

An Exploration on Farm Crisis and Suicides in the Cauvery Delta Districts of Tamil Nadu

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Abstract

The Cauvery delta is the most productive food bowls in India and which cultivates more than 70 percent of paddy in Tamil Nadu. However, the situation of farmers suicides is alarming and leading to farm suicides manifested from the fragile situation during 2017, since farmer suicides are rare in this region. In this context, this study is taken-up and used descriptive research design with both primary and secondary data source. Empirical data have been collected from the 21 victim farmers' households of three Cauvery districts of Thanjavur, Thiruvarur, and Nagapattinam. The empirical research found several causes: the scarcity of water and drought are the major causes of the present agrarian crisis. It is reported that every victim farmers of the study area borrowed for crop cultivation and unable to repay the borrowings on time due to crop failure. The victim farmers are disappointed by the crop failure, agriculture policies, and schemes are failed to compensate for their needs. Thus, safety net measures like crop insurance and allowances may be provided as immediate relief from debts. Intensive counseling at the household level is another intervention, which may reduce the suicides immediately. Local educational institutions and their community service wings may be utilized for educating and counseling the distress farmers.

Keywords: Cauvery Delta, Erratic Monsoon, Water Dispute, Crop Failure and Farmers' Suicides.

Introduction

Farm suicides have been a sin in India, and this is growing every year. This untoward activity is every day in agriculturally developed areas also. Combination of economic, institutional, and social factors is responsible for this. Though it is a difficult task to identify a set of factors, it is instead growing at a high rate in India. Various states are finding it challenging to deal with this evil. More than 19.18 lakh ha of land is developed in the Cauvery delta during average years. Over the years, due to non-availability of sufficient water, an area under cultivation has been consistently declining, and now less than 8 lakh hectares are grown with paddy due to lack of water. The patterns of irrigation source are also changing faster. Earlier assured a source of canal water was the primary source for paddy crop. Due to non-availability of guaranteed irrigation source regularly farmers went in for digging bore wells and are irrigating around 30 percent of the total cropped area. Compounded with this, the severe drought of this year has added catastrophe to already suffering farmers in the delta. The fragile rural economy has been witnessing stress, and as Sen (2016) explains, agrarian distress is partly due to a recurrence of below-average rainfall.

Review of Literatures

Swaminathan (2017) explained that farming is a life-saving profession, and if it is to become a life-taking profession, then something is very wrong. Though factors contributing to farmers taking the extreme step vary from region to region, debt remains the primary reason. "Gram panchayats should develop some mechanism to deal with them as they are aware of distressed families in any village. Farming is the riskiest profession. The reasons for the farm deaths vary. Vidarbha has got one set of reasons while Tamil Nadu has got another. One has to study it carefully. The community and the gram panchayats, as a whole, should develop some mechanism so that suicides could be limited" he lamented.

Rajendran (2014) reported that unable to bear crop loss and meet the responsibilities of refunding crop loan; farmers have completed their lives. According to Cauvery Delta Farmers' Protection Association, since 2012, 13 farmers performed suicide in delta districts owing to crop failure following water scarcity (Srividya PV: 2014). There is a general supposition that only farmers in dryland regions commit suicide, but now, this tragic practice has been witnessed in fertile delta regions as well. Unless appropriate and adequate social safety measures are put in place to tide over the drought crisis, distress may be aggravated even in irrigated and developed zones.

Kannaiyan and Jeyaraman (2013) brought out the circumstances and reasons as narrated by the family members who have tried to understand the causes of these deaths in Cauvery delta districts. The fact that most of them had to borrow resources to cultivate crop from moneylenders at a high rate of interest tells about the more profound crisis in agriculture where one cannot even put in his savings after doing agriculture for many years. The harassment of money lenders is assigned to as one of the primary reasons for farmers' suicides in many parts of India.

Harichandana (2015) reported that repeated crop failures, debt hassles, lack of alternative sources of income, and absence of institutional finance had left the farmers with no alternative solution other than ending their lives. Another disturbing and heartening trend has been identified where farmers commit

suicide to avail relief and benefits published by the government to support the families of the farmers who have died. Here is true in the case of several farmers in Andhra Pradesh who perpetrated suicide so that their families could at least profit from the Government's relief programs. This is a heartening situation as precious lives are given up to safeguard the family members at times of crisis.

