

# Victims of Swadeshi Pesticides & Policies

## Caught in a Vicious Cycle Cotton Farmers Commit Suicide on an Epidemic Scale

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Nearly 500 cotton growing farmers have committed suicide in the last few months most of them in Warangal district of Andhra Pradesh. From there the contagion spread to Karnataka and then Maharashtra.\* If such a spate of suicides had happened in any civilised country newspapers would write about it for weeks together. However, in India, farmers committing suicides is not 'man bites dog' and hence not much of news.

How does one explain the spate of suicides in these three states? In Andhra Pradesh, some 10 years back, 12 farmers from Prakasam district committed suicide. Since then, every year a few do kill themselves. In Maharashtra, on March 23, 1986 Sahebrao Karpe of Yeotmal district took the whole of his family to Wardha where they all ended their lives by consuming

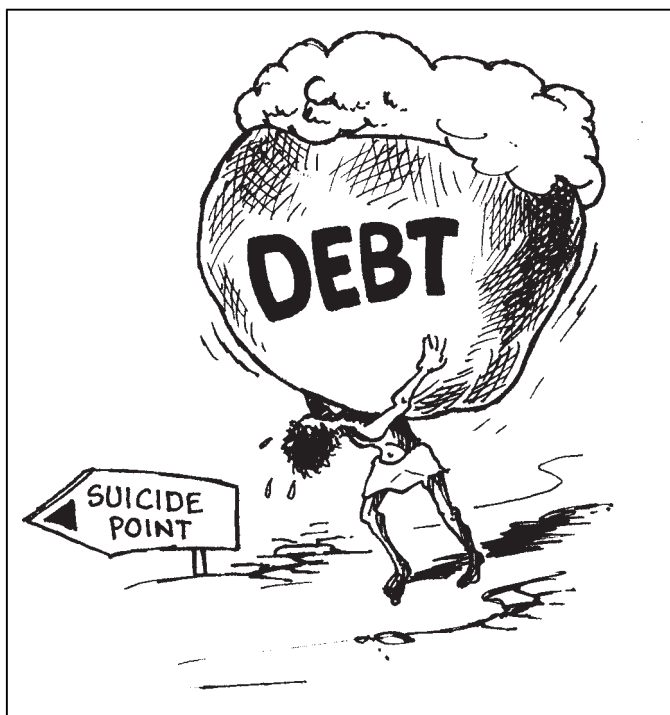
*\*The Punjab suicides came after this article was sent to MANUSHI.*

pesticides. They preferred death to seeing helplessly their crops die for want of irrigation because the State Electricity Board had cut off the power supply upon non-payment of dues.

But close to 500 suicides is more like an epidemic. Suicide is supposed to be principally a personal decision. How come hundreds of farmers living in different villages in dispersed areas come in unison to such a stark decision within a span of few days?

There are psychologists and sociologists who have claimed that the suicides happen in clusters. Sustaining life and continuing it is a basic urge of all living things. But, one suicide in a family, in the neighbourhood or in the community can easily put suicide as a feasible item on the operative agenda of any individual. In the anti-Mandal agitation in Delhi many a young student tried self-immolation once an example was set by a Goswamy. A young bride, who feels harassed, contemplates suicide because

she has heard and read about so many women in her situation finding a way out that way. Even the mode of suicides follows a cluster pattern. Young brides more often than not go for burning themselves. Farmers consume pesticides commonly and easily available in any farm household. That is, certainly, one reason why farmers wishing to commit suicide use them. But, the fact that they have heard of so many farmers ending their lives by consuming poison suggests that as a pattern.



