

Widows of Farmer Suicide Victims in Vidarbha

Differential Dependence in Early and Later Cases

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Farmer suicides due to agricultural distress are a tenacious and recurring tragedy that plunge the lives of the unprepared widows into chaos. First, the widows must struggle to survive in the same circumstances that claimed the lives of their husbands, but with much less experience and guidance. Second, the widows must emerge from entrenched invisibility imposed upon them by the state, the community, and even the family. However, the study of five widows of the farmer suicides across a decade in Vidarbha reveals differential dependence and autonomy. The widow-headed households of earlier cases appear to succeed with time as compared to the later cases, and mostly through their own individual agency. The study, originally conducted through the years 2014–17 in 18 villages of six tehsils of two districts of Vidarbha, also points to normalisation of distress of widows that leads to their continuous exclusion from the state understanding of farmer suicides.

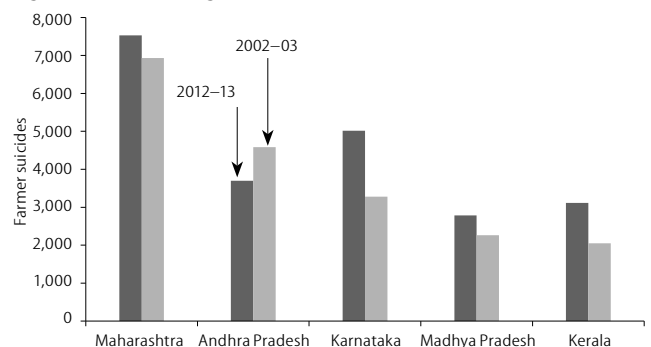
Widows of farmer suicides are the first witness to the agricultural crisis in India. But their invisibility to the state, the community and even the family diminishes the role they play in the survival of their households and nullifies any contribution they can make towards finding remedies.

Every farmer suicide immediately presents the widow with two challenges. First, she is plunged unprepared into the same circumstances that claimed the life of her husband but with much less experience and guidance. Second, she must displace herself from the position of dependence and invisibility of her internal world in the household to enter the external. The present study seeks to compare the condition of widows of farmer suicides separated by a decade in 2002–03 and in 2012–13, and finds that widows who have survived alone for a longer period of time, like in the case of the early farmer suicides, are less dependent and have more autonomy than those from later cases. The study also reveals that the state's normalisation of the distress of the widow, through its procedure for suicide inquiry in Vidarbha, is a valuable opportunity lost in understanding the causes and impact of farmer suicides.

Hidden Figures

According to the National Crime Records Bureau (NCRB), Maharashtra has reported the highest number of farmer suicides, especially in the Vidarbha region, and in the years under study (Figure 1). Among the districts of Vidarbha,¹ as per the local

Figure 1: States with Highest Farmer Suicides

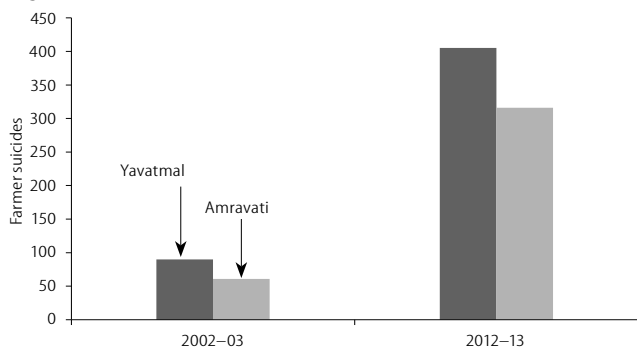


Source: NCRB reports (2002, 2003, 2012, and 2013).

district administration, Yavatmal and Amravati recorded the maximum number of suicides that have increased comparatively in the decade (Figure 2, p 25).

Hidden behind these statistics are the unregistered widows of Vidarbha, whose experience of agricultural distress reveals the ignored facets of farmer suicides. Some of the findings of

Figure 2: Farmer Suicides in Yavatmal and Amravati



Source: District administrations, Yavatmal and Amravati.

the study in this regard are given here. First, loan waivers were important interventions, which proved temporary due to unresolved chronic problems like lack of irrigation, fragmentation of land, and low access to credit. Second, the crisis was deepened due to unsuitable seeds for cotton in Vidarbha that increased the cost of cultivation without matching profit and deepened indebtedness. Third, the state’s denial and distrust of farmer suicides was evident in the suicide inquiry of the families, and added to the desolation in the villages. Fourth, holding the farmer’s habits and choices responsible for the crisis underlined the apathy of decision-makers towards the distress.

