CHAPTER I

Introduction

1. Introduction .................................................................................................................. 1
   1.1 Agrarian Crisis and Farmers’ Suicide.................................................................1
   1.2 Widows of Farmers.........................................................................................2
   1.3 Background of the Universe ...........................................................................3
   1.4 The Magnitude of the Issue of Farmers Suicide .............................................4
      1.4.1 In Wayanad District ...............................................................................5
      1.4.2 In Kerala State ........................................................................................6
      1.4.3 In India- National level ..........................................................................7
   1.5 Chapter Scheme ...............................................................................................8
Introduction

Suicide appears to be the most personal action an individual can do. However, social relationships play an important role in its causation and it has a profound social impact. While it seems to aim solely at destroying the self, it is also an act of aggression against others. The study of suicide illustrates that human action, however personal, is also interaction with other people and that the individual cannot be understood in isolation from his social matrix and hence, it is a subject of scientific study. Suicide is a specifically human problem. Any animal can die by disease and can be destroyed intentionally or accidentally by an outside agent. However, as far as we know, only man can will his death and kill himself.

Suicides have an individual and social context. According to Durkheim- behavioural scientist, suicide could be because of social isolation/individualism (egoistic) or excess of social integration (altruistic) or break down of social regulation (anomie) or excess of social regulation (fatalistic). Suicide being a multifaceted and complex phenomenon, the risks are identified either in neuro-biological or socio-economic domain. The former are predisposing in nature and are internal to the individual, whereas the latter are the precipitating ones and are external to the individual.

1.1 Agrarian Crisis and Farmers’ Suicide

Farmer’s suicide is a critical issue today. This phenomenon is largely the fall-out of stagnation in agriculture, when agriculture was not yielding remunerative income, the farmers became more desperate. They took to suicide as a last resort. According to the national crimes records bureau, 17,060 farmers committed suicide in the country in 2006 with Maharashtra having the highest number of suicide deaths 4,453 and Vidharba termed as a “Disaster Zone” (Aerthayil, 2008, Pushpa, 2007). Punjab is the latest in the list of states having farmers’ suicides. This is a record in the agricultural history of India. It points to the acute nature of the problem which has affected the vast majority of the population, and which has triggered a real crisis. It is not only an outcome of top-sided development in the country but also an indicator of the failure of the state agency in achieving ‘inclusive growth’. ‘A relatively higher suicide among a particular subgroup is indicative of a larger socio-economic malice’. (Sreejith Mishra, 2007) Risks, farmers’ suicides and agrarian crisis in India: Is there a way out?)
fact is that people when confronted with any or a combination of the above are led to utter despair. Prolonged frustrations and cries by no means always result in suicide and it is not clear as yet just why some are prone to take this disastrous decision. People face innumerable unpleasant crises in different ways. Often they choose various alternatives to approach the situation. When some people resort to religion, some others may choose the path of religion. There are also other people who can make light of the situation and while others evade the issue. It becomes clear that the person who commits suicide is unable to find a satisfactory alternative solution to the problems he faces. This is what we can notice in the case of farmers who end their life in the situations that they fail to cope with. However, these acts of frustrations leave many social problems behind.

1.2 Widows of Farmers

The most vulnerable section among women is widows. Character assassination is a weapon used to control widows and single women.

The death of a husband can affect a woman’s life in three basic ways, by reducing the amount of human, physical and financial resources available to the women. The worst affected in Jhabvala’s judgment, are typically the unpaid family workers, as they often have no independent access to credit, skills markets or alternative occupations. However, the situation of women who work for wages outside the home can also be quite precarious, especially in the rural areas, as participation in wage labour often depends on being able to work alongside one’s husband.

In brief, many widows need to work in order to earn their up keep. In addition to their daily sustenance, most of them need to work in order to repay the debts that are incurred for various reasons before the death of their husbands or to pay for the death ceremonies. Often these poor widows have to repay the debts that they inherited from their husband. In some cases they need to redeem the land their husband mortgaged before his death. Given the variety of pressing needs that many widows face, it is clear that they need gainful employment than they are allowed to work or are able to find work in the present situation.