RUSTAM

I visited Prakasam district 10 years back and met each of the bereaved families. The story more or less followed the same pattern. Farmers with small land holdings took some additional acres of land on lease, in the hope the cotton crop would yield them, if all things go well, as much as Rs 5,000 per acre. All the victims had pawned the gold ornaments of their womenfolk and started the gamble that is cotton growing. The rain-gods failed successive swarms. Pesticides cost over Rs 1,000 a litre. Like a *jawan* fighting an enemy they used repeated sprays, some as many as 20. But the pests held on and the crops were destroyed. There was no way the lease money could be paid and none whatsoever of retrieving the pawned jewellery. That, by long tradition, is the ultimate humiliation for a man—not manly enough to be able to restore his wife’s gold. Apparently, the landlords are inclined to consider favourably renewal of the lease to a member of the victim’s family because the family’s honour stands proven by the suicide. All the suicides were men, except one. The one woman who killed herself was the head of the family. The government then had announced some paltry compensation.

“So, what will you do hereafter?” I asked the survivors in each family. The invariable reply was, “What else? We have no way but to continue growing cotton.”

But 500 suicides this year mark not only a difference of degree but also of kind. Why so many suicides? Why such a concentration in Andhra Pradesh and in cotton and *tur* (a lentil variety) producing areas of Karnataka and Maharashtra? Why does not one hear of suicides by Haryana Jats where the wheat crop has failed almost 40 per cent? What is the economics and the so-

ciology of these suicides? The unseasonable rains played havoc in practically all the states of the country this year. It rained for over 20 days in November ’97 and for over 24 days in December ’97. Not even the oldest living farmers recall this kind of rainfall in their living memory. Soybean, sorghum (*jowar*), cotton and *tur* have been badly damaged all over. The dry parts of Punjab that generally produce little wheat have benefited from the unseasonable rains. Their wheat crop will be more plentiful. The traditional wheat producing districts, on the other hand, might give a poorer performance. The unseasonable rains are reported to have been good for sugarcane. We may expect a bumper cane-crop next season. Cane-growers will face problems of plenty coming season. Most other farmers faced instant ruin.

The signs of discontent amongst farmers were visible to those who had eyes to see and audible to those who had ears to hear. The input pattern has drastically changed since the introduction of the Green Revolution technology package. In case of crop failures now the first crunch that is felt by the farmers is about payment of electricity bills. Then comes the need to repay loans taken for the purchase of seeds and pesticides. That is the reason why farmers’ agitation in diverse regions have

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tended, since the 1970s, to centre on electricity tariffs and loan-waivers. Payments of electricity bills and loans, understandably, are first to fall in arrears. These perpetually accumulating burdens have become the curse of a peasant’s life.

Year after year, when monsoons come, farmers pick up both courage and hope, somehow put together the seed and the fertilizers and put it in their land with the abandon and recklessness of a gambling addict. Sometimes the crops are bad, sometimes they are not so bad. In either case the economic outcome is the same. If the crops are fair the prices are bad and vice-versa. The financial year in farm accounts invariably ends by a much bigger figure of outstanding payments including the loan money, the interest, the compound interest, the penal interest and what not.

The farmers, no matter from which region they come, have a sense of honour. Probably it’s their religious belief but they think it bad not to discharge their debts, no matter if the money-lender prepares crooked accounts, no matter that agriculture is a losing proposition which can never yield surplus for honourably repaying the loans and other dues.

This has been so for generations and generations. As they became old the farmers finally realised that they had lost the game. Their life became a misery at the idea that they were passing on to their sons a burden of debts far more crushing than what they had inherited, that they could do little worthwhile work due to old age and that they had become burdens to their children. The traditional way was to tell the

children, "We have become old, we would like to die in Kashi so that we may attain heavens." The old people left the household with a minimum of wherewithal; some of them even reached Kashi or some such holy place. Large number of rich people gather there and feed multitudes

of poor in the hope of expiating their sins. One could count on getting a couple of meals of charity every week and thus live on till the death came. In Sindbad's tale, there is mentioned a place where elephants worn out by age come to die. Going to Kashi has been a mode of suicide for old peasants for generations.

The Green Revolution technology made it possible to feed the urban population by making intensive use of expensive inputs—the cost of which was hardly ever covered by the prices received. The farmer sank deeper and deeper in debts and poverty. The number of suicides amongst farmers should have increased many fold. This does not appear to have happened. The explanation can be found in the fact that little by little the pride of the peasantry eroded, and the sense of honour about repayment of loans disappeared.