Importance of the Study

Suicides are complex to pinpoint a factor, which led a person to commit suicide (Deshpande, 2002). However, the circumstantial evidence may be collected from the households for ascertaining a suicide case. Studies on farm suicides generally attribute the indebtedness besides crop failure as critical factors for committing suicide. Here in the case of the delta region, many factors including debt, crop withering and quarrel over debt among family members and so on, are cited as reasons for suicides. While some farmers collapsed in the farm plots due to crop withering a few farmers unbearable to cope up with the crop failure committed suicide by consuming pesticide and or hanging themselves. Many of such deaths are surfaced from eastern parts of the old delta. Sadly a farmer from upland in Trichy district attempted suicide over the loan obtained for crop cultivation. All these culminated from the severe distress, crop withering, and non-availability of water. Against this backdrop, an effort is made to unfold the hapless farmers' suicides in the delta with the following broad objectives.

Objectives

- To discover the status of issues behind farmers suicides in Tamil Nadu and India.
- To understand nature of farm crisis in the Cauvery delta districts of Tamil Nadu.
- To explore the socio-economic condition of victim farmers' families in the Cauvery delta districts.
- To identify factors of farmers suicides and sudden death in the Cauvery delta districts.

Methodology

This study is based on both main and secondary data source, which are collected from various

journals, newspapers, and Government reports. The field-level data from 21 farmers' from three districts of Thanjavur, Thiruvarur, and Nagapattinam in Cauvery delta are used in the analysis. These 21 were committed suicide during 2017 – a drought agriculture year. This study used descriptive research design. It was a Herculean task to gather accurate data/information, and hence, many people, officials, activities, relatives, and neighbors were conducted.

Analysis and Discussion

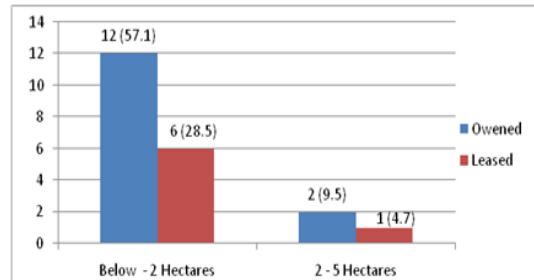
This analysis and discussion section explain the field level discussion in detail. The field-level data from 21 farmers' from three districts of Thanjavur, Thiruvarur, and Nagapattinam in Cauvery delta are used in the analysis. As it was already pointed out, a cross-section of local people, officials, and grassroots volunteers were reached for field-level data collection.

It is recommended that 43 percent of the farmers who committed suicide/died to belong to the age group of 51-65 years. It is to be recognized that in Indian society, this age group has more family responsibilities and hence has constant pressure. Another observation is that the young farmers who are less than 35 years are less prone (5 percent) to suicides. Nevertheless, a young farmer who got a diploma committed suicide by consuming pesticide. In this case, the family members scolded him for crop failure and resultant loss. Unbearable to all these, the younger generation may be keeping away agriculture as their profession. A calming to a CSO study in 2013-14, 42 percent of the farmers want to give up agriculture to migrate into urban areas in search of decent employment.

It is seen that illiterate farmers are highly prone to stress in the study area of Cauvery delta districts. It is also pointed out during the field survey that even 50 years experienced farmers fear to continue in agriculture as it becomes less rewarding. Nevertheless, such farmers continue in farming, only if the enterprise is profitable. But in the study area, both illiterate and educated farmers appear to be under distraught severe. Many empirical studies also noted that the terms of trade are unfavorable to agriculture – a critical policy issue needs immediate attention.

Farm suicides are not in general related to farm size and resource endowments. Large farmers, even in agriculturally prosperous regions, reported deaths. Here in the deltaic districts, all the victim farmers possessed a tiny parcel of less farm 5 hectares. Here in the Cauvery delta leasing out of temple lands is a common practice. Of the surveyed farmers, some had leased in temple lands and lost the crop.

Figure 1 Distribution of Victim Farmers' Landholdings



* Figures within the parentheses are percentages to total respondents.

The figure 1 shows that the land is holding details of respondents. This study found that 12 (57.1 percent) respondents are having below 2 hectares of owned property, and 6 (28.5 percent) farmers having leased land. Secondly, 2 (9.5 percent) respondents come under 2 to 5-hectare own nation, and 1 (4.7 percent) respondents come under the leased inland. It clearly shows that small farmers dominate here and affected by the drought and committed suicide. Moreover, in these affected households as per field observation, not many are employed either in private or in public to support the families. This kind of employment pattern could not extend helping hand to distress farmers who are in dire need of support.

A unique difficulty faced by the victim farmers is the lease in farmers cannot avail any compensation or crop insurance for the loss. This issue has been revealed to a victim household in Venkathangudi in Mannargudi. Which is needs to be clarified while insuring the crop itself mechanism may be worked out for removing these difficulties to ensure the safety net.

