

Coping With Spousal Suicide (A Sociological Study of Widows of Farmers' Suicides in Karnataka)

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Abstract

The growing incidence of farmers all over the country has shattered the farmers' households. Piled up debt, erratic and insufficient monsoon burden of the family, farming have fallen on the shoulders of the widows of farmers who had committed suicide. India being an agricultural nation and its commitment being welfare state cannot afford to lose one lakh farmers every year. It is of importance to see as to how these widows cope up the tragedy befallen on their families. Are they reeling under pressure of the farm and the family? or are they also likely to follow their spouses in ending a hapless life?, Whether or not they able to bail out themselves and their families from the distress is examined in this paper.

Key words:

Farmers' Suicide: The self inflicted deaths willfully carried out by the farmers, due to the debt burden and the loss of self esteem.

Coping: The ability to bear the tragic death of their spouse as a widow and efforts put in to bail out themselves and their families from the distress.

Introduction

Suicide is a human act self inflicted, self intentioned and untimely cessation of life. Suicide has emerged as an increasing public health problem in India over the last two decades, highlighted especially by the rise of male youth suicide rates in rural areas. According to National Crime Records Bureau's latest statistics, 1.22lakh suicides every year in India and Maharashtra tops among all other states of India.

According to National Crime Records Bureau, between 1997-2007, 1, 82,936 farmers have committed suicides in India. During 1999- 2001, it was estimated that 110 farmers committed suicide in Karnataka. According to one estimate, 3,000 farmers committed suicide in Karnataka between 1998 and 2006

(Muzzaffar Assadi: 1998 & 2005). If we take the report prepared by the Crime Branch of Karnataka, the number of suicide under the heading "farming and agricultural activity" comes to 15804 between 1998 and 2002. The year 2000 saw the maximum number of suicides 2630 followed by year 2001; these are the years when agriculture saw the negative growth. Interestingly, as per the crime branch report, between 1996 and 2002, 12889 male farmers and 2841 female farmers committed suicide.

The suicides of the farmers, has posed severe challenge to the governments. The interventions brought in were aiming to provide relief to the families of the farmers, who had committed suicide. The implications of the suicides of the farmers do not end with that. It is of vital sociological interest to know, as to how these households are trying to cope up with the suicides of their bread winners? Was the relief provided adequate enough? The Widows of the farmers are now a disadvantaged group with indebtedness and the social stigma of widowhood. How do these women cope up to wriggle out of the socio

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economic and psychological distress, is to be examined so as to stem the rot.

Widowhood is a phase of cruel experience for a woman in Indian society. With a single stroke of death of her spouse, she becomes a symbol of anathema. In the same family she becomes an unwanted creature relegated to the background, bereft of all social interactions. Mentally she has to overcome the grief of loss of companionship more than any one in the family. She has to assume the obligations and expectations of the role of bread winner besides the crucial role of mother for her children.

Her very presence is considered as inauspicious. According to Hindu Dharma Shastras, the widows are forbidden from using Sindoor and Bindi, bangles, nose -ring and Mangalasutra. Some women were forced even to tonsure their head. She must wear white sari only. Adding to her woes, she is isolated from the public life. She should not laugh or even talk loudly. Moreover she should not speak with outsiders. Most of the widows suffer from one form or the other form of social discrimination the widow is in young age her plight in life is unimaginable. In short she is socially excluded. The woman's status is at once transformed to a status of a widow, symbolizing exclusion and disability because of so many restrictions imposed on her. This is more so in rural society, where she has to undergo the restricted life, with so many obligations to fulfill and it is a life most miserable for a woman. This becomes much more severe, when she has to manage the debt ridden agriculture besides the familial responsibilities.

The specific objectives of the present research paper are

- 1) To portray the socio- economic profile of the widows of farmers Suicides in Karnataka with special reference to Tumkur, Chithradurga and Davanagere districts of Bangalore division of Karnataka State during the period 2001-07.

- 2) To know how do these widows cope with the distress of the suicides of their spouses and also the economic distress befallen on their families.

