% of total cultivators in this state, are excluded from institutional credit, input subsidies, insurance, and disaster relief. In majority of the cases, these benefits are

³⁵Suchitra, M. (2015). Over 400 farmers have committed suicide in Telangana since its formation. *Down To Earth*, July 4.

³⁶ Sudhir, Uma (2017). After Selling Crop At A Loss, Telangana Farmers Return Home With Pesticide. *NDTV*, November 17.

enjoyed by the landowners while the landless tenant farmers get ‘trapped’ in the distress³⁷. Cases of absentee landowners making use of agricultural loans at lower interest rates were reported. This has a dual effect of nudging the actual (tenant) cultivators towards informal lending with exorbitant interest rates even after formulating a policy that is *aimed* to help them. It also nullifies the point of finding it necessary to provide the farming community with lower interest loans by formal credit sources.

A toll-free 24x7 suicide prevention cell - 104 –was set up by the Telangana state to prevent farmers from ending their life, which worked only for two months before closing down³⁸. The loan waiver announcement made by Telangana Govt. (post bifurcation) in 2014, totaling an amount of 17 crores, was implemented in a staggered manner. The Govt. waived off formal debt of only land owning farmers, excluding landless tenant farmers and the debt from private sources, thus not entirely relieving farmers of their debt burden like the scheme originally intended to. Increasing tenancy costs in Telangana with zero guarantee on remunerative prices, pushed tenant farmers into the clutches of informal moneylenders and a deeper debt trap.

Loan Eligibility Card (LEC) launched by (then combined) Andhra Pradesh Govt. in 2011-12, was aimed to let a tenant farmer avail formal credit while protecting the rights of the land owners. LECs are valid for one year and help in getting access to input subsidies and insurance which are otherwise directed to the landowners. LECs acknowledge the otherwise invisible tenant farmers, and their struggles with getting a loan or insurance. In 2011-12, over 5 lakh tenant farmers procured bank credit of 390 crores with an average of Rs. 7800 per farmer via LEC which fell to 3.9 lakh tenant farmers and 133 crores - average of Rs. 3410 per tenant farmer in 2012-13 and zero cards were given by Telangana Govt. in 2014 and the years that followed³⁹. Although LECs were issued, banks denied them loans fearing non repayment as the tenant farmers do not have any collateral.

³⁷ Adepu, Mahender (2017). Crop loans still a far cry for tenant farmers in Telangana. *Hans India*, June 22.

³⁸ 2015. ‘24x7 toll-free suicide cell proposed for Telangana’, *Deccan Chronicle*, September 5.

³⁹ Rao, Bhanupriya (2018). Telangana’s Rythu Bandhu scheme fails farmers, flops in curbing their anger. *Business Standard*. December 06.

The 'Rythu Bandhu' scheme implemented by Telangana Govt. in 2018 with a budget of 12000 crores aims to provide farmers direct cash of Rs 8000 per year (Rs 4000 per season in kharif and rabi), excludes landless (tenant) farmers⁴⁰. Identification of a 'farmer' by the Govt. (earlier problematized in chapter 2), explains how a landless tenant farmer is excluded from schemes targeting the farming community ie., they end up targeting only the 'land owning' farmers. Nearly 797 cheques of worth Rs 87,76,830 went missing as of August 29 questioning the 'efficiency' of the scheme⁴¹. As 70% of the farmer suicides in Telangana are by tenant farmers, it becomes a necessity to extend Govt. schemes and support to also include tenant farmers in addition to the land owning farmers⁴². A mechanism that keeps in check the efficiency of implemented schemes is needed.

It is evident from the above discussion that while the LEC and Rythu Bandhu schemes were conceived to help farmers in times of drought and agrarian crisis, in actual operation it benefitted only land owning farmers. The reality of rural Telangana is that a major chunk of cultivators are tenant farmers and agricultural labourers. These schemes did not address this group and excluded them from its benefits. Thus we note that those farmers most adversely affected by the agrarian crisis could not access these schemes, thereby pushing them deeper into the crisis, and some to suicide.

The growth of urban wealth and rural misery could be seen as parallel 'developments' in the growing / developing India. It indicates that the agrarian surplus extracted via exploitative measures imposed on the marginalized farming community help in accumulation of wealth / capital resulting in urban development and negative returns in cultivation (Narasimha Rao, Suri 2006). Tenant farmers (primarily landless) undergo dual marginalization - one, as agriculture as a whole is sidelined in the larger political context and two, as the schemes targeted to issue credit or subsidies or financial support exclude them from it.

⁴⁰2019. Centre replicates Telangana's Rythu Bandhu scheme to give income support to farmers. *The News Minute*, Feb 01.

⁴¹Pradeep, B. (2018). 654 Rythu Bandhu cheques go missing from SBI branch. *The Hindu*, August 29.

⁴²Nitin, B. (2017). Is Telangana underplaying farmer suicides? 77 dies in the last 3 months, say activists. *The news Minute*, June 22.

3.2.3 Farmer resistance in Telangana

Telangana has seen a history of resistance by farmers to exploitation. The Telangana peasant struggle (1947-51) and Tebhaga movement (1946-47) in Bengal are identified as “*the beginning of the liberation struggle against bourgeois landlord Government*” ie., Congress (Sundarayya, 1973, pp 23). It is recognized to be on the lines of Chinese revolution rather than the Russian revolution, as the aim is not to attain political power but control over land by actual cultivators who were reduced to tenants-by-will or sharecroppers or landless labourers and also to get rid of excessive exploitation under ‘bonded labour’ (*vetti*). In the Telangana Peasants Struggle, peasants killed or drove out landlords and local bureaucrats and seized and distributed the land⁴³. 4000 communists and peasant militants were killed in the fight with private feudal army, 25000 were arrested while 10000 were detained and more than 10,00,000 acres of land from over 3000 villages was distributed to landless peasants as the result.

The Kisan Long March under the leadership of the AIKS in Maharashtra in March 2018, with 40000 to 50000 farmers and a larger participation from adivasis and women saw a strong resistance towards the attitude of the government in regard to its anti-farmer, anti-agriculture and anti-rural policies. The Kisan March to Mumbai, demanded the implementation of MSP, loan waiver and institutional credit in the field of agriculture. More than 30 farmers from Tamil Nadu protested in Delhi (in April 2017) for more than 100 days demanding implementation of loan waiver and the M.S. Swaminathan suggested MSP which is 50% over the cost of production. It was the ‘mode of protest’ by Tamil Nadu farmers - wearing skulls of farmers who supposedly committed suicide and pretending to eat rats - that caught the Nation's attention not the intensity of the crisis by itself, questioning the reporting ethics on farmers that Indian media upholds.

Protests of the same nature, opposing “*Modi and Adani's 'Modani' model of corporate profiteering and loot of resources*” were seen in Haryana, Rajasthan, Punjab, Assam and few other states (Krishnan, 2018, pp 87). But Telangana with its history of organizing a peasant struggle for five continuous years and a long fight for a separate state (due to economic, social and cultural exploitation) for 45 years, was not actively seen protesting against the anti farmer

⁴³ Mondal, Puja. Peasant Movements: Telangana Peasant Struggle (1947-51). Retrieved from <http://yourarticlelibrary.com/sociology/peasant-movements-telangana-peasant-struggle-1947-51/31982>. Accessed on April 04.

regime. Except for very few localized protests, eg: protest demonstration by farmers on excluding tenant farmers under 'Rythu Bandhu' scheme, and the recent protest before the 2019 election on NH44 by Nizamabad farmers demanding the implementation of Swaminathan's MSP, there are no protests by Telangana farmers against the larger issue of agrarian crisis and its regional manifestations in spite of having a consistent and a higher farmer suicide rate. Ironically, Telangana Chief Minister KCR was awarded 'Agriculture Leadership Award 2017' by Indian Council of Food and Agriculture, headed by MS Swaminathan - who is recognized as the father of green revolution in India.

3.3 Summary

Telangana movement demanding a separate state was initiated due to economic, cultural and political oppression by the rest of united Andhra Pradesh. Agrarian distress intensified the movement as majority of people belonging to Telangana, except for people in Hyderabad, are dependent on agriculture and its allied activities. After more than 4 years of its formation, Telangana ranks second with respect to farmer suicides in India (it is to be noted that farmer suicides have always been higher in the Telangana part of united Andhra Pradesh). But, no steps were taken by the newly formed Govt. to effectively deal with the issue of agrarian crisis and farmer suicides.

1/3rd of Telangana (153 out of 584 districts) is declared to be officially drought hit. One should note that this region makes a strong case for examining the intensified consequences of agrarian crisis. If one takes farmer suicides as a yardstick to measure the intensity of the crisis, states like Bihar, Andhra Pradesh, Punjab which exhibit semi-feudal characteristics, experience the crisis with relatively lower intensity. With a mode of production that closely resembles capitalistic characteristics, Telangana experiences the distress with a higher intensity. This chapter argues that the region (type of crop cultivated, water availability, social relations, politics, penetration of market) determines the intensity of the crisis and the crisis in turn re-shapes the region. When the mode of production is understood as the focal point of the crisis (key argument in the Marxist literature), and when it is different in different regions, it is essential to look at how the region affects and gets affected by the crisis. The consequences of the agrarian crisis and coping mechanisms are discussed in detail in the next chapter.

Chapter 4: The Consequences and Coping Mechanisms of Agrarian Crisis

Indian farming has transitioned into an unsustainable activity post 1980s. Increasing farmer suicides, starvation deaths, high poverty rates among the rural agricultural households, indebtedness are indicators of the deepening agrarian crisis. The crisis adversely affects the small, marginal and landless tenant farmers. The persistent ‘side effects’ of the crisis also reveal the ineffectiveness of the Govt. policies that were put in place to counter the agrarian crisis. This chapter is an attempt to document the consequences of agrarian crisis (with prime focus on farmer suicides) and coping mechanisms that are practiced by the farming community as means to withstand the crisis.

As was already mentioned, Telangana has little research done on the consequences of agrarian crisis or the crisis itself. Telangana is a drought affected state with a higher farmer suicide rate post bifurcation and hence it has become a suitable canvas to study the adverse effects of the agrarian crisis. This chapter is based on field work in select villages in two districts of Medak and Mahbubnagar that primarily draws attention to the consequences and coping strategies of the agrarian crisis, with a special focus on farmer suicides. The study has chosen to use the pre-bifurcation reference to the districts throughout. The rationale for choosing Mahabubnagar and Medak is explained in chapter 1 – both are drought prone, have a similar cropping pattern, low development and high farmer suicides.

Medak and Mahabubnagar are both drought declared districts. Persistent drought conditions make agriculture an unviable option for small and marginal farmers. But water inadequacy is only one among many factors that intensify the agrarian crisis which in turn tends to worsen the social, economic condition of the marginalized farming community. The other factors include lack of Govt. regulation on output procurement and prices, falling Govt. investment in agricultural sector and its withdrawal from providing the financial support (via subsidies) at both state and the center level. These factors aggravated the living conditions of the agriculturally marginalized. Consequences faced by the farming community (belonging to Medak and Mahabubnagar, in particular and all over, in general) and coping mechanisms employed to neutralize the adverse effects are dealt with in this chapter. This study is also an attempt to document how the agrarian crisis affects working women in the agricultural sector. With the

increasing feminization of agriculture, the labour dynamics with respect to gender have changed (though it is for mere survival) in agricultural sector with respect to agrarian distress. This is explored towards the end of this chapter. A key focus of this chapter is on understanding what pushes some farmers to commit suicide as a reaction to the crisis.

4.1 Profiles of the subjects interviewed

In Medak and Mahabubnagar combined, 75 farmers were interviewed for this research which included 25 small / medium farmers, 25 big farmers and 25 families of farmers who committed suicide. A small farmer is someone who owns land up to 5 acres (< 2 hectares), medium farmer - owning 5 to 10 acres of land (2 to 4 hectares) and big farmer - owning more than 10 acres of land (> 4 hectares)). In addition to these, 5 pesticide and fertilizer sellers were interviewed. As mentioned in chapter 1, only 60 of those interviewed (ie., 20 in each category) were considered for the study owing to non-responsiveness in 15 cases.

Table 4.1, Village wise distribution of the sample of interviewed farmers in Medak and Mahabubnagar.

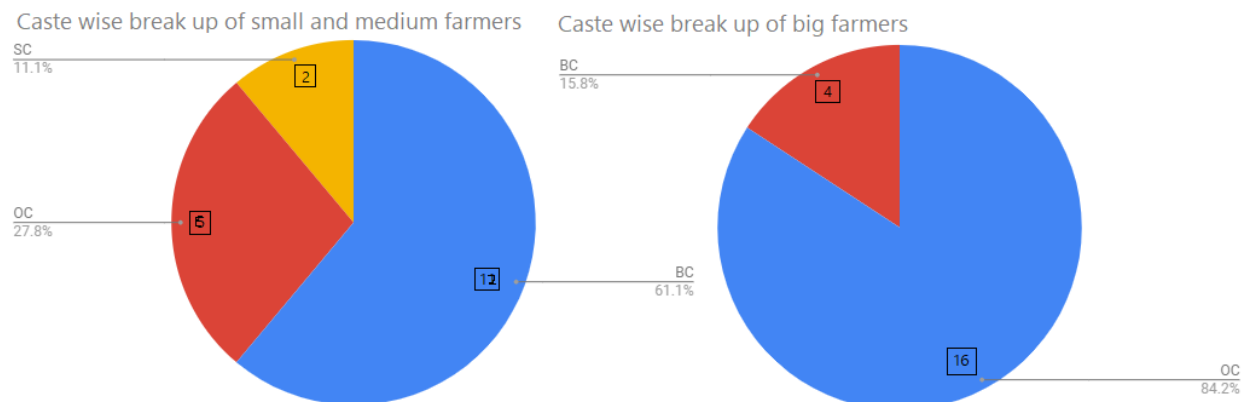
Village	District (new)	Small / Medium farmers	Big farmers	Farmer suicides	Total
Gudlanarva	Mahabubnagar	2	2	4	8
Lattupalli	Mahabubnagar	2	2	1	5
Nandi Vaddeman	Nagarkurnool	1	2	2	5
Velkicharla	Mahabubnagar	2	3	2	7
Patha Molkara	Mahabubnagar	3	1	1	5
Kothapally	Sangareddy	0	1	1	2
Aarepally	Sangareddy	0	1	1	2
Yellapur	Sangareddy	1	0	1	2
Laxminagar	Sangareddy	1	2	0	3
Aurangabad	Sangareddy	0	0	1	1
Paathuru	Sangareddy	3	0	2	5
Kunchanpally	Sangareddy	0	2	0	2
Timakkapalli	Siddipet	1	2	2	5
Mallareddypalli	Siddipet	2	0	0	2
Nentur	Siddipet	2	1	1	4
Thupran	Siddipet	0	1	1	2
Total		20	20	20	60

Source: Fieldwork, 2017-18.

