

Paper presented in a panel on Rethinking Development in a Conference on 'Mainstreaming Human Security- an Asian Perspective' (October 3-4, 2007) organised by Chulalongkorn University, Bangkok.

Human Security and the Case of Farmers' Suicides in India: An Exploration

Dr. Ritambhara Hebbar
Associate Professor
Centre for Development Studies
School of Social Sciences
Tata Institute of Social Sciences
Mumbai

Introduction

The issue of Human Security has gained ascendancy over the last decade, as conditions of violence, deprivation and the indignity of human existence have become all pervasive and are not confined to special circumstances of war or external threat to national security. The term human security is expansive in that it extends the concept of security to human beings, to conditions of everyday life, the social and economic crisis created by modern development that adversely affect and impact lives of people. The emphasis is on enhancing human development and human rights of people. Human security complements the concerns of human development and human rights. In this regard, the definition of the Commission of Human Security, 2003 seems relevant. For the Commission, Human Security is 'to protect the vital core of all human lives in ways that enhance human freedom and human fulfilment'.¹ It also shifts the focus from state security to *security of the people*, from the state to the community and the individual, and from threats to the state to threats to the people. It brings the state within the purview of criticism and redress. The reference here is to peoples' movements, resistances and struggles that have challenged state institutions and practices that have impinged on human rights of the marginalised.

An interesting point made by the Human Security Commission 2003 regarding the complementarity between human security and human development is that while human

¹ Human Security Now, Commission on Human Security New York 2003

development is ‘about people, about expanding their choices to lead lives they value’, human security deliberately focuses on *downside risks*. By downside risks, the commission draws attention to the economic downturns in society, which have been particularly evident in Asian countries following liberalisation and globalisation. In common parlance, it refers to situations of crisis or contingency. First of all it is important to recognise such situations, and thereafter prepare for and attend to them. The paper focuses on the issue of farmers’ suicides in India, which highlights the economic downturns in agriculture in India. It has received ample media attention but somehow the real issues concerning the security of farmers as a group has not been given due importance. While farmers’ suicides are an extreme manifestation of the rural crisis, it is symptomatic of the development processes and policies that have affected lives of farmers in India in the last decade and more.²

Farmers’ suicides in India reflect the collapse of basic support structures, both economic and social, in rural areas. It has put into question the entire course of rural development in India. Farmers’ suicides are clearly not poverty deaths and therefore have perplexed experts and government officials alike as to its cause. The dominant official position on farmers’ suicides in India has underplayed the problem by passing it off as a psychological phenomenon rather than treating the issue as a wake up call for rethinking rural development. The state has at the most announced regular relief packages and development programmes to overcome the crisis. But the state has failed to view the problem as the ‘downside risks’ of the structural and processual changes that have accompanied the green revolution, liberalisation and globalisation in the countryside. The crisis begs a rethinking on rural development, not just in terms of its short sighted policies and programmes which have over the years led to the decline of agriculture in India, but also in terms of evolving protective measures and mechanisms to protect the interests of the ordinary farmer and enhance the capacity of farmers to participate in the

² A Crisis necessarily involves conditions of uncertainty. Crisis situations also question routine and familiar course of government action and intervention. But while a crisis requires a re-examination of existing procedures and programmes, it also seeks a remedial intervention on the part of the state and the government.

market effectively and profitably. This however requires a more *people centred* understanding of the problem, taking into account the vulnerability of the farmers' vis-à-vis agriculture and the market.

I am particularly keen on presenting farmers' suicides within the human security framework, not just because it denotes the extreme sense of hopelessness expressed by the farmers, but also because it cuts into conventional positions on poverty and deprivation in India. It squarely vests the responsibility on the state to overcome the crisis and accept the issue as more than a psychological one. It asserts that lip service and piecemeal economic relief is not enough.

