

**CULTIVATING DISTRESS: FARMER SUICIDES AND LOCAL
MENTAL HEALTH IN TELANGANA, INDIA**

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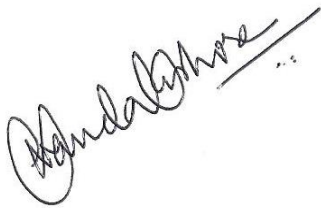
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Philosophy

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Declaration

I, Nanda Kishore Kannuri, confirm that the work presented in this thesis is entirely my own. Where the information has been derived from other sources, I confirm that this has been indicated in the thesis.

A handwritten signature in black ink, written in a cursive style, slanted upwards to the right. The signature appears to read 'Nanda Kishore Kannuri'.

Signature:

Date: 01/06/2015

Abstract

This thesis examines the manifestation of global and national policies in rural distress and mental health wellbeing of cotton farmers in India. It draws upon the disciplines of medical anthropology and cultural psychiatry to argue for a re-calibration of health care systems and mental health pedagogy. The thesis addresses three interlinked research questions. Firstly, to examine the social and cultural contexts of farmer suicides. Secondly, how and why do these socio-cultural issues mediate between cotton farming and mental distress? The third question investigates the psycho-social consequences for survivors.

Ethnographic field work for 12 months (2011-2012) was conducted in a village in Warangal district, Telangana State, India. A nuanced analysis points at a confluence of global and local forces in defining rural predicament when encountering modernity. Cotton symbolises this plight as it demonstrates the transformation of rural landscapes into environmentally and culturally toxic terrains. Such toxic landscapes amplify existing social and cultural marginalities leading to immense distress. Marginalised communities embody their suffering in both psychological and social forms. Furthermore this process generates an unrelenting state of social defeat amongst the despaired farmers. The thesis posits that shrinking state responsibility, inactive civil society and media posturing lead to an erasure of rural distress and renders it socially invisible. This is compounded by state oppression that denies cotton farmers an agency to collectivise and resist reproducing their marginalised identities.

The thesis explicates that health and wellbeing of farmers are contingent on rural distress that continues to be unaddressed. The existing cultural gap between the clinic and people poses a challenge for local biomedical health care. The thesis proposes that in order to transform such toxic into 'healing' landscapes, a radical rethink of texts and training of professionals and policy makers is required. An interdisciplinary approach that is culturally sensitive and is critical of received wisdom and global models is vital. This applies to disciplines of agriculture, public health and social sciences.

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I thank all of them for making it possible.

Preface

“Chance encounters are what keep us going.”

-Haruki Murakami,

Kafka on the shore.

The serendipity of circumstances led me to undertake this arduous journey of self-exploration. It started in 2010, attending the short course on “Rethinking Psychosocial Interventions in South Asia, Contributions from Medical Anthropology” jointly organized by UCL and The Banyan Academy of Leadership in Mental Health, Chennai (8-10 November 2010). A psychiatrist colleague of mine dropped out at the last minute and passed on the opportunity to me saying ‘it’s about medical anthropology and might interest to you.’ As an anthropologist who had recently returned to academia, having become disillusioned with the idea of ‘development’ after more than a decade in non-governmental organisations, I was excited by the idea of medical anthropology contributing to ‘psycho-social interventions’. After a flurry of urgent emails, approvals were granted and I went to Chennai for the course. Attending it and meeting Sushrut and his team altered the course of my life. The idea of a ‘good PhD’ came back to me after I abandoned my earlier attempt in 2000 after reflecting on the purpose of any academic research.

Ever since my fieldwork days in anthropology training, I've been always captivated by rural and tribal landscapes. My work in the social development sector took me to different places in the erstwhile state of Andhra Pradesh in India. I worked closely with people in rural areas and was always captivated by the people’s proximity to nature and the simplicity of lives. But I was equally aware of the drudgery and the poverty among most of the rural people. During long discussions about the areas of mutual interest, the idea of farmer suicide came across and it stuck. I have known about the suicide of farmers in my

region, and I could relate it to my own interest in agriculture, though I am not a 'caste' farmer.

I decided to pursue the idea of investigating farmer suicides. Questions from my colleagues trained in biomedical sciences, e.g. "how can farmer suicides be considered a public health problem?" set the tone of my research, and my journey to explore the predicaments of cotton farmers began. This journey was fraught with intense self-reflection and counter-transference during my stay in the field. One of the important subjective feelings (which as a researcher I had to deal with) was the question: how am I going to change the suffering in the lives of the people with whom I was interacting? This question had been so overwhelming that I had abandoned my earlier attempt at doctoral research, started more than a decade before. I certainly did not have answers to this question in the research reported here; I recognised that I could not make an immediate impact on the lived suffering of the survivors of farmer suicide. At some point I felt my feelings resonated with the sense of helplessness and hopelessness expressed by the survivors. It was impossible to remain unemotional as a researcher engaging with families who faced such loss. The families of farmers were shattered and were unable to come to terms completely with the loss of their family member. My interactions with each of the families affected by suicides had a different impact on my framing of the issues they face. Many a day I had to return from a meeting without any sense of 'data'. Some of families were reluctant to talk about the dead. The spouse of a farmer who committed suicide commented "everyone comes to ask about the dead person. Nobody is bother about us whom he left behind. He left us happily. We are the ones who are suffering." This statement shaped my quest to understand the consequences of suicide on the surviving families. Many times I listened to the woes of the survivors, not knowing how to respond. Such interactions with the family members on a regular basis, and dealing with their emotions, had an impact on me. As my interaction with the families continued over a period, I felt suicide survivors projected their anguish, helplessness and also their hope onto me, considering me as a saviour who had the ability to help them. Each interaction with these families shaped the way I interpreted their suffering. Despite explaining the purpose of my study, the initial interactions

with the survivors of the suicide was fashioned by their expectations of me. I was viewed as someone who had the power to influence the officials, e.g. to get them some financial and other assistance. Therefore the discussions were more on the economic hardships and lack of support from the government. However, as I continued to stress that I did not represent the government and might not be able to help them get any financial assistance, I disappointed them. One of the survivors asked me “if you cannot help us, why do you trouble us asking all these questions?” It was a difficult question for me to answer. I replied by saying, ‘if I can bring out your stories to the notice of the policy makers and others, at least that will help save few lives of the farmers and also will help the survivors.’ This answer did not appeal to him; he responded, “There are many people who came and went. There is no change in our lives and farmers are still committing suicide.” My perseverance in engaging with them regularly over a period of time helped me penetrate the barrier. After many interactions, the families started to share more details beyond their economic suffering. They started to open-up to discuss issues like their caste, religion, village, relatives, problems in agriculture, changing relationships within the village, future, aspirations, hope, humiliation. I was successful in establishing a good relationship with most of the families of the survivors as they disclosed private details and also sought opinions and advice. Most of the time the farmers and their families sought advice on agriculture and health matters as they realised that these aspects were the focus of my interaction with them and others.