As part of the procedure, the state collected information from the widow relevant for the suicide inquiry to decide whether or not a farmer’s death was eligible for compensation. The visibility granted through this inquiry was only partial and conditional to the respondent being a widow of the farmer. Once the inquiry was finished, her struggle within her family and outside, and against the crisis remained unmediated by the state. This also reflects the difficult relationship between state and gender (Agarwal 1994), where the state can either increase cooperation or, on the other hand, entrench discrimination. For instance, the widows had to sign on statements prepared by officials from the administration based on selective questioning.

By distancing the widow from the farmer suicide through endorsing her invisibility, the suicide inquiry normalised a widow’s distress and located her as an outsider in the agricultural crisis rather than as a survivor. However, this marginalisation of the widows’ perception was part of the larger neglect of rural women, evident elsewhere when women farmers who committed suicide were not recognised as farmers (Sainath 2004). Further, the state of the widows reinforces the view that farmer suicides are not just the result of falling agricultural income and debt, but are a manifestation of the breakdown of community and social networks as well (Jodhka 2016). The impact is felt most by widow-headed households whose survival depends on the very factors that have neglected the crisis, and therefore, contributed to it.

Widow-headed Households

Women-headed households account for 10.4% of all rural households in India (Census 2011: Table 1). A woman in a patriarchal society like India headed the household only under

specific conditions. These include: (i) widowhood, divorce, separation, and desertion of the woman; (ii) migration of the male; (iii) unemployment, disability, illness, and reluctance to take up employment by the male; (iv) no mature sons; and (v) sons living in nuclear families (Lingam 1994).

The headship of the household embeds the woman deeper in poverty and adverse conditions rather than alleviating her situation, as evident from the state of such households in India. Women-headed households are smaller with constrained dwelling units (Census 2011), and have a high percentage of no or low levels of education (GoI 2009). Such households also display economic vulnerability, with higher indebtedness and low access to bank loans, forcing them towards informal sources of finance (Ghosh and Vinod 2016). Further, among the constraints women face are limited access to opportunities for income generation and government assistance (Lingam 1994).

Table 1: Head of Households by Gender

	Total	Rural	Urban
Number of households (lakh)			
Total	2,467	1,678	789
Male-headed	2,198	1,504	694
Female-headed	269	174	94
Number of households (%)			
Total			
Male-headed	89.1	89.6	88
Female-headed	10.9	10.4	12

Source: Census of India (2011).

In the present study, the widow-headed households face constraints that contextualise the invisibility of the woman first as a wife, and then as a widow. The invisibility becomes operational by representation of the widow’s internal world in the external world, and how the “male mediation” (Agarwal 1994) is required to cross the barriers of movement, communication, and exchange.

The invisibilities imposed on the widows are activated through tradition, status, procedure, opportunity, value, and vote (Neelima 2018). These six invisibilities maintain the internal world of the widows and allow them to survive even if in a disadvantaged position. The superiority of the visible male over the invisible female was particularly in conflict when the widow sought to move out of her represented internal world to the external or outside world, and articulated her own interests. However, the widow fought these battles while situated within the patriarchal framework, and succeeded only on the basis of individual resolve and strength, without any directional intervention in this matter by the state or community. It took time and practice for the widows to navigate the external world and obtain favourable response to their needs. When it did occur, such intervention came in the form of welfare schemes or employment opportunities by the state and financial or social support by the community. To the credit of the widows, they utilised even limited assistance they received to break away from dependence and rebuild a life left in shambles by farmer suicides. The present study of five cases from Vidarbha, separated by a decade, illustrates the difference in dependence between early and later widows of farmer suicides.

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Table 2: Profile of Widow-headed Households

	Age (as of 2017)	2012–13		Pending Loan at the Time of Farmer Suicide (₹)
		Education	Size of Land (Acres)	
Sunita Dhale	41 years	12th class	4.5	44,371
Vandana Rathod	35 years	5th class	10.61	41,706
Manjubai Rathod	38 years	5th class	5	91,462
		2002–03		
Jayashri Sawankar	40 years	12th class	3	50,000
Lata Patil	41 years	10th class	2	44,000

Source: Field notes.