Farmers' suicides have been recorded from all over the country, but it has been chiefly associated with Maharashtra, Andhra Pradesh and Karnataka. All these three states are adjoining each other. The paper is based on my field research on farmers' suicides in two states of India, those of Maharashtra and Karnataka. The situation in both the states is similar to the extent that the areas affected by farmers' suicides are dry regions and agriculture is largely rain fed. Also in both states, suicides are mostly among small and middle farmers. These are farmers who have been growing cash crops, which include cotton (particularly in Maharashtra), sunflower, groundnut, and sugarcane (especially in Karnataka), and have been producing for the market for decades now. The paper would begin with an overview of farmers' suicides in the two states and the response of the respective governments to the same. The attempt thereby is to demonstrate how the state governments have treated the issue as deserving nothing more than the routine development intervention based on stereotypes about rural life and farmers' attitudes reiterated in the government reports on farmers' suicides. The subsequent section based on my interaction and interviews with experts, farmer organisations and activists, farmers and the suicide affected families would present the alternative understanding of farmers' suicides that raise important human security concerns for rural development. The latter would be discussed in the concluding section primarily to develop a human security perspective on the crisis facing the farmers and agriculture in India.

Farmers' Suicides: An Overview and State Response

Farmers' suicides have been understood variously. But all experts have invariably associated the suicides with the neglect of agriculture in the country, with the government encouraging and allowing unsustainable agricultural practices in rural areas. Commercialisation of agriculture has led to the indiscriminate use of fertilisers and pesticides, deteriorating soil quality and fertility, reducing ground water levels making it difficult to sustain regular agricultural output from land. Also, with the cost of agricultural inputs increasing with each passing year, farmers have been forced to take credit from institutional and non-institutional sources. The rise in agricultural cost of production is not supported by or accompanied by rise in agricultural prices. Local prices for agricultural produce do not even cover the cost of production. The policies of the government have rendered the farmers more vulnerable than before, but the government on its part has not instated checks and balances to protect the interests of the farmers. Despite these warnings of experts about the dismal condition of agriculture in the country, the state has not responded with the same urgency.

The Prime Minister of India visited Mumbai recently. One of the reasons for his visit was to assess the agrarian situation in Maharashtra. Maharashtra is one of the states that have recorded regular and high incidences of farmers' suicides in the last decade, with the highest no cases registered from Vidarbha in the north east of the state. The Chief Minister was armed with his defence of the problem, even before the PM arrived claiming that the suicides had halved since the PM's last visit and after the state implemented the Centre's Rs. 3750 crore Relief Package for farmers announced by the Prime Minister in July 2006. The money according to him has been used to compensate suicide affected families, waive off interest on farmers' loans, initiate irrigation and watershed programmes and promote horticulture.³ Farmers' suicides are still being reported from across Vidarbha, as the Chief Minister proudly announced his success in bringing down the numbers. But is the issue just about bringing down the numbers or addressing the larger processes that have led to the spate of suicides in the region? The

³ Dharmendra Jore's news piece titled *Deshmukh to Claim Suicides have Halved...* in **The Hindustan Times**, Mumbai, August 31, 2007.

attitude of the Chief Minister reflects the general approach of the government towards the issue.

The issue of farmers' suicides in Maharashtra first came to light when the All India Biodynamic and Organic Farming Association wrote to the Mumbai High Court expressing its concern over farmers' suicides in Jalna, a district in Maharashtra. The High Court treated the letter as a petition and requested the Tata Institute of Social Sciences (TISS), Mumbai to conduct a study on farmers' suicides and present its findings to the Court. Based on the findings of the TISS report, the Court asked the state government to attend to the issue seriously and provide immediate relief to the farmers. The TISS report identified the untenable cost of agricultural production and indebtedness as the key reasons for suicides. With input costs in agriculture escalating and the returns no longer commensurate with the investments made by the farmers, the farmers have incurred heavy losses and are unable to maintain the bare minimum necessary for survival. Growing dependence on the market for agricultural inputs such as seeds, pesticides, fertilisers etc and the declining prices and fluctuation in crop prices in the international market have directly impacted farmers.

The Mumbai High Court asked the Maharashtra government to come up with a comprehensive action plan to revamp the set up of its extension activities, propagate an alternative low cost organic or natural farming system through a strong network of voluntaries bodies, activists and farmers' organizations. On its part, the Maharashtra government commissioned the Indira Gandhi Institute of Development Research (IGIDR) to conduct a study on farmers' suicides and make suggestions for intervention. The IGIDR study listed various reasons for the suicides. The causes range from personal reasons such as love affairs, social reasons such as dowry to economic reasons such as debt. The IGIDR report did not implicate the government or its policies for the suicides; instead it sought a greater role for government intervention through rural development programmes to expand non-farm activity among farmers.