In fact, since most of the farmers who have larger holdings and, consequently, social standing and political power make it a point of honour and prestige



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not to repay loans, all stigma attached to non-payment of loans is fast disappearing. This would be called moral degeneration but it is this degeneration that has allowed the farmers to live on and not go to the nearest well or the river or the bottle of pesticides to end the journey in a tunnel at the end of which no light was seen.

The first to rise were the farmers in Haryana. There were violent demonstrations in November 1997 on the question of electricity tariff. Farmers who blocked the railway tracks were fired on by the police killing eight and injuring nearly a 100. On

December 12-13, the Shivashahi police killed three and injured 17 in a brutal firing on farmers in Amaravati district demanding a better price for cotton. On January 9, 1998 soybean farmers of Betul district in Madhya Pradesh who gathered at Multai tehsildar's office

were mowed down with the ferocity of a General Dyer. Twenty seven farmers including three women were killed, the number of injured has not been yet finally established.

In a meeting of various farmer organisations held in Delhi on March 21, 1998, all this was reviewed and talked about. The representative from Andhra Pradesh was in tears, "Something needs to be done in the South." A farmer from Punjab said, "Don't go by the fact that we are not killing ourselves, the situation in Punjab is equally difficult." (*see box on p.16*)

The suicides in Maharashtra and Karnataka are an outcome of the normal anti-farmer policies over the decades. Maharashtra and Karnataka type of suicides might be increasingly generalised unless somebody can awaken the conscience of the world to the subhuman treatment the peasantry in India is getting.

The epidemic of suicides in Andhra Pradesh requires a closer look. There is a widely reported case of one B. Venkatrama Rao at Uppakapadu of West Godavari

district whose father had borrowed a sum of Rs 15,000 and died of cancer two years back. The sum swelled with interest to Rs 27,695, the cotton crop failed and the officials of the local bank which had lent the money came to the village for recovery. They came accompanied by not only the police force but also drum-beaters who went round the village announcing, "The belongings and property of the defaulter Venkatrama Rao are being seized by the bank. Let those villains who refuse to repay the bank, beware!" The neighbours pooled in some Rs 10,000 and paid the sum to the bank staff. Venkatrama Rao requested the squad-leader to stop the drum-beating and the announcement, but to no avail. Then he prayed for some time so that he could go to a nearby money-lender and try to get some loan at 60 per cent rate of interest. The moneylender, however did not oblige. Venkatrama Rao saw that the bank staff had started taking out his belongings and loading them in the truck. Even the cot on which lay his sick daughter was not spared. It was clear that someone was bent on taking it out on the poor defaulter. He went to an agro-service centre shop, managed to get a bottle of Endosulphon, drank it and returned to his house where the bankers were gleefully continuing their operations. Faltering, Venkatrama Rao treaded his weary way home and quietly dropped down and died.

A widow who had only a 13-year-old son told the child, "There is no hope left for us. I am going to kill myself by drinking this poison. You will probably get some money from the government. Repay the loans to the extent you



can and all my blessings be with you." The child tried to dissuade the mother, "You are more precious to me than any thing else. Please, do not forsake me." The mother was determined and carried out her decision.

There is a story of a more heroic farmer who climbed up the podium from which the Chief Minister Chandrababu Naidu was addressing a public meeting and drank the pesticide right in his presence. I also came across one who drank pesticide but survived because it was profusely adulterated and possibly just fake. It is difficult to say for certain what caused Warangal suicides. But, there are certain distinguishing features of cotton cultivation there. Maybe, the key to the riddle lies therein.

