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FARMERS' SUICIDES IN KARNATAKA: A POLITICAL PERSPECTIVE

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ABSTRACT

Since 1997, the suicides by farmers in Karnataka State have caught the attention of the state government, state legislators. This paper observes the issue of farmers' suicide in Karnataka from political perspective and explores how the political parties have responded to this agrarian crisis in Karnataka and how the political parties tried to play a kind of politics on the issue of farmers' suicide. Psychological, social, economic, agricultural and political factors are also taken into consideration for the analysis of farmers' suicide in Karnataka. According to the NCRB (National Crime Records Bureau) data 321 farmers have committed suicide in Karnataka during 2014. It is fifth highest in the country. It's a matter of great concern for the state government. All political parties have politicised this issue. The opposition party will always try to use the issue to gain political mileage and the ruling party will always try to find excuses. Whichever party is in the power does the same things. There is a need of strong political willingness to find

solutions to stop farmers' suicides.

KEYWORDS: Farmers' suicide, reasons, politics, Karnataka.

INTRODUCTION :

Since 1997, the suicides by farmers in Karnataka State have caught the attention of the state government, state legislators. Over the past two decades, the incidence of farmers' suicides in the state has shown an alarming increase. It is now widely recognized in the state that there is a deepening and complex economic and social crisis in rural areas that has not been adequately addressed by any state government over the past two decades.

It is not easy to collect the data or statistics regarding farmers' suicide in Karnataka. According to NCRB (National Crime Records Bureau) data, Maharashtra has recorded the highest number of farmers' suicides in the year 2014 with 2568, followed by Telangana 898, Madhya Pradesh 826, Chhattisgarh 443, and Karnataka comes next with 321. This shows the horrible picture of the burning issue. This is an alarming situation for the state to find proper solution for the menace. The economy of the state depends upon the agriculture and the agriculture depends upon the farmers. If the farmers are in good condition, the economy of the state will also be in a good condition. So the Government must better understand this. Instead of making politics on the issue, the political parties should show some humanitarian spirit in finding solving this problem.



FACTORS BEHIND FARMERS' SUICIDE:

Various reasons have been mentioned to explain why farmers commit suicide in Karnataka, including: floods, drought, debt, use of genetically modified seed, public health, usage of lower quantity of pesticides due to less investments produce a decreased yield and also government economic policies. The studies show suicide victims are motivated by more than one cause, on average three or more causes for committing suicide. Aravind Panagariya, a leading economist states, "farm-related reasons get cited only approximately 25 percent of the time as reasons for suicide" and "studies do consistently show greater debt burden and greater reliance on informal sources of credit" amongst farmers who commit suicide.

Development and policy experts have cited a number of reasons for why farmers commit suicide, from heavy debt burdens to alcoholism and depression. Some have suggested that the compensation of Rs. 1 lakh offered to the families of farmers who have committed suicide could be a reason why farmers in distress see suicide as a way out for their families. A few have suggested that suicides for other personal reasons are likely to be reported as distress suicides by family members in order to claim the compensation. But few are willing to accept the truth that the state's economic and financial policy trends have significantly contributed to the economic stress of the state's rural population.

The reasons most commonly cited by farmers' and agricultural workers' organizations, state and local level social justice groups, journalists, and independent researchers who have followed the issues closely include:

- Crop failures resulting from drought, scant or no rainfall, and pest attacks;
- Increasing prices of chemical fertilizers and other essential inputs;
- Poor quality of seeds, fertilizers and pesticides;
- Failed bore-wells and all-around scarcity of water for agriculture and household use;
- Poor or non-existent power supply;
- Collapse of prices of agriculture commodities, accompanied by inadequate or non-existent crop insurance;
- Mounting household expenses related to health, marriages and deaths of family members;
- Heavy debt burdens, including debt to money lenders and banks;
- Loss of lands and/or distress sale of lands resulting from an inability to repay debts and meet financial obligations;
- Unequal distribution of risk between share-croppers and marginal farmers on one hand, and wealthier land owners and seed companies on the other hand;
- Lack of comprehensive agricultural policy in the state and in the country.
- The drinking habit which atrophies the productivity of the farmer
- Extravagant expenditure on marriages
- Bad health and illness and inability to meet the necessary expenditure on medicine and health services.

The State and Central Governments have failed rural populations in their rush to attract high-end foreign investment, information technology companies and other rapid growth industries, the governments have neglected the needs and aspirations of farming communities.