Due to the lack of proper response, data collected from 15 farmers was excluded, and only 60 farmers (20 from each category) were included as a part of this study. The interviewed (60)

farmers / families of farmer who had committed suicide are spread over 16 villages and 8 mandals. Post bifurcation, Medak was divided into 2 districts - Sangareddy and Siddipet while Mahabubnagar was divided into 4 districts - Wanaparthy, Nagar Kurnool, Jogulamba Gadwal and Mahabubnagar. Of these new districts, villages in four of them were chosen for field work (Sangareddy, Siddipet, Nagar Kurnool and Mahabubnagar). Purposive sampling (higher instances of farmer suicides being the criteria) was used to pick the villages and once the quota is established ie., 25 in each category, Simple Random Sampling (SRS) was used to pick the sample to avoid personal bias. Table 4.1 provides details of farmer composition within the chosen villages.

Figure 4(a), Caste wise breakup of the interviewed small & medium big farmers.



Source: Fieldwork, 2017-18.

The interviewed small and marginal farmers owned land in the range of 1.5 acres to 7 acres. 50% of them took additional land under tenancy to increase the operational size of land holding (upto 6 acres, by one farmer) with respect to cultivation. The small sized land holdings restrict experimentation with respect to innovative approaches compared to the profitable large agricultural fields. Majority of these small and marginal farmers belonged to backward castes (BC), followed by scheduled castes (SC) and general category (OC) (Figure 4(a)). While this is the case with small and medium farmers, majority of the big farmers are from general category (OC), followed by backward castes (BC) owning land in the range of 10 - 40 acres. Both small/medium and big farmers took land for rent for additional income (Table 4.2). Farmers who had committed suicide are primarily small and marginal farmers from BC community.

Table 4.2, Land ownership of the interviewed in the chosen field.

Farmer	Land (in acres)	Land taken for rent (in acres)
Small / Medium	1.5 - 7	upto 6*
Big	10 - 40	upto 10

Source: Fieldwork 2017-18.

Tenancy is high in the districts of Medak and Mahabubnagar. Small and marginal farmers are observed to be taking land under tenancy to reach the economically sustainable operational land size. Big farmers are considering tenancy as a way to reduce their cost per acre as it lets them experiment with new cost effective techniques that are associated with large scale cultivation. Tenancy is seen in two major forms in Medak - of sharecropping (called *Charaanapal*, meaning 25% of the cultivated produce goes as rent to the land owner while the rest remains with the tenant farmer, the actual cultivator) and of fixed rents in both productivity (setting the quantity of bags that have to be paid to the landowner beforehand) and in monetary terms. Sharecropping could be understood as a feudal characteristic of agrarian relations with respect to tenancy. Mahbubnagar only has one form of tenancy, that is, fixed rents (in both monetary and productivity terms). While fixed tenancy rates are in the range of Rs. 7000 per acre to Rs. 20,000 depending on the quality of the land at hand, 1-3 bags of whatever is produced is demanded per acre in the case of sharecropping.

“As the rent is not predetermined with no regard to the productivity, charaanapal , in a sense, is more considerate of the factors affecting the yield”, says X, 32, a small farmer. Though non-monetary transactions still exist, their proportion is not significant and is reported (by the farming community) to be falling. This falling share of non-monetary transactions make the case for the mode of production to be closely resembling capitalistic nature in spite of the presence of semi-feudal relations. While the maximum land acreage small and medium farmers managed to obtain under tenancy remains low ie., 4.5 acres, the maximum big farmers could manage (from the observed sample) is 12 acres. As the bargaining power rests with the land owning person under any form of tenancy, it puts the tenant farmer in a vulnerable situation giving scope for possible exploitation.

The respondents are of the opinion that water inadequacy in Medak and Mahabubnagar has become a normal phenomenon due to persistent droughts. Majority of the cultivation in these two districts is rain water based (same is the case with rest of the state) and with the uncertainty involved with regard to rainfall, borewell irrigation has increased in these districts. A high investment on borewells is made by the farmers who can afford, even though the success rate of a functional borewell remains low. The worst failure rate was reported by a farmer in Medak district, *'of the 20 borewells that were dug and installed, only two turned out to be functional, giving a success rate of 10%.'* And the highest rate of success reported was 66.6%, where two of the installed three bores remained functional. Besides, the success / failure rate of borewells, one has to look at its high cost, which would leave the small, marginal and medium farmers in absolute indebtedness.

With the wide differences in the land ownership within the farming community, the interviewed big farmers are observed to have easy access to credit - formal and informal - while the small and marginal farmers due to their small land holdings are distanced from formal credit sources (in cases of loan exceeding a lakh). Small and marginal farmers are forced to approach informal money lenders who charge an interest rate that is three to four times higher. Economically weak and socially marginalized sections of the farming community in the sample are observed to face 'dual oppression' / oppression at multiple levels; one, as the farming community as a whole is politically oppressed by giving preference to the urban projects over the rural developing sectors and two, as the benefits reach big land owning farming community while the landless, small and marginal farmers are left out for various reasons like landlessness, not having Aadhar, errors in Govt. data set etc. When 20% of the farming community owns 80% of the agricultural land in India, a policy framed on a prerequisite of land ownership, does not benefit the small and marginal land owning community. Farmers belonging to BC, ST or SC are subjected to further exclusion by the existing social structures that thrive on hierarchical exploitation of marginalized by a powerful few upper castes.

4.2 Consequences of Agrarian Crisis

A crisis with respect to production in agriculture is 'agricultural crisis' and is associated with a lower productivity / yield. Agrarian crisis describes the phenomenon where it is not just the

productivity that is at stake but the producer (cultivator) him / herself is under pressure. Agrarian crisis has longer lasting and damaging effects than agricultural crisis. Agrarian crisis affects the farming community and also people dependent on activities allied to agriculture due to the prevailing linkages between them⁴⁴. Consequences of agrarian crisis with respect to the farming community in Medak and Mahbubnagar, are theorized from a Marxian perspective in this section (which is also the first objective of this study)

4.2.1 Labour exploitation and alienation

Looking through the Marxian lens, agrarian crisis is the result of transition of an economy from being agrarian based to service / manufacture based. The investment (both public and private) is directed towards ‘the other’ sectors for development of the economy. This process in turn led to increasing self exploitation by the farming community with small and medium sized land holdings. In addition to it, a higher level of alienation and exploitation of landless agricultural labourers by the land owing big farmers is also witnessed in the field. Exploitation is recorded at various levels by the farming community - in the fields of production, transportation and marketing. “*A farmer suffers multiple forms of exploitation (rythu adugaduguna mosapothunnadu)*”, says X, 45, a small farmer.

The rate of exploitation, with regard to small and marginal farmers is relatively higher, though it could not be measured quantitatively. This is a result of the financial dependence on an external body / entity for all activities associated with cultivation since majority of the interviewed are stuck in debt traps. They are forced to sell their output to the moneylender as a part of their oral agreement (Table 4.3). This leads to the exploitation of cultivators’ labour (including family labour, in majority of the cases). The moneylender turned output buyer, encouraging ‘distress sales’ is an embodiment of exploitation of the small and marginal farmers. “*We have to sell the output to the ‘seth’ even if the offered price is relatively less (‘seth’ ke ammala, takva ki aina sare)*”, says X, 62, a small farmer, who was trying to highlight his ‘powerlessness’.

⁴⁴Though linkages between the farm and non farm sectors are not negligible, impact of agrarian crisis on non farm sectors is considered to be beyond the scope of this study and hence not undertaken as a part of this research.

Big farmers skipped distress selling as they can afford to take the risk of waiting to selling their produce in the market at a better price (as witnessed in Medak and Mahabubnagar districts). Aforementioned ‘risk’ is in terms of uncertainty involved in obtaining another loan from the moneylender in the next period. In addition to the dependence on money lenders, “*investment we make does not get reflected in the monetary outcome*” says Ramesh, 35, a small farmer, explaining how market also plays a role in maintaining the ‘trapped’ situation or status-quo. With the deepening agrarian crisis, the identity of an (agricultural) labourer was reduced to a ‘thing’, as one of the inputs required for the production process, as commodification of labour has reduced the value of labour to mere monetary wages ie., its value of exchange.

Table 4.3, Farmers who sell their output directly to the money lender vs those who have access to other buyers.

Category of farmers	Number of farmers	To the moneylender	Other buyers
Small and Medium	20	9	11
Small and Medium (fs)*	20	12	8
Big	20	4	16
Total	60	25	35

Source: Fieldwork, 2017-18.

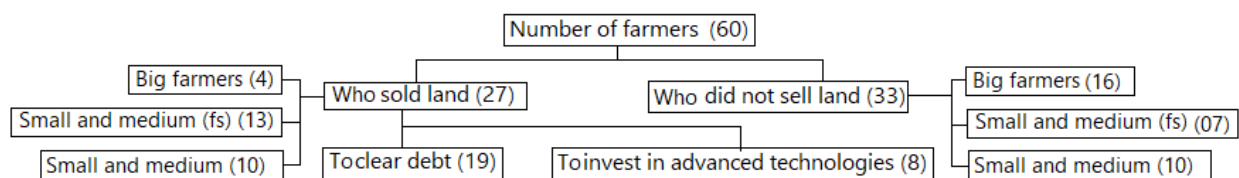
Alienation of labour, according to Marx, is of primarily 4 types (Armando, 2017). *Alienation of labour from the product* - what has to be produced, using what inputs (seeds, fertilizers, pesticides etc) is no more decided by the producer or even by the consumer him / herself but by the capitalist / corporate class which dominates the market. *Alienation of labour from the act of production* - it is not anymore a choice exhibited by the farming community to remain in this sector. It is the only option imposed upon them via various structural factors including the Govt. policies that failed to provide alternative employment. *Alienation of labour from ‘species-being’* - where the labour produce commodities with no intention of contributing to the socio-economic activity that is a part of a collective production process for the common good of the society. Labour produces commodities only as a means of survival / physical existence. *Alienation of labour from labour* - where the social relations among labour are ruined due to the competitiveness that has been introduced into the market. Small, marginal and landless tenant farmers in Medak and Mahabubnagar in particular and all over in general, are experiencing alienation at various intensities but primarily dominated by the alienation from the product, production and labour (which could be seen from the quotes of farmers mentioned in sections

4.2.4 and 4.3). As the different forms of alienation are not of exclusive nature there is an overlap of these alienations as faced by the farming community.

4.2.2 Towards partial proletarianization

Proletarianization is the downward social mobility defined as becoming landless or to be on the verge of becoming landless with regard to agricultural sector. The share of small, marginal holdings in India increased marginally from 86.21% in 2010-11 to 87.4% 2015-16 indicating two possibilities⁴⁵. One, landless farmers buying small pieces of agricultural land and hence becoming small farmers. And two, an increasing trend of land sales among small and medium farmers - either out of desperation or by choice. The latter could be attributed to the increasing indebtedness where the farmer is forced to sell land to clear their debt. 27 farmers out of the interviewed 60 have sold some land either to pay back their debt (19) or to invest in advanced technologies (8) - mechanical or otherwise, that are expected to be cost minimizing (Figure 4(b)). There was one instance of a small farmer with 3 acres of fertile land becoming landless as he had to sell his land to clear the accumulated debt due to mounting social pressure in addition to the pressure by money lender. After working on an agricultural land for nearly 3 decades, having to sell the same to clear the agricultural debt embodies the pressures marginal farmers experience. Looking at the distress land sales by small and medium farmers could be understood as evidence of the crisis.

Figure 4(b), Land sales among the interviewed farmers.



Source: Fieldwork, 2017-18.

The direction towards marginality / proletarianization among the farming community is ambiguous as the trend of preference towards self-cultivation over tenancy cultivation is persistent. The percentage share of area leased to total area operated in India fell from 10.7% in 1960 - 61 to

⁴⁵Krishnan, Varun, B. (2018). What the agriculture census shows about land holdings in India. *The Hindu*, Oct 3.

6.5% in 2002-03. Desire for upward social mobility by farming community belonging to the lower economic and social backgrounds finds them push for land ownership, self-cultivation and a risk taking attitude. This behaviour is noticed in Mahabubnagar, where land ownership is associated with the person's identity of being recognized as a 'farmer', entirely disregarding the category of landless 'tenant farmers'. "*How could a landless cultivator be called a 'farmer'? (bhumi lenivaadu rythenti?)*", questions Veera Reddy, 56, a big farmer. Only two categories of people are involved in agriculture, in this view. One, the landless 'agricultural labourers' and two, landowning farmers who could further be divided into subcategories like small, medium and big farmers.