The suicides had almost all taken land on lease. The annual rent can be as high as Rs 3,000 to Rs 5,000 per acre. The cotton-grower of Warangal incurs one type of cost which is spared to most of the Indian farmers. Most agricultural land is inherited. The land revenue is negligible, and therefore, the land represents no cash cost to most farmers. The

notion in economics that the interest on the market price of the land is an opportunity cost would sound strange and bizarre to most of them. It does not occur to them that if they sold the land and kept the money in fixed deposit account they would get a certain assured income which they forego by the very fact of their decision to cultivate land. However, the land cost is not notional but very real for the Warangal farmers. Clearly, the cost of production of cotton in Warangal is going to be, depending upon the yield and the amount of rent, about Rs 150 to Rs 500 per quintal higher than anywhere else on account of the rent of land alone.

Secondly, the suicide regions are dry land areas where the irrigation has to be assured by lifting water. Sinking of wells, pipe lines and supply of electricity—all become important inputs. Cotton is grown in small patches wherever there is a possibility of at least protective irrigation. Such oasis of cotton fields are more vulnerable to attacks by pests. Large-scale use of pesticides becomes necessary. Farmers carry out 15 to 20 sprayings. Andhra

Pradesh uses 24 per cent of all pesticides used in the country. This is temptation for the unscrupulous traders and manufacturers. There are as many as 60 local manufacturers of pesticides in Warangal. Their product is often ineffective, adulterated or just fake. Traders act as part-time money-lenders as well. They do not sell pesticides on credit. They lend money on interest. But instead of giving cash to the loanee they force him to buy their products, particularly pesticides.

I was told of a case where a farmer needed urgently a sum of Rs 2,000 for the treatment of his wife in a hospital. There was no way he could raise the money. So, he went to an agro-service centre, borrowed Rs 4,000 but was given one litre of a pesticide in lieu of cash. He took out some and sold the rest for Rs 2,000. The money was given for the wife's treatment and the farmer drank the poison to save the embarrassment of being a defaulter.

Are Warangal suicides cowards? Are they heroes? Or, are they simply the victims of an economy that is manipulated against them coupled with a questionable set of moral values?

In the early years when the gamble in cotton began the virgin soil yielded 15 to 20 quintals of the 'white gold'. Year by year the yields are falling and the typical yield now is 8-10 quintals. The cost of inputs is around Rs 12,000-15,000 per acre. So in the best of years the cotton-grower may barely cover his expenses so that he gets nothing but the wages for his and his families labour. If the rains are bad, if storms come, if the seed is substandard, if the pesticide is doctored, if the electricity supply fails just when



**Photos on this and facing page shows grieving families of cotton farmers who killed themselves.**

irrigation is needed he is in trouble. Cotton-growing in Warangal is as risky as trapeze acrobatics with no safety-net.

Wherever there are dead bodies vultures will gather. A number of NGO leaders, never known to have shown any interest in the economics of agriculture, are gathering in Multai and Warangal to try and preach the farmers that the whole misfortune has sprung from the policies of liberalisation and that economic freedom is bad for them. Some of the anti-MNC

brigades are carrying out a vitriolic campaign that the multinationals and the World Trade Organization (WTO) are responsible for the Warangal suicides. Now, the multinationals are dumping in cotton at Rs 800 a quintal; so it is the multinationals that are killing the farmers. This kind of propaganda from the anti-freedom squads is not surprising. After all did they not, in the days of the Dunkel debate, tried to frighten the farmers that, "This monster Dunkel will take away your seed and your cows?"

The argument is so false that one feels bad about having to take the trouble to refute it. In fact, the spurious pesticides of local origin have been a major cause of the tragedies. According to the information supplied by the Ministry of Commerce to the WTO, cotton grower over the years has suffered under the worst kind of negative subsidy (-205.82 per cent for years 1986 to 1989). Negative subsidy is calculated as the difference between the government-controlled price and the international market

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## The Contagion Catches up with Punjab

After Andhra Pradesh, Karnataka and Maharashtra it's now Punjab. Reports of debt related suicides by farmers are trickling in from the state which heralded the Green Revolution. Sucked into a vicious cycle of failed crops and debts, more and more cotton farmers in the state are consuming Celphos, the Rs 10-a-bottle insecticide.

