



Dilapidation of the Rural

Development, Politics,
and Farmer Suicides
in India

Sudhir Kumar Suthar

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I hope that this study would bring forward concerns of villages and farmers of India.

New Delhi

Sudhir Kumar Suthar

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Introduction

My husband wanted to give us a decent life. He paid the price for that.

Gudda, Village: Siklodhi

These men think that they can handle things alone. They need not share anything with us. They will get irritated and fight but will not tell us what is going on in their mind. They say you are a woman, and you should take care of the household work. I am a man, and I will take care of the finances, loans, and other things.

Wife of Narender, whose elder brother committed suicide in Donoda

According to a report published by the *Down to Earth* magazine, every day, 25 farmers commit suicide in India (Table 1.1).¹ On December 11, 2018, the Guardian had reported:

The US farmer suicide crisis echoes a much larger crisis happening globally: an Australian farmer dies by suicide every four days; in the UK, one farmer a week takes his or her own life; in France one farmer dies by suicide by

¹ <https://www.downtoearth.org.in/news/45-farmers-commit-suicide-each-day-in-india--34387>.

Table 1.1 Farmer suicides in India since 2010 (total cases)

<i>Year</i>	<i>Total farmer suicides</i>	<i>Percentage change from previous year</i>
2010	15,964	11.9
2011	14,027	10.3
2012	13,754	11.4
2013	11,772	8.7
2014	12,360	9.4
2015	12,602	9.4
2016	11,379	8.7
2017	10,655	8.2

Source NCRB reports. Author's own work

every two days; in India more than 270,000 farmers have died by suicide since 1995.²

Though some academic writings did anticipate possibilities of an agrarian crisis in makings during the later 1990, nobody had imagined the severity of distress mounting up in India's rural areas. The causes of this "social calamity"³ are still unclear, and it continues to remain a puzzle: what compels a farmer to take his own life? Why higher suicides in regions which have witnessed an increase in agricultural productivity in the past few decades? If the economy is the cause, why are there low suicides in the regions with higher rural poverty levels? Does it indicate an individual's psychological crisis, or does it signal the very structure of the rural economy and society as a cause? Are economic factors or categories like "agrarian distress" adequate to explain this change? These are some of the unanswered puzzles which continue to haunt the scholars working on the rural and agrarian India. This book engages with some of these questions. It attempts to answer them by bringing in a new set of variables and reformulating existing conceptual categories.

² <https://www.theguardian.com/us-news/2017/dec/06/why-are-americas-farmers-killing-themselves-in-record-numbers>.

³ Karl Polanyi uses this word in his book *The Great Transformation*. He explains: "... a social calamity is primarily a cultural not an economic phenomenon that can be measured by income figures or population statistics" (Polanyi 1944: 164).

A range of studies exists on the changing character of rural society,⁴ agrarian relations, and their linkages. While using diverse methodologies, such as large-scale data analysis methods (Mishra 2006a, b), single village studies (Mohanty 2005), or longitudinal survey studies (Himanshu et al. 2016), these studies analyzed various aspects of rural economy (Mishra 2014; Kumar 2016), politics (Gupta 1999; Dhanagare 2015; Mohanty 2005) and society (Gupta 2005; Vasavi 2012; Jodhka 2012). Some studies tried to understand this change within the broader framework of the Indian process of development, changing global economy (Nagaraj et al. 2014; Shiva and Jalees 2005; Patnaik et al. 2011), and micro-level changes within the rural areas (Jodhka 2006). Few writings also highlighted the emergence of an atomistic society in the villages as a cause of farmer suicides (Jodhka 2006; Vasavi 1998; Mohanty 2011; 2016; Kumar 2019).

Yet, researchers were neither able to predict nor explain the kind of crisis rural India witnessed by the turn of the twentieth century. It was a sudden shock to the popular narrative of economic growth, rising agricultural productivity, and a development of the rural landscape. This narrative started in the 1960s and became dominant with the onset of the green revolution and its gradual expansion in various parts of India and continues to remain so till date. The cracks in the five decades-old agrarian development were visible on the surface by the end of the twentieth century. Rising cases of farmer suicides raised serious questions about the restrictive economic framework terming the agricultural change a success.

Most of these works look at the change in agrarian relations in the backdrop. This book introduces the concepts of “the political” and “politics” as two significant intervening variables to explain rural suicides—one of the major “social calamity” of the twenty first century India.