The death of a husband can bring tremendous changes in a widow’s life in terms of her access to property and in her living arrangements, and in terms of her social identity and relationships. Moreover, the death of a husband can be catastrophic in
economic terms. However, surprisingly, widows are rarely mentioned in the literature on poverty or in public debates on economic policies.

1.3 Background of the Universe

Wayanad is one of the smallest district in the state accounting about 7,80,619 population. The total geographical area is 2,131 sq. km. Density of population per sq. km is 369 according to the 2001 census. The male-female ratio is 995 women per 1000 males. Literacy rate is 86%. It comprises of 25 Grama Panchayats and one Municipality. District has a mixed population of Hindus, Christians and Muslims. As per 1991 census, the total district population comprises of 50% Hindus, 26% Muslims, 23% Christians and a small Jain community forming 1% of the total population.

Wayanad is basically an agrarian district. Plantation economy is playing a major role. Out of the total 2131 sq.km of land, 78,787 hectares are forest, forming 37% of the total area. 1142 sq.km of the total area is used for agriculture which forms 54% of the total land area of the district. Census of India 2001 reveals that 47.3% of the total work force of the district is involved with agriculture while the figure for state of Kerala is 22.8%. Traditionally the inhabitants were cultivating food crops for food security and economic development. Wayanad is also known for its spice cultivation and has established its reputation in earning foreign exchange for the country.

Etymologically Wayanad indicates “Vayal Nadu” (Paddy Field). Several varieties of paddy were cultivated through centuries, but most of them were now gone into oblivion. The government policy of the Agriculture price commission adversely affected the paddy growers that even the cost of production was not available for them. In reality Wayanad lost its major chunk of traditional food crops.

Till not very long ago, Wayanad had plenty of water. However, today the entire region is facing drought due to unchecked deforestation and large-scale conversion of paddy fields into plantations. In 1982, there were 30,000 hectares of paddy fields in Wayanad. It has shrunk by more than 76 per cent to 7,000 hectares in 1999. Paddy, once the major crop of the District, is now cultivated in 12988 hectares only and that too for a single harvest. Much of the paddy field of the district is being converted for banana cultivation. Ginger cultivation in Wayanad has also substantially increased in recent years and paddy fields are increasingly being converted for ginger/vegetable
cultivation. Many traditional rice varieties have also disappeared. According to 2001 census in Wayanad 47.3% of its working population is involved with agriculture or related activities. The average size of land holding is 0.68 ha. A variety of crops including annuals and perennials are grown in these small holdings. The crops include coconut, betel nut, pepper, vegetables, tuber crops, drumstick, papaya, etc. and fruit trees like mango and jack.

From the last decade the economy of the district is threatened with a host of crisis which has not been adequately addressed by the governmental authorities. The total destruction of the agriculture sector crushed the economic background of almost all families. The difficulty in meeting the daily needs by many households pose enormous challenges. These lead the farmers into the trap of indebtedness and gradually to the clutches of suicide.

1.4 The Magnitude of the Issue of Farmers Suicide.

Suicides among farmers are widely discussed by people from various walks of life: the politicians, journalists, writers, social workers, philanthropists, psychologists, psychiatrists, and centre and state governments. Many surveys and study reports have been published too. However, no one has taken up the challenges of an investigation into the factors that lead to farmers’ suicide, and the impact of suicide on their dependents, especially the widow - a matter of great concern. This urges the researcher to have a focused study into the psychosocial factors leading farmers to suicide and social work intervention among their widows in Wayanad District.

This study is an attempt to motivate the government authorities as well as the NGOs to take up necessary measures in preventing suicide among the farmers and rehabilitation of the dependants specially the young widows and their children. The immediate victim of this tragedy is the poor widow of the farmer. The sole responsibility of supporting the family and overcoming the mounting debt that is left behind by her husband falls on her. The social stigma in being a widow, the accusations made by the in-laws family, social and familial demands crush them down with severe stress and tension. Widows need to be attended by the society and the society has to support them to stand on their own feet. This research helps us to evaluate the efficacy of the components of social work intervention in reducing the
stress level among the widows of the farmers who committed suicide in Wayanad district.

The findings can be published in mass media, magazines, newspapers, and journals.