The Maharashtra state government announced a special relief package in December 2005 for six districts of Amravati, Akola, Buldhana, Yavatmal, Washim and Wardha. The brief

that accompanied the relief package identified 'unscrupulous money lenders' as the culprits for the high level indebtedness among farmers and therefore aimed to put an end to indebtedness, arrange for fresh capital from banks to improve farm productivity, bring desirable changes in cropping pattern, encourage organic farming and measures to reduce the cost of cultivation, provide financial assistance and encourage community marriages (large number of marriages performed at one place on the same day) with the help of social organisations and encourage value addition by supporting cooperative processing units. The package squarely laid the blame on private money lenders for farmers' suicides and to the rising level of private expenditure by farmers for social occasions and festivities. The announcement to hold community marriages was seen as a way of overcoming the latter.

The package announced Rupees One hundred thousand as compensation to the victim family upon verification by the local officials. Crop loans up to Rupees Twenty five thousand was to be rescheduled, giving a moratorium of two years and repayment in three equal instalments. The accumulated interest was waived with the government paying the same directly to the banks. Fresh crop loans up to Rupees Twenty thousand was to be paid to eligible farmers through *kisan* (farmer) credit card. Loans taken from private money lenders were to be waived off and authorised money lenders were to be regulated. The interest payable to cooperative lending institutions was capped to the principle amount. Government also sought to promote self help groups to disburse loans. The government was to subsidise crop insurance premium of small and marginal farmers. It also sought to extend financial assistance to economically weaker sections of the farmers of up to Rupees Twenty five thousand to increase productivity by procuring agricultural equipment, bio fertilisers, seeds, etc.

A social watch study conducted by GreenEarth with the support of Help Age India to assess the impact of the Chief Minister's special package of Rs. 1075 crores for farmers' of Vidarbha region in Maharashtra has been highly critical of the slipshod manner in which the package was implemented. Money was pumped into already existing programmes of the government such as that of horticulture, irrigation and agribusiness

without a review of the conditions that are pushing farmers to take their lives.⁴ The real beneficiaries, according to the report, were not the farmers but the banks and the agriculture implements production companies. The study has been highly critical of the top-down approach in the design & implementation of the relief measures. In the meantime, suicides occur daily and the numbers are multiplying with each passing season. One of the most fundamental reservations with both the Prime Minister and Chief Minister's relief packages is that they failed to serve as a media for re-examination and self-review of government interventions in rural areas and its inability to anticipate the impact of the larger changes wrought by the opening of the market.

The situation in Karnataka was no different. The highest number of farmer suicide cases was reported from northern Karnataka, the dry region of the state; in Haveri, Davanagere, Dharwad, Chitradurga, Hassan and Kolar districts. Most of the victims held land between 2 and 10 acres. Following reports of farmers' suicides in the state, the state government constituted a seven member expert committee to study farmers' suicides under the Chairmanship of Dr. G. K. Veeresh with members from the government and educational institutions such as the Institute for Social and Economic Change (ISEC), National Institute of Advanced Studies (NIAS) and National Institute of Mental Health and Neuro Sciences (NIMHANS). While the report presented some important observations on the issue, explicating the reasons for the helplessness among the farmers that pushed them to take their lives, it also absolved the government from the blame. The report identified high levels of indebtedness among farmers, with examples of cases where farmers with one acre of land have against their name over Rupees Three hundred thousand worth of loan. Related to high levels of indebtedness was the tendency among farmers to take more than one loan at a time, from institutional and especially non-institutional sources at high interest rates of 3 to 4% per month. The report rejects the argument that farmers take loans because of low agricultural prices, as the Minimum Support Price (MSP) for main crops such as rice, maize, green gram, groundnut, sunflower and cotton has gone up over the years with the rate of inflation. But again, the report agrees that the MSP has not been

⁴ Rs. 2,177/- crore for irrigation projects; Rs. 78 crore for micro irrigation; Rs. 100 crore for Vidarbha watershed mission; Rs. 25,000/- financial assistance (total INR 150 crore) to economically weak farmers for farm inputs; Rs. 30 crore for promotion of agro based subsidiary livelihood option; and Rs. 6 crore for promotion of mass marriages (INR 10,000/- per couple grant).

an effective mechanism to counter market fluctuations in agricultural prices. Here again, the report casually brushes aside the important issue of market fluctuation, which has been an issue that farmers from across the country and in the state have been consistently raising in the context of the growing vulnerability among the farmers.

The report drew attention to the practice of leasing of land in Karnataka, and very often the lessees do not possess right of records, necessary for taking loans from institutional sources. Many farmers therefore approach private money lenders for loans. Pesticide and fertiliser companies also have been extending credit to farmers in Karnataka and in Maharashtra, which adds to their debt burden. The government in both states fail to take cognisance of these facts. Clearly, the cost of seeds, pesticides and fertilisers are high, much beyond the earnings of the farmers. This issue is not discussed in the reports. Rather, in both states, the governments have created greater avenues for indebtedness by pumping more money through its relief packages into institutional lending agencies. Although lip service has been paid to diversifying cropping patterns and introducing non-farm avenues for raising earnings in rural areas, the focus is still on raising productivity (rather than reducing costs) through cultivation of conventional crops such as cotton and sugarcane, which has over the years registered decreasing yields.

But the reason that got the most publicity and that the government focused on was socio-behavioural practices among farmers that have led to the degeneration of social life in rural areas. According to the report, poor health conditions, family disputes over property, domestic problems, and heavy social burden of marrying daughters coupled with alcoholism has pushed farmers towards suicides. At stake then are both the self-respect (*swabhimana*) and self-reliance (*swavalambane*) of the farmers, due to their own doing and not because of the insecure land tenures, and escalating costs of production. The report effectively shifts the focus from the government to the farmers, and thereby suggested the creation of a farmers' welfare fund, collected from the farmers in the form of market cess, welfare cess and a part of land revenue. The fund would help farmers with social expenses. The issue of economic insecurity among farmers is relegated to the background, with the focus more on personal and social lives of farmers. The report also suggested the adoption of organic farming without enunciating how the same could be

achieved when the district level farmers' contact centres (*Ryata Samparka Kendra*) consistently encourage farmers to use chemical fertilisers and pesticides.

The governments' approach in both states have been reformist and welfare oriented, in that they fail to recognise the need for major review of agriculture and policy shifts to accommodate farmers' interest as they compete internationally for remunerative prices and price stability. Interestingly, in both states, there was no grassroots' representation of farmers' perspective within the board or committee that looked into the issue. This absence is particularly glaring as the governments' position has been very different from the perspective that emerges from the grassroots. The next section would elaborate on the same and present an alternative understanding of farmers' suicides that I argue, forms the base for further policy deliberations and human security interventions.

Farmers' Suicides and Agrarian Distress

Organisations and persons working on the issue in the grassroots have been highly critical of the governments' response to farmers' suicides. Both states, that is, Maharashtra and Karnataka have been known for the farmers' movement, which was at the peak in the 1980s. While the movement in Maharashtra spearheaded by the Shetkari Sanghata (Farmers' Association) has fizzled out, with its leaders representing farmers issues in an individual capacity, Karnataka still holds on to its movement led by the Karnataka Rajya Ryata Sangha (Karnataka state farmers' organisation) or the KRRS as it is known in short. The Shetkari Sanghata was dubbed a rich farmers' movement by some scholars, but to some it was a movement that represented the small to medium sized farmer who participated actively in the market in order to maximise his economic return (Lenneberg 1988). The farmers' movement in both states in that sense reflected the changing agrarian relations and practices in the countryside. It represented the changing aspirations of farmers and their expectations from the government in attending to the same. The movements brought to light the disregard of farmers' interests' vis-à-vis industrial production. The Sanghata reflected the concerns of thousands of farmers over the fluctuations and decline in agricultural prices and the parallel rise in the prices of manufactured goods for farming and personal consumption. The Sanghata directly

attacked the faulty government policies for the situation as well as the agricultural lobbies that came in the way of any meaningful agricultural policy initiatives. The Shetkari Sanghata directly targeted the government for purposely keeping cotton prices low to fulfil the interests of the cotton textile mills lobby in the state.

Vijay Javandhiya, one of the founders of Shetkari Sanghata, along with Sharad Joshi, does not see the situation very differently now. The problem has only accentuated, with the price protection provided to cotton farmers prior to 2001 giving way to the policy of paying the farmers for their crops over three instalments. Moreover, recovery of bank loans at the office of the Agricultural Produce Market Committee, where the farmers sell the cotton further complicates matters. First of all, the farmers receive a low price for their crops, which just about, and in many cases does not, cover the costs of production; secondly, they now receive only one third of the payment; thirdly, most of the amount is taken away by the lending banks as interest for the agricultural loan extended to the farmer. The KRRS presented a similar scenario with sugarcane growers of Karnataka. A ton of sugarcane fetches Rs. four hundred from private mill owners and Rs. one thousand one hundred and ten from the government for the farmer, which is an abysmal low price for any product. The farmers are not even paid immediately by the government. The payment is made about three to four months later, which means that the farmer has no money for any purpose-social or economic. Indebtedness is an obvious consequence.

The KRRS has also argued that farmers' suicides are an extreme manifestation of the consistent neglect of agriculture in the country in favour of industrial growth. Thus farmers' suicides, for the KRRS, are not an aberration, but the logical conclusion for the anti-farmer, anti-rural policies followed by the state. Agriculture has always been seen as a sector meant to fulfil industrial needs. Competitive prices have never been offered to farmers. The quest towards self-reliance in food production, the ostensible aim of the green revolution, according to the KRRS, is the beginning point of the decline of agriculture in India. Increased costs of production, with seeds, fertilisers and pesticides being bought in the market, giving up of multiple cropping for mono-cropping of cash crops, decreasing soil fertility with increasing exposure of land to chemical fertilisers for increasing production have made farmers more vulnerable than ever to market

fluctuations and desertification of land. The KRRS has initiated a campaign for promoting 'nature farming', or farming that was traditionally practiced. This has been KRRS' way of distancing from 'organic farming' that the Karnataka state government has been trying to promote since 2004 as a part of its new organic farming policy. The KRRS has been encouraging farmers to use organic seeds; in fact the seed or *bija* have been played up as a symbol of life, growth, self-reliance and dignity, while it simultaneously suggests a shift from commercial agriculture to production for self-consumption. Beyond the rhetoric, this shift suggests a complete sense of distrust of the government and its machinery to genuinely address the problems of the farmers. In this case, questions have been raised about the new organic farming policy that the state government is promoting as a solution to the agrarian distress in the area. The corruption rife in the system is far more palpable at the decentralised levels, at the farmer contact centres established by the state to help farmers, even though it is far smaller in scale compared to the higher levels of administration.

Nonetheless, the KRRS has certain clear demands from the government: a scientific price for the crops of farmers, which accounts for the input costs of cultivation. If not a scientific price, then the farmers should at least be given a 'respectable' rate (*gaurava kraya*) for their crops. The emphasis has been that the farmer should be able to recover the costs of production comfortably and also invest for further production. For this, they suggest the creation of a farmers' federation along the lines of the Karnataka Milk Federation that has secured standard rates despite market fluctuation and the highly perishable nature of milk. As things stand now, the farmer loses out even when s/he produces a surplus as that brings down agricultural prices.

Conclusion

According to the Human Security Commission Report 2003, three situations of economic insecurity impair human security, that of insufficient economic resources, unstable economic flows and asset losses. All these three situations have emerged as central in the analysis of farmers' suicides. Clearly, there is a crisis in the countryside, economic and financial, that goes against the grain of human security. Caught in the web of

indebtedness, farmers are unable to live a life of dignity, exercise vital freedoms towards greater enhancement of life chances and leading a fulfilling life. Savings and investments are instrumental in ensuring human security. Market instability and fluctuations mar any possibility of long term economic and social investments for farmers. They live from one agricultural season to another in the hope of a good crop, a better price, enough to pay the interest, cover social and economic expenses. Is it proper to leave these minimum expectations of farmers, of a life free of financial insecurity, to the workings of the market and the vagaries of nature? The state reports of both Maharashtra and Karnataka find fault with the farmers themselves, in the disintegration of community life and social ties in rural areas evident in high incidences of personal problems, domestic conflict as well as the pervasiveness of alcoholism. No community can survive and cope with chronic structural insecurity and the same would reflect in family/household and community disharmony. By confining their analysis to the immediate cases of suicides, the report steers clear from addressing issues of structural inequality and insecurity that create conditions of disarray. Therefore, the issue of farmers' suicides necessarily beckons a shift in perspective- the human security perspective. The human security perspective is a perspective of the most vulnerable, which here entails ensuring a range of market and administrative interventions on behalf of farmers that enhance people's freedom and security. It is simultaneously about widening people's capabilities and freedoms, along with the concerns of social justice and equity.

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