One would like to understand how a landless tenant 'farmer' is different from a landless agricultural labourer when both seem to be working on other's land. While a landless agricultural labourer works on someone else's farm on a daily / weekly basis, a landless tenant farmer essentially cultivates and has complete control over it. As selling of land and becoming landless has become a reality in Mahabubnagar due to repeated drought conditions and crop failures, they are no more considered to be associated with agriculture. Partly because they have left agriculture to find a non farm (unskilled) job and partly because they do not fit into the conventional definition of a farmer anymore, with no land ownership.

In cases where the (now) landless have taken up cultivation via tenancy, though he is primarily a producer (and hence a farmer), his social identity remains equivalent to that of an agricultural labourer. "*I had to sell an acre last year to clear my pending debt. As I do not own any land, they (the villagers) call me a kuli (agricultural labourer)*", says X, 27, who was once a marginal farmer, and now cultivates paddy in 2 acres, as a tenant farmer. Two contradicting forces ie., increasing landlessness and increasing self-cultivation are at play and the marginal rise of the proportion of small and marginal farmers (according to the Agricultural Census of 2010-11) is understood as increasing land sales or landlessness by the farming community. The trend of increasing small land holdings, existence of tenancy and agrarian distress are indicators of a crisis manufactured by capitalist forces - comprising of rentier class exploiting the other (Murthy, Vidyasagar & Gadiyaram, 2018). The rentier class is an umbrella term for landlords, fertilizer suppliers, money lenders who make profits without any contribution to production but only on the resources they own (land, capital etc). While capital class reinvests to survive in the

competition, rentier class exhausts majority of their profits. “*Middle men benefit while we do not (dalarulu bhatukutunnaru, makem ledhu)*”, says Ramulu, 28, a small farmer, reflecting on the reality.

4.2.3 Feminization of agriculture

Agrarian crisis has made it a necessary condition that small and marginal farmers consider farm labour or non-farm employment as an obligation for a subsistence living. 28 respondents from 60, chose farm labour alongside cultivating their land while rest 32 male farmers chose additional non-farm employment (Table 4.4). As the men (32) are seen moving away from agriculture, it is indicative of increasing participation of women in agriculture (full time as opposed to the earlier partial involvement) as a means of survival among 14 of the interviewed families, (8 (small / medium) + 6 (farmer suicides - fs) + 0 (big farmers)).

Table 4.4, Farmers involved in non-farm work.

Category of farmers	Number of farmers	Into farm labour	Non farm work
Small and Medium	20	11	9
Small and Medium (fs)	20	11	9
Big	20	6	14
Total	60	28	32

Source: Fieldwork, 2017-18.

The choice between working as a farm labourer and in any form of non-farm employment is not an easy one as it involves various factors like the income (wages, in this case), cost of living (if it is a job in an urban space) considering post privatized costs with respect to health and education, social security etc. While the average wage employment (farm + hired out) for men is <100 days a year, it is 150 days for women (Murthy, 2018). With the increasing non-farm employment by male members of the farming community, feminization of agriculture has become a survival mechanism in spite of wage differentials. The daily wages as reported by the farming community is Rs 200 - 250 for women and Rs 300 - 350 for men in Medak and Mahabubnagar districts of Telangana. Though feminization of women has given them social visibility among the farming community, the decision making power still remains with men - with respect to what has to be produced, where should it be sold etc. “*I now work in the farm full time. Though he works as a security guard in the nearby town, required agricultural inputs are brought by him. That’s how*

we share the work burden”, says X, wife of a farmer who moved out of agriculture. Women's participation in agriculture is seen as assistance to men in providing for the family; denying her an identity outside her marriage even in terms of work. Participation of women in cultivation and other non farm activities as survival mechanisms is discussed in detail in section 4.4 which deals with agrarian crisis using women as key players.

4.2.4 Indebtedness to debt trap

89% of the agricultural households in Telangana are in debt. Indebtedness is not new for the rural poor. But what has changed over time is how indebtedness has turned into a 'debt trap'. Penetration of capitalism into agricultural sector post 1990s has increased input costs over time, while output prices that are paid to the producers have not correspondingly increased, thus squeezing their surpluses. The farmers interviewed observed that, as the moneylender emerged as an output buyer, it resulted in exploitation at two levels: one, the money lender charged an interest rate 3 - 4 times more than the interest rate offered by formal sources; while interest rate within the formal agricultural credit framework would not exceed 6% per annum, it is in the rage of 12 - 60 % per annum in cases of informal credit facilities. *“We are aware of the higher interest rates, but do we have a choice? (telsina em chestham?)”*, says X, 57, a medium farmer. Two, the moneylender pushes the small and marginal farming community to sell their produce to him at a lower price than the market price or MSP, to repay their loan. This happens due to the oral agreement observed in both Medak and Mahabubnagar which forces the farmer to sell their produce only to the moneylender (ie., if they wish to take a loan again). It gives the moneylender / buyer an opportunity to underprice / undervalue the farmers produce. *“Though the market price of corn is Rs. 1200 - 1500 per quintal, I sold it to ‘seth’ for Rs. 1000 so I could get a loan for the next crop. It is not as bad as it seems to be, I save the transportation costs”*, mentions Mallesh, 26, son of a farmer who committed suicide. The internalized (or socially acceptable) exploitation is more dangerous than it appears to be. The proportion of informal loans among small and marginal farmers out of the total loan taken (including loan from formal and informal sources) is noticed to be 90.3% in Medak and Mahabubnagar while that of big farmers is 49.2% (Table 4.5).

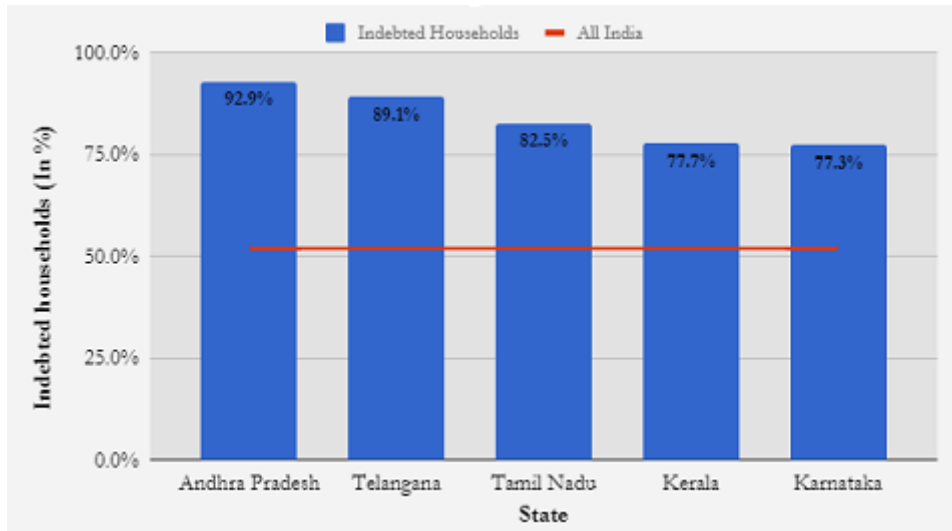
Table 4.5, Proportion of informal loans to total.

Category of farmers	Number of farmers	Total loan	Informal loan	Formal loan	Proportion of informal to total
Small and Medium	20	10180000	6750000	430000	66.3
Small and Medium (fs)	20	9403000	9300000	1030000	90.02
Big	20	16675000	8205000	8470000	49.2
Total	60	36258000	24255000	9930000	66.89

Source: Fieldwork, 2017-18.

This proportion reveals that the small and marginal farmers are prone to intense exploitation by moneylenders. Inaccessibility with regard to formal lending also aggravates the problem of indebtedness turning into a debt trap due to exorbitant interest rates. Income received by agricultural households from all sources is shrinking while the expenses are increasing pushing them into a debt trap (Figure 4(c)). When a farmer is forced to take an agricultural loan every year, it indicates the Govt. failure with regard to establishing a farmer friendly market and a credit support system.

Figure 4(c), Indebtedness among the agricultural households in the South Indian States.



Source: Ministry of Statistics and Programme Implementation. (NSSO 70th Round 2014)

In addition to distress selling, a phenomenon identified as ‘distress buying’ emerged over time in rural India (Nirmala, 2018), which also holds true for Medak and Mahabubnagar districts. This phenomenon is a manifestation of small and marginal farmers attempting to mimic big farmers in aspects like the selection of seed, fertilizer and pesticide that is used. A costly pesticide used by a big farmer becomes a *prerequisite* for small and marginal farmers who also aim to get a positive

agricultural surplus. “*We do what everyone does (oorlo vallu edhi chesthe adhe)*”, asserts Chandraiah, a small farmer. This desperation drives them to the debt trap as the market is not in favour of small and marginal farmers. The phenomenon of (self) imposition / forced buying is termed as ‘*distress buying*’ which further aggravates the problem of increasing expenditure with no / limited means to clear the debt. It is understood as “*they (farmers) do not completely understand the consequences of frenzy buying*”, “*they stopped thinking as survival itself has become difficult*”, said Anjeneyulu and Narsaiah, respectively, both small farmers.

When land ownership is associated with a higher social status in the rural setting, the act of selling land to clear their debt represents the intensity of desperate conditions marginal, small and medium farmers face. “*What could be more absurd than a farmer having to sell his land to clear his debt?*” questions X, a small farmer, who considered selling his land only as the last resort. Small and marginal farmers due to persistent lack of agricultural surplus alongside increasing expenses look at the land sale as a way out of debt trap and this process represents partial proletarianization of the agriculturally marginalized (Figure 4(b)). The interplay among various factors which are primarily of capitalistic nature with the aim to exploit the rural marginal sections of the farming community, ensure that the farmer remains in the debt trap. It also ensures that the farmer is on the verge of entering the reserve army but not quite yet⁴⁶.

4.2.5 Falling Standards of Living

Increasing indebtedness resulting in a debt trap has additional consequences like falling standards of living and instances of starvation deaths among small and marginal farmers. The fall in standards of living could be witnessed from the kids (17) dropping out of school (due to increasing costs post privatization) (Table 4.6). . “*I started tailoring as it would help my mother financially (pani chesthe intlo ammaiki sahayam ga vuntadhani tailoring nerchukunna)*”, says a girl child (15) who dropped out of school. It is not the productivity crisis that is threatening the existence of cultivators but the interventions made by middlemen in the ‘free and fair’ market and the lack of a safety net (failure or lack of Govt. support system). It has become threatening to the existence of small and marginal farmers to the extent that starvation deaths and increasing

⁴⁶Reserve army of labour (which appears in the Marxist framework) is that segment of labour which is held in reserve to be called into workforce as needed.

malnutrition has become the reality of parts of rural India, despite the surplus aggregate agricultural produce. “*There are no Govt. schemes that support our survival (rythulani bhatikinche schemelu levu)*”, says Venkatayya, 52, a small farmer. Of the 60 interviewed, 4 individuals (spread over both the districts of Medak and Mahabubnagar) identified themselves to be malnourished (*poshakahara lopam*). Failure of PDS and lack of funds for food security in India further intensified the distress conditions. Increasing expenditure makes sure that a small / marginal farmer finds no way out of the debt trap. When the marginalized of the farming community are looking at suicide as a way out, it means they are desperate and have exhausted all other options.

Table 4.6, Indicators for falling standards of living of the farming community.

Indicators	Count
Malnutrition	4
Kids dropping out	17

Source: Fieldwork, 2017-18.

A major chunk of agricultural surplus is redirected and is invested in non-agricultural sectors where the (forced) landless, small and marginal farmers are used as cheap labour (working for 350 - 500 Rs a day in an urban setting with a higher cost of living). The distress conditions faced by the agricultural marginalized in turn ensures a profitable functioning of the other urban sectors of the economy. Agrarian distress does not result in formation of the reserve army of labour as they (ie., labour released from agriculture) are funneled into other non-farm unskilled jobs, without being left unemployed. As Table 4.4 shows, 18 small and marginal farmers of the total 60 interviewed, are involved in non-farm jobs, working for ‘subsistence wages’.

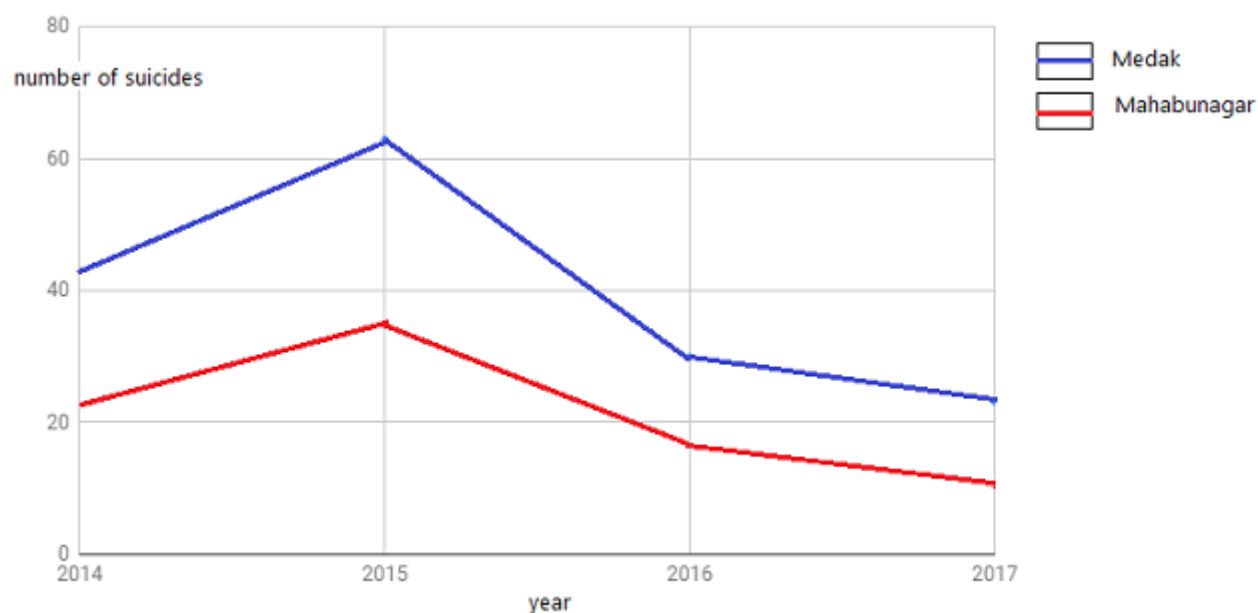
4.2.6 Farmer suicides

A farmer suicide could be understood as the most desperate manifestation of the agrarian crisis. Factors like increasing debt with no alternative sources to (stable) income, unregulated exploitation at the marketplace, exploitation by the money lenders, seed and fertilizer sellers etc further add to the distress conditions resulting in increasing farmer suicides in rural India. Farmer suicides, in this context, are to be understood as the result of the structural violence imposed

upon the farming community by the State. They cannot be seen in isolation from the social, economic and political factors that led to the intensification of agrarian crisis.