Methodology

The research was conducted between 2014 and 2017, for farmer suicides that had taken place in 2002–03 and in 2012–13. The sampling frame for the case studies was the district administration's farmer suicide list in Yavatmal and Amravati, respectively, and within the districts, tehsils were selected based on accessibility and distribution. The final sample was distributed in six tehsils of Arni, Ghatanji, and Ner in Yavatmal, and Bhatkuli, Chandur Bazar, and Morshi in Amravati.

Individual cases were chosen based on data from the district administration, the list of farmer suicides, the government schemes for children of farmer suicide households, and the suicide inquiry for compensation. The criteria followed for selection were age of farmer, time of suicide, marital status, welfare schemes, accessibility by road, and availability of documentation for suicide compensation. The final list contained 18 cases that were recognised by the state or had been eligible for compensation. Of these, two women had died of illness in 2006 and 2014. Among the remaining 16 cases, three widows had stopped working in the agricultural fields, while 10 widows now worked only as daily wagers. Of the total, five cases were widow-headed households and in all the five cases, according to post-mortem reports, the farmers had committed suicide by pesticide poisoning.

The unpaid bank loans at the time of their husbands' deaths were in the range of ₹41,000 to ₹92,000 (approximately) and the land owned by the widows or her family was between two acres and 11 acres (approximately). Some widows had also leased out their land to other farmers. The main crop of cultivation was cotton, followed by soybean and pigeon pea (*tur*). All cases were followed through the period of research to chart their financial, social and agricultural profiles, among others. This allowed tracking of agricultural productivity, state of education and health, as well as state-related work like applications for irrigation and employment schemes, below poverty line (BPL) cards, deepening of wells, making of barriers, etc. To ensure that the narratives were in the voice of the widows, once recorded, they were read out to the widows for review. Among the five cases presented in this paper, two belong to farmer suicides that took place in 2002–03, three cases belong to farmer suicides in 2012–13 (Table 2).

Widows of Suicide Victims (2012–13)

More women-headed households in India live in “no exclusive room” or “in one room” dwellings as compared to male-headed households (Census 2011). This was borne out in the case of

Vandana Rathod's precarious residence in Ajanti village of Yavatmal that housed five members of the family. The fragile mud-and-thatch structure with a low roof appeared to have undergone frequent repairs, and the single room and kitchen were inadequate.

Widow-headed households faced ambiguity over their economic viability, which is one of the immediate outcomes of farmer suicides. Already stressed due to debt and crop failure, the family of the farmer requires support, which mostly comes from the community. This also constitutes the first of the many changes a widow faces in her status, where she is now dependent on the kindness of others, along with an awareness of her own helplessness. This was true for Vandana as well who was 31 years old in 2013 when her husband consumed pesticide meant for the crops. She had rushed him to the hospital, but said she knew he had died on the way. She was left alone to support herself and her four children, the youngest of whom was nine years old. She spoke in 2014:

My relatives helped us in the initial days after my husband's death. But they have their own families to look after, I understand that.

Unable to cultivate her land alone, Vandana had rented it out at ₹9,000 per year, which alleviated her financial burden per month by ₹750. Further, she worked as farm labour for daily wages, and earned from ₹70 up to ₹100 per day. But her income was incumbent on the availability of work, which was seasonal. All the earnings were already budgeted for education of children, health and other expenses, and the income always fell short. Despite her best efforts, she continued to be dependent on others for financial assistance, as she explained:

My yearly expenditure is between ₹30,000 and ₹40,000. I cannot get that money from either the rent on the field or from my work as labour. So I borrow money, sometimes from my parents and my brother.

Typically, widows are uninitiated into the financial matters of the family, until the farmer's death. As also seen in other studies, the widow incurs the outstanding loans of her husband, which she discovers only after his death (Padhi 2012). In this, there are marked differences between the widow-headed households and the farmer or male-headed household.

First, the financial control of the male-headed household is unlikely to be shared with the woman, mainly because of her presumed low level of awareness and low visibility in the external world. Second, the farmer gets guidance and support from other male members of his family and community to learn financial management. The widow of the farmer is not used to interacting with male members of the family or the community about finance. Third, the farmer takes years to gather experience about agriculture and explore other avenues of income. The widow finds herself immersed in the crisis immediately after the farmer's death. Fourth, with his wife sharing his burden of labour inside the house and outside in the farm, the farmer is able to work on improving the economic health of his household. The widow finds herself alone in circumstances she is untrained to handle. These factors were especially observed in the later cases of farmer suicides, like Vandana, where Ganesh had handled all matters related to

loans, crops and the agricultural land. Vandana's financial experience began only after the farmer suicide, which was also apparent in her struggle to survive.