The story of the Punjab cotton farmer is similar to the ones told and retold in Andhra and elsewhere. It begins with the farmer taking a loan from a bank for a crop. The crop fails and he is unable to repay or go in for the next crop. So the farmer turns to a moneylender, borrows money but the crop fails again. The farmer has nowhere to go or hide from the moneylender. The story ends in Celphos tablets.

➤ Karnail Singh of Gill Khurd village in Bhatinda owed banks and moneylenders Rs 6 lakh. When the moneylender came calling, Karnail Singh thought of the unthinkable: selling of his 11 acres. But he could not find a buyer. A few days later, he ended his life by eating the insecticide.

➤ A day later Mohan Singh of Teona village, 9 km from Bhatinda, threw himself in front of a running train. He had borrowed Rs 1.5 lakh from banks and an *arhitya* (commission agent) and the crop failed. Five days later Jasbhakar Singh, 33, of the same village, consumed Celphos.

➤ On June 11, successive crop failures and unpaid loans drove Kirpal Singh of Longowal village to Celphos. Before the embers of his pyre died down, his wife Mandip Kaur administered poison to her infant son and then ended her own life.

It is all happening in Punjab where agriculture was equated with prosperity. The failure of the cotton crop for the fifth consecutive year has reduced the farmers to penury. The crop yield touched an all time low 7.13 lakh bales against the target of 22 lakh bales this year. The result: a severe cash crunch in the cotton-belt comprising

the districts of Bhatinda, Mansa, Sangrur, Faridkot, Ferozepur, Muktsar and Moga.

With the decline of the joint family system, the size of land holdings has shrunk significantly. However, small farmers keep tractors and other machinery which render agriculture unprofitable. According to a recent survey, 72 per cent of the farms in Punjab are less than 10 acres in area.

But there is more to the farmers' problems than these factors. According to Sukhdev Singh, former agriculture commissioner to the Union government, the spate of suicides, though a recent phenomenon, is the outcome of the build up of circumstances over the years. After the Green Revolution in late 1960s, which brought wheat-paddy and wheat-cotton rotation to predominance, a number of crop alternatives have been tried but without much success. The failed experiments of introducing new crops and popularising fruits like grapes and kinnow and vegetables, have left farmers only poorer.

"Experiments on the farm front have failed because of lack of efficient marketing, poor crop production technology, inability of the government specialists to guide the farmers and lack of thrust on food-processing and agro-industries," says Singh. According to agricultural experts, the farm research and extension services have also failed to keep pace with the advances in the field.

The problems of Punjab farmers have, meanwhile, multiplied. For instance, a decade ago water logging was confined to about 10,000 hectares in the state but spread last year to more than 100,000 hectares in the southern districts. As a result, the farmers have been reporting successive crop failures over the past few years.

**Kuldeep Mann** in Bhatinda with  
**Kulvinder Kular** in Chandigarh  
(*Courtesy : The Indian Express,*  
*June 17, 1998*)

price leading to a crippling, though indirect tax on farmers. Simply put this means that the prices of cotton have been kept very much below the prices elsewhere in the interest of the textile-mill lobby. This is a crucial reason why incomes from cotton remain so low that one crop failure spells disaster for most of the farmers, who have no staying power.

So, will this terrible tragedy continue year after year? To all appearances, yes. It is said that in the great famine of Bengal hundreds of thousands of farmers with their families left their villages and came to Calcutta in search of food. They camped right in front of godowns full of rice stocked for use of the army, but none dared break open one of them. They died silently of hunger right near those godowns full of food grains.

Gandhiji said often that his non-violence is not cowardice and that it's better to have recourse to violence than submit meekly as a coward. Therein lies a message for the farmers who do not see any prospect of relief and hence are driven to suicide. □

### ***Post Script***

**According to the newly appointed Punjab Pradesh Congress Committee President Amrinder Singh, 170 farmers have committed suicide in Punjab because of heavy indebtedness.**