There were a total of 163 farmer suicides in Medak and 95 in Mahabubnagar district between 2014-2017. (Figure 4(d)). Though the trend depicts a falling rate of farmer suicides, since the (absolute) numbers of farmer suicides are still above the average rate of general suicides in both the State and India as a whole, the issue of farmer suicides should be problematized and dealt with (both at the state and national level).

Figure 4(d), Farmer suicide numbers in Medak and Mahabubnagar during 2014 - 2017.



Source: Rythu Swarajya Vedika (RSV).

This section attempts to understand farmer suicides by an analysis of the profile of 20 farmers who committed suicide in Medak and Mahbubnagar. 20 families of farmers who committed suicide from these two districts were interviewed, out of which 2 were cases of female farmer suicides (concentrated in one village in Medak district)⁴⁷. Crops cultivated primarily by farmers who committed suicide are paddy, cotton, corn, sugarcane and groundnut. Productivity for these crops except cotton is in the range of 2-6 quintals per acre. Average productivity of cotton is 4 quintals. Due to increased cost per acre and uncertainty involved in the market price by the time

⁴⁷Name of the village is not revealed, to protect their identity

the crop is cultivated, these farmers were left with very little or no surplus (not including the farmer and their family's labour). “*What do we eat and how do we survive out of the little surplus we get? (dhantlo em thinali, etla bhathakali?)*”, questions Parvathalu, 45, a small farmer”. The caste wise distribution of the farmers who committed suicide in Medak and Mahabubnagar is shown below in Table 4.7.

Table 4.7, Caste break-up of Farmers who committed Suicide.

Caste	Medak	Mahabubnagar	Total	Proportion
BC	5	6	11	55%
SC	0	4	4	20%
ST	1	0	1	5%
OC	1	3	4	20%

Source: Fieldwork 2017-18.

The list of farmer suicides in Medak and Mahabubnagar that was obtained from RSV did not include ‘caste’ with respect to a considerable number of farmers, as RSV collects data from newspaper reports and police stations, where caste is often not reported. Hence, data on caste with regard to farmer suicides could only be collected from fieldwork, after choosing the sampling units (using simple random sampling to avoid personal bias). Since, the caste break-up of the population of farmer suicides could not be done, cross checking to see if the considered sample is representative, was not possible. Of the 20 families of farmers who committed suicide that were interviewed in these two districts, majority of them belonged to backward castes (BC), followed by a higher concentration among farmers belonging to scheduled castes (SC), general category (OC) and lastly scheduled tribes (ST). Looking at the land ownership of these farmers, 65% of them own land in the range of <1 to 2 acres while the rest 35% own land in the range of 3 to 6 acres (Table 4.8). If we recall Figure 4(a), which shows the caste wise distribution of farmers interviewed, majority of the small and marginal farmers belonged to BC community. Since it is predominantly the small and marginal farmers that committed suicides, concentration of suicides among farmers belonging to BC could now be correlated.

Table 4.8, Land ownership of farmers who committed suicide.

Category	Number of farmers	Proportion to total
Marginal (upto 2.5 acres)	7	35%
Small (2.5 to 5 acres)	13	65%
Total	20	

Source: Fieldwork 2017-18.

Due to the small and marginal size of land owned by majority of the farming community, there is a need to explore the possible credit sources beyond the formal setup. These sources based on the data collected include informal money lenders, fertilizer and seed sellers, medical stores (for medical expenses only), DWCRA and Mahila Mandals (with interest rates starting from Rs. 0.25 per Rs. 100) (Table 4.9). Loans from medical stores and pesticide / fertilizer sellers are specific loans for purchase of their goods (ie., they are not general loans). As a farmer take loans from multiple sources, the non-exclusivity results in sum not adding up to 60 (ie., total number of the interviewed).

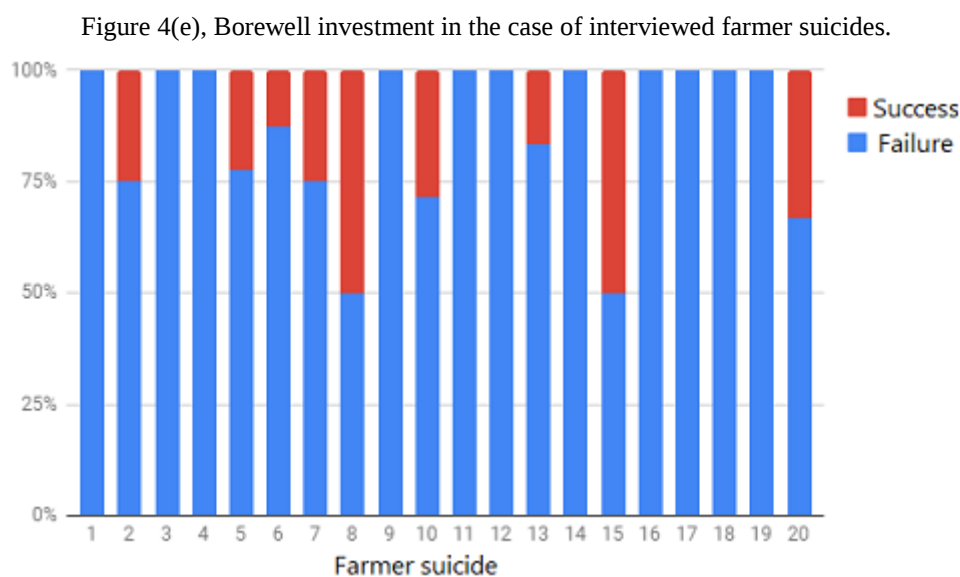
Table 4.9, Credit Sources of the interviewed (60).

Sources	No. of farmers
Formal	42
Informal:	60
1. Money lenders	60
2. DWCRA	6
3. Mahila mandals	4
4. Co-operatives	4
5. Fertilizer sellers	2
6. Medical stores	2

Source: Fieldwork 2017-18.

Factors that contributed in pushing farmers to take the extreme step of killing themselves (as mentioned by the family members) are primarily the increasing input costs and cost of living, ineffective Govt. policies (MGNREGA, electricity subsidies, procurement centers). *“Our debt got accumulated to 6 lakhs (excluding the interest). Moneylenders started coming home on a regular basis demanding repayment. I do not blame them but he (her husband) could not live with it”*, says X, wife of a farmer who committed suicide. Increasing costs is seen from buying seeds, fertilizers, pesticides to increasing additional costs like investment on bores (which has

become a necessity due to the inadequate water in these drought hit areas). “*Nothing could be done without a bore (bore lekunda pani nadvadhu)*”, says Bhim Reddy, a big farmer. Investment with respect to borewell is in the range of Rs. 30000 - 100000 per bore depending on its depth. The figure 4(e) below shows the number of successful borewells as a proportion to the total number of borewells dug by the farmers and clearly, the success rate is not high. The increasing investment on borewells intensified the debt burden as they are being financed via new loans. Karnataka provides subsidized loans to its farmers to dig borewells and data does show it has fewer instances of farmer suicides than Telangana (according to the NCRB data). But to what extent this could be attributed to State intervention and who are the beneficiaries, involves a much deeper analysis. The point however is that, Karnataka, a drought hit state, has recognized the financial burden with respect to investment on alternative sources of irrigation and started acting in the direction of subsidizing it to help farmers. “*When Karnataka could do it, why couldnt Telangana follow its lead?*”, asks Pochiah, 34, a medium farmer.



Source: Fieldwork, 2017-18.

Construction of a house and / or a marriage in the family involves a new loan in the rural Medak and Mahabubnagar. A blame game was observed to victimize a farmer for taking a loan to spend on non-farm expenses (for marriage / construction of a house). “*When one consciously takes a loan, it is his responsibility to repay it under any circumstance (telisi appu chesinapud edhemaina thirchala)*”, said P, a big farmer. The failure of economic policies and Govt. in

making agriculture an economically sustainable activity by regulating prices (also ensuring regular functioning of the procurement centers) and the role of middlemen is subtly disregarded. Another Govt. funded employment generation programme, MGNREGA, has proved to be ineffective in these two districts. Instead of providing employment for 100 days in an year it provides only 30 - 50 days of employment for 2 / 5 hours a day in a year with a wage rate in the range of Rs 150 - 180 a day (via inputs from farmers) as against the official wage rate of Rs 197 in the year 2017 (Table 4.10). “*The given wage is inadequate to meet our expenses. Hence, I did not enroll myself in the scheme (valliche jeetham karchulaki saripodhani namodhu cheskole)*”, said Ramulu, 28, who prefers working as an agricultural labour instead.

Table 4.10, MGNREGA wage rates, hours and days.

	Wage	Work hours/ day	No. of days/ year
Max	180	5	50
Min	150	2	30

Source: Fieldwork, 2017-18.

The question ‘why not leave cultivation for good?’ needs to be addressed. When asked this question the responses were interesting. Small and marginal farming community which constitute the majority of farmer suicides, are not equipped with skills other than farming. Unskilled non-farm employment could be a potential alternative. But a higher cost of living in urban centres, without the social support and networks of their village, caste and their ‘loss of identity’ is seen as a tough call to make. There is another view which looks at farming as a risky activity but hope over the years there will be profits. “*There might be a surplus this year and a deficit the next year but over time, we expect to make a living out of it*”, said Hanumanth, 36, small farmer. In addition to these, there are also other reasons for not leaving agriculture. Staying in agriculture is associated with ‘prestige’ as mentioned by a farmer. “*If one is working, he would rather work on his land (polam vidichi kastam chesedhi enti, chesthe ikkadne cheyyala)*” said Raju, 26, son of a farmer who had committed suicide. The rural masculine pride is hurt by the casual reference to farmers who leave agriculture as a ‘failure’, that “*he is not capable of doing it (vadiki chethakadu)*”, analyzed a small farmer.

4.2.6.1 Case study of a farmer suicide

X, 45, a small farmer hailing from the BC community, committed suicide in Mahabubnagar. He owned 3 acres of land and cultivated on additional 20 acres that was taken under tenancy. Cotton and groundnut were chosen because of a relatively higher market price. He invested on 6 bores, all of which failed increasing his total debt to 8 lakhs. Additionally, due to the agreement he had with his money lender, X was bound to sell output to him at Rs. 500 per quintal, lower than the market price. There were many instances of money lenders publicly humiliating him and demanding repayment of the debt amount. After persistent agricultural deficit (for more than 5 years), X committed suicide in 2016. His two sons (aged 22 and 26) sold an acre to clear a part of the debt, post their father's death. Farmer's wife and the elder son cultivate 2 acres of land that they now own (which is registered on farmer's wife's name) + 5 acres taken under tenancy. The younger son works as a construction worker in the nearby town. Both the sons are unmarried because “*who would marry a poor farmer? (pedha rythu ki pillanevaristhaaru?)*”, asks their mother. They did not receive any compensation though the required paperwork was submitted twice.

One can construct the structural exploitation imposed on X. Due to his small land holdings, he was directed to the informal credit sources where he faced dual exploitation: of higher interest and a lower price for his produce. Increasing input cost (including the spending on alternative irrigational sources or 6 borewells), with falling farm income resulted in a debt trap that he could not ever get out of. Taking into consideration the acts of public humiliation by money lenders, any mild setback could have pushed the farmer to commit a suicide. The lack of water in the dry borewells, poor rainfall, the cash crops he cultivated (which demanded higher amounts of fertilizers and pesticides), increasing exploitation by other actors (market, credit) created a situation, where the farmer chose death as the way out of this distress. Deaths such as that of X and other farmers cannot be individualized or reduced to personal problems alone. There is an institutional/State blame too that needs to be recognized.

4.2.6.2 Post farmer suicides

The suicide of a farmer is associated with grief, financial instability, increasing pressure from money lenders and general uncertainty for the family. The first aspect to change dramatically

with the farmer's death is with respect to the intensified pressure from money lenders demanding the family to repay the debt even if it means selling the land or house or by mortgaging their head (*thala takkatu petti ayina*). Of the announced compensation of 500000, only three families (of 20) received it in the amounts of Rs 150000, 375000 and 470000 (Table 4.11). A major chunk of this amount was immediately diverted to repay their existing debt due to the excessive pressure. “*Not a single rupee of the compensation amount was left with us for personal use (ee governmentolu ichina motham lo oka paisa kooda ma chethla migalle)*”, said Y, wife of a farmer who committed suicide.