The problems of farmers' suicides, and the severe economic stress that small-hold and marginal farming families face, need to be understood in the context of broader economic and policy trends in the state. Perhaps more than any other state, Karnataka has been at the forefront of the liberalization of

agriculture for almost the last two decades. Karnataka was the first state to implement the new agriculture policy in 1996, which ushered in corporate dominated agriculture including floriculture, aquaculture and also the production of special gherkins for export. The state has amended land reform laws to facilitate corporate agriculture and has systematically opened up its agricultural markets, thus exposing its farmers to unregulated competition from outside. Of the 1500 items for which the Indian Government removed Quantitative Restrictions to fulfill its obligations in World Trade Organization (WTO) regime, most agricultural commodities are produced solely in Karnataka. These include rosewood, sandalwood, gherkin, coffee and ragi (a cereal grass).

Also, in addition to attempting to establish itself as an Information Technology (IT) and Bio-Technology (BT) Centre. Monsanto (BT Company) already has a research centre in Bangalore and the past two decades have seen a mushrooming of biotechnology research initiatives in the state through university programs and private centers. Recently, IT and biotechnology companies have displayed interest in collaborative efforts to expand their operations and scope of services. The State Government has continued to actively facilitate the expansion of these two sectors by assisting them in land acquisition and power and water supply, and providing other economic incentives to private companies in these sectors. These facilities have proved to be extremely expensive to farmers in general and small and marginal farmers in particular, who have been confronted with water and power scarcities, loss of lands, mounting debts and a near absence of economic and financial supports.

The disaster of farmers' distress and suicides has been politicized by various political parties and their candidates. In the May 2004 state and national elections, electoral candidates from all parties invoked the issue in their electoral campaigns, and in turn accused both, the State Congress Government as well as the national BJP Government of advancing elite interests at the cost of the poor, particularly farming communities. At the same time, however, none of the electoral candidates outlined a clear plan of action to address the economic crisis that has resulted in the tragedy of the suicides. This attitude of the political parties has not changed in the successive elections and governments. The state has witnessed the Kalasa Banduri Controversy recently which is causing distress in the farmers of North Karnataka region. In this issue also one can see the politics of political parties.

The government in Karnataka has declared some urgent measures to provide relief to farmers in distress. These measures include improving irrigation in dry areas, restructuring of farm credit, a temporary moratorium on all debt repayments to banks and money-lenders, and enhanced access to seed. The early onset of the South-West monsoons offers significant hope that drought conditions in the state will abate. However, the entrenched agricultural crisis in the state will require more far-reaching and deeper policy shifts by the state government, which are not yet in evidence.

Society needs to hear the voices of the farmers, and to appreciate what would have stopped farmers from taking their own lives, and what will stop these tragedies in the future. When a farmer commits suicide, the economic and social distress of the entire family deepens. The compensation offered by the Government does not assure the family long-term relief or means of meeting livelihood needs. Past trends show deepening rural poverty and distress migration to urban centre where jobs are scarce and insecure, thus entrenching a downward spiral of poverty, hunger and despair. The disaster of farmers' suicides is society's tragedy, and society must start to show collective responsibility to address it.

The suicides point to two things: first, a serious agrarian crisis shaped by an increase in cultivation costs and a decline in agricultural income, which is pushing farmers into a debt trap; and second, the sociological pressures that farmers face because of the disparity between their income and

those in urban areas.

The problem is also sociological: Farmers who aspire to the lifestyle of salaried persons end up taking loans, sometimes at 60-80 per cent interest rates, and become prey to loan sharks. For most farmers across the State, which were once considered luxury items such as cars have now become aspiration necessities.

The problems are clearly multi-pronged. They have psychological, sociological, economic agricultural and political dimensions. While it is true that not all these deaths might be suicides but just presented as such so that families might claim compensation, the numbers are still alarming enough to warrant investigation. And while each suicide may have been the result of multiple factors, including personal reasons, the big picture they present is disturbing.

CONCLUSION:

According to the NCRB (National Crime Records Bureau) data 321 farmers have committed suicide in Karnataka during 2014. It is fifth highest in the country. It's matter of great concern for the state government. All political parties have politicised this issue. The opposition party will always try to use the issue to gain political mileage and the ruling party will always try to find excuses. Whichever party is in the power does the same things. There is a need of strong political willingness to find solutions to stop farmers' suicides.

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