Primarily, existing explanations of farmer suicides lay an emphasis on economic reasons revolving around agricultural economy and indebtedness. Indebtedness has been explained as the *raison d’être* causing stress situations compelling peasants to take their lives. Such studies are mainly dealing with farm-related determinants and considering agriculture as an unprofitable and extremely burdensome profession for the farmers (Narsimha and Mishra 2005; Sainath; Gill and Singh 2006). Besides, the

⁴ The rural society is also referred here as villages or village society.

lack of alternative sources of income and rising expenditures have further added to the economic burden on small and marginal farmers. They constitute almost 70 percent of the total agrarian population of India. This decline in the economic conditions of the farmers is a stress-causing factor leading to suicides. Miseries of rural population in this sense are associated with agriculture as a profession. These studies tend to overlook the fact that the existence of these problems have been part and parcel of farmer's lives throughout history (Bhattacharya 2019). Yet, no significant cases of suicides were recorded attached to agricultural hardships. A crucial question arises here: what has changed in the past few decades that farmers or rural communities find it increasingly difficult to psychologically manage debt or crop failure or inadequate rains?

This study is an effort to understand the phenomenon of farmer suicide in India in the context of the arduous process of multifaceted change and its impact on social as well as individual behavior in rural India. For this purpose, a village is seen as a multidimensional social, political, economic, and a spatial unit connecting the rural as a structure with individual and community with an array of relations and networks. While passing through various phases of changes rural in India has gradually lost its unique socio-cultural and economic character or what is also referred as "rurality" producing deeper psychological effects on its peasantry.

Scholars have looked at the socio-economic side of this process of change. Jan Breman and Sudipta Mundle (1980) characterized India's agrarian transformation as a "missed transformation," contrary to Karl Polanyi's famous description of European social and economic transformation as "great" since it brought large scale structural economic change in the traditional agrarian society, on the one hand, and destruction of peasant economy on the other. Breman and Mundle argue that India's agrarian transformation is still incomplete due to the existence of traditional forms of agriculture, property, and labor relations.

The study attempts to show that despite missing a Europe like transformation, rural India has witnessed a loss of its essence and identity. The current imagination of a rural society not only involves the material gains from agriculture, but it also has a notional character associated with it i.e. how one perceives the village community, and where does one locate oneself. Village is perceived as a unit lagging behind in the process of development and change resulting into a crisis of identity. There is a fundamental alteration in the very notion of family and community. Villages in India have witnessed a gradual change in family structures,

practices and above all change in the role of a masculine selfhood.⁵ Role of man as a guardian of the family, his prestige, his role in protection of the values associated with this structure in the overall social and collective affairs of the village society has witnessed a qualitative change.

Dilapidation indicates a process of falling into decay or being in disrepair. Dilapidation of the rural here refers to a gradual disappearance of village as a socio-cultural and spatial entity. The process of dilapidation of the rural in India involves a gradual collapse of the linkages between village as a community, family as a unit and farmer as an individual leading to the decay of the very idea of rural society. This process of dilapidation has been a complicated one producing diverse impacts on various socio-cultural groups inhabiting the village. The story of suicides is of those who are unable to handle this change and disappearance. The very idea of village has not only changed economically and socially but has also transformed in physical, spatial, and notional sense. Physically, the rural public spaces that made village appear as a community have changed. Spatially, the perceptions about everyday life of village community living in its festivals, gatherings and other social occasions have transformed. The community or family bonding which were formed or strengthened through these occasions have seen a qualitative change. Above all, the notion of village as a collective community space has witnessed a complete change. The story of changing villages in this study is not about how the outside world looks at a village. Instead, how people living in the villages, especially where suicides have been reported, perceive themselves and the idea of the village is the subject matter of this study. This process of economic and social change has been characterized by scholars as “incomplete,” “changing,” or “vanishing.” In this study it is argued that a particular section of the rural this change connotes a crumbling of the structure provided meaning to their existence. This gradual process of crumble is explained here as *dilapidation* that is structural in nature having serious ramifications for individual behavior and meaning of self in the rural society. The phenomenon of farmer suicide is explained here while showing this linkage between rural structural change and its relationship with change in the meaning and nature of the self.

The process of change has been a perilous process and has impacted the lives of millions of people living in rural areas; a majority of whom

⁵ The word man in this research refers to man as a social construction in the sense of imposition of masculine values and not as a biological being.

are peasants.⁶ peasant households.⁷ Existing scholarship on the subject has not paid much attention to this process of structural behavioral change the level of rural society and its relationship with individual behavioral change. Akram Lodhi and Christophe Bay argue while explaining relationship between peasantry and rural society:

...the subordinate position of peasants affects the complex network of social relationships they enter into with others, the economic transactions they undertake with others, and the content of the cultures within which they live day by day. This means that in understanding the position of the peasantry, it is necessary to understand the relationships of peasants to their social superiors, to each other, in their families and in their communities on the basis of gender, age and kinship, to the state and to the operation of the product and labor markets they may use. (2009: 5)

The implications of this process of dilapidation are diverse. There are few rural households who are happy (like upper caste or intermediary farmers with large landholdings and marginal sections, especially scheduled castes, without land but received education or have achieved some economic diversification) with this transition since they are the net beneficiaries. There are others who have changed themselves as per the changing realities of the villages (upper caste or intermediary farmers with medium landholdings and some form of economic diversification) and are trying to extract maximum from this change. And there are those who are unable to make sense of it and are still trying to figure out how to cope with this process of change (small and marginal farmers belonging to intermediary castes without much economic diversification or education). A majority of people living in rural areas including farmers have accepted this transition and joined this process of change. Some of them have migrated to nearby towns or urban centers, other families have sent their youth outside the village, while remaining have started a small business and so on.