Table 4.11, Profiles of farmers (who committed suicide), who received compensation.

Age	Caste	Category of farmer	Compensation
53	BC	small	150000
32	BC	medium	375000
30	OC	small	470000

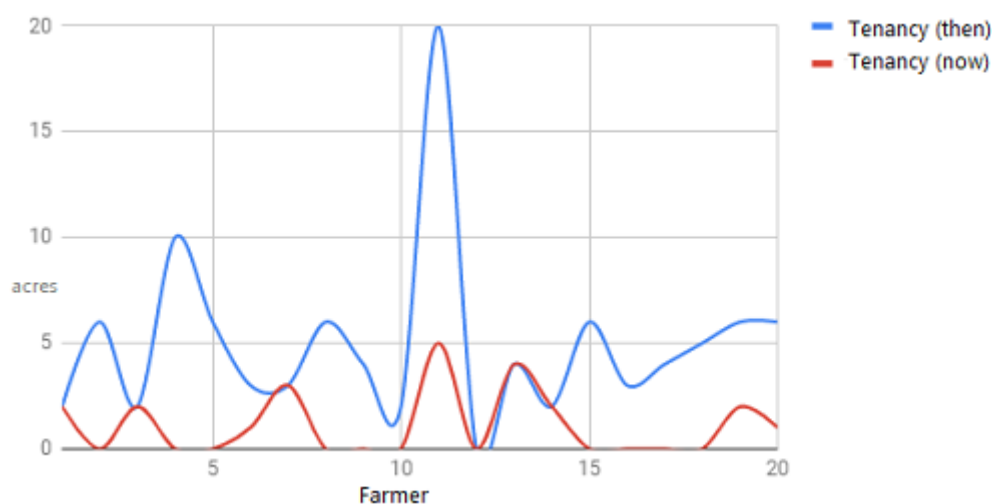
Source: Fieldwork, 2017-18.

The process of declaring the death of a cultivator as a ‘farmer suicide’ is complicated in reality. It requires 13 documents (as mentioned in chapter 1), of which the post mortem report is considered to be a vital decision making document. Three families (of the interviewed 20) did not have the post mortem report, out of which two families were not aware of the required procedure that makes the family eligible to get the compensation amount. “*We did not have enough money to get the post mortem check done anyway*”, mentioned a family member. Police in the presence of the village Sarpanch, determine if a death qualifies to be a farmer suicide. “*They (police) did not ask us on what happened while filling the form and left in a moment*” said a family member pointing at how vulnerable they are in this bureaucratic setup as they were denied the compensation later. Another two families were rejected compensation on the reason that ‘*it doesn't look like a suicide*’ though the farmer killed himself by hanging in one case and by burning herself in the other.

As reported by the interviewed farmers, police play a crucial role in deciding whether the farmer's death falls under the category of a ‘farmer suicide’ or a ‘fake / *duplicate* farmer suicide’. The categorization as either a genuine or a fake farmer suicide is a further trauma to the family, who have to prove it was a farmer suicide to be able to claim compensation. It is in this context

that another aspect of farmer suicides, which is sidelined, came to light. In Paathuru village of Medak district, the researcher was told there were four women farmers suicides, but only two were found in the records⁴⁸. Underreporting of farmer suicides (in the considered time frame of 2014 - 2017) has also been observed in other villages like Nandi Vaddeman, Velkicharla and Thimakkapally. Underreporting is a fraudulent practice that is being followed by few States (eg: NCRB records of West Bengal and Chhattisgarh in years 2013, 2014 and 2015 showing zero suicides) both, to undermine the intensity of the distress at a State/National level and to reject the compensation to be received by the farmer's family at the local level.

Figure 4(f), Tenancy before and after farmer suicides.



Source: Fieldwork, 2017-18.

Cultivating additional land through tenancy is normalized since it is one of the practical ways to reach an economically sustainable operational land size (as majority of them own marginal pieces of land i.e., < 2.5 acres due to land fragmentation). 16 of the farmers who committed suicide took additional land under tenancy in the range of 0 - 20 acres, with the modal acreage taken under tenancy being 6 acres. No land was taken under tenancy by 4 farmers, as they feared the increasing indebtedness.⁴⁹ After experiencing losses for a few consecutive years, most decided to 'save' the money spent on tenancy costs and only one farmer took the risk of taking

⁴⁸This is not questioning RSVs methods of data collection or the authenticity of the data provided, but merely pointing out that under reporting with respect to farmers suicides has become a dangerous trend (by both the media / news papers - source of data collection for RSV and by MRO offices - source of data collection for NCRB).

⁴⁹ Mode is a measure of central tendency that represents the data point with highest frequency (or repetitions).

20 acres under tenancy (usage of the word ‘risk’ is consciously made keeping in mind the cost incurred by the tenant farmer regardless of the income it brings in i.e. cost approximately amounting to Rs. 10000 times 20 = 200000 per annum). Post suicide by the farmer, there is a drastic fall in the amount of land that was undertaken for tenancy by the family members. (Figure 4(f))

Post farmer's death, the operational land size has come down drastically for two primary reasons in the considered sample. One, land taken under tenancy has fallen, and two, the family had to sell a piece of land to repay the debt (in 13 cases of the total 27 as shown in Figure 4(b)). With a fall in the operational land holdings, family members are now experimenting with jobs outside the agricultural sector. *“We sold land to clear our debt. Now that we do not have enough land, we turned to the nearby town for work (appu thirchanike bhumamminam, malla bhumu lekane town ki povadam)”*, said Shankar, 19, son of a farmer who committed suicide. Temporary out migration is observed in cases of young males (aged 17 - 25) who are now working as mechanics (1), electricians (1) and construction workers (5). Young widows (2) are working as ASHA (with a salary of Rs. 5500 - 6000 per month) and beedi workers⁵⁰ (Table 4.12). Majority (11) of the families are still involved in the agricultural sector full time. *“Remaining in agriculture is respectful, profits and / or losses do not matter”* mentioned X in the context of smoothening agricultural income over time, family member of a farmer who committed suicide.

Table 4.12, Alternative activities main family members are engaged in, post farmer's death.

Activity	No. of men	No. of women	Total
Agricultural labourer	5	6	11
Construction worker	5	0	5
Mechanic	1	0	1
Electrician	1	0	1
ASHA worker	0	1	1
Beedi worker	0	1	1
Total			20

Source: Fieldwork, 2017-18.

⁵⁰Rs 90 for 600 beedis and Rs 150 for 1000 beedis while the material is provided by the local contractor.

“If the crop fails, they blame it on the monsoon. If the rainfall is decent, they blame the over / under usage of fertilizers for the lower productivity. No one talks of duplicate seeds. Amidst this blame game we are losing our lives” was a statement made by one of the (late) farmer’s mother. The narrative that it is lower productivity that acts as the triggering factor for farmer suicides is a dominant one among the rural farming community. Water inadequacy (due to which the State is declared to be drought hit) and increasing sales of duplicate seeds / *nakili vithanam* (mixed with genuine seeds) adversely affect the productivity. The market plays a major role in failing the farmers by undervaluing their produce. As reported by one of the farmers interviewed, *‘cost of cotton was Rs. 4200 per quintal at the beginning of the season in 2017 but by the time cotton was finally cultivated its price fell to Rs. 3800 per quintal. Cotton was chosen to be cultivated in that period because of the higher price it offered, among other crops.’* This ‘deception’ (nomenclature used by a farmer), by both the market (for changing it) and Govt. (for not regulating it) is what results in falling agricultural surplus. This results in a debt trap, which in turn becomes a triggering factor for farmer suicide.

When the Kisan and Kisan organizations all over India were demanding the implementation of MSP suggested by Swaminathan Committee, a section of the small and marginal farming community in Medak and Mahabubnagar had a valid point to a rise on this issue. From their observations, the market price had always been over the MSP by a decent margin. *“The problem here is that we are forced to sell our produce to the ‘seth’ or the moneylender at less than the market price or the price that they think is just”*, complained Ramesh, a small farmer. For small and marginal farmers stuck in debt, access to market is under threat. Untangling themselves from the grips of money lenders and benefiting out of the improvised MSP with regularly functioning procurement centers could only be achieved when they are free from the informal debt claims. Informal debt falls outside the scope of any loan waiver scheme. Policy makers need to understand the ground reality before implementing schemes that aim to neutralize the distress if not to minimize it.

4.2.7 From the big farmers point of view

Small, medium and marginal farmers take the worst blow with respect to the agrarian crisis. It doesn't, however, exclude big farmers from getting affected by the crisis. With rise in the cost of

inputs, the agricultural surplus received by the farming community including big farmers, in Medak and Mahabubnagar, is observed to be reduced. Since they have access to the market and Govt. schemes, they manage to get a better price for their produce when compared to the small and marginal farmers who are stuck in informal ‘credit trap’ that restricts their access to the market spaces. Big farmers are in a financially privileged position to be able to postpone the sale of their agricultural produce in case the offered market price is too low, which the small and marginal farmers could not afford to do. *“If the market price is low, we wouldn’t mind waiting for a month or two to sell our produce (dhara takvunte nela rendu nelalaagi ammutham)”*, said Kondal Reddy, 51, a big farmer. Access to credit is another aspect that differentiates a big farmer from a small and a marginal farmer. Interest rate with respect to formal agricultural lending is 3 - 4% while the informal rates are in the range of 12 - 60% per annum. None of the interviewed big farmers (20) are in a ‘debt trap’, though they have large amount of loans to clear. Majority of the big farmers are involved in activities other than cultivation (which would be discussed in section 4.3) eventually making an overall surplus.

Agrarian crisis is understood by big farmers in a way that is slightly different from the small farmers narrative. *“Actors other than the producer himself are controlling the market when it should be the other way around”* stated Anjeneyulu, 43, a big farmer. While big farmers want reforms which ensure a better income, small farmers look at structural changes as the way out. With respect to MGNREGA, an employment generation scheme, while the farming community finds it to be inefficient, small and big farmers have different reasons why. Small and marginal farmers complain of MGNREGA wages being less than regular wages and its inadequate fund allocation. Big farmers look at it from another perspective. *“Work which could be completed by 5 men is being done by 20 now (under this scheme) and they earn full day wages for work done only for 2 hours. Given this, we are forced pay a higher wage to get them employed. MGNREGA has changed the existing agrarian relations and is exploiting us,”* said Veera Reddy, 32, a big farmer. This gives a picture of how big farmers disregard or negate the distress undergone by other marginal farming communities who undergo intense exploitation and constitute majority of the farmer suicides. *“Farmers are earning peanuts. ‘Owners’ are only making as much as ‘workers’”*, Reddy continues⁵¹. This statement is a reflection of how big farmers prefer to

⁵¹ Owners are the land owning farmers while workers are agricultural labourers as clarified later by the interviewed.

distance their distress from that of small, marginal and landless farmers'. While this distinction is indeed necessary, it is important to note that the crisis is not seen by big farmers as a by-product of the interplay between factors at large, but rather as the result of overtly demanding marginal sections of the farming community by way of demanding higher wages, along with market imperfections.

Though big farmers are affected by the crisis, their livelihoods are not threatened by it. The fall in income does not drastically affect them the way it affects a small or a marginal farmer. Intrusion of middlemen into the market space who pocket a major chunk of the profit still remains to be a problem, but not one that pushes a big farmer into a debt trap. In the worst case scenario, he could 'choose' to lend out his agricultural land for tenancy and generate income from it. Small and marginal farmers cannot leave agriculture as they do not have the required capital (human or material) to make the shift. It is not to belittle the impact agrarian crisis has on the big farming community, but only to point out that the crisis is not threatening to their very existence. Uncertainty involved in production, increasing input costs, water unavailability, exploitation in markets, becoming a consumer / a funding agent to non-farm activities (via consuming the goods produced by non-farm sectors or by investing resources - capital and human - in non-farm sectors) impacts the whole farming community, without any exceptions, at different intensities.

The consequences of agrarian crisis affect the marginalized sections of the farming community the most. Land sold due to the crisis in proportion to the land owned by big farmers is minimal when compared to the proportion of land sold by small, marginal and medium farmers. 21 of the interviewed 40 small and medium farmers, sold an average of 40-50% of their land, while only 6 of the 20 big farmers sold roughly 15% of their land. Feminization of agriculture has happened only with respect to small and marginal farming community (out of desperation) and not in the big farming community (would be discussed in later sections of the chapter). As a conclusive remark, while agrarian crisis has affected all the sections of the farming community, it also becomes important to understand how different sections experience the crisis differently with the backdrop of the structurally imposed constraints that restrict their accessibility and mobility.

4.2.8 Inputs from fertilizer sellers

5 fertilizer and pesticide sellers from the two districts were interviewed additionally. Three of them were small scale sellers who play a dual role of a pesticide seller and a lender. In two of the three, the lending activity is restricted to pesticides and fertilizers and they earn 5 - 6 lakhs per annum. In the third case, it is extended to ‘general’ loans earning upto 10 lakhs per annum (Table 4.13). This third seller did not reveal if he insisted that farmers who had taken loans from him have to sell their output directly to him or not. But looking at the difference in the incomes earned by these three similar fertilizer sellers it could be speculated that there may have been an oral pact that required the debtor to sell their produce to him at a lesser price - as he did not deny, but only chose to skip the question, when asked. *“It is not as rosy as it appears to be, I have pending loans amounting to 34 lakhs from last year”*, said a money lender / pesticide seller who requested to stay anonymous, talking of how they do not always get (supernormal) profits. This situation arises out of the fear of not having a source that would lend him / her money when required in the later period. Two large scale sellers were also interviewed: where 3-7 people are employed to run the business on the owner’s behalf. These sellers stick only to the fertilizer business. None of the employees are trained nor do they hold a degree in B.Sc. Agriculture, but they suggest pesticides that they think are ‘suitable’ for their customers’ needs. Income is in the range of 12 - 15 lakhs per annum (it is an under reported estimate, as mentioned by one of the employees towards the end of the interview). One of the two large scale seller has an additional branch in the adjacent mandal which also is capable of potentially earning another 15 lakhs per annum. While a farmer is facing a crisis, markets surrounding the farmer are generating profits out of the crisis.