Like dependence, the other aspect that the widow becomes aware of in the months after the farmer suicide is the inevitable interaction with the world outside the household that had remained inaccessible to her as a wife. Although mediated initially by the community, the widow who heads the household is disadvantaged because of the absence of past linkages that she can count on. Even her interaction with the state, which could have been supportive, is not only cursory, but also short-lived. The state inquiry concluded that Ganesh's death was eligible or *patra*² for compensation. While questioning Vandana about the death, the state did not investigate her condition. Beyond seeking responses to questions that generalised agricultural distress, the state did not explore the farmer as an individual. But Vandana explained:

He (Ganesh) used to worry too much. But there was never any money to save, any money to spare. He could not rest knowing that the failed crops meant the loan could not be repaid. I never knew he contemplated killing himself. I would have never let him.

Despite the various responsibilities that kept her occupied, the widow desperately fought against poverty and destitution. Vandana knew her income from farm labour would not be enough to meet the basic necessities of her children (Table 3, p 28). She was also aware that the children had to be provided for beyond mere survival and that she would fail to do so under the present circumstances. This burdened her as she watched her children grow, and she said:

Although I want my children to study so that they can have a better future, I do not have the money to support them, and I do not get any work, other than as a daily wage. The children study under the single light bulb, the bill for which is ₹300 for two months. The bus for the school costs ₹200 per month.

Even by 2016, the finances of the family had not improved. Vandana had to borrow ₹70,000 from a private moneylender, which was the only recourse in the absence of formal finance. This met the pending expenses of the family, but Vandana had no way of repaying the loan. Her main source of income remained farm labour in which her elder daughter also now joined. They earned ₹100 each per day in the monsoons, and the rains had been kind in 2016. Besides this, Vandana received a monthly interest of ₹500 from the state compensation amount deposited in the bank. The future of the children is the main preoccupation of the widows, in which they repose not only the hope for progress but also the justification for their struggle. Therefore, the widow, more than the farmer, is focused on the education and plans of her children. However, without state support, the widow must once again count on the community to assist her efforts, entrenching her dependence.

Manjubai Rathod's struggle: In Son Wadhona village of Yavatmal, Manjubai Rathod, a widow of farmer suicide in 2013, said,

I have no idea how to make my children's dreams come true because I have nothing and I cannot keep begging people for help. Everyone has

responsibilities and it is not easy for anyone to constantly take money out of their pockets and give it to me instead.

Manjubai, like many other widows in this study, was anxious that her emphasis on survival should not replace the aspirations of her children. The realisation of those aspirations, however, required improvement of her income, which was impossible without opportunities for employment in the village (Table 3). Of all the crises, the unravelling of her children's dreams hurt the widow the most. Speaking months after the farmer suicide, Manjubai stated:

How can a child in this situation even have a future? My son is a witness to our situation. He knows there is no money. He may dream of a bright future, but it will all be impossible. There is no answer to the question of what he would like to be in life. It is not in his hands. His fate is already sealed by our poverty.

Her situation raised questions about the role of the state that was absent from the lives of the widows when they required urgent and critical support. The state had swiftly wound up the suicide inquiry in which it concluded that Atmaram's death should be compensated for the family. But the process of the inquiry left Manjubai with no doubt about the state's condescension, and also, suspicion. The inquiry seemed to work on the premise that the farmer might have killed himself for reasons other than the ones stated by his family. The 43-question form³ that was required to be filled out for every suicide procedurally confirmed that Atmaram grew cotton, soybean, tur, and sorghum (jowar), without registering his attempt to diversify the crops to cut losses. The questions dug deep into the life of the deceased farmer, as if to ascertain the truth of the widow's statements. For instance, questions 20 and 21 were about how many animals the farmer had had and how many of them were young, while questions 22 to 24 tried to discover whether the farmer had sold cotton to the federation or to private buyers. Although Manjubai had explained the sources of Atmaram's income, the inquiry sought to investigate if he enjoyed additional or hidden financial benefits.