Often it is blamed that only the resource-poor small farmers are under distress owing to low energy to withstand shock. Now the literature is flooded with evidence that resource-rich farmers in agriculturally

prosperous areas are also under distress at times and commit suicides. Here in the present survey, only small and marginal farmers yielded to the pain and ended their precious lives. Table 1 portrays that 86 percent of farmers come under small farm category,

and 14 percent of households fall under average size farm households. A number of farm suicides (9) from Nagapattinam followed by Thirivarur (7) and Thanjavur (5) as could be seen has been in table 5.

Table 1 Distribution of Victim Farmers by Size/Districts

S.No	Farm Size	Thanjavur	Tiruvarur	Nagapattinam	Total
1.	Small	3	6	9	18 (85.71) {2.07}
2.	Medium	2	1	-	3 (14.28) {5.33}
Total		5 (23.80) {3.2}	7 (33.33) {2.43}	9 (42.85) {2.23}	21 (100) {2.41}

* Numbers within the parentheses are percentages to total respondents.

* Flower brackets show average farm size of the household in an acre.

Due to the high density of residents and households in delta region Delta regions owing to assured irrigation source, attract more population to eke out income in agriculture. The Cauvery delta is not an exception to this.

The holding size is worked out as small. In the entire selected farm households, the average landholding size is valued at 2.41 acres per family of the chosen delta districts; the per-household land distribution is low in Nagapattinam (2.23 acre), Thiruvarur (2.43 acre) and Thanjavur (3.2 acres).

Table 2 Outstanding Amount from Victim Households by Districts (in Rs.)

S.No	Farm Size	Thanjavur	Tiruvarur	Nagapattinam	Total
1.	Small Farmer'	1,40,000 (3)	95,000 (6)	1,24,000 (9)	3,59,000 (18)
2.	Medium Farmer'	3,70,000 (2)	4,00,000 (1)	-	7,70,000 (3)
Total		510,000	495,000	1,24,000	11, 29,000 (21)

Note: Numbers in braces are the number of respondents

Table 2 discovers the outstanding amount of victim farmers households in the study area. It shows the total outstanding loan for small farmers is operated out Rs.3.59 lakhs and Rs. 7.70 lakhs for medium-size farm households and the overall 21 victim households had Rs.11, 29 lakhs in the study area. The small farmer's outstanding loan is quite low in the district of Thiruvarur and Thanjavur compares to the Thanjavur district, which is suitable for growing perennial crops like coconut and cash crops like sugarcane. Thus the above discussion shows that besides resource endowments, local cropping patterns and conditions also impacted on the borrowings and outstanding loan amount. The next aspect is to explore the causes of borrowing money.

The situation of a 64-year-old farmer in Irumputhalai village in Papanasam Taluk at Thanjavur is highly deplorable. He was disturbed by money lenders and unbearable to twin pressure of

money lender and crop withering had with a sudden heart attack and died instantly on January 6th, 2017. Another but young farmer, 36-year-old from Athichapuram village 29 km from Thiruvarur district in Mannargudi taluk of Kottur block depressed over poor germination of paddy seeds even after two months of sowing. Field investigation shows that this young farmer also got a loan from a money lender. He was upset for a couple of days and when he visited the fields on 5th November died due to heart failure on the track itself. A passerby noticed his body and informed the Kottur police station. It was found that not even 50 percent of the seeds sprouted from his fields. All these depict an essential point that the Cauvery delta is under distress and the rural economy is in fragile condition. Once a lush green area like covered with green blankets across the historic delta region, now parched fields and wilted crops pathetically welcome the visitors.

Table 3 Sources of Loan for Victim Farmers'

S. No.	In Rs.	Cooperative	Government Bank	Private Bank	MFI	Money Lender	Total
1.	< 50000	5	2	3	2	5	17
2.	51000 - 1 Lakh	-	-	-	1	2	3
3.	1 Lakh – 2 Lakh		1		1	3	5
4.	> 2 Lakh	2	2	-	1		5
Total		7 (33.33)	5 (23.80)	3 (14.28)	5 (23.80)	10 (47.61)	30

Source: Primary Data; * Data within the parentheses are percentage to total respondents.

The above table 3 discovers the sources for victim farmers' indebtedness in the selected households. These details are listed as five. The respondents bought debt from cooperative banks, private banks, microfinance institutions, and money lenders. It is simply shown most of the respondents received credit from the money lenders. Because they don't have any nation/home document for taking a loan from the bank. Their village money lenders give loan without any material but more of interest. At times of default, such money lenders force the borrowers to repay the loan. During the field investigation, it was bought to notice that bank officials were aggressive as compared to other sources towards the defaulting

farmers. However, cooperative credit agencies were soft towards the borrowers. Among the selected households, all (22) borrowed money for crop cultivation. Many families availed loan to the extent of fewer than Rs.50000 thousand.