⁶ Peasant here indicates farmers with small or marginal landholdings with Usage of the term peasant.

⁷ The term peasant here indicates farmers with small or marginal landholdings whose family labor is involved in agricultural profession. In addition, these households also have a unique social feature of embeddedness in the rural culture and society. Generally, in this book usage of the term farmer also indicates peasant farmers. This has been described in detail in this chapter.

For those whose hopes, aspirations and imaginations are still attached to the village, its society and community, and the everyday life associated with it, this transition is not a smooth process, it is a perilous one, marked by an irreplaceable loss. They are stuck in between as they find it difficult to go forward but can't go backward either. It is these families or individuals, referred here as intermediary caste-class peasants who are the core subject matter of this study.

This study is the story of those who are not able to cope with the transition. This is not reducible to economy, profit, and debt as an account of this transition must encompass one's sense of self within a community that no longer exists. Millions of farmers committing suicides in rural India in the last two decades constitute the most tragic manifestation of this continuous psychological struggle with the transition. There are farmers who can feel that they are losing everything in the changing villages and yet they try to search themselves in the village, its community life or in the friend circle within the village. For them the transition of the village is about nostalgia, a life that once was but is no more. In our discussions with families of farmers who had committed suicide we could identify this sense of change, loss and associated pains of transition. It is the behavioral change of this group that is the subject matter of this study.

It is necessary to identify structural factors that cause distress in individual behavior. Durkheim (2002) had used the concept of egoistic and anomic suicides to indicate individual behavioral change, increasing stress situations finally culminating into self-killing within larger structural social change. If placed within this discourse, this study uses both these explanations to explain farmer suicides in India. To this study distress is taken as an intervening variable resulting from processes of social change and individual behavior having a critical role in this.

The American Psychological Association describes distress as "The negative stress response often involving negative affect and psychological reactivity, a type of stress that results from being overwhelmed by demands, losses or perceived threats. It has a detrimental effect by generating physical and psychological maladaptation posing serious health risks for individuals."⁸

Clinically, suicide is an outcome of prevailing extreme stress situations that an individual is unable to cope with. Theoretically, works of Emile

⁸ For details see <https://dictionary.apa.org/distress>.

Durkheim and Karl Marx's writings on suicides in nineteenth century Europe tried to explain "suicides in modern society more in social than in psychological terms, both view suicide as symptomatic of broader social ills" (Anderson 1999).⁹ What are these social ills? In Marxian terms, it is the process of alienation or dehumanization of humans, resulting in loss, division, conflicts, and psychological issues. For Durkheim, it is increasing individualization and a decline in the social solidarity that leads to suicides. However, both processes indicate significant structural changes in a society which impacts human lives negatively. Along with the agrarian issues related explanations, farmer suicides have also been explained as clinical problems (Ravi 2015).¹⁰ Some studies also link it to climate change, global agrarian change, and above all variations in the temperature and its relationship with suicides. Explaining such a large number of farmer suicides as an individual-centric clinical problem may not be a very useful explanation as it fails to register the magnitude of behavioral change: producing anxiety, sense of loneliness, anger, frustration etc.

For a very long-time various government agencies and officials rejected any relationship between government policies and suicides. Family related personal problems were recognized as a major cause of suicides in rural India. The existing data on farmer suicides, provided by the National Crime Records Bureau highlights the fact that family problems are a major immediate cause of such suicides. However, quite like agricultural problems, family problems are also not new in rural India. An appropriate question to be asked is: what has changed so drastically in India's rural areas that people prefer to kill themselves even due to personal or family related issues?

The answer to this question lies in the structural transition that rural India is witnessing and how it is being perceived by various segments of the rural society. There are systemic, structural factors at work, resulting in pressing stress situations for the farmers leaving few with no option

⁹ Anderson, Kevin 1999. 'Marx on Suicide in the context of His Other Writings on Alienation and Gender', in Eric A. Plaut and Kevin Anderson. Eds. *Marx on Suicide*. Northwestern University Press: Illinois. pp. 3–28.

¹⁰ A study by Brookings India argues that suicides were an outcome of absence of psychological medical facilities in rural areas. The study fails to acknowledge suicides as a collective social problem and reduces it to an individual's behavioral complexities which could be resolved by providing medical assistance. See the report online <https://www.brookings.edu/wp-content/uploads/2015/06/shamika-paper-suicides-edited.pdf>.