Further, the state included every important official of the administration in the inquiry, like the panchayat sarpanch, deputy sarpanch, police constable, civil surgeon, subdivisional officer, agriculture officer, *talathi*, tahsildar, as well as the district collector. This would have been an ideal place to discover the causes of farmer suicides from the person closest to the farmer, his widow, and build a bank of information on the realities of the distress that could have led to possible remedies. Instead, the array of officials mainly ensured that the farmer's family should not be wrongly awarded the compensation. For instance, even after Manjubai had stated that she did not have a BPL ration card,⁴ she had to sign a certificate saying so. In the end, the administration and the police declared that Atmaram's "mental condition and social status were good,"⁵ and found the case eligible for compensation. The tehsildar placed the amount in a fixed deposit in the name of the children, which allowed the family to get a monthly interest until the amount matured. However, the widow of the farmer suicide is also laden with unpaid private loans, which the state does not record in its proceedings. By 2015, Manjubai had to

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clear some part of a private loan taken by her husband. There was urgency in her actions indicative of the insistence on repayment by private moneylenders, and also the indispensability of private loans in the life of the rural poor.

Informal finance was a crucial lifeline for the widows who were less likely to access bank loans (Ghosh and Vinod 2016). That was also the reason why private loans were repaid on time and took precedence over repayment of bank loans. When the harvest is good, the loans are cleared on priority, and Sunita Dhale did just that in 2016. A widow of the farmer suicide that took place in 2012 in Chincholi village of Yavatmal, Sunita hoped to harvest about 30 quintals of cotton from their field that year. Although the suicide was recent, Sunita's comparatively alleviated circumstances were because of her employment.

Sunita worked as a supervisor at an anganwadi school⁶ and was the sole livelihood earner for the family (Table 3). Owing to her dedication and capability, she received recognition from the women and child development department for being one of the best teachers in the district. She earned ₹5,000 per month, and the family had a BPL ration card. Sunita had applied for a sewing machine to augment her income, which the local panchayat was yet to approve. Despite her agency and ability, Sunita still felt that the troubles of survival overwhelmed any optimistic planning for future. She believed the only way was to educate the children and ensure a life independent of agriculture. Sunita's view, however, was not shared by her father-in-law, the 65-year-old Kishan Dhale, who had been a farmer all his life. He argued:

We can sell the land and get some money. But what will we do then? What will our children do? Without land, the private moneylenders do not give loans. We need loans for the marriage of my granddaughters. The land is kept for my grandson.

Without irrigation facilities, however, the future would be no different from the past. In 2015, the family had applied for a well to be commissioned by the panchayat through the Mahatma Gandhi National Rural Employment Guarantee Act (2005) and expected it to be approved soon. A similar well had been sanctioned in the village in 2014 and Kishan was hopeful:

My land will never give a good yield without irrigation facilities. Politicians promise us big things, but they do not help us get the loans. Bank officials do not clear our pending loans despite knowing our condition. We are always at the mercy of the local moneylender and that will never change.

The land had been in the family for more than 70 years, from the time before independence, and the financial state of

the family had not allowed addition to their holdings. According to the report of the agricultural officer,⁷ the crops cultivated by the Dhale family in 2010–12 when they had outstanding loans were cotton and tur. In 2010–11, they harvested nine quintals of cotton and 60 quintals of tur, while in 2011–12, they got eight quintals of cotton and 48 quintals of tur. It was clear from the records that the production of both crops had either stagnated or decreased, eventually leading to Ramdas' suicide. The cost of cultivation allowed no profit, as Kishan explained:

The expensive Bt cotton seeds cost ₹930 per 450 gram. In 2015, we had to sow the seeds thrice because of the failure of rains. We usually spray pesticides five to six times for the crop. Our bill for the water pump in the field comes to about ₹1,000 to ₹1,200 per year.

In 2014–15, Kishan's ill-health had also cost the family an additional ₹1,000 in medical bills. There were reasons why Sunita found agriculture unviable for her family:

I have young children who cannot work in the fields, and I have an anganwadi job from which I cannot get time off to do farming. My father-in-law or mother-in-law cannot till the fields at their age. How are we to survive on my meagre salary? What happens to the farm? If we employ labour, we must pay them ₹100 per day per person if it is a woman and ₹200 in case of a man or for every 40–50 kg of cotton they pick. If we cultivate cotton, we must employ at least six women for the harvest. How do I save any money from agriculture when I must spend so much on it?