1.4.1 In Wayanad District

Wayanad is basically agrarian, with plantation economy playing a major role. Census of India 2001 reveals that 47.3% of the total work force of the district is involved in agriculture while the figure for state of Kerala is 22.8 percent. Coffee in the district shares 33.65 percent of the total cropped area in the district and it covers 80 percent of the total coffee plantations in the state of Kerala. Other major crops are Pepper, Coconut, Rubber, Areca nut, Cardamom, and Ginger. During the last 10 years, Wayanad has earned Rs. 4192.48 Crore through the export of Coffee alone. Since Wayanad is the district that produces mainly cash crops and earns a good share of foreign exchange to the national exchange, the state and central governments have a special responsibility to protect the agro eco system and economy of Wayanad.

From the last decade onwards, the economy of the district is suffering from severe devastation and the people of this district face various problems. The total devastation in the agricultural sector crushed the economical background of almost all the families. The difficulty in meeting one’s own daily needs as well as the dependants became an enormous challenge to the family heads as they move with huge financial debts. The following are the major setbacks suffered by the farmers of the district such as price fall of agricultural products, lack of proper marketing, crop failures due to crop diseases, wild animals attack and natural disasters, reduction of fertility of land, high production cost and low income, increased use of chemical pesticides and fertilizers, indebtedness of farmers and lack of repayment capacity, lack of industries, lack of processing industries for agricultural products for value addition and lack of support price for agriculture products. Thus, agriculture became unreliable means of living and the people of Wayanad became the victim of the entire crisis. These difficulties led the farmers into the trap of indebtedness leading to the clutches of suicide. The sudden demise of the responsible member of the family, leads to social maladies or exigencies emerging. Often the huge responsibility or the family burdens, with the mounting debts were shifted to the shoulder of the wife of the household. It is to be noted that the widows of farmers who committed suicide were forcibly drawn into insurmountable tasks with huge social and economic implications. Moreover,
there are also some cases in which the children in their younger age were compelled to take up harder tasks beyond their age. They own the responsibility of their ailing parents who were bent with old age and chronic illness.

1.4.2 In Kerala State

Agricultural sector of Kerala is unique in several ways. Some of its special features are as follows. It is highly fragmented and small size of holdings except in the plantation sector, homestead farming with mixed crops yielding high income, a large area under commercial crops, especially capital intensive perennial free crops, export orientation of crops, such as spices, cashew, rubber, coffee, tea, vanilla etc., credit and hired labour-intensive cultivation and a higher indebtedness of farmers. Some of these features are found to be the handicaps of the sector in the open trade environment that has emerged after the formation of the World Trade Organization (WTO). While following trade liberalization, exports of agricultural commodities from the state declined. There was a rise in imports, which led to a fall in domestic prices of commodities and rise in its volatility. This intensified the problems already faced by the agricultural sector of the state due to the high cost of cultivation, stagnant productivity etc (Joseph and Joseph 2005 and Jerome 2005).

During the last few years, the problem worsened due to a deficiency in rainfall, a sharp decline in prices, lower production and the consequent increase in debt burden of farmers. As a result, close to 2000 farmers committed suicide in the state (GOK 2006a). Exports of commodities from Kerala suffered a major setback in recent years. There was a rise in the import of commodities, which were in fact produced and exported from the state for decades. The agrarian crisis and farmers suicides in Kerala are closely linked to the neo liberal policy that the governments implemented in the country in the recent past. The associations between the agrarian crisis and farmers suicides are more in the regions of the state that are heavily dependent on export-oriented crops such as coffee and pepper. The worst affected are the small farmers, as they are more vulnerable to crop losses and price declines. Unless the plight of farmers are addressed in terms of changing the macro-policies regulating taxes, prices and imports, the condition of farmers cannot be improved on a sustainable basis, either by increasing the availability of institutional credit or providing some alleviatory sops to the families of the victims of farmers’ who committed suicide.
1.4.3 In India- National level

It is said that the Indian farmers live in debt, die in debt and bequeaths it to their children. Indian agriculture is in a state of crisis, farmers’ indebtedness and suicide, the stagnation of agricultural domestic product, the fall in per capita GDP in agriculture, the increased volatility of the output, greater susceptibility of Indian prices to international price movement and rising cost of production. The impact of economic reform in the field of agriculture in India and other such developing economics are liberalisation, privatization and globalization. These are three pillars on which the edifice of the new economic policy has been created in India.