It is found from the field that except a few other borrowers used the money for raising a crop. But crop withering led to crop loss, and the result was distress and suicides. It is to be noted that some farmers who avail a loan for crop cultivation divert it for consumption and hence unable to use it for the intended purpose. Fortunately, the interaction with the victims' relatives by and purge show that such cases are not found here in the delta region.

Table 4 Causes for Borrowing in Victim Households

S.No	Reasons	Thanjavur	Tiruvarur	Nagapattinam	Total
1.	Crop Cultivation	5	7	9	21 (100)
2.	Buy Tractor	1			1 (4.76)
3.	Bore-Well	1			1 (4.76)
4.	Others	1	3	3	7 (33.33)

Source: Primary

It has been extensively reported in the media and cited in various committees and commissions that the borrowing farm households do not use for the intended purpose. This is quite understandable given the nature of the agrarian structure, and other institutional, social, and economic dimensions in India and Cauvery delta is not an expectation. Here among the victim farm households (Table 4) in the delta region, all the families availed a loan for crop cultivation. It includes payment for wages, purchasing external inputs like fertilizer, pesticide, seed/seedling, and so on.

Unfortunately, some farmers, as revealed by the neighbors, used a portion of borrowing for other purposes including repayment and cleaning of old loans. Nevertheless, lack of assured irrigation

and insufficient rainfall compelled the farmers not to use more quantity of chemical fertilizers. Consequently, the yield declined considerably. Other routine operations such as preparation of land for broadcasting/transplanting were done. With all that erratic rainfall and absence of assured irrigation led to low crop growth/germination, and the result was crop withering and farm distress.

Besides several local issues like an accumulation of silt on water bodies, weed growth and poor maintenance of water bodies have also been found locally which affect smooth flowing of water and decline in storage capacity. Ponds and tanks in the delta districts are encroached by ipomoea crania weed locally known as Neyveli kattamanakku. This prevents the free flow of water in the canals and

channels. Accumulation of silt on river/cannel tanks and ponds is yet another hurdle to reduce the holding capacity. Such water bodies need delisting to increase holding capacity. An age-old form of protecting and maintaining water bodies (Kudimaramathu) has been revived by the state government with a budget outlay of Rs.100 crores. The NABARD on its part announced Rs.500 crore for this innovative but age-old practice of managing local water structures with achieving community participation. Already a considerable amount of work has been done, albeit some amount of misuse of funds.

It is expected that this age-old conservation measure is expected to increase the water holding capacity besides water flow. Also, the silt thus taken out could be used as organic manure for farm plots. If Kudimaramathu is periodically carried out, the water bodies will thrive and sustain in the long run and would ensure agrarian prosperity in the delta region. Also, if check dams are constructed across major reviews inappropriate areas, the water stored would enable to irrigate the groundwater table.

Suggestions and Conclusion

The increasing incidence of farmers' suicides is symptomatic of a more significant crisis, which is much more widespread. Presently, the Cauvery delta shows a dangerous distress situation, and immediate intervention from the policy circle is required. The empirical research found farmers' suicide has a multiplicity of causes. Mainly the victim farmers are disappointed by the crop failure, and government regulations and schemes failed to compensate. Hence the Durkheim's ideology of egoistic circumstances generated anomic thoughts to commit suicide.

The scarcity of water is the common factor for farmers' suicides in the Cauvery delta. A water crisis is due to untimely rainfall – climate change and water dispute between Karnataka and Tamil Nadu. Adaptation of cost-effective investments in water infrastructure could take relief from water crisis. Another side, the indebtedness is the central driving factor behind the suicides in India (Sainath, 2014) it is common in the Cauvery delta. Risk mitigation strategies should go beyond credit to control farmers' suicides and a more massive crisis of agriculture sector. Giving compensation to

victim farmer is not be a permanent solution for the disaster (BL, 2017). The Government should create awareness about agriculture loan schemes, programs and should encourage farmers organizations for collective action. So far of 21 victims households have been surveyed, only farmers 8 reviewed at least primary compensation from the government and opposition political party. Remaining 13 farmers are running from pillar to post. Many political parties made a beeline to these households, and nothing has been concretely done. The Government of Tamil Nadu announced compensation for only 17 The government as reported recognized/approved only 17 farmers as suicide cases. Others were disowned as such cases were not declared officially as farm-related deaths suicides.

Victims and provided Rs.3 lakh for each family. Moreover, safety net measures like crop insurance and allowances may be provided as immediate relief from debts. Intensive counseling at the household level is another intervention, which may reduce the suicides immediately. Local educational institutions and their community service wings may be utilized for educating and counseling the distress farmers — long term measures like identification and propagation of drought-resistant and wide yielding varieties of seeds to be distributed. Alternative livelihood strategies like fish rearing, cattle rearing, and farm forestry may be taken up in the delta.

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