Widows of Suicide Victims (2002–03)

One of the most important frameworks of support for the widow after the death of her husband is his household in which she lives. However, the farmer's family is not always amenable to accepting the financial and social responsibilities of his widow. There is a transfer of dependence of the widow from the husband to his family, with an expectation of submission to the new and much diminished reinterpretations of her role in the household. The cases in the present study show that the longer the widow stayed with the family of her husband, the more tenuous her position became. Further, a widow's compliance to discriminatory practices of the household was presumed because it facilitated a safe, although dependent life for her. The expectation of an independent life, on the other hand, was not supported by families, a reason why widow-led households are mostly a result of circumstances than revolt. The case of Lata Patil of Borala village of Amravati is an exception.

At first in 2015, Lata Patil, a widow since 2003, appeared to be reconciled to her submissive role in the household of her

Table 3: Financial Status of Widow-headed Households

	Children	Bal Sangopan Yojana	Below Poverty Line (BPL)	2012–13	
				Antyodaya Anna Yojana ⁸	Sources of income
Sunita Dhale	3	-	√	-	Farmland, anganwadi worker, sewing machine (applied for), bank interest
Vandana Rathod	4	-	-	√	Leased land, daily labour, bank interest
Manjubai Rathod	2	-	√	-	Farmland, daily labour, bank interest
			2002–03		
Jayashri Sawankar	2	√	-	√	Leased land, part-time attendant (PTA) at a dispensary, sewing machine, bank interest, self-help group
Lata Patil	2	√	-	√	Farmland, daily labour, cattle, bank interest

Source: Field notes.

husband and to live in crowded proximity with the family of her brother-in-law. Her quietness was a cultivated habit and she seemed to tolerate the injustices of her life for the well-being of her children. The house she shared with her in-laws was deep inside the village, a small structure with two portions built for two brothers. One portion belonged to her late husband, Sahebrao, which Lata now occupied. His two-acre farm was transferred to her name after his suicide, which he committed by consuming pesticide. Lata did not cultivate cotton that failed due to lack of irrigation and led to mounting of unpaid debt. Instead, she grew soybean and pulses, which gave her a modest income. It took eight years for her to clear her husband's dues, and even then, a few of them still remained outstanding.

Besides tending to her farm, Lata also worked as farm labour on daily wages and the income went towards the education of her two children. Her son received a government grant of ₹5,000 per year under the Bal Sangopan Yojana.⁹ It was inadequate in a household of several pending expenses. For instance, the bus passes of both children for school cost ₹400, roughly equivalent to Lata's income from two to four days of daily labour on the farms (Table 3). This battle against the impossible odds had begun with her husband's suicide. Lata recalled:

It was difficult to survive with two young children and there were times when I too wanted to end my life. Then I forced myself to live one day at a time. Nothing happens by itself, and hope is not enough. I had to learn to think about the future of my children and plan for them. I discovered that I need not be dependent on the family for survival. I can fight my own battles.

These appeared mere words against the towering problems of her life. But in 2016, it became clear that Lata Patil meant what she said. With the help of a government loan sanctioned following her application,¹⁰ she managed to build a house of her own across the lane from her old dwelling. The sanctioning of the loan had come as a surprise, as the application had been pending for several years. The government assistance reached her not when she required it the most, but when she expected it the least. Nevertheless, Lata utilised the opportunity to demarcate her life and make it independent of the family of her husband. She sold her portion of the house to her brother-in-law and invested in a nearby plot of land. The government loan proved insufficient and she had to take a private loan to complete the construction of her house. It contained three rooms and a stable for a new cow named Kapila. After 13 years of her husband's death, Lata Patil finally achieved her goal and lived in a household that she headed. Lata reflected on her struggle:

There is a problem about dealing with widows in our society; everyone is used to seeing them as dependents who live a subordinate life and die in vagueness. I could sense that my family was uneasy with the positive transformation in my life. They accepted me when I was in the grey world of the widow who had no voice or rights, but they did not know how to support me when I sought a better destiny. I have understood that now.

There was hypocrisy in the way the family dealt with the issues of dependence of widows. A widow could be discarded by

male-headed households as unwanted responsibility, but her assertion of independence was seen as an affront and deeply resented. Lata referred to her experience:

I never expected the men in the family to think for me; how would they know what it was like to be a single, unsupported woman? But even the women in the family did not take my side and that always hurt me. And when I sought to leave them and move away, I was criticised even more.

Lata's long ordeal seemed to have strengthened rather than weakened her. For instance, the agricultural land still posed problems for her, but she did not give up the farm. The crop failed either due to weather or disease, and she barely recovered the money she invested in it. Time and practice taught her to negotiate with the external world and, where the formal loans were not forthcoming, she managed by taking private loans. She is calmly combative, as she says:

The bank tells me that I should repay or I will not get a new loan. I ask them how I am supposed to repay them. Everyone knows my financial condition, then how do they expect me to repay?