Method of Study

This paper is based on a study on 227 Farmers who committed suicides during the years 2001-2007 in Chithradurga, Davanagere and Tumkur district of Karnataka.

Findings and Discussion

It was sad to find that about 64.76 per cent of the farmers wives have become widows before they were 35 years of age, thus indicating the marital, mental and physical depravity experience in their lives. Widowhood is a painful emotional shock, a sharp change in social status, often an economic catastrophe and usually an introspective challenge to the widow. It also leads to the loss of prestige resulting in a state of helplessness and a state of alienation. The age at which the respondents became widows shows that 25.56 per cent of the respondents attaining the widowhood in their age between 25 to 30 years, 23 .78 per cent of them becoming widows between 30 to 35 years. Other 14.97 per cent of the respondents attained widowhood in the age between 20 to 25 years. Above 14.09 per cent of them were attaining in widowhood between 35 to 40 years. Half of the respondents became widows in their young age. After the death of her husband they have to face more restrictions at each and every step of their lives.

The economic distress for the families of the farmers' suicide in the form of debts revealed that 81.06 per cent of the respondents had debts of less than 1 lakh. Nearly 16.29 per cent of the respondent's debts are in the range of 1 to 2 lakhs. Only 2.65 per cent of the respondents had debts of more than 2 lakhs mostly borrowed from private money lenders. Analyzing the data on debts accumulated

Most of the farmers had borrowed money to invest on agriculture to buy inputs like seeds fertilizers and pesticides with the hope of raising a good crop. But the failure of monsoons in consecutive years, depleting ground water level, drying up of bore wells, use of spurious seeds, pesticides could not give them good crop for the two or three years. This dashed their hopes driving them into more debts resulting in a psychic state of depression. In the absence of institutional credit, the respondents have started borrowing from private money lenders even to manage even regular family expenses. When the creditors came to collect the dues the farmers had to cut a sorry figure the abuse of the moneylenders and when they tried to seize the cattle and the property of the farmers the hapless farmers could not bear the shame and the loss of self esteem which they enjoyed earlier. Though the amount of debt was not much the erosion of the social esteem weighed high in their mind driving the farmers to desperation to end their lives.

As part of coping up with the predicament forced on the widows of farmers by the suicides of their spouses, 51.54 per cent of respondents have taken up augmenting the incomes of their families through poultry, dairying, petty shops and farm labour etc and could raise amounts to clear part of the debts. Indebtedness had engulfed the households of the farmers and the respondents wanted to clear off the debts at the earliest. As the farmers relied excessively on agriculture alone they were never in a position to repay the debts. Caught in the midst of the storm, the respondents dared to accept the total responsibility of both the family and the farm. But the widows of the farmers never wanted to remain 'cog in the wheel' as his late husband used to be. Instead, her goal or objective in life decided, efforts initiated in the right direction, to bail out the family from the crisis with determination at its peak, these women demonstrated utmost firmness and steadfast resolve not to buckle under pressure but tried their best to cope with the crisis effectively not swerving from the path of recovery.

It is heartening to observe that 43.17 per cent of the respondents have repaid debts ranging between Rs 25,000 to 75,000. About 56.83 per cent of the respondents have successfully repaid the debts below Rs 25,000 each. Of the widows, 43.17 per cent of the respondents have repaid debts in the range between Rs 25,000 to Rs.75000 each. These have been successfully repaid by the respondents. Taking moral responsibility, they are toiling 'in' and 'out' of the family and within a short span they have almost repaid the debts successfully.

It was found that in 57.27 per cent of the families, it was the respondents, who are managing the family and agricultural activities. In 32.59 per cent respondents' families, the eldest child managed the family activities. Only in 10.14 per cent of the respondent's families the brothers of spouses or their parents were found to be managing agriculture and the families of the widows. The widows have the say in the management of farm and family in most of the cases. Nearly 10.14 per cent of the respondents families were managed by the brothers or parents of the victim. More than half of the families are managed by the respondents. About one fifth of the families are managed by the eldest issues.