Table 4.13, Income earned by pesticide sellers.

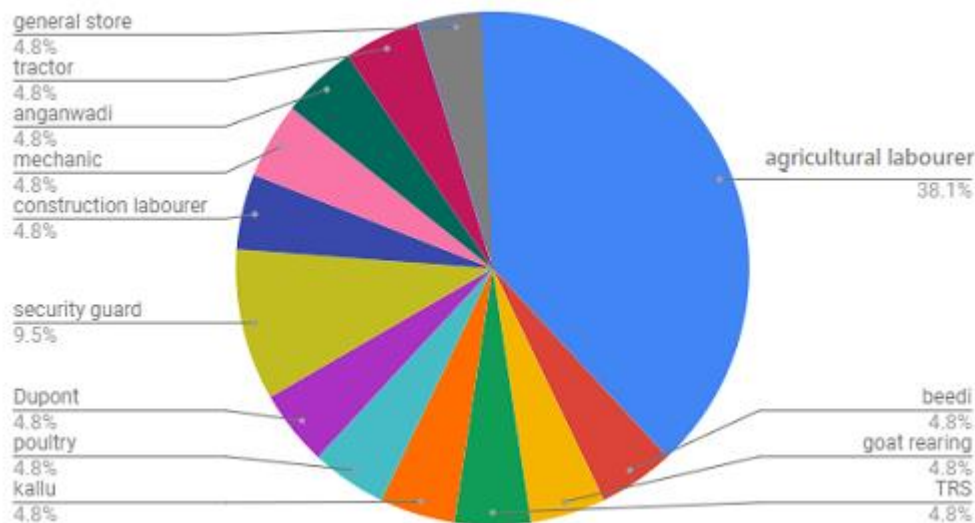
Category	Annual income
Small seller	5-6 lakhs
Medium seller	10 lakhs
Big seller	12 - 15 lakhs

Source: Fieldwork, 2017-18.

4.3 Coping mechanisms to withstand Agrarian Crisis

Coping mechanisms and resilience are two concepts that are associated with any crisis in general. The usage of coping mechanisms and not resilience with respect to the agrarian crisis is a deliberate one. “*Resilience is the process of adapting well in the face of adversity, trauma, tragedy, threats or significant sources of stress... It means ‘bouncing back’ from difficult experiences*” (APA⁵²). In the context of agrarian crisis, it might not be appropriate to term it resilience as long as the distress conditions continue to exist. Majority of the small and marginal farmers are only one step away from giving up. The increasing rate of farmer suicides indicates that the distress conditions are only worsening over time. “*You see this farmer over here? Madam, you first interview him as he may have committed suicide by the time you come here for another visit*”, pointed out a farmer who refused to reveal his identity⁵³. ‘Bouncing back’ to normalcy, in this context, requires both short and long term structural and economic policy changes. When farmers with no or very little support from the Govt. attempt to deal with and counter the crisis, it can be understood as coping mechanisms.

Figure 4(g), Coping mechanisms with respect to small and medium farmers.



Source: Fieldwork 2017-18.

⁵² Source: <https://www.apa.org/helpcenter/road-resilience.aspx>.

⁵³ Saying he doesn't care even if one files a police complaint on him.

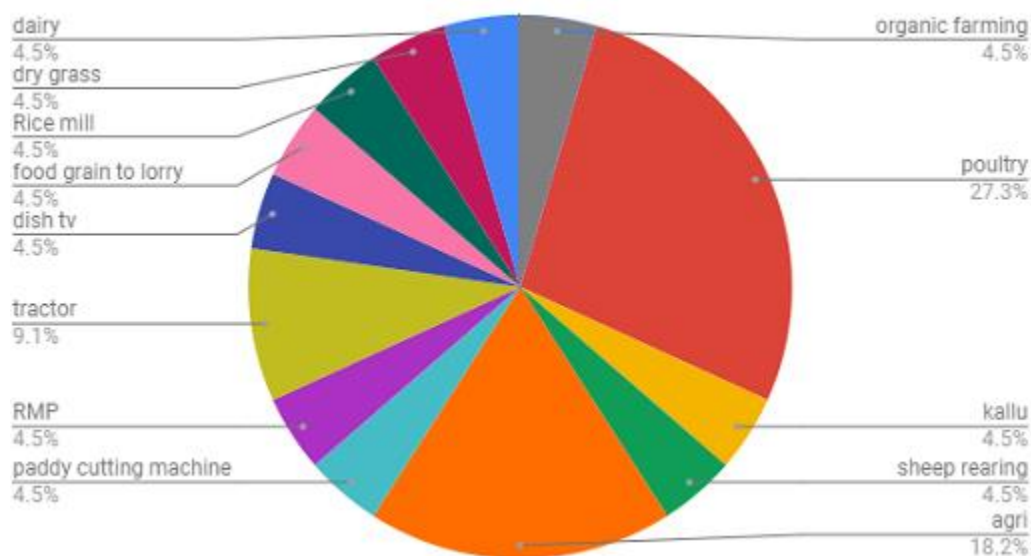
As observed from the field data, mechanisms adopted by small, medium and big farmers to counter the crisis vary significantly. Majority of the small and medium farmers look at alternative work opportunities, as agricultural workers (8), security guards (2), construction (1), beedi work (1), mechanics (1), involved in poultry (1), *kallu* (toddy tapping) (1) and general store/shop (1) (Figure 4(g)).

These ‘coping mechanisms’ employed by small and medium farmers require low investment, involving physically exhausting unskilled labour earning a maximum of Rs 500 per day. Income earned by engaging in non-farm activities is used to cover the day-to-day expenses as told by the small and marginal farmers. Of the 20 small and medium farmers interviewed, only children belonging to 7 families are sent to school, the rest dropped out (when they were younger) and are in some way contributing to their family income (via working in agricultural sector or via the above mentioned activities). Family members of small and medium farmers are involved in both farm and non-farm sectors as labourers and they work for more than 8 hours a day. In cases where the male is working outside the agricultural sector, women enter the field primarily as ‘farmers / cultivators’ (though they are not recognized as farmers). Feminization of agriculture, as a means of survival, has taken shape in the small and medium farmer community. Feminization of agriculture, though it is evidently spreading, its expansion is restricted to the small, marginal and medium farming community.

The income earned via activities that are undertaken as coping mechanisms, in a way, attempt to compensate the income that is ‘lost’ with respect to agriculture. The ‘lost’ income instead is redirected into the pockets of middlemen as the Govt. has failed to regulate their activities. Because the small and marginal farmers are not well equipped to leave agricultural sector and get a ‘skilled’ non-farm job, the alternatives they look out for also involve physical hardships and exploitation (this could be understood as a second round of exploitation). Exploitation by the market and state forces in agricultural sector instead of building a reserve army, results in an *almost there* reserve army- which could be seen as the first phase of exploitation. Consequently, the non-farm sectors benefit out of the farmers vulnerability by offering them employment at a lesser wage rate due to excess supply of labour - this could be seen as a second phase of exploitation.. *“I work as a construction worker and return to field during the harvesting season.*

Construction sector absorbs most of the rural labour including people like me who chose to get away from agriculture. We are paid less and have very little security”, says Chandriah, who completed his 10th class. Depending on the social, cultural and political setting the farmer belongs to, additional layers of exploitation are further pressed upon him/her. Farmers belonging to marginal or backward communities with respect to caste, religion and gender are prone to further exploitation. The non-farm sectors (that accommodate the farming community) are, in a way, making profits out of the distress that is structurally imposed on small, marginal and medium farmers by the agrarian crisis. The intensity of distress the marginal farming community is experiencing could also be understood by this phenomenon of self imposed exploitation of labour as a ‘means of survival’.

Figure 4(h), Acts of resilience by Big Farmers.



Source: Fieldwork 2017-18.

One observes differences in the coping mechanisms of big and small / medium farmers. From the field data it can be surmised that the strategies incorporated by big farmers to counter the agrarian crisis could better be understood as acts of ‘resilience’. Since agriculture is one of the many sources of their aggregate income, a crisis affecting agricultural sector doesn't have intensified consequences, like it would with the small and marginal farmers for whom agriculture is their major or the only source of living. Big farmers deal with the agrarian crisis by turning to

making investments in: poultry (6), rice mill (1), paddy harvesting machine (1), tractors (2), dish tv supply (1), dairy (1), organic farming (1) and few other allied activities. (Figure 4(h)).

Income earned via these activities range from Rs 1,00,000 (via poultry) to 5,00,000 (via *kallu*) a year⁵⁴. This surplus is in addition to the income made by them in agriculture. Their own physical labour with respect to cultivation is low, with 17 out of 20 big farmers reporting zero work. It is the agricultural labourers who earn surplus for them via their (exploited) cheap labour. Of the total income earned, 45% of the small and medium farmers' income and 65% of big farmers' income is from non-farm activities and the rest from agriculture (Table 4.14). Coping mechanisms with respect to small and medium farmers require lesser investment while the activities big farmers take up involve higher investment (up to the extent of 1 crore - for the rice mill),but requiring less physical labour. While wives of big farmers are not involved in productive work (ie., income generating work) that contributes to the family's income, their children (both male and female) are involved actively in skilled non-farm jobs (predominantly in IT, Medicine and other jobs in urban centres).*"I wanted my kids to get away from physical hardships ie., agriculture. My son and daughter are both software engineers. They stay in the city and earn good money"*, says Narsimha Reddy, 42, a big farmer.

Table 4.14, Non farm and farm income of small & medium and big farmers proportionate to the total income.

Category	Non farm income (proportion)	Farm income (proportion)
small and medium	45%	55%
big	65%	35%

Source: Fieldwork 2017-18.

Organic farming remains an activity restricted to the big farmers in this sample. Small farmers look at it as an undesirable practice. *"While one would have to invest on their own, if it is organic farming; it is easier to get a loan for cultivating the hybrid varieties hence making it attractive"* says X, a small farmer. Apart from the input costs, since hybrids promise a higher yield, convincing the farming community to get back to organic farming could be challenging.

⁵⁴Income earned from *kallu* (toddy tapping) by the small farmer is in the range of Rs 10000 - 15000 per month. The difference in income with respect to the same activity lies in the large scale investment made by the big farmer.

Majority of these ‘coping mechanisms’ are restricted to activities that are alternative income generating sources. This reflects the rural understanding of the agrarian crisis. The immediate need that the agriculturally marginalized experience is that of financial nature. The persistent agricultural income shortage / deficit pose a serious threat as they cannot make their ends meet without an alternative income source. In this context, locating alternative income sources is a rational strategy the farming community could employ to counter the crisis, as other measures are beyond their control.

The income generated through other activities is expressed in different time periods (ie., per annum, per month, per day) for different categories of farmers (Table 4.15). As big farmers fund their activities and generate income throughout the year, it is expressed in annual terms. Activities taken up by small and medium farmers do not ensure a regular 12 month income. Depending on the nature of work it is either a monthly or a daily contract, resulting in a highly uncertain annual income. Hence it is expressed in either daily or monthly terms.

Table 4.15, Coping mechanisms and income earned by small, medium and big farmers⁵⁵.

Income generated by big farmers		Income generated by small / medium farmers	
Activity	Income per annum (Rs)	Activity	Income (Rs)
Poultry	100000 - 125000	Agricultural Labour	200 - 350 per day
Organic farming	400000 - 500000	Beedi	200 - 300 per day
Kallu	500000 - 540000	Dupont	300 - 400 per day
Gaddi	100000 - 120000	Mechanic	12000 - 15000 per month
Paddy Harvest Machine	300000 - 200000	Security Guard	8000 - 10000 per month
Tractor	150000 - 180000	Kallu	10000- 15000 per month
Dish TV	100000 - 120000	Anganwadi worker	10000 per month
Rice mill	300000 - 200000	Goat rearing	20000 - 40000 per annum

Source: Fieldwork 2017-18.

This study observes that the farming community as a whole is looking at non-farm sectors to have a regular income flow to tide over the crisis. This situation is the result of failure of the agricultural sector in providing the farming community with surplus income. As majority of the rural population is dependent on a sector that is persistently in a crisis, it is the responsibility of

⁵⁵Dupont in Medak undertakes cultivation by employing agricultural labourers.

the State to funnel required resources to provide farmers (particularly the small and marginal farmers) with a safety net. Policies and schemes which benefit only a section of them (ie., the land owning farming community), cannot be understood as means to curb the crisis, as it leaves out the most vulnerable landless and tenant farmers.

4.4 Women in Agrarian crisis

The third objective of this research is to look at how the agrarian crisis affects women involved in agriculture as farmers and agricultural labourers. Women are affected by the agrarian crisis at two levels : one, as the crisis affects the whole of the farming community of which they are an integral part of and two, as ‘victims’ of the family where the farmer has committed suicide (ie., wives, mothers, daughters etc) they experience distress with a higher intensity. As the conflict between patriarchal social structures and feminization of agriculture arise as a consequence of the agrarian crisis, it demands women to take up a crucial role in the production process but at the same time cultural constraints ensure unequal gender relations. No equality, in this context, is discrimination based on gender and persistence of the socially defined gendered power equations. This section attempts to explore another facet of agrarian crisis that involves looking at the changing dynamics of women's labour participation and social visibility from the lens of patriarchy and the agrarian crisis.