Looking ahead, one of Lata's main objectives is to educate her daughter. The trend has been recorded in comparative studies of villages elsewhere as well (Jodhka 2014), which found more support now for education of girls than there was a few decades ago. Lata explained why:

Every moment of my life is spent in planning on how to pay for my daughter's education. I want her to have a career for herself and get a job. I do not want her to be dependent, the way I had been. She must do something with her life and not be at the mercy of others. There is nothing else I can give her except for education.

Lata wanted her children to leave the village for good and never return to do agriculture on the farm.

I have not taught my children how to work in the fields—I have never even taken them there. Without irrigation facilities, what would I have taught them anyway? That they should cultivate the soil, sow the seeds, and wait for the rains? My children cannot do agriculture and will not work as farm labour; they do not know how to. The only thing they know is education and what they learn in school, and that is how I want it to be.

The length of time allowed Lata to reflect dispassionately on her husband's suicide:

I keep thinking that if only my husband had told me about how anxious he had been about the loan, I would have helped him somehow. But in those days, no one really knew I could think of solutions. It was, perhaps, my mistake that I never tried to explore how he paid for food and other expenses, or how he ran the household. I was like any other woman who is taught only to manage the children and stay at home.

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I wish I had been much stronger then, like I am now, and perhaps, I could have helped my husband live.

Death is often on the minds of the widows of farmer suicides, especially when they are cornered by poverty and desperation. If they find the strength to survive, it is not because of state assistance or community support alone, but because the widows of Vidarbha do not give up easily. Like Lata Patil, even Jayashri Sawankar of Sirasgaon village of Yavatmal had lost her husband several years ago in 2002. Her husband, Ganesh, had killed himself due to unpaid debts and failure of the cotton crop, leaving her alone to support herself and her two daughters. Recalling those difficult times, she said:

Everyone said that my two daughters would only be a burden on me, whereas a son would have taken care of me. I wonder if a son would have been strong enough to face what my daughters had to face; I wonder if he too would not have committed suicide like my husband had. Men seem unable to deal with the hard life and, perhaps, it takes a woman to survive the tough times.

As a testimony to her resolve, Jayashri never borrowed from the moneylenders who had harassed her husband. She had leased out the three acres of her farmland at the rate of ₹5,000 a year, even if it meant giving up on whatever little farm output there was. Having passed out of school, she worked as a part-time attendant at a dispensary and earned ₹1,200 per

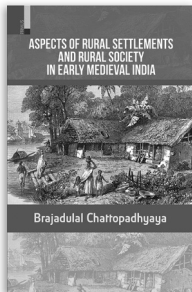
month. She had benefited from welfare schemes, mostly through her own awareness and through long-drawn battles with the state to be identified under categories of unsupported women, single mothers, and widows with children, etc (Table 3). Apart from her job, she added to her income by acquiring a sewing machine through a scheme implemented by the local panchayat. Jayashri had also obtained training in cattle management and milk production technology in 2008 in a study course organised by the district administration.

The most crucial intervention of the state has been in the case of her children. Her elder daughter was a beneficiary of the Bal Sangopan Yojana; the letter¹¹ informing her of the scheme had come to Jayashri in 2011–12, nine years after the death of her husband. But the scheme had stopped when her child needed it the most. Jayashri contends:

Children over 18 years of age cease to benefit from the Bal Sangopan Yojana. I find that strange, because parents and school-going children are already incentivised through fee waivers or free books, etc, in schools. It is the education after school that many parents cannot afford and the children are forced to look for full-time employment or work on the farms.

Jayashri had become a role model for the women of her village for the way she rebuilt her life alone. There were requests that Jayashri should contest the panchayat elections in January 2015, but she had refused, surprising the villagers. She explained:

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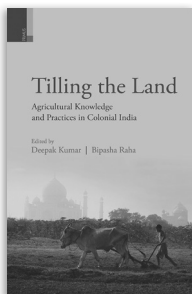


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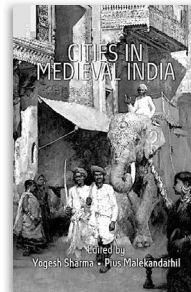


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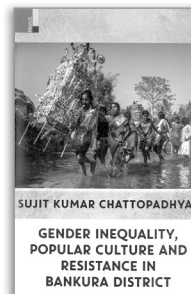


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I cannot contest (elections) because I cannot antagonise anyone in the village. There is no telling when I might need someone's help. Even as part of an election campaign, if I oppose someone who is important, I will not be able to survive in the village. Politics is not for me; not because I am afraid I may lose, but because I am sure I will win.