Following the suicides of their father, only in about 9.69 per cent of families, children dropped out from studies, while in 90.31 per cent of the families, children continued their education. Widowhood, and the economic vulnerabilities that are often associated with it, undoubtedly have an influence on the well-being of the children of widows. Since a widow often has to turn to her children's labour as a source of economic support, the children of widows are likely to enter the workforce and withdraw from schooling at an earlier age than that of the children of married women. 90.31 per cent of the children continued their education. Even though it was very difficult for them to spend on educating of their children they were keen on sending them to school. It can be inferred that they have considered education as a weapon

that could help in over powering all their problems.

Around 41.85 per cent of the respondents received moral support from their relatives. Nearly 18.50 per cent of the respondents owed the moral support to their parents. In 18.06 per cent of the cases the roots of moral support was in the friends. About 8.37 per cent of the respondents had the NGOs as moral supporters. The widows do have support from various quarters which made them to cope up with suicides of their spouses. About one third of the respondents got relief from the government and the same was utilized to clear off the debts. One fifth of the respondents were assisted by the friends and relatives. Almost all the respondents have received assistance from one source or the other. Be it the government or the NGOs who have provided training in self employment schemes like tailoring, embroidery have successfully transformed the respondents into self reliant and a confident lot. The friends and relatives have also contributed their mite in assisting the helpless respondents. Thus, the support that one receives from the society and their beloved one goes a long way in reinforcing

Table No 1: Distribution of respondents by Age at Widowhood

Sl. No	Age at widowhood	No. of respondents	Per cent
1	< 20 years	3	1.34
2	20 to 25 years	32	14.09
3	25 to 30 years	58	25.56
4	30 to 35 years	54	23.78
5	35 to 40 years	34	14.97
6	40 > years	46	20.26
	Total	227	100.00

Table 2: Distribution of the respondents based on the debts accumulated

Sl. No.	Accumulation	No. of respondents	Percent
1	< Rs.1 lakh	184	81.06
2	1 Lakh- 2 lakhs	37	16.29
3	Rs.2Lakhs >	6	2.65
	Total	227	100.0

Table 3: Distribution of respondents by the allied means of livelihood

Sl. No.	Other means of Livelihood	No. of respondents	Percent
1	Dairying	53	23.35
2	Poultry	31	13.65
3	Small shop	11	4.85
4	Daily wage labour	22	9.69
5	No subsidiary Activity	110	48.46
	Total	227	100.00

Table 4: Distribution of the respondents as to how much debt they have cleared

Sl. No.	Debts able to Clear	No. of respondents	Percent
1	< 25000	129	56.83
2	25,000 to 75,000	98	43.17
	Total	227	100.00

Table 5: Distribution of respondents about who manages the family after him

Sl. No.	Person	No. of respondents	Percent
1	Self	130	57.27
2	Eldest Child	74	32.59
3	Husband's brother	12	5.29
4	Husband's Parents	11	4.85
	Total	227	100.0

the confidence of the widows to face the exigency boldly and bail out their families from the distress.

About 64.75 of the respondents got relief from the government and the same was utilized to clear off the debts. 18.50 of the respondents were assisted by the friends and relatives. There are around 31.3 per cent of respondents who feel clearing off the debts as their burning problem while about 27.3 per cent opined continuing the education of their children as their major problem. For about 13.7 per cent of widows, continuing of

Table 6: Distribution of respondents as to whether the children dropped out of education

Sl.No	Dropped out	No. of respondents	Percent
1	Yes	22	9.69
2	No	205	90.31
	Total	227	100.00

agriculture as the major problem and for about 23.3 per cent of respondents, burning problems revolved around social obligations such as girls' marriage, death ceremonies and family responsibilities as the problems looming large before them. Poverty being the bane of the majority of the respondents, the burning problems encircled around uncleared debts. Unable to repay the debts the farmers were branded as 'defaulters' by the money lenders. After being humiliated by the money lenders the farmers suffered loss of social prestige and

Table 7: Distribution of respondents based on the source of Assistance received

Sl. No.	Source of Assistance	No. of respondents	Percent
1	Govt.	147	64.75
2	NGOs	19	8.37
3	Relatives	42	18.50
4	Friends	16	7.05
5	Other	3	1.33
	Total	227	100.00

Table 8: Distribution of respondents by their current problems

Sl. No.	Problem	No. of respondents	Percent
1	Children' education	62	27.3
2	To clear off debts	71	31.3
3	Agricultural maintenance	31	13.7
4	Health	10	4.4
5	Others	53	23.3
	Total	227	100.0

Table 9: Distribution of respondents based on the membership of Self Help Group

Sl. No.	Membership in SHGs Self Help Group	No. of respondents	Percent
1	Yes	130	57.26
2	No	97	42.74
	Total	227	100.00

Table 10: Distribution of respondents about their level of confidence

Sl. No.	Confidence	No. of respondents	Percent
1	Very Confident	60	26.44
2	Confident	91	40.08
3	Some what	76	33.48
	Total	227	100.00

sacrificed their lives. The responsibility of repaying the debts was thus transferred to the respondents. After this incident the prestige of the family was at stake. Hence in order to regain the prestige the respondents admitted repaying the uncleared debts as their burning problem. Finally even amidst grinding poverty some of the orthodox respondents wanted to celebrate a few occasions and ceremonies. Dearth of financial resources came in the way of arranging these. The unpleasant feelings made them admit that the major problem in life is arranging and celebrating occasions.

As revealed in the about 57.26 per cent of respondents had taken the membership of SHGs and tried to repay debts. SHGs can act to provide social cohesion and a sort of support to families of farmers' suicides to augment the financial position of their families. The SHGs have come to the rescue of these women in their effort to bail out their families. Emile Durkheim too advocates that group is an insurance against the suicidal tendencies. He advocates forming of occupational guilds which can reinforce solidarity among people and can insulate them against suicidal tide, when distresses befall them. The presence and their membership in SHG has acted as a moral

support to these women. This has further given a fillip to their confidence.

Suitable policy interventions

- Organization of Farmer' Guilds to bring all farmers into a fold to educate them about the farming, management of resources particularly water resources and marketing strategies. This guild is to be the nodal link between the farmers and the government. India being agrarian economy this major initiative would insulate the farming community against any distress and also embolden them to face crisis of any sort.
- The state should encourage co-operative farming strengthening flow of credit through co-operative farming and the co-operative credit system collapsed in most of the districts in the state should be revived.
- Form Self help groups for wives of farmers and also widows of farmers to shield them against alienation and suicide.
- Easy accessibility to institutional credit at low rates of interest with quick and liberalized processing.
- Provide over all compulsory Farm insurance.
- Making DWAMA to advice farmers on water management and the judicious use of water and advice at times of identifying points for bore well.
- Government should make cloud seeding as a permanent programme for drought prone areas.
- For a sustainable development of rural poor non-land based agro-processing activities to be encouraged and financed to generate additional income for the farmers.
- The NGOs to be encouraged to launch programmes for farmers in sensitization, educational and counseling programmes,

particularly for the susceptible community of Farmers in rural areas to cope up with crisis and also imbibe self confidence.

Conclusion

The widows of farmers' suicide in the three, the districts Karnataka, have been widows for about nine years. Though the suicide deaths of their spouses came as a rude shock shattering their lives, they could come out of the grief, cope with the economic and emotional distress befallen on them. Their coping up behavior reveals that most of them have assumed total management of family and farm with the support of their children and the emotional, moral support extended by their relatives. Most of them judiciously repaid part of the debts with the relief got from the government and they have augmented the families' income through taking up allied activities and sizable portion of them have joined Self Help Groups, which could imbibe confidence, capacity building to face problems boldly. Hailing from rural families, with poor literacy levels, amidst the insurmountable crises and distress, these widows have exhibited remarkable resolve to swim against the current to bail out themselves and their families and brim with confidence to tell that they are 'Women of substance'. The government if only it initiates new policy interventions mentioned above the tragedy of farmers suicides can be averted and those who had become widows also can be insulated against any possible suicide attempts.

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