The reasons for agrarian distress in India lie in the conjunction of the changing nature of agriculture and democratic politics. With cultivation becoming an unrewarding occupation, the growing disparities of wealth between the rural and urban areas, the inability of farmers to unite and bring pressure on the governments and a disjuncture between the interests of the farmers and that of the political representatives, have all led to the neglect of agriculture and deterioration in the conditions of farmers.

National sample survey organization has carried out a survey in 2003 to assess the situation of farmers in India. Half of the farmers are indebted and much of the indebtedness was due to agricultural expenses. Inequality in income between the rural and urban households and between the cultivators and non-cultivators has been growing. The changed pattern of land holdings changed the cropping pattern due to a shift from light crops to cash crops. Liberalization policies prematurely pushed Indian agriculture into the global markets without a level-playing field. Heavy dependence on high - cost paid out inputs, growing costs of cultivation, volatility of crop out, market vagaries, lack of remunerative prices, indebtedness, neglect of agriculture by the government, decline of public investment, break up of joint families, individualization of agricultural operations, so on and so forth are also responsible for the deteriorating nature of Indian agriculture.

The most important fact to be noted is that India has witnessed agrarian distress in history worse than this. However, the farmers had not committed suicides as happen now. According to an official statistics, there are nearly two lakh farm suicides since 1997. According to National Crime Record Bureau (NCRB) between 1997-2008 1,99,132 farmers have committed suicide in India. This has been happening in droves and the frightening phenomenon continues to persist and recur year after year, without
any sign of abatement. In as much as these suicides reveal the plight of the victim, they also tell us a great deal about the plight of the farmers who are alive but whose condition bears a close resemblance to that of the victim. The condition of our farmers constituting about 65% of the total population (Census, 2001) is nothing but a dignified slavery.

1.5 Chapter Scheme

There are three main parts in my research study. They are as follows; the first part of the study concentrates on the background information of the deceased and their widows. The economic and the psychological factors of the deceased farmer are dealt with. Especially his attitude towards the value system and also the victim’s capacity to relate to societal organizations, and also the self evaluation of their place in the society also is well examined. The second part of the study focuses on the mental stress of their widows and their stress coping mechanisms. The third part of the study is the social work intervention and related experiences of widows.

The chapters are arranged as follows:

Chapter - I  This chapter serves as an introduction. Here, we explain the necessity of this project in Indian, Kerala and Wayanad context.

Chapter - II  Review of literature on suicide and the studies done abroad and in India, with a special reference to farmers suicide and agricultural crisis and the problems of widows.

Chapter - III  Explains the research methodology applied by the researcher.

Chapter - IV  Research analysis and discussion on factors that contribute to suicide of Farmers.

Chapter - V  Research analysis and discussion on mental stress and coping mechanism of widows.

Chapter - VI  Research analysis and discussion on social work interventions with reference to widows.

Chapter - VII  Research findings, suggestions and conclusion, also include case studies and focus group discussions to substantiate the quantitative data for the studies.
Finally the appendices which include, interview schedule, guides for case studies and focus group discussions, how to identify persons at risks, agencies on suicide prevention in India and the bibliography.

Farmers’ suicide need to be understood in terms of farm or the growth crisis in agriculture. From the last decade, the economy is suffering from severe devastation so the people in Wayanad district face various problems. The total destruction in the agricultural sector crushed the economic background of almost all the families. The difficulty in meeting one’s own daily needs as well as the dependants became an enormous challenge to the family heads along with a huge financial debt. The farmers suffer by the price fall of agricultural products, no proper marketing, crop failure due to the crop diseases, natural disasters reducing fertility of land, high production cost and low income, indebtedness and lack of repayment capacity, ultimately leading farmers to suicide. This work is an innovative attempt to delve deep into the problems of this agrarian community and the severity of problems that the widows face to bring up the family that the suicided farmer left behind with debts. The social and financial insecurity that crush the widows with stress and tension. It also attempt to find an amicable solution to the problems they face.