Like Lata, even Jayashri took a different view of her husband's suicide:

If the state had supported my husband with ₹1 lakh that they paid (as compensation) after his death, he would not have committed suicide. It is not the farm that lets us down.

Conclusions

The study of widows of farmer suicides separated by a decade allowed for understanding the differential dependence and autonomy of their financial and social status. Variations were recorded between two categories: widow-headed households that were only recently headed by men, and those that have been widow-headed households for some years. The following are a few key findings of this study.

One, the comparative study reveals that distress among cotton cultivators in Vidarbha's worst-affected districts has been continuous over a decade. The widows held rain-fed agriculture to be the cause of indebtedness and poverty, and also a factor responsible for the farmer suicides. Out of the five widows, one each from both categories had leased out her farm, while the others continued to cultivate their lands. Cotton was the main crop of cultivation, followed by soybean, jowar, and tur.

Two, agriculture was not the most preferred occupation of the widows for their children. Their emphasis was on education, for facilitating employment in the cities. The widows of early farmer suicides showed higher commitment to education for their daughters, who were allowed to study in nearby towns. In households of widows from later farmer suicides, the

men of the family still exerted influence, due to which sons received more importance than daughters.

Three, the external world was navigated better by the widows of early farmer suicides than the later ones. The widows of the early farmer suicides applied for welfare and targeted schemes, which they pursued themselves. They achieved financial autonomy unmediated by the male members of the community. The widows of later farmer suicides, however, struggled without any knowledge and experience of the external world, in continuation with the life they had led hitherto in the male-headed households.

Four, the widow-headed household of early farmer suicides enjoyed a diversity of income sources, whereas the widows of later farmer suicides were mainly employed as farm labour. However, the dependence on loans was discovered across both categories, pointing to the continued inadequacy of income generated for running of the household.

Five, dependence of widows was normalised and any contestations led to resentment among the family and the community. Although the family and the community supported the widows in the initial years after the farmer suicides, their assistance decreased as the years passed. Further, when the widows managed to get benefits from the schemes, not just their financial status, but also their social status improved. Asset-building was non-agricultural and took place in widow-headed household many years after the farmer suicide.

Six, and last, the state withdrew after the initial suicide inquiry, which neither guaranteed compensation nor worked towards remedies. It was only through the widows' own agency and work that the government schemes reached them, usually several years after the farmer suicides. The neglect of widows may be symptomatic of the state's disregard for agriculture and rural distress that is irrefutably etched in their long and lonely struggles for survival.

NOTES

- Information provided by Vidarbha Jan Andolan Samiti for 2009–14.
- The word *patra*, or "eligible" is written in Hindi on the suicide inquiry files. It certifies that the farmer's family is eligible for state compensation.
- A list of 43 questions are asked during suicide inquiry, which included name, age, address, date and place of death, post-mortem findings, cause of death, farmer's land details and crop yield, family members' land details and crop yield, the mental state and the social status of the farmer, etc. (Neelima 2018).
- The below poverty line (BPL) ration card is a tool to decide the economic status of a poor person. Those earning less than ₹32 a day in a rural area or less than ₹47 a day in an urban area were under the BPL line (GoI 2014).
- Statement of police constable of Son Wadhona village, Ner tehsil, Yavatmal district, October 2013.
- An anganwadi worker is employed from within a community to mobilise women and children for the Integrated Child Development Services (ICDS) programme. See www.icds-wcd.nic.in.
- Certificate given by the tehsil agricultural officer of Ghatanji tehsil and others, of Yavatmal district, 2012.

- Antyodaya Anna Yojana provided subsidised foodgrains for BPL families.
- The Bal Sangopan Yojana provides assistance to children whose parents are not able to take care of them owing to difficult circumstances. See www.womenchild.maharashtra.gov.in.
- The Government of Maharashtra's Gharkul Yojana provides financial assistance for housing to widows, members of Scheduled Castes and Scheduled Tribes, next of kin to defence personnel killed in action, minorities, and BPL category households. See www.pmayg.nic.in.
- Letter from district women and child development office, Yavatmal district, dated 15 June 2012.

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