I discussed these situations with my supervisor and that is when he suggested the concept of transference and counter-transference in one of our de-briefing sessions. I started to analyse the projections of anxiety, the expectations of the suicide survivors on me as a researcher who was listening to their stories as transference and my reaction and response towards the survivors and their condition as counter-transference. This effect had a profound impact on my further interaction, analysis and writing-up of the cases of survivors, as I felt as affected as the survivors are, in the unconscious processes of constructing the narratives of their lives. I felt it was my responsibility to encourage a sense of hope and self-worth among the survivors, while overcoming my own fears and

feelings. Regular debriefing sessions with my supervisor helped me to get away from my mental blocks.

Whilst I was living in the village, I had few strange dreams which I believed reflected my state of thinking. In the initial stages of my stay in the village I had a couple of dreams which I vividly recall about being lost in a cotton farm chasing a blue dragonfly and being inundated with cotton when I was sleeping in my room in a farmer's house. I thought these dreams were a reflection of my anxieties of engaging in a new situation and new people. The idea that I was to deal with the narratives around personal loss of the families also weighed on me. As a conscientious researcher, I made a note of these dreams and this shaped my further interactions with the villagers. But one of the key aspects of my reflexivity has been the projection of the suffering of the families on me as an individual. My subjectivity influenced the way I engaged with the families who experienced suicide. One of the key challenges I faced was to 'translate' the local narratives into English. As a non-native English speaker, the challenge remained a key limitation. I would like to end with a disclaimer - this thesis is not about the effectiveness of the genetically modified cotton (Bt Cotton). I have used the case of Bt Cotton to delineate the distress experienced by the farming communities I researched, and may be relevant to many other farming communities in India.

Acronyms:

BJP: Bharatiya Janata Party

BKS: Bharatiya Kisan Sangh

Bt: *Bacillus thuringiensis*

CI: Circle Inspector of Police

CPI (M): Communist party of India (Marxist)

DMHP: District Mental Health Plan

FIR: First Information Report

GMH: Global Mental Health

GoAP: Government of Andhra Pradesh

IEC: Information, Education and Communication

mhGAP: Mental Health Gap Action Program

MNCs: Multi-National Corporations

MRO: *Mandal* Revenue Officer

NCRB: National Crime Records Bureau

NGOs: Non-Governmental Organisations

NIMHANS: National Institute of Mental Health and Neurosciences

NMHP: National Mental Health Plan

NREGS: National Rural Employment Guarantee Scheme

PTI: Press Trust of India

RMP: Registered Medical Practitioner

RTI: Right to Information Act

WHO: World Health Organisation

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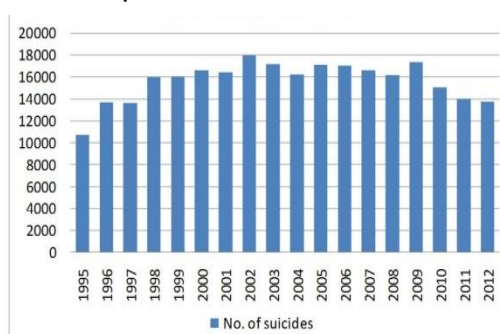
Chapter 1

Introduction and Background

“An Indian farmer has committed suicide every half hour since 2001.” (Sainath, 2013a)

The aim of this thesis is to problematize the influence of global and national policies on rural distress and mental health wellbeing of cotton farmers in India. To unravel the phenomenon of farmers' suicide, three interlinked research questions are investigated. Firstly, to ascertain the social and cultural context of farmer suicides. Second, how and why do these socio-cultural issues mediate between cotton farming and mental distress? The third question investigates the psycho-social consequences for survivors.

Using theoretical approaches from medical anthropology and cultural psychiatry, the thesis analyses the concept of marginality as an axis to determine other social and cultural factors such as rural distress, social suffering and humiliation amongst farmers. The phenomenon of farmers' suicide is examined in the larger context of modernisation and social change. Though there is a danger in reducing farmer suicides as a part of societal and cultural transition, the thesis argues that an integrated and interdisciplinary approach will inform locally relevant and culturally sensitive policies and interventions.



Total **2,84,694** in 18 years

Source: NCRB 1995-2012

<http://www.agrariancrisis.in>

Figure.1.1 Farmer suicides in India 1995-2012

Background:

“Suicide rates among Indian farmers were a chilling 47 per cent higher than they were for the rest of the population in 2011. In some of the state’s worst hit by the agrarian crisis, they were well over 100 per cent higher. The new Census 2011 data reveal a shrinking farmer population. And it is on this reduced

base that the farm suicides now occur.”¹

India is largely an agricultural country with a majority population dependent on agriculture and allied professions. According to the economic survey conducted in 2013-14, about 50% of the Indian population is engaged in agriculture (Ministry of Finance, 2014). The number of individuals and families dependent on the agriculture is enormous. According to the National Commission for Enterprises in the Unorganised Sector Report (2009), as of 2004-05 nearly two thirds of the 259 million agricultural workers are self-employed farmers. Of the remaining, a little over one-third (36 per cent) are wage workers. Sixty per cent of the farming households own less than 1 hectare of land, and only 5% own more than 4 hectares. Only 5 million farming households (5% of 90 million) have an income that is greater than their expenditure (Choudhary & Gaur, 2010).

The Green Revolution (GR) during the 1960's and 70's has marked a drastic shift in the agricultural sector of post-independent era in India. The 'miracle' technologies of green revolution, backed by input subsidies, helped the rich peasants at the expense of small and marginal farmers (Ghatak, 2000). The rich peasantry class gained wealth and political powers overtime. Farmers' movements led by rich farmers attracted the small and marginal farmers to take-up intensive cultivation practices. Economic liberalization policies adopted by India during the early 1990s saw a shift in the government agricultural policies. State policies started to move away from a social justice agenda to a market- and capital oriented agenda. It affected the small and marginal farmers the most as it meant withdrawal of input subsidies and minimum support prices. The open market economy facilitated entry of Multi-National Companies (MNCs) into the farming sector. They ushered in the era of hybrid seeds in Indian agriculture. Most small and marginal farmers shifted from food crops to commercial crops like cotton, chillies, and sugarcane to make-up for the input costs of seeds, fertilizers and labour. Ensuing economic reforms

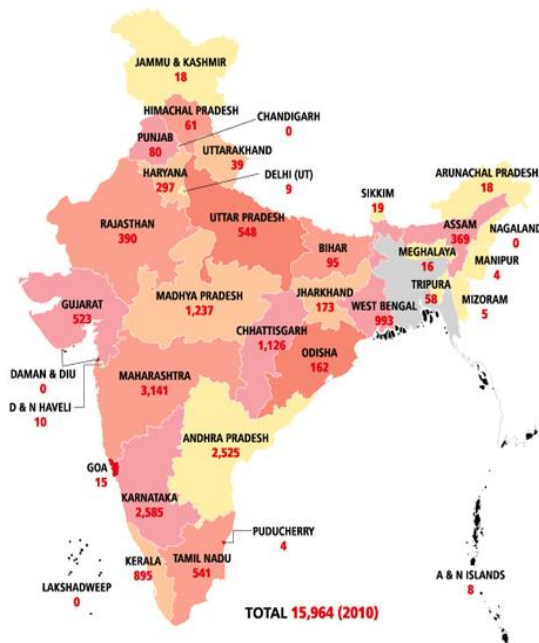
1

From: Sainath. P 'Farmers suicide rates soar above the rest'.
The Hindu, May 18, 2013, Mumbai.

implemented by the state has further reduced public investment in agriculture resulting in an agrarian crisis and rural distress (Ghosh, 2005a).

The debates about agriculture as a sustainable profit-making occupation in the Indian context have been critical of such optimistic prospects. It is suggested that if the family members working in agriculture are given an imputed value, most of the Indian agriculture will turn out to be un-remunerative (Talule & Rasal, 2008). While describing the marginal position of the Indian farmers, Dnyan Talule adds that: 'In the last five decades, majority of farmers have become poor and harried outcasts in their own country with no respectful place in the government schemes of things.

Today they are on the margins of India's economic, social, cultural and political life' (Talule & Rasal, 2008)



The ensuing changes in the agrarian sector, due to the impact of larger global economic forces, are reflected in the socio-cultural and structural patterns of the rural life. This is especially evident in the case of landholdings, where there is a shift from the traditional crops to cash crops. Individualization of agrarian practices, indebtedness resulting

Figure 1.2 India map indicating spread of farmer suicides across various states in 2010

Source: <http://www.downtoearth.org.in/content/45-farmers-commit-suicide-each-day-india>

from high input costs, low productivity and decreasing familial and community bonding are other salient changes. Many small and marginal

farmers caught in the quagmire of agrarian distress have resorted to taking their own lives. Suicides among farmers have reached epidemic proportions in some states of India.

The number of farmers who have committed suicide in India between 1995 and 2012 now stands at a staggering 284,694 (NCRB, 2013). Close to two-thirds of these suicides have occurred in five states (India has 29 states and seven union territories). The Big 5 – Maharashtra, Karnataka, Andhra Pradesh (including

Telangana), Madhya Pradesh and Chhattisgarh – account for just about a third of the country's population but two-thirds of farmers' suicides (Sainath, 2009). A majority of reported cases was concentrated in districts of northeast Maharashtra (Vidharba District), northwest Andhra Pradesh and northern Karnataka. These areas became known for cotton cultivation in the 1990s as farmers started to grow cotton in response to demand generated by the large textile industry in Mumbai (Birner, Gupta & Sharma, 2008).

Cotton is one of the important cash crops grown across India and India is the largest grower of cotton in the world. According to the Ministry of Agriculture, Maharashtra has the largest number of farmers cultivating cotton at 2.15 million farmers. Gujarat follows next with 1.30 million farmers and followed by Andhra Pradesh with 0.96 million. Though cotton was cultivated in large areas in the country, the output was not commensurate with the total acreage. Bollworm was identified as an important reason for lower productivity as it destroys the crop. To promote disease resistant-cotton crops, Bt cotton², which confers resistance to important insect pests of cotton, was first adopted in India as hybrids in 2002 (Santhanam & Sundaram, 2008).

Many small and marginal farmers considered Bt cotton as a panacea for their



Figure 1.3. Bt Cotton grown in the filed site.

financial woes. They shifted from their native crops to Bt cotton with the hope of making quick returns. This shift has spelled a disaster for many farmers and their families as it pulled them into the vicious entanglement of the capitalist scheme of dependency (Nagaraj, 2008). There are issues about capital, seeds, pesticides, technology, suitability of the crop, climate, and inequality associated with the adopters

and non-adopters of Bt cotton in India.

In response to the increasing number of cotton farmer suicides being reported in the country, the government of India reluctantly

² Cotton, genetically modified by inserting one or more genes from a common soil bacterium *Bacillus Thuringiensis*, which produces proteins toxic to insects, is called Bt Cotton.

responded by implementing interventions (mainly in the form of relief packages) for farmers belonging to areas which reported high distress. A debt relief package of Rupees 60,000 crores (nearly 700 million GBP) for loan waivers was declared for the benefit of 30 million debt-trapped small and marginal farmers; also, a onetime settlement of dues for 10 million farmers was announced in 2008 (Ministry of Finance, 2009). Marginal farmers holding up to one hectare (~2.5 acres) and small farmer owning up to two hectares (~5 acres) having loans from a government entity (like a bank or a cooperative) were declared eligible as per the criterion laid out by the government. This criterion denied access to a large section of Indian farmers to benefit from this scheme as it excluded farmers who have loans from private money lenders, who own less than one hectare, and farmers under tenancy (Dhar, 2008).

As suicides were continuing unabated, under increased pressure from civil society organizations, the Indian government instructed the National Crime Records Bureau (NCRB) to register farmer suicides in the year 1996. This led to an interest among researchers from different disciplinary backgrounds to study the phenomenon of farmer suicides. Most of the research studies on suicides among cotton farmers in India have been conducted from academic and policy perspectives. One of the first studies on farmer suicides in India was conducted in Karnataka. The study highlighted structural changes in the society post-liberalization as cause of agrarian distress and suicides (Assadi, 1998). Following this study there were many studies on Indian farmers suicides from diverse perspectives (Bose, 2000; Das, 2011; Deshpande, 2002; Grover, Kumar, & Kamal, 2003; Iyer & Manick, 2000; Mohanty & Shroff, 2006; Nagaraj, 2008; Nirmala, 2003; Parthasarathy & Shameem, 1998; Rao & Gopalappa, 2004; Revathi, 1998; Sarma, 2004; Sridhar, 2006; Glenn Davis Stone, 2011; Vasavi, 1999).

Research conducted in the ecological context highlighted increasing modernization of agriculture, shifting from subsistence to commercial crops, usage of hybrid seeds, pesticides and insecticides for commercial crops, poor irrigation and crop failure as key reasons for agrarian distress. This approach locates suicides in interlinking social, ecological and economic factors, pushing the farmer into distress and crisis (Vasavi, 1999).

Another important discourse emerging from some studies on farmer suicides in the Indian context is the negative impact of neo-liberalism and encompassing globalisation. The increasing incidence of suicides among farmers is attributed to the agrarian crisis resulting from to market reforms under neo-liberal policies³ being promoted by the Indian government since 1990s (Nagaraj, 2008). Commercialization of agriculture and linking it to the world market has exposed Indian farmer to broader market risks (Patnaik, 2004, 2006; Shiva, Emani, & Jafri, 1999; Sridhar, 2006). A corollary to this line of thinking is that there is an increased burden of production costs for farmers and decreased returns. This phenomenon has resulted in indebtedness among farmers (Mohanty & Shroff, 2006; Vyas, 2004).

Some studies were critical of government policies that ushered in economic reforms and cut back on institutional support and rural credit, leading to a deceleration in rural growth (Dev 2004, Rao and Gopalappa 2004, Ghosh 2004). This is in turn led to a decline in wages, growing indebtedness and unemployment for a large section of agricultural labour (Patnaik, 2004; Rao & Dev, 2003; Sarma, 2004).

Studies conducted in a Durkhemian framework identify that suicides among lower and middle caste peasants is due to enhanced aspirations, while suicides among farmers of larger and medium sized farm is due to failure in business, trade and politics. They conclude that farmer suicides in India are consistent with Durkheimian concept of individualization and socio-economic estrangement of farmers in the context of rapid economic growth (Mohanty, 2013; Parthasarathy & Shameem, 1998). As a critique to the application of Durkhemian framework to analyse farmer suicides, a need for a broader political and economic frame of analysis has been proposed (Revathi, 1998).

One of the important developments in the Indian agricultural sector in the recent past was the introduction of genetically modified Bt Cotton. Many studies have associated Bt Cotton with the increased number of farmer suicides in India. They related Bt Cotton with rising input costs, the commodification of seeds (Bharathan, 1998; Kumbamu, 2009; Qayum & Kiran, 2003), and negative ecological

³ The key features of the neo-liberal policies adapted by the state were: i. promotion of free market private enterprise, ii. Reduction of public expenditure for social services, iii. De-regulation, iv. Privatization, and v. Priority to individual over the community. These policies benefit people who were already empowered, thus leading to further marginalization of the disempowered.

consequences and harmful impacts on livestock (Ramdas, 2010). However some studies contest this claim and questioned the association of Bt Cotton with the increased incidence of farmer suicides. Studies problematize the threat perception of Multi-National Corporation (MNCs) like Monsanto and quote scientific studies and the popularity of Bt Cotton among farmers as a proof of ability of the farmers to adapt. Thereby they justify the technological dominance of MNCs (Herring & Chandrasekhara Rao, 2012; Herring, 2005, 2008). However, a review of published and unpublished sources between 2002 and 2007, to analyse the association between farmer suicides and Bt Cotton, concluded that the analysed data did not support the argument that the resurgence of farmer suicides after the introduction of Bt Cotton in the 5 year time period did not justify the case (Gruère & Sengupta, 2011).

1.1 Farmers Suicides in other countries:

Farmer suicide is a global problem, though the reasons and contexts vary. There is extensive research relating to suicides among farmers in the developed nations like Australia, Canada, France, United Kingdom and United States, (Booth, Briscoe, & Powell, 2000; Fraser, 2005; Gregoire, 2002; Hanigan, et al., 2012; Hawton et al., 1999; Hawton et al., 1998; Judd et al., 2006; Malmberg, Hawton, & Simkin, 1997; Pickett et al., 1998; Saunders, 2007; Stark et al., 2006).

Researchers compared mental health problems among farmers and non-farmers to identify additional risk factors. They did not find any association between farming and increased mental health problems and concluded that individual personality, gender and community attitudes limit a person's ability to acknowledge and express mental health problems and to seek help, as significant risk factors for farmer suicides (Judd et al., 2006). Contradictorily, some other studies established that farming populations in UK, mainland Europe, Australia, Canada and United States experienced higher rates of suicides. They inferred that those involved in farming are at a higher risk of developing mental health problems. A literature review focused on examining mental health issues experienced by farming populations indicates that farmers and their families face considerable stress, which is detrimental to their mental health (Frazer et al 2005). A survey of rural Australian farmers explored the

association between mental health and measures of community support, social support networks, sense of place, adversity, and perceived problems. The resulting statistical analysis highlighted the multidimensional nature of social capital as an important determinant (Stain et al. 2008).

1.2 Conclusion

Farmer suicides are an important problem which is plaguing India. The phenomenon of farmers' suicide signifies an underlying agrarian distress that encompasses the vast majority of rural population of India. Cotton is the key cash crop that connotes a transforming agrarian situation linked to concurrent economic policies of the state and global market. Agrarian transition is clearly one of the important factors influencing the rate of suicides among farmers in India. The introduction of Bt Cotton contributed to an increased burden on small and marginal farmers. There are contradictory claims regarding the association Bt Cotton and farmer suicides. However, a linear explanation, based only on economic or psychological causative factors for farmer suicides in India, is inadequate.

Most sociological studies on suicide highlight modernisation, economic determinants and the influence of culture and gender as causative factors for suicide. Social change in general and modernisation in particular, have had an overarching impact on the culture and society in India. These changes have a differential impact on various sections of Indian society. Marginality determines how modernisation is experienced by the people in disadvantaged positions. Marginality in the Indian context can be experienced in both social and spatial realms. Social marginality refers to the existing hierarchical social order based on hegemonic caste system and religious practices. Spatial marginality signifies the position of communities in a society by virtue of their location in the village or their access to services, which usually are located in the center and are controlled by the people who socially belong to the center (Ecks & Sax, 2005). Modernisation can be advantageous for some sections of the society who are more “centrally” positioned than the people at the margins. This thesis explores the relative marginality that the farmers face in their social and spatial contexts. Analysing modernity as an overarching concept includes the analysis of the various modern institutions, like market, and how the market logic determines the lives of farmers.

Methodologically, a majority of the studies conducted on farmer suicides are in a positivist tradition. They attempt to collate numbers and rates of suicides reported in different geographical contexts. Emphasis is more upon the objective tendency, set to prove the causal relations through systematic quantification. Research has largely focused on establishing the risk factors, the incidence and prevalence, and identifying the determinants of suicide. This approach to suicide has led to a disassociation of subjective aspects of suicides both at individual and collective levels. Research based on ethnographic approaches that explore the meaning of suicides in local contexts, impact of global and local changes on the changing social and cultural context of suicides is very limited.

The need was therefore established for more intense interdisciplinary approach to unpack the complex phenomenon of farmer suicides in the context of larger macro-determinants and the immediate local cultural contexts of their occurrence. It was also important to study the impact of suicides on survivors and the larger community for a holistic understanding. It is hoped that such research will inform a much-needed national policy for suicide prevention both among farmers and general population. It also becomes imperative to locate the issue of farmer suicides in the context of the public health system in India and the role of the clinic and health system. One of the suggestions for generating a holistic understanding of the cotton farmer suicides in the Indian context is to undertake longitudinal, multi-village, multi-ethnic, probabilistically selected, ethnographically grounded studies that avoid bias (Stone, 2010).

Key questions were generated from the overview of cotton farmer suicides.

These questions guided the thesis in unfurling the complex phenomenon.

These include:

- How is suicide documented in the cultural history in India?
- How did cotton transform from a symbol of resistance to a metaphor of death?
- What are the socio-cultural factors that led to agrarian distress and suicides among cotton farmers?

- How are suicides reflected in the popular media and how do these media shape the perceptions of common people?
- In what way does the marginalization of peasants have an impact on their response to agrarian distress?
- What is the impact of agrarian change on the wellbeing of farmers?
- What is the public health systems response in India to suicides among cotton farmers?

1.3 Outline of the thesis

The thesis is divided into nine chapters including conclusion. The key arguments articulated in each chapter are summarised below to provide an outline to the thesis:

Chapter 1 outlines the background to farmer suicides in India, situating the phenomenon in the context of existing literature. The aim of the research is presented here with a set of emerging research questions that framed the study from the review of literature.

Chapter 2 lays out the theoretical considerations and methodological approaches of the thesis. Critical medical anthropology and cultural psychiatry theories provide the basis for the analytical framework of this study. The chapter delineates the justification for the selection of the field site and the ethnographic engagement of the researcher. A brief history of the village and region is presented to contextualise the research.

Chapter 3 presents a review of literature on suicide across cultures. It highlights that majority of the research studies place suicide in a biomedical framework. It argues for a nuanced, interdisciplinary approach to locate suicides in the immediate context of their occurrence and local meanings, while linking them to larger macro determinants. It concludes that a more comprehensive understanding of the interplay of social and cultural factors can lead to a better approach for addressing the problem.

Chapter 4 traces the cultural history of cotton in India through a literature review. The main argument presented in this chapter is that a cultural history of cotton provides an insight into its role in the social, cultural and environmental history of human beings across various time periods and countries. Historical agency is ascribed to the cotton plant, as it has played a major role in defining human development and progress in various countries at different times. Cotton has been used as a symbol of Indian resistance to colonialism. It played an important role in shaping the ideas of development and modernity in independent India. The chapter concludes that the monopoly of cotton by the MNCs led to the transformation of cotton to a symbol of distress and suicide.

Chapter 5 proposes that under the pressure of rapid globalisation and the need to align with modernisation, India implemented green and gene revolution. The modern technological approach to agriculture reproduced and amplified the existing fractures in Indian society. It contributed to the transformation of rural landscapes into 'counter-therapeutic' and 'toxic' landscapes. This has impact on the wellbeing of the majority of farmers in rural India.

Chapter 6 presents an argument based on the hypothesis that marginalization has played an important role in suicides among cotton farmers in the study region. It concludes that farmers in the study region face multiple marginalities: geo-political, state and policy neglect, and caste-based marginalization. To substantiate the argument, ethnographic case studies are presented that discuss the link between marginality, social suffering and humiliation. This chapter further posits that *Dalit* farmers who are in the lowest positions in the caste hierarchy, lack symbolic capital. Symbolic capital derived from inter-caste relations is required to authoritatively embody cultural values required for agriculture. The chapter concludes by positing that these phenomena are germane to understanding the mental health morbidity amongst distressed farmer families.

Chapter 7 presents a critique of state policies and media. The chapter explores their role in shaping socio-cultural sensibilities of popular culture. It argues that the pervasive rhetoric of neoliberalism, determines the way social problems are constructed and interventions designed. It concludes that the Indian state, in

during a transformation into a market-oriented state, has generated a form of embedded neoliberal consensus among all the institutions which has resulted in new and powerful forms of state governmentality.

Chapter 8 discusses why farmer suicides are largely attributed to individual failures and functional imbalances in brain. It explores why rural farmers, policy makers and medical professionals have divergent views about mental health and illness by elucidating the global ideas influencing local mental health. It concludes that the outlook of mental health and policy professionals is shaped by the cultural history of psychiatry. Initiatives by World Health Organisation and Global Mental Health movement represent a dominant biomedical model mediated by neo-liberal policies that could alienate public mental health from the local realities of a majority of the Indian population. It concludes by delineating options for balancing these divergent views currently embedded in the rural and professional cultures.

Chapter 9 discuss the key findings of the thesis suggesting future research directions.

Chapter 2

Methodology

The background research and literature review on suicides informed the theoretical orientation and methodology chosen for the study. The key findings highlighted in the review are:

1. Farmer suicides are a global public health problem. It is therefore important to contextualize the role of clinic and public mental health response.
2. Modernisation is an important determinant in the context of suicide. It is essential to understand it in the hierarchical social order of the Indian society.
3. There is a need for in-depth ethnographic research to explore the meaning of suicides in the local contexts and how these might embody global changes.

2.1 Theoretical Orientation

Theoretical frameworks from medical anthropology and cultural psychiatry frame the analysis of farmer suicides that are rooted in the larger socio-cultural, historical, political, and economic and public health factors. Medical anthropology encompasses the domains of individual experience, discourse, knowledge, practice and meaning; the social, political and economic relations of health and illness; the nature of interactions between biology and culture; the ecology of health and illness; the cross cultural systems of ethno-medical systems and healing practices, and the interpretations of human suffering and health concerns in space and time (Merrill Singer & Erickson, 2011).

Amongst various theories in medical anthropology, this study is based on the critical approach in medical anthropology that focuses on individual's actions being a result of culturally informed interactions between social actors, political and economic relations. Critical approach emphasises the role of 'historical rootedness' of any phenomenon; the relevance of 'local' contextualised in the broader political scenario; 'agency' of the individual who responds to the material conditions around; role of cultural forms and activities contributing to the 'resistance' and the 'sufferers experience' determined by the social and

economic forces (Baer, 1996; Morsy, 1981; Scheper-Hughes, 1990; M Singer, 1989, 1995; Merrill Singer & Erickson, 2011).

Further, to analyse the social suffering of the farmers and their families, the conceptual understanding of suffering as a result of structural violence and social suffering (Farmer, 1996, 2005) and the influence of political, cultural, social, economic and institutional power on the people and how the powers vested in these realms influence the response to these problems (Kleinman, Das, & Lock, 1997) shall be deployed. This frame of approach shall assist to understand the marginalisation and suffering endured by the farmers and their families in the study region.

Engagement with culture plays a pivotal role both in medical anthropology and cultural psychiatry. The new cross-cultural psychiatry evolved in 1970's after Arthur Kleinman proposed it as a response to the existing focus on conventional psychiatric epidemiology and models of culture and psychiatry. In principle cultural psychiatry questions the universalization of psychiatric constructs and Kleinman argued that cultural psychiatry should reinvent itself by aligning with anthropology and ethnographic research method (Kirmayer, 2006) This approach underlines the way in which a medical symptom, diagnosis or practice replicate the social, cultural and moral concerns existing in a society.

The theoretical convergence of anthropology and psychiatry has proven to be very productive as they focused on the impact of culture on experience and behaviours. As the idea of culture is fluid, it requires a dynamic model to understand and address emerging concerns.

Ideas of agency and embodiment will also be discussed in the of context local culture. Culture shapes the human self and behaviour and the self and behaviour in turn are adapted to culture. The structure of the family as well as customary roles of age, gender, are all artefacts of culture and are basic to the formation of self (Erchak, 1998; Sokefeld, 1999). The thesis shall also allude to a critique of these theories during the analysis of the data.

2.3 Ethical concerns:

As a part of the research, human subject and their emotions, suffering and death were to be studied. Therefore there was a possibility of leading to further distress and trauma. Therefore the proposal was sent for a full review of the Institutional Ethics Committee at UCL and ethics approval from an Institute in India was mandatory. The required documents for safeguarding confidentiality of the respondents; ensuring informed choice; and respecting their right to withdraw were submitted. Mitigation measures in case of any distress by identifying support systems such as counselling services and other community based support was proposed. In presenting the findings of the study it is ensured that the anonymity of the respondents is maintained.

2.2 Research Questions

This thesis focuses on three inter linked questions: a) what is the social and cultural context within which such suicides occur? b) How and why do these socio-cultural issues mediate between cotton farming and mental distress? c) What are the psycho-social consequences for survivors?

The specific objectives of the study are:

1. Profile the social and cultural contexts of suicide among cotton farmers including existing policies and intervention, in an identified community.
2. Elicit local and institutional conceptualization of marginality, distress, mental health within the identified community
3. Develop a culturally sensitive psycho-social model to inform interventions addressing farmer suicides.

2.4 Methods:

As a social anthropologist, I was pre-determined to use ethnography as a method for my research. When I discussed my research topic and preferred method with my colleagues who were bio-medically trained epidemiologists, there were puzzling questions from many. They had questions about my hypothesis, analysis framework, the software I intended to use for my data analysis etc. The closest they could comprehend was that it is some sort of qualitative research. I tried to explain. To explain about ethnography to people

who are tuned to numbers and statistical signifiers was not easy. I was asked to define ethnography.

It was tricky to define Ethnography. All I could say was it is a reflexive methodological framework encompassing different techniques of data collection aimed at eliciting subjective aspects of any area under research. Having said this, I wanted more clarity for myself so that I can be better prepared for such questions.

One of the descriptions of ethnography which drove my research was:

Ethnography involves a continuous effort to place events, situations, and interactions in a larger context of meanings. At once, it is a process of data collection and the way in which data is analysed into a final written output. It combines research design, fieldwork, and various methods of inquiry to produce historically, politically, and personally situated accounts, descriptions, interpretations and representations of human lives. It is a reflective writing practice where fieldwork shapes and connects important personal experiences. That way, it locates between the interiority of autobiography and exteriority of cultural analysis (Tedlock, 2003).

Fieldwork, participant observation and reflexivity are key aspects of ethnography. Fieldwork and prolonged immersion in the study community will give an opportunity for a reflexive space to the researcher to delve into the social meanings of the phenomenon in the context of local cultural. The personal and theoretical orientation of the ethnographer will shape reflective process in the field and it is important to state that in ethnography (Marcus & Fischer, 1986). The object of study in social science is a human being who thinks and feels. Ethnography is one of several effective ways to understand human thoughts and feelings. Ethnography challenges basic conventions; it offers an alternative construction in an alternative style (Kleinman, 1988). Ethnography is a marginalized tradition in terms of its contribution to the knowledge construction in the medical field. However, ethnography is an effective means of representing pluralism, reflexivity, and uncertainty. It captures the subjective aspects of health and suffering more than any other method of enquiry. Clarity in these principles of ethnography helped me to

refine my approach to fieldwork. I was aware that my experience of suicides amongst families I know, my position on the social issues and my ideas of society will have a bearing on how I conduct fieldwork and analyse the data.

Focus Group Discussions, semi-structured interviews, open-ended interviews and in-depth ethnographic interviews (Spradley, 1979) were deployed as a part of ethnography to collect data . To infer the psychological consequences of suicides in the families of the farmers in the framework of psychiatry, I relied upon WHO Mental Health Intervention guide (WHO, 2010b). As I'm not a trained mental health professional, all the case narratives including presentation and behaviour were extensively discussed with a clinical psychiatrist and medical anthropologist, to establish a formal psychiatric diagnosis as appropriate in each family, including a retrospective diagnosis amongst farmers who completed suicide (WHO, 2010a).The methodological tools used with various respondents apart from participant observation are listed below

S.no	Respondents	Method	Key Themes
1	Survivors of farmers Suicides	Ethnographic Interviews, mhGAP guidelines	Antecedents and consequences of suicides.
2	Cotton farmers Men	FGDs, Ethnographic Interviews	Agricultural practices, cotton cultivation, Health
3	Cotton farmers-Women	FGDs, Ethnographic Interviews	Agricultural practices, cotton cultivation, Health
4	Village Elders	Ethnographic Interview	History of village, agriculture, Transformation
5	Pesticide dealers	Ethnographic Interviews	Agriculture practices, The role of seed and chemical companies
6	Village RMPs	Semi-Structured Interviews	Health and mental illness
7	Psychiatrists	Semi-Structured Interviews	Health system, mental illness, Clinical Practice, Treatment
8	Seed Company scientists	Open ended Interviews	Role of private seed companies in Indian agriculture, Genetic Modification, Bt Cotton

9	Priest and Pastor	Ethnographic Interview	Health and wellbeing, Spirituality, Mental health, treatment
10	Revenue and Police officials	Open ended Interview	Official documents, land and suicide particulars, Farmer suicides

Table 2.1 Respondents and methodological tools used to collect data

I maintained a pocket diary during my fieldwork to document daily field observations. I made brief notes whenever possible during the interactions. I elaborated these into field notes on my return to my room in the village during the night. As power cuts were frequent during late evenings in the village, I mostly had to complete my writing during late nights. The interviews and FGSs were recorded with an audio recorder. The audio files were later transcribed and translated by me from the language of the region *Telugu* to English.

Data analysis was a reflexive process and was carried out regularly whilst in the field. Triangulation (Bryman, 2012) and member checking (Lincoln & Guba, 1985) was undertaken regularly to ensure the validity of the field observations. Accordingly, the focus of ethnographic interviews was re-calibrated to suit the context and the respondent. A systematic thematic analysis was undertaken to elicit key themes, subthemes and linkages which fed into various chapters of this thesis.

Review of literature, discussion of the proposal with peer group and suggestions by my supervisors, provided me a direction on what to focus during my fieldwork. But having said that, I realised the whole process of my entry into the village and settling there involved many learning experiences which had a bearing on the way I understood farmer suicides. Even after living for about 12 months in the village I still pondered about the extent I could succeed in being a part of peoples' lives to capture their realities. However I should say, my field work experience had been extremely gratifying and re-affirmed my own commitment and values as an anthropologist.

Some limitations of the study:

1. Disciplinary orientation that determined the research questions and the research design adapted for this study has some inherent limitations. The validity of the research findings was ensured through triangulation (Bryman, 2012) and member checking (Lincoln & Guba, 1985) . I acknowledge a possibility of generic interpretations which might not have larger generalisability.
2. The study did not engage with the clinic and other informal sources healing places such as *Dargah* and magico-religious healers.
3. The study did not focus on the viability question of Bt Cotton and analysis of its effectiveness.
4. The study might have failed to capture the distress felt among the upper caste farmers. The majority of the farmer suicides occurred amongst the lower caste farmers.
5. One of the key limitations has been the size of the village. The village had 1200 households and a population of about 5000. For the sake of my research, I focused largely on the families who were growing cotton. However, that did not stop me from engaging with non-cotton cultivating farmers.

The important phases of my fieldwork which shaped my fieldwork are detailed below. These phases led to a reflective rethinking regarding many aspects of my inquiry and my engagement with the community.

2.4. Identifying the village- meeting the MRO, Police:

To select a field site, I relied on various studies which documented farmer suicides in Warangal district. Hasanparthy *Mandal*⁴, was identified as a worst affected *Mandal* that witnessed highest number of suicides. Hasanparthy *Mandal* consists of 18 villages with a total population of 20,700 (Census, 2011). More details about Warangal district is discussed in a later chapter.

To identify a village for my field study, I approached the local *Mandal* Revenue Officer (MRO), to gather information about suicides in the *Mandal* and also inform and seek approval for the study. *Mandal* Revenue office is a part of the 4 tier administrative setup established by the state government for effective governance. MRO is the person who is in charge of the interface between the government and the village level administration and people in the *Mandal*. The tasks of the MRO include facilitating collection of information at the *Mandal*

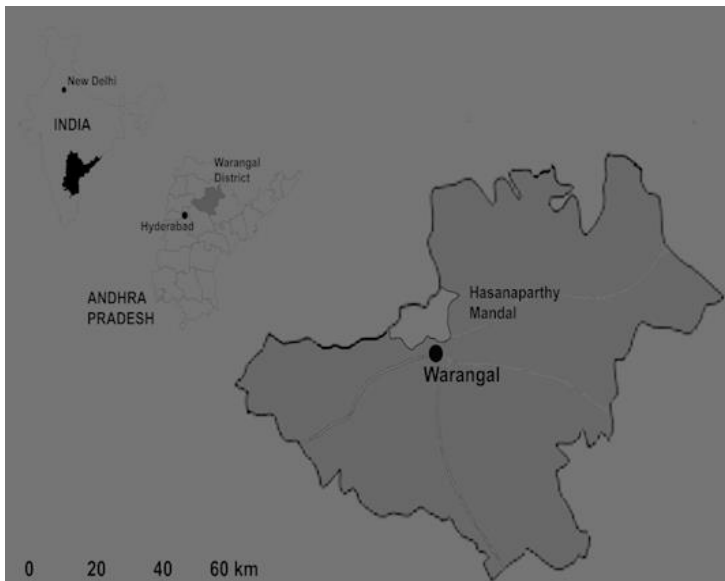


Figure 2.1 A vector map of India, Andhra Pradesh and Hasanaparthy mandal where the study was conducted

level, conduct any inquiries, provide feedback to the district administration and assist in decision making at the higher level. MRO is assisted by a team of junior level officers including *Mandal* revenue inspector who is

responsible for field reports, land revenue collection etc.

A Deputy *Tahasildar* deals

with the general administration of the office. A surveyor, whose role is important in land surveys and assistant statistical officer who maintains data regarding rain fall, crop estimates, births and death etc. to help the planning and section officer.

⁴ A Mandal is an administrative division at the sub-district level that constitutes a number of villages

I contacted the MRO on his telephone and sought an appointment. The MRO did not grant me an appointment for some time. I persisted for a week and explained the purpose of my research, emphasizing the fact that I wanted information for purely academic reasons. I gathered from my conversations with the local staff that the MRO was reluctant to discuss this topic and give details. He was anxious presuming that the details would be published in the media and that the state officials and higher ups may note this. MRO relented after a week and gave me an appointment. He asked me to submit a letter clearly stating the purpose of my enquiry. On the day of the appointment, the MRO made me wait for about half an hour to complete his engagements. The MRO office is a busy place teeming with visitors coming in for various purposes. The building was relatively well maintained. An attendant was seated on a wooden stool outside the MRO's room. People who wanted to meet the MRO had to explain the purpose to him and he would then decide who was to meet the MRO.

He did not consent to audio record our conversation. He said he would be able to discuss things more freely if the conversation was not recorded. He started by saying *"there aren't many suicides reported in my area. Most of the suicides are reported in the neighbouring Mandal. The political representatives of the Mandal wanted to take advantage of the situation and got all suicides declared as farmer suicides. That has an effect on our Mandal"*

After being given repeated assurances that the data being collected is for purely academic purpose, he said, *"I agree there have been suicides in my Mandal, but they are lesser than the number of suicides in other mandals. Even in my Mandal, I can say not all suicides are farmer suicides, but we have to oblige the local politicians and people to categorise them as farmer suicides for the sake of their eligibility for compensation. The compensation amount is released according to the agricultural activity they undertake in specific season. This has to be certified by the local agriculture officer. We then accordingly release the compensation in instalments so that the money is effectively used."*

(Ethnographic notes)

It is evident that the officer was under pressure to maintain that there are no 'official' farmer suicides in the *Mandal*. This has an implication on how the data on farmer suicides is collected.

After providing me access to initial details, he suggested that I approach the local police station for more records as suicides are medico-legal cases. One of the sources for official data on farmer suicides was the records maintained by the local police. It is mandatory for any act of suicide to be recorded by local police in their first information register. The statistics are then collated and the information is further forwarded to state crime records bureau, which in turn consolidates and forwards the data to the Nation Crime Records Bureau (NCRB). NCRB publishes cumulative data on suicides, along with all other crimes from across the states in the country.

After completing my interview with the MRO and collecting information from his office, I visited the police station at Hasanparthy *Mandal*. The police station is situated on the main road. It is a new building construed like a fort, with a sentry posts and other fortifications. The entrance to the police station gate is blocked by a big wooden log connected by a pulley as a safety measure to prevent any sudden entry of a vehicle. The wooden log can be lifted up by the guards to allow any vehicles into the premises of the police station.

As I ventured closer to the barricade, the guard from the watch tower asked my particulars. Who I was, where I was from and the purpose of my visit. I told him that I had come to meet the circle inspector for a research related study, and I needed some information. He let me in after being sure that I indeed wanted to meet the Inspector. I entered the police station, the first room had a table and two policemen sitting there, speaking to some people. I tried to talk to one of them with a thick moustache but he did not bother to listen and said that the Circle Inspector was not there. He further mentioned that the sub-inspector was transferred, and the writer had gone out for tea. It was up to me to leave the place or wait. I decided to wait. There was no waiting hall or chairs for the visitors to sit. Near the sentry's watch tower, there was a shed, where I supposed people could wait. I went there and sat on a cement bench. I waited there for about an hour, observing the people and the police. Police stations in

these areas are intimidating and an unwelcome place for common people. I noticed most people who came in were aggrieved for some reason or sought a resolution for their grievance. The sentry was keeping a watch through the peeping hole and was reading a newspaper. He had a fan and a clock in his watch tower. After a while, a person in civil dress came on a bike. As other people waiting in the police station were wishing him, I thought he could be the writer I was waiting for. I went up to him and told him the reason for my being there. He took me into his room and asked me to sit. I explained the reason for my visit and gave him a letter describing my study. He said he wanted a photocopy of my letter and went out. He asked me to write an application addressing the CI. He looked into the application. After staring at it for some time he asked me to write down my mobile number. He gave me the CI's mobile number and asked me to call him in the evening.

I called the CI in the evening at 5.15 p.m. and told him about my application. He asked me to go to the police station at 5.30 p.m. I was there at 5.30 p.m. at the police station. The sentry on duty asked me the same questions where I was from and the purpose of my visit. I told him that I was there to meet the CI and that he has given me an appointment. The CI was not there in his office. I waited for him for some time and was again observing people who came to the police station. Two men walked to the guard to seek the release of a seized vehicle which was parked in front of the police station. They started negotiating the payment to release the vehicle. The guard asked them the original documents of the vehicle and they did not have them. Eventually after some discussions, an amount was exchanged and the guard handed over the key of the vehicle. The two men tried to start the vehicle but it refused to start. They realized that the police pulled off wires at the ignition and started to search for a wire. Meanwhile, it was 6 pm and the sentry in the watch tower was impatient and was yelling for the other guard who was supposed to taking his turn for guarding. The guard who replaced the earlier one was asking the outgoing guard about the vehicle deal and said he took very less money. The outgoing guard replied that it was not easy to extract money from them as they were willing to pay very less.

Meanwhile the constable yelled for the representatives of the complainants to come and talk to him. A group of people rushed towards him and the constable shouted at them asking only the representatives to come forward. Meanwhile a jeep came into the compound and there was a flurry of activity. The constable shooed the people out of the station. I walked into the PS and spoke to the gunman of the CI and told him about the purpose of my visit. He ushered me into CI's room. The CI asked me to sit and asked me my details. A pistol was resting on CI's table on to his right hand side for easy reach. I have told him about my educational background and research topic. I asked him if it possible for me to access records on farmer suicides since 1990. He mentioned that the records were better organized since 2000 till recent years. He called the constable and instructed him to get First Information Report (FIR) register from the year 2000. He checked whether there was an index in the register. Realizing that there was no index, he said all cases under section 174 of Indian criminal penal code will have to be checked. He asked me to sit near the Sub-Inspectors table and refer to the register. After checking the registers I could trace 4 cases of farmer suicides in Hasanparthy *Mandal* in the year 2000. CI asked the constable to give me the next five years records. While I was referring to the registers and taking notes, there was a power failure. There was no power backup in the police station. I continued my search for cases in the dark with the help of my mobile light. Power resumed after 30 minutes. I finished taking down notes and asked for the next five years records. Ill health was cited as a reason for a majority of suicide cases. Stomach pain was cited as reason for most of the suicides amongst women. Suicides among cotton farmers reported because of cotton farming and resultant accrual of debts. After checking FIR registers till 2010, I could record a total of 44 cases over a period of 10 years in Hasanparthy *Mandal*. Amongst the 19 villages in the *Mandal*, Vangapahad and Arepally, two neighbouring villages have reported a maximum of 6 cases each during a 1990-2010 (excerpts from field notes, 2010).

For the selection of the research site, I visited both Vangapahad and Arepally villages and chose the former as Arepally is closer to the city and the houses are scattered around the highway road.

2.4.1 Justification of the selection of the study site:

During the time of inception of the study the field site was a part of Andhra Pradesh state, located in the south-eastern part of the country, is the fifth largest state in India both in terms of geographical area and population. The state is ranked eighth among the states both in terms of share of agriculture GDP (24.7 %) and employment generation (58.55%) as per the 61st round of National Sample Survey (Dev, 2007). Close to 30% of state's GDP is from the agriculture and allied sectors and provides employment to 64.55% of the state's population. Out of the state's 11.5 million landholdings, 61 per cent are marginal and another 22 per cent are small.

Andhra Pradesh has three geographic and socio-cultural regions- Telangana, *Rayalaseema* and *Kosta* Andhra. Telangana region consists of 10 districts, Rayalaseema 4 and Coastal Region has 9 districts. Eventually by June 2014, Telangana part of erstwhile was carved out as 29th state of India after a protracted struggle for identity. This aspect of the region is discussed in detail further in the chapter.

While coastal Andhra is fertile and well-watered region with prosperous farmers since the colonial period, Rayalseema lying in the rain shadow consists of dry uplands, and Telangana is a backward region, which historically was under the rule of the Nizam of Hyderabad.

2.5 Brief History of Telangana Region



Telangana region was part of a larger state ruled by the Nizam dynasty since 1724. It was called Hyderabad state and comprised of eight Telugu speaking districts, five Kannada districts. Nizam rulers resisted being a part of Indian Union after the British left India

Figure 2.2 Map highlighting the Telangana Region of Andhra Pradesh

in 1947. Nizam Hyderabad state was annexed into Indian Union on 17th September 1948.

During the Nizam's rule, a class of landed gentry, consisting of Muslim *jagirdars* and Hindu *deshmukhs* belonging to the Reddy⁵, Velama and Brahmin castes, constituted the support base of the *Nizam's* rule (Srinivasulu, 2006).

These dominant caste groups have had control over the agrarian resources like land and water in the Telangana Region and have perpetuated feudal system of agriculture in the rural areas through a hegemonic control over other caste groups. Over a period of time, feudal system had to be abandoned and agricultural reforms gave an opportunity to the dominant caste groups to foray into other realms of power like politics, business and education.

Anti-Nizam and anti-feudal struggles in the Telangana region resulted in re-distribution of the land that was in control of the feudal representatives of Nizam. Redistribution of lands of the Brahmin-Karanam, Reddy and Velama *doras* during the struggle was significantly influenced by the caste composition of the *panch* committees which were assigned with this task. Thus, while the lands of these *doras* were distributed among the Kapu-Reddy *ryots* and tenants, the common pