

Rise in farmer suicides and the challenges in the agrarian sector of vidharbha re...



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INTRODUCTION

Suicides in Vidharbha are endemic and are in dire need of structural reform. The paper reviews different literature on rising suicide rates in the agrarian sector of Vidharbha region of Maharashtra. Though, ironically the action of killing oneself intentionally, does not define the suicides in Vidharbha because it is defined by number of social determinants of health. The paper will analyze different social determinants of health such as socio-economic status, structural violence and other socially constructed disparities that has led to marginalization of the sector which employs the maximum workforce of India. It will highlight various factors like governments' apathy, ecological framework, water disputes between states, mental health, the plight of families coping with distress and polarization of the issue for votes, all this has not only resulted in igniting the agrarian distress but has also led to consequential rise in suicides. The paper aims to critically evaluate and create possible nexus of different social determinants to draw an inference to pragmatic approaches of rectifying and indemnifying the colossal damage to the agrarian sector.

Background

Post colonial making of the agrarian sector and their impact on farmers

Varshney (1995) talks about how India dealt with the brunt of the Bengal famine and how marginal farmers were subjected to abject penury. Not much change was seen after independence for these impecunious farmers, there was only a 12% surge in agriculture produce post independence, while the population escalated by 40% leading to food crisis. Only 15% of

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cultivated land was under irrigation while the remaining land relied heavily on monsoons. The newly elected government emphasized more on industrialization which led to marginalization of the agriculture sector.

(Posani 2009; Varshney 1995)

Green revolution

Posani (2009) argues that how impact of green revolution had negative implications on marginal farmers, so he gives a clear picture of agriculture after the Nehruvian era, the revolution started in mid sixties which led to a totally different approach to agriculture. Introduction of new technologies and discovery of HYV (High yield variety) seeds, all these changes resulted in major shift to different agricultural practices in India. The food grain production had increased from 74. 2 to 108. 4 million tons by seventies but the revolution made much of its impact on irrigated belt of India. Thus, indicating the differences of its impact on rich and poor farmers of India (ibid.).

Current facts and figures illustrating the real picture of agriculture in India

The agriculture sector accounted for 16. 1% of the GDP of India in 2016 (Government of India, 2016a) whereas, the manpower engaged in this sector was 54. 6 % (Agricultural census 2010-2011). The two estimates show a huge contrast, thus indicating the gap in addressing the plight of Indian farmers. According to Government of India (2014) 66% of farmers were marginal and the remaining 18% were small compounding to a total of 84. 8 % cited by Shroff, Kajale and Bansode (2017). These figures speak in

volumes about the pressing issues of agrarian sector.

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Maharashtra and its significance

The commercial success of Maharashtra in terms of GDP is paramount and Mumbai, the capital of Maharashtra is also known as the financial capital of India, the GDP of Mumbai was 1.6 times greater than other cities within the state. The gross domestic product of 18% districts was higher than the GDP of the state and the remaining were far below mean average of Maharashtra's GDP and 41% out these districts did not even reached the national average, agrarian sector accounted for the main source of income in these districts (Shroff, Kajale and Bansode 2017; Government of Maharashtra, 2016). On analyzing the given data, it addresses the key disparities in distribution of resources and citing its significance to the core of the issue. The figures show a contrast relationship between the urban and rural population of Maharashtra.

Vidharbha region

Vidharbha comprises the east of Maharashtra and has 21.3% of population of the state. Agriculture is the main source of income, has a rich and diverse cultural background. Marathi is one of the most commonly spoken languages in Vidharbha.

Major cash crops in this area are cotton, oranges and soya bean. Sorghum, pearl millet and rice are traditional crops. The region has recently been in news for increase in number of suicides of farmers at an alarming rate. The occupation for 70% of manpower is farming in 50% districts of Vidharbha and Marathwada. (Shroff, Kajale and Bansode 2017). The data shows how a huge population of Vidharbha is affected.

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Literature review and critical analysis

Socio economic factors of farmers in Vidharbha

Many articles have drawn their attention to socio economic status of farmers committing suicide. Majority of studies found socio economic status as key factor to determine the risk for committing suicide. It was observed by Shroff, Kajale and Bansode(2107) the age bracket for farmers who committed suicide was 31 to 60 years and 62% population was in this bracket, and 40% were not educated. About 86 % were villagers. The average yielding capacity was 110. 24 % which is diminutive and irrigation only covered 12. 11 % of gross area. Profit on Investment capital was null; Rs -27, 301 per acre was an average yield on investment. The spending capacity of farmers was more than their income which eventually led to increased borrowing from unregulated authorities to meet their daily expenses and it accounted for almost 61. 08% (ibid.).

Another article reiterates similar findings that a sharp decline in the average size of land holdings was observed leading to increase in number of small and marginal farmers. (Posani 2009; Bhalla 2005).

Further studies resonate with similar findings, like one of the authors argue that factors like indebtedness exceeding income, huge losses, huge interest on unregulated sources for advances, lack of inundated land and poor irrigation facilities led to an increase in farmers' suicides. (Dongre and Deshmukh 2012).

Moving forward to another study conducted by Indira Gandhi Institute of development research (Mumbai), found similar results. He observes that solely depending on farming as a source of income and other factors like indebtedness and poor yield were major reasons for the suicides. (Wakude 2009)

On the contrary, majority of the articles fall short to address why these socio economic factors were even construed in Vidharbha. They emphasized largely on the socio economic status as a major risk factor for increasing suicides in Vidharbha but lagged to identify the key instruments for the existence of such disparity. My argument proceeds following the lines of two different schools of thoughts, one which talks about structural violence and the other emphasizes on class conflict.

Critical Analysis

Paul farmer argues that current situation should be looked through the lenses of history and political economy of the place that has constituted the present scenario of a particular place. Not many of the articles have taken that into account for finding a possible solution to the distress in Vidharbha. He talks about structural violence that has crept into the system because of disparities that were socially, historically and economically construed for ages.

Drawing on a correlation from his paper between Haiti and Vidharbha, it gives a clear picture on how exploitation by French Colonies and then Americans has led to the current day picture of Haiti. Similarly, for a better analysis on the issues of farmers' suicides, one has to look on how these <https://assignbuster.com/rise-in-farmer-suicides-and-the-challenges-in-the-agrarian-sector-of-vidharbha-region-maharashtra/>

disparities were constructed socially, economically and politically. Further analyzing this case, as mentioned in his study “ one has to meticulously document and fight amnesia of structural violence that is present in the system”. (Farmer 2004)

Governments' apathy to agrarian distress and marginalization of agriculturist

The plight of farmers' in Vidharbha is alarming and is in dire need of amendments. Many articles highlight the ongoing discord between farmers and the government. These articles show a possible nexus between increased governments' negligence and subsequent rise in marginalization of agrarian sector in India and Vidharbha thus, painting the real image of actual conflicts between the two and underpinning the urgency of framing the much needed reforms in the agricultural sector of India and Vidharbha.

According to a report published in 2017; the article cited different government data for analyzing the actual problem. In Eleventh Plan 3. 6% growth was attained which was less than aspired growth of 4%. Again, the Twelfth plan (2012-2017) has not shown any different picture. The investment for agrarian sector was fairly low. The government only invested 4. 4% in Ninth plan, dropped to 3. 9% in Tenth plan and further declined to 3. 7% in Eleventh plan. Government is not allocating enough budgets to agriculture thus, leading to increased debt. (Shroff, kajale and Bansode 2017; Government of India, 2015). The statistics depict a grey picture of agrarian sector and translate into less government support for the marginalized farmers

Posani(2009) stated that in 2004-2005, the agrarian sector accounted for 20.2% of GDP and man power engaged was almost three times greater which is 56.5%, showing a huge difference in the given data. Productivity of agrarian sector is reducing considerably; the output of agrarian sector is very low. The following figures demonstrate how GDP by agriculture was reducing over years, it was 3.08% in 1980-81 to 1990-91, declined to 2.57% in 1992-93 to 2005-06 and further reduced to -2% in 2000-2001 (ibid). Again these set of numbers show how productivity of agriculture is declining despite engaging the maximum workforce in comparison to manufacturing and tertiary sectors where productivity is on a rise. This disparity describes the actual stand of government.

Moving forward, Gol (2006) and Posani (2009) discuss how lack of government support and huge surge in the cost for growing crops has led to subsequent increase in suicides. Introduction of high yield variety seeds and shift to cultivation of more cash crops is leading to increased cost as farmers rely on pesticides for better yield. This is forcing farmers to depend on traders for their agrarian needs. The traders are increasing the prices in recent years, leading to increased cost for farming. Bt cotton is 4 times more expensive than domestic hybrid varieties of seeds (ibid). This may indicate failure of government to cap the market, which resulted in acute distress in the agriculture sector.

Interesting facts were revealed in a report by Sainath (2013) in one of the leading newspapers of India where he spoke about data fudging at state level in Maharashtra. According to data almost 54000 farmers have

committed suicide over a decade. But, these numbers are subjected to <https://assignbuster.com/rise-in-farmer-suicides-and-the-challenges-in-the-agrarian-sector-of-vidharbha-region-maharashtra/>

discrepancy, as they exclude some figures. The state has categorized suicides into “ Farmer’s relatives’ suicides,” or “ non-genuine” suicides to hide the actual numbers. Many states have been following a similar pattern to fudge the data. (Sainath 2013).

This may show governments’ apathy for agrarian sector. Coming to a conclusion after thoroughly analyzing the following studies; the current scenario of agrarian sector Vidharbha is partly a result of governments’ negligence but these studies haven’t emphasized much on the issue that why the government has developed that attitude towards the agriculture sector of India. Much of these structural changes are due policy shifts, emergence of industrialization due to better outcomes and development of concepts like neoliberalism. My argument will entail Marxist theory to understand the suppression of marginal farmers and their ongoing struggle.

Analysis

According to the Marxist theory Vidharbha is a classic example of conflict between two classes. Figures illustrate how marginal farmers are at a greater risk of suicides. The current predicament of the marginal farmers will lead to social anomie, which is a true representation of Marxist movement. Here the two classes are marginal farmers and government, talukdars (landlords). Rise of movements to address the issues of farmers with the government were observed. Amongst them one is The Maharashtra rajya kisan sabha Long march on foot, 50, 000 farmers marched for 200kms from Nashik to Mumbai in March 6-12. The protest was to address the key issues with the state government on better prices and loan waiver (Gujar, Nawale

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2018), another protest was organized by All India kisan sabha(AIKS) in May, 2017 in Khamgaon; Vidharbha region for similar issues. In my opinion all these movements signify the growing dissonance between the government and farmers, which will eventually lead to increased agitation and distress in the agrarian sector.

Ecological Factors impacting the farmers of Vidharbha

To understand Vidharbha more accurately in context with increasing number of suicides one has to analyze and evaluate the ecological framework of Vidharbha. Many studies have been done to understand the ecological status of Vidharbha. Since, there is suicide epidemic concentrated in Vidharbha region of Maharashtra; one has to really figure out every aspect of Vidharbha region for coming to a conclusion that how the problem of increasing suicides should be addressed.

In one of the articles; Adhya (2013) draws the real picture of Maharashtra which was hit by a continuous spells of droughts, but it was severe in 2013. The disaster affected majorly Vidharbha region of the state in March, 2013. Very less rainfall were experienced from Feb to June. Major reasons for drought in this region were less rainfall, destruction of forest, decreased levels of natural sources of water. The drought was followed by sudden and heavy downpour in June; entire Maharashtra experienced that. These disasters had a major negative impact on human life but, the condition of farmers was empathetic. (ibid)

Adhya (2013) again talks about how more than 11, 000 villages in

Maharashtra were affected and approximately 2 million people suffered.
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Sources of water were scarce; crops were damaged in the fields and farm animals perished. There seemed not even enough water to meet the daily needs of the people. The drought led to increased distress in the agrarian sector of Vidharbha eventually resulting in epidemic of suicides that year (Adhya 2013). Though, the article is only a brief description of the fragile ecological conditions of Vidharbha but gives a clear picture of the vulnerabilities of farmers in Vidharbha.

Another author reveals that cotton needs excessive amounts of water for cultivation in Maharashtra; the farmers solely depend on monsoons for this and thus, making the crop highly vulnerable. (Shroff, Kajale and Bansode 2017) Few more observations were made by a study which showed that almost 40% of Maharashtra comes under Drought prone Area (DPA). This article discusses about the effects of natural calamities in Maharashtra as it is the leading economic performer in India contributing 15% to national GDP. The average downpour is reduced to 750 mm (29.5 in) in Maharashtra. Farming is the main source of income for 64% of farmers in Maharashtra thus, impacting a large population of the state. Maharashtra experienced less than average rainfall in 2012. Central Maharashtra and Marathwada experienced minimum downpour of about -25% & -33% in 2012 affecting the agrarian sector and lives of the people in Maharashtra. (Udmale, Ichikawa, Manandhar, Ishidaira, and Kiem 2014)

Another author describes the complexities associated with changing climatic conditions and the catastrophic impact on agriculture and other ecological structures. The study discusses the implications of factors like loss of soil, failure of crop, low production, and death of farming animals and outbreaks <https://assignbuster.com/rise-in-farmer-suicides-and-the-challenges-in-the-agrarian-sector-of-vidharbha-region-maharashtra/>

of fire in the dry arid regions. Health was also impacted because of scarcity of food and water resulting in outbreak of many diseases. Water resources were affected largely; lack of water led to reduced production of electricity, industries were affected resulting in increased outflow of people. (Udmale et al. 2015)

One of the authors argues and has a different outlook on this issue, he emphasizes that there is a gap in the awareness among farmers for these new agricultural practices which they are practicing to meet the growing demands of changing markets. Introduction of HYV seeds and increased use of pesticides have resulted in an increased dissent among the marginal farmers. (Vasavi 2012)


On analyzing different studies it shows that how vulnerable the population of Vidharbha is and especially the agrarian sector. Continuous droughts and floods affect the agriculture sector more than any other sector. Policymakers need to address the ongoing climatic catastrophe as a matter of urgency. Serious measures need to be taken for conservation of environment. Industrialization and other activities contribute more to the climatic changes that the world is witnessing today but, marginal farmers are comparatively paying a greater price. Following the argument one has to analyze and understand that how the climatic conditions have shaped in Vidharbha over a period of time and how these changes need to be incorporated in framing new policies.

Analysis


Climatic changes in Vidharbha may be due to a couple of factors. Agrarian sector is most vulnerable to such calamities and when it comes marginal farmers; they are subjected to maximum castigation. Leaving the natural and indigenous practices for meeting world standards has led the farmers to resort more to environment damaging practices like use of high amounts pesticides to increase their crop yield. Decreasing water levels and other such factors have contributed considerably to the ongoing apathy of farmers in Vidharbha. More sustainable measures for farming have to be introduced in Vidharbha which should be economically self sufficient too.

Practices like 'Jhum' cultivation and climatic resilient practices should be incorporated for marginal farmers in Vidharbha. 'Jhum' cultivation is an indigenous practice widely spread in north eastern states of India where lands are cultivated temporarily, and then the land is abandoned till it reverts to original state that was before it was cultivated. This leads to soil nourishment and helps to conserve the diversity of crops. Though it has its shortcomings but, it will restore the ecological imbalance and is more sustainable. Farmers technically don't own lands for farming thus, reducing the socioeconomic disparity. Successful examples of this practice is Nagaland where local people have adopted growing of alder trees in 'Jhum' lands for better crop production and soil conservation.(Arunachalam, Khan and Arunachalam 2002; Ramakrishna 1997) . Incorporating this practice in Vidharbha could be a daunting task but positive changes can be made. More climatic resilient practices can be incorporated so as to make the agriculture more fruitful for the coming generations.

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