4.4.1 Changing labour dynamics and social visibility

Traditionally, the role of men and women in agriculture is defined / assigned keeping in mind the patriarchal understanding of male and female strength / fragility and visibility. Women sow seeds, take the weeds out and pluck the output (eg., cotton) while men till the land (with the help of an ox / a tractor), water the land and spray fertilizers and pesticides. While plucking cotton is primarily done by women / children because of their *fragile / delicate* hands, “*women cannot effectively spray pesticides (aadollaki challaradhu)*” said a male farmer, X. Women's role in agriculture is restricted to the agricultural activities that are performed on the field, while men are actively seen interacting with the market and society. The social visibility associated with agriculture and women was / is negligible. This started to change with the increasing distress in agricultural sector.

Small and marginal farmers started looking at non-farm employment with a stable income flow as a potential alternative for their survival, which resulted in out migration of a temporary nature. This in turn, led to the feminization of agriculture which emerged primarily as a survival mechanism though it is interpreted by propagators of liberalization as economic empowerment of women (Pattnaik et al 2017). While the share of men in agriculture in 2004 was 58% and women 42%, it is actually 41% of men and 59% of women (NSSO survey, 2014), thereby indicating feminization of the agricultural sector. This changed the labour dynamics and the role of small and marginal men and women farmers in the agricultural sector. With men completely out of agriculture (due to their non-farm employment), feminization of agriculture has emerged as a trend among the small and medium agricultural households in both Medak and Mahbubnagar. Women's role in agriculture is not restricted to the above mentioned agricultural activities anymore (sowing, weeding out etc). Women are now involved in agriculture full-time employing and working as agricultural labourers, as required. It is interesting to note that, though women now are into agricultural sector playing a crucial role in the absence of men, decisions are being taken by men regarding the type of crop to be cultivated, the type of seed / pesticide / fertilizer to be brought and where to sell the crop and to whom. Though the work being done by women is recognized as a significant contribution to the productivity and their family income, their position in the society remains unchanged.

Apart from agriculture, additional activities taken up by men and women are in two different trajectories. While men look at activities (Figures g and h) like poultry, *kallu*, goat rearing and working as security guards, construction workers etc which either require an initial investment or result in out migration, women are seen to be involved in beedi making, working as ASHA and anganwadi workers which neither require an initial investment nor mobility. This helps in understanding the way patriarchy works in rural India, where visibility of women is under the control (of men) even under changing labour requirements. Feminization of agriculture is a result of decisions taken by men as means of survival. A phenomenon '*badulu cheyadam*' is observed in Medak district where lower caste women work in each other's field not for a wage but on an agreement that they work in their field in return. This 'community based camaraderie' that works as a innovative survival mechanism, was practiced by SC women coming together to help each other. But this does not extend to all castes in the villages. "*The upper caste farming community has*

always been in a privileged position to employ agricultural labourers without any hassle. They associate this mechanism (badulu cheyadam) with the 'lower' castes and hence refrain from practicing it" (an interview with Sajaya K, an activist).

One needs to be careful with understanding the process of feminization of agriculture as it is not financial liberation of women as perceived by supporters of early 1990s liberalization. While men are moving away from agriculture due to the existing agrarian distress of multiple dimensions, women are structurally constrained and are forced back into agriculture - a non-economical source of living. *"He (her husband) started rearing goat as it provides a relatively certain income and this changed the work distribution between us. Earlier I worked in the farm only when they needed additional labour during harvesting and sowing; now I work full time. We both work hard to earn just enough to survive"*, says X, wife of a small farmer. While the involuntary mobility expressed by men with respect to employment represents vulnerability, women are socially put to work in recession proof sectors of the economy requiring lesser mobility, representing their utter lack of choice with respect to work. Recession proof jobs are those that one is likely to be able to find even during hard economic times. This could, in agriculture, be understood as 'feminization out of compulsion' / 'feminization on agrarian distress'⁵⁶. These women are observed to have no source of income ie., no certain paid income outside of farming. As it becomes hard to calculate individual income earned in farming, it is generally considered as pooled family income and in this context, feminization of agriculture could be understood as 'feminization of poverty'⁵⁷.

Out migration of men resulted in greater female participation in the rural labor market. Did this participation ensure control over assets, incomes and greater participation in household decisions? To examine the legitimacy of this notion one needs to look at the status of female labor on: 1. ownership of assets, 2. participation in decision making processes (Table 4.16). While ownership over assets (agricultural land, as discussed in the next paragraph) is reported positively in the sample, but only if they also participate in decisions regarding the kind of crops to be cultivated, agricultural inputs brought, lease in agricultural land, children's education and

⁵⁶Coined by Itishree Pattnaik et al (2017).

⁵⁷Coined by Martha Gimenez (1987).

financial decisions like opening a bank account or applying for a loan, could it be understood as empowering women. Though feminization of agriculture resulted in women enjoying better social visibility, their contribution to the family income however is not translated to a better participation in decision making processes.

Table 4.16, Proportion of women owning land (which is registered in their name) and making decisions in the household.

Women	Count	Proportion
Land ownership	15	25%
Decision making	5	8.30%

Source: Fieldwork, 2017-18.

Land ownership from a gender lens helps us in understanding the role of patriarchy in maintaining an unequal power balance between the genders. Land, a major asset in an agricultural setup, is in most cases given to men while women are given gold leaving them with no land ownership rights (inferences from the interviews). *“As men take forward the surnames, ancestral assets like land are transferred to them while women are given gold”* says X, wife of a farmer who committed suicide, in an attempt to explain the gendered distribution of assets. In a situation, where the identity of a farmer is reinforced with land ownership, this excludes women from being recognized as farmers. There were few cases of women owning land which is legally not on their names but either on their husband or father. New Govt. initiatives like reduction with regard to registration fee in case the land is on a woman's name encouraged women land ownership in Telangana (in Medak and Mahabubnagar, to be specific). 15 families out of the total 60 interviewed had some amounts of land ranging from half an acre to five acres registered in a woman's name. But to what extent could land ownership be understood as a proxy for women empowerment is questionable, as the decision making power nevertheless rests with men. During an interview with X, a woman owning agricultural land of 2 acres, when asked if she chooses on what is to be cultivated, what kind of seeds and pesticides to use, she responded by saying *“he (her husband) looks after it because it is a man's job”*.

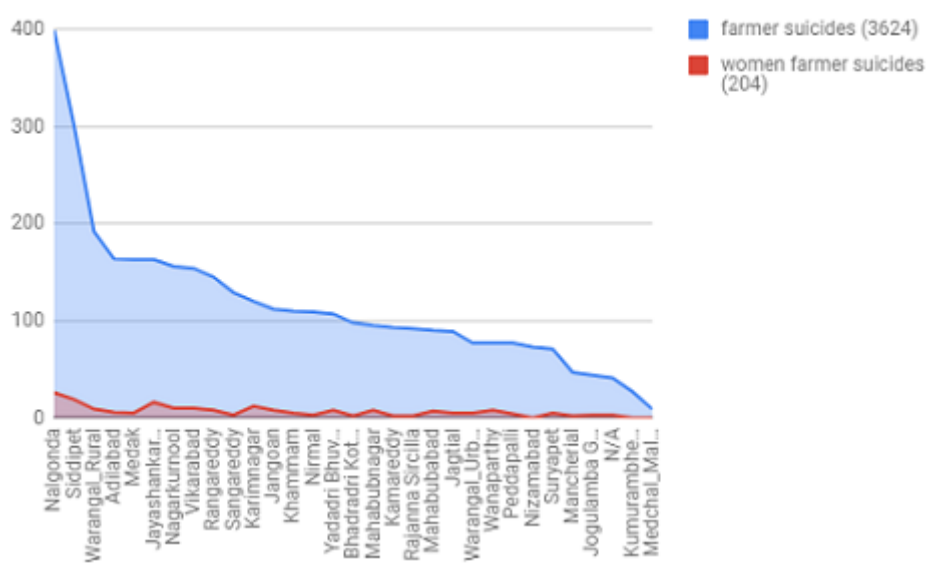
Looking at this issue from the caste lens offers an interesting insight. Lower caste women are observed to have better visibility and mobility (in a relative sense) than upper caste women.

Lower caste women owning small and marginal land holdings are seen working as agricultural labourers in other fields while the mobility of upper caste women is restricted (by men) to working only on lands belonging to upper caste communities. This could be demonstrated by taking the case of an upper caste small farming family who lost a member to suicide in Mahabubnagar district (as they requested anonymity, their identities are not disclosed). The (late) farmer's son chose not to work as an agricultural labourer, in spite of growing financial distress. *“Hailing from Reddy caste, it is disrespectful to our community if I work as a farm labourer”*, he stated. His mother, however, works as an agricultural labourer in a field owned by an upper caste farmer in order “to survive”, indicating her ‘restricted’ mobility (of working only in the lands owned by the upper caste communities). A relatively higher mobility exercised by women belonging to lower castes should be seen as a result of intensified distress and not as a result of the growing concern for women and their liberation.

4.4.2 Women farmer suicides and women post (male) farmer suicides

With the deepening intensity of agrarian crisis, farmer suicides have been increasing, of both men and women. Of the total farmer suicides that happened in Telangana, women make up 5.6 % in the period 2014 - 2017 (Figure 4(i)). While it is true that men are exposed to the market and the risk associated with it, it has to be understood that women also share the burden - economically or otherwise.

Figure 4(i), Women farmer suicides from 2014 - 2017 in Telangana (district wise).



Source: Rythu Swarajya Vedika.

Data on women farmer suicides remains undermined as women in agricultural sector are recognized not as farmers but as farmer's wives⁵⁸. Land rights are often on their husband's or father's name further complicating their legal recognition as farmers. This sub-section attempts to look at characteristics of women farmer suicides in Telangana in general and in Medak and Mahabubnagar in particular.

The mode of death chosen by women farmers in Medak and Mahabubnagar is self immolation while male farmers committed suicide by hanging themselves or by consuming pesticides. The method of self immolation is likely to take less preparation and is widely understood as an impulsive act with / without complete knowledge on the complications of burn injuries. According to a study, younger women with a 'history of financial hardship' are likely to choose this method (Hosein et al, 2015). While men have easy access to pesticides at the farm, women have easy accessibility to kerosine, specifically in the rural India. These women farmers were deep in debt and this could likely be the reason in which a mild set back (financial or otherwise) could act as a triggering point. Apart from the 20 interviews of families of farmers who committed suicide, an interview with a woman farmer who attempted to commit suicide using kerosine (and was rescued) was done as a part of this study. She confirmed that it was indeed an impulsive step taken by her due to their worsening financial situation. The whole *act* has further pushed them into a deeper debt trap as they had to spend 4.5 lakhs on her treatment. They had to go to a private hospital as the closest Govt. hospital was inadequately equipped, reflecting on how privatization of basic amenities like health and education have become burdensome to rural agricultural households. *"I survived only to worsen our family's distress. Is a decent livelihood too much to ask?"* she questions. Since she cannot actively participate in agriculture after the incident (with 60% body burns), she started rolling beedi as an alternative income generating activity.

The category of a 'farmer suicide' is exclusionary in nature as it does not recognize suicides by landless farmers as farmer suicides. While this is the general case, women undergo additional layers of non-recognition as farmers. Most rural women do not own land and in case they do, it legally remains on her father's / husband's name. The nature of work done by women represents

⁵⁸Sharma, Vaibhavi, Pathak (2018). In conversation with P Sainath, Editor of people's Archive of Rural India. *DUbeat*, October 24.

the functional definition of an agricultural labourer (as discussed earlier), hence they fall outside the scope of the official definition of a 'farmer' and eventually a 'farmer suicide'. During an interaction with the neighbour of a female farmer who committed suicide, when asked if she was a farmer, she responded by saying "*no, she only works in the farm (ledu polam lo pani chesthadhanthe)*". The rural understanding of the agrarian distress in the context of women farmer suicides is undermined due to patriarchy which only lets the man exhibit 'masculine farmer' characteristics.

When a woman farmer commits suicide it is generally associated with non agrarian /personal reasons while man's distress is due to agricultural deficits. "*It (suicide) must be the result of a fight between her and her mother-in-law. It's a family matter, madam, you don't have to 'investigate' it*", stated another neighbour of the woman farmer who committed suicide. When a male farmer commits suicide, it is observed as a 'respectful' death ("*after fighting against all odds, he finally gave up*", "*what else could he do?*", "*he was pushed into it*" as expressed by villagers and family members) while the death of a woman farmer is seen as just another death. Male farmer suicides are (sometimes) given a political undertone while the women farmers are robbed of it. It is distressing that, of the 2 female farmer suicides in the study, none of their families received a compensation from the Govt..

Women belonging to families where the farmer has committed suicide experience tightening social constraints. Traditionally, it is men who engage with the market (credit, input, output etc) and his death forces these women to take his place without intervening with the existing power structures. With their 'invisible' personhood, these women are viewed as outsiders in the society which further adds to their distress. The gap between them and the market is bridged either by the farmer's (elder) son / a close male relative. Widows of these farmers took full control over the decision making process only in two (of 18) cases, while the daughters and mothers are observed to have absolutely no voice. The increasing participation of women in agricultural work and their contribution to the pool of family income did not, however, change the rural perceptions towards them. X, wife of a farmer who committed suicide says, "*they blamed me for his death, that I brought bad luck to him*". X and the farmer's parents do not share a cordial relation, though they live in the same house. In addition to the constraints on the access to markets, the social taboo

associated to a ‘death’ (a ‘bad death’ in the case of a suicide) is observed to further intensify the widow's trauma.

Out of 20 families (of farmers who have committed suicide) who were interviewed, in 7 cases the wife and parents of the farmer were not on good terms. This adds another layer of complexity in the lives of these 7 women (ie., farmer's wives). Though the farmer's wife lives with her kids in the same house, they are all emotionally detached. *“If it is just her, we could have asked her to leave but my son’s son stays with her and that is our blood so we are bound to keep her”* says a (late) farmer's mother. This reflects the patriarchal attitude that is engraved within their minds ie., desire for a male heir to the extent that it has become the only thread that keeps them together. The wife's identity is reduced to being a burden, though she is the primary bread earner. In the other 11 cases, the cordial relations with in-laws act as an emotional support system for the widow (Table 4.17).

Table 4.17, Relation between farmer's wife and his parents post his suicide.

Relation	Count
Cordial	11
Non cordial	7
Total	18

Source: Fieldwork, 2017-18.

In addition to the out migration of male small and marginal farmers, male farmer suicides also led to feminization of agriculture. Though majority of the widows (15 of them) are into agriculture full time, major decisions regarding the type of crop to be produced, pesticides etc are still made by men in the family - the elder son, or a close male relative. Only in two cases were women seen exhibiting decision making authority and both of them belong to a lower caste (BC). None of these women are recognized as ‘farmers’ by the villagers. Their identity is limited to ‘someone who works in the farm’ - definition of an agricultural labourer. Reduction of a woman's identity is not however limited to the agricultural sector alone, it is a more universal issue signifying the strong hold of patriarchy in India.

4.4.3 Understanding 'marriage' amidst agrarian crisis

Agrarian distress affects people involved in agricultural sector at multiple levels depending on many aspects such as land ownership, caste, religion, gender etc. Lack of employment with steady income flow or having a failed crop is understood in the rural setting as a failure that is associated with men and their failed ability to provide for their families. Understanding the concept of a 'marriage' within the context of agrarian crisis in a rural setting could be, in a way, translated to an 'economic burden' and fulfilling the responsibility of '*handing over*' a woman to a man (*Oka ayya chethilo pettadam*), - marriage as understood by Yadagiri, a small farmer. All the interviewed 60 families (including big farmers) had taken a loan to cover the marriage expenses ranging from 1 lakh to 7.5 lakhs. Marriage expenses further tighten the debt trap that the small and marginal farmers are stuck in. Marriage of a girl child in a farmer's family leaves them with a debt that falls on the elder male or the male children belonging to the family. Dowry, another aspect of patriarchy has equally damaging consequences in the context of agrarian crisis, where indebtedness due to loans for a daughter's marriage plays a crucial role in triggering suicide.

Table 4.18, Age wise distribution of the interviewed farmers.

Age group	Farmer suicides	Small/ Medium	Big	Total
<=25	0	1	0	1
26-35	9	8	5	22
36-45	5	7	8	20
46-55	4	3	4	11
>=56	2	1	3	6
Total	20	20	20	60

Source: Fieldwork, 2017-18.

Of the 20 families interviewed who had lost a member to suicide due to agrarian crisis, 9 were men in the age group of 26 - 35 years (Table 4.18). None of their wives have remarried. Since farmer suicides in time period of 2014 - 2017 were considered, it would be too early to comment on the possibility of a re-marriage. But it was observed (during focus group discussions with the farming community) that widows do not remarry, nor is it socially acceptable. "*A widow remarrying? That is absurd (malli pella? Em matladuthunaru!)*", says a widow's neighbour. With the economic burden of uncleared debt and the responsibility of taking care of their kids,

these widows are financially trapped. There were instances of widows going back to their maternal homes seeking help (financial or otherwise), but none of them considered remarriage. In the case of 2 women farmer suicides (of ages 26 and 44), there is a visible pressure from the husband's family to get the men remarried (who were 27 and 48 at the time of the interview), so there would be someone to take care of the house and kids. While it is acceptable for men to remarry, women are socially, culturally and sexually bound to only be with one man.

4.5 Summary

This chapter sketches out the ground realities from Medak and Mahbubnagar districts regarding the agrarian crisis. Looking at the intensified state of the crisis, it struggled to find answers to the questions : what are the consequences? What is being done by the farming community in response to the crisis? What pushes farmers to commit suicide? How are women in agricultural sector affected by the crisis?

Farming community, as opposed to the general notion, is not homogenous. They differ based on the land ownership, caste, class, gender, religion and many other aspects. Farmers with marginal land ownership and landless tenant farmers took the worst hit as a result of the crisis. Fall in agricultural income coupled with uncertainty and indebtedness pushed the farming community into distress as this crisis went beyond just decline in agricultural produce. With increasing expenditure and exploitation at multiple levels and by multiple agents, the agriculturally marginalized are looking at risky alternatives to cope up with the crisis. The risk taking behaviour could be understood as a strategy opted by the desperate as a way out of the crisis.

Exploitation by the seed companies, fertilizer sellers and the market resulted in increasing expenditure and an agricultural deficit. Agricultural deficit and the growing indebtedness led to the debt trap, of which the small, marginal and medium farmers have become victims. Big farmers are indebted to money lenders but are not stuck in debt traps. Instances of land sales and distress sale of the produce reflect the desperate conditions small and marginal farmers live in. Data collected confirms the above mentioned statements. Farmer suicides, of all the consequences of the agrarian crisis, signifies the apex point of the distress where the farmer chooses death over a life filled with exploitation and indebtedness. This chapter, in a way,

attempts to offer a Marxian understanding of the consequences of the agrarian crisis using empirical data.

As agricultural surplus has narrowed or zeroed down, alternatives or ways to cope with it and other issues that resulted in the crisis have been put in place by the farming community - like poultry, goat rearing, working as agricultural labourers, mechanics, security guards, anganwadi workers, setting up rice mills, tractors, paddy harvesting machines etc. The small and medium farmers look at those non-farm activities that demand a small / no investment. They are involved in selling their labour. The broader set of activities that small and big farmers take up as alternative income sources vary widely. While small and medium farmers consider the alternative income generating sources as survival strategies, big farmers look at them as additional income generating sources. Big farmers are in a financially advantageous position to invest in projects that require a higher investment.

Women in agriculture are not recognized for their contribution to the agricultural productivity and consequently to the household income. Feminization of agriculture due to out migration of male farmers could be understood as one of the consequences of agrarian crisis. It has given women partial visibility where their contribution is now accounted for and is taken into consideration. Contribution to the household income does not, however, imply decision making ability. Though visibility of women in public spaces has improved with increasing feminization of agriculture, it does not indicate changing power structures within private spaces (of household). As a result of the contradicting forces ie., expanding mobility / visibility coupled with unchanged power relations amidst changing labour and gender dynamics in rural India, increasing small and marginal women farmers participation in farm / non-farm sectors has to be understood as a survival mechanism rather than an empowering strategy. The oppression undergone by women farmers at multiple levels needs to be recognized as an outcome of the existing agrarian crisis and the social structures.

As long as the exploitative measures such as the informal lending activities, unregulated tenancy, unregulated markets are in place, marginalized of the farming community can only find a temporary solution to the crisis through their 'coping mechanisms'. One has to look beyond

these individual aspects and connect the dots that present the larger picture to understand the ways and means of achieving a long term and permanent solution to the agrarian crisis. The unregulated exploitative structural aspect of the making of agrarian crisis has to be dismantled and regulated. This could only be achieved by consistent Govt. reforms in policies targeting the landless tenant, small, marginal and medium farming community.

Chapter 5: Conclusion

Agrarian crisis, from a Marxian perspective, is an outcome of the transition from primarily an agrarian based economy to manufacturing / service sector based economy. Chapter 1 maps out the Marxian framework along with the historical, economic, sociological and political aspects to provide a background for the consequences (of the crisis) which would later be discussed, as one of the objectives of this study. As identifying the mode of production has an important role in the Marxist framework in understanding the nature of the agrarian crisis, the first task was to look at the mode of production in the agricultural sector in India. With persistent semi-feudal characteristics overlapping with the capitalist features, a clear distinction cannot be made. If one could think of the transition from feudalism to capitalism as a spectrum and not as discrete classes, the mode of production in agriculture in India appears to tilt towards capitalistic characteristics even in the presence of semi-feudal relations. This, in a way, explains the parallel existence of sharecropping (like *chaaranapal*) alongside monetary tenancy (where rent is paid in the form of money) in parts of Telangana.

Agrarian crisis has resulted in labour exploitation and alienation, partial proletarianization of labour, feminization of agriculture, debt trap, falling standards of living and increasing farmer suicides. Among these consequences, special focus is put on farmer suicides where the farmer understands death as the only way out of the exploitative system – an extreme manifestation of the intensifying crisis. This research problematizes the category of a ‘farmer’ as understood by the Census board and NCRB. The category ‘farmer suicide’ is further analyzed keeping in mind Durkheim's analysis of a suicide. Chapter 2 essentially outlines the debates revolving around the understanding of a ‘farmer suicide’. It further argues that farmer suicides cannot be singled out and be seen as an outcome of a personal crisis, but instead as the result of structural factors at a macro level. With little research done in the newly formed state of Telangana on the nature of crisis and its consequences, the new state is chosen as the area to work on. Chapter 3 talks of suicides in Telangana (primarily a drought hit region) and specifically looks at Medak and Mahabubnagar within the state of Telangana.

Transition towards the capitalist mode of production over the last few decades resulted in an intensified exploitation of the marginal land owning sections of the farming community.

Exploitation is observed at various stages of cultivation - from production to marketing. With the dual role that moneylenders play as output sellers, indebtedness has turned into a 'debt trap'. As Medak and Mahabubnagar are both drought hit areas, water inadequacy remains a major problem for agriculture. This resulted in increasing investment on borewells, pushing farmers deeper into the debt trap as the success rate of finding water remains low. It is argued that this resulted in farmers selling their land to repay the debt, which Marxian discourse refers to as the process of 'partial proletarianization'.

One alarming manifestation of the crisis is identified to be a higher farmer suicide rate. The vast majority of these suicides are by farmers belonging to BC community, who are small and marginal farmers. With uneconomical size of land to operate on and no alternative employment opportunities, a farmer suicide, as argued in Chapter 4, is to be looked as a result of structural violence imposed on them. Looking at the aftermath of a farmer suicide reveals how the family is further pushed into a deeper distress. With increasing pressure from the money lenders to repay the debt, to the failure of the state in providing the required assistance at the right time, families start looking at unskilled jobs (farm or non-farm) with a stable income for their survival. The small and marginal farmers need structural changes, not mere economical support (via MSP, loan waiver etc) as the long term solution to the crisis. It is the big land owning farming community that looks at reforms as a solution, as the crisis is not threatening to their livelihood, though it resulted in a drastic fall in the agricultural income.

The landless, small and marginal land owning farming community takes the worst hit of the agrarian crisis. For the small and marginal, the crisis becomes threatening to their livelihood while for the big farmers, it is not as intense. Marginal, small and medium farmers are engaged in activities involving low investment with a higher physical labour participation, like working as a construction worker, mechanic, security guard, in beedi making etc. Big farmers invest in activities demanding a higher capital and less physical labour participation like rice mills, tractors, paddy cutting machines, poultry etc,. The study argues that the way small and medium farmers face and respond to the agrarian crisis can be understood as 'coping mechanisms', while that of big farmers can be seen as 'resilience' to the crisis. By participating in the non-farm sectors, the big farmer is trying to make up the income lost in agriculture, whereas the small and

marginal farmer is looking at mere survival. Increasing dependence on non-farm sectors led to the temporary out migration of men farmers, resulting in feminization of agriculture. The research argues that this phenomenon of increasing feminization has to be understood as a survival mechanism and not as an embodiment of women empowerment, as the decision making power continues to rest with men.

Women in agriculture, are often not identified as ‘farmers’ but as what is recognized as a functional definition of an ‘agricultural labourer’. Feminization of agriculture, which has resulted in increasing social visibility among women did not change the power dynamics as they still do not have a say in the decision making process (inside and outside the household). This research argues that feminization in the agricultural sector is more within the small and marginal farming communities, implying that it is to be understood as a survival mechanism associated with the agrarian crisis. Women constitute 5.6 % of the total farmer suicides that were recorded in Telangana from 2014 - 17. The extent of women farmer suicides is speculated to be higher than reported, as the vast majority of women are by default not considered as ‘farmers’. A very small proportion of women farmers own land - this further distances women from categorizing them as farmers. Though the crisis by itself is threatening to the livelihoods of the farming community, looking at it from a gender lens offers another perspective, suggesting that women are further exploited by the market and structural factors.

A primary focus of this study is to draw attention to the definition of a ‘farmer’ which the study argues is exclusionary in nature. A more inclusive and an appropriate definition of a farmer is proposed which takes into consideration livelihood dependency on agriculture in addition to land ownership to better assist in understanding the category of a ‘farmer suicide’. This research attempts to conceptualize the consequences of a deepening agrarian crisis (with farmer suicides being the focal point) and its coping mechanisms using a Marxian framework. Medak and Mahbubnagar districts in Telangana provide the context. The study asserts that economic support by the Govt. provides only a short term and partial solution to the crisis, and a more permanent solution lies in structurally changing the existing agrarian relations. Redistribution of land (via land reforms), with regulated markets (for credit, products etc) in addition to the economic support could be understood as a possible solution for the agrarian crisis in India.

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She has presented the paper entitled **“Causes and Consequences of Farmer Suicides: A Case Study in Three Districts of Andhra Pradesh”**.

Place: Vadodara

Date: 8th December 2018



(Prof. Lancy Lobo)
Director

Centre for Culture and Development



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FATHER'S NAME : LAKSHMAIAH/ANJANA

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RS702	Theorizing Region : The Indian Context	C	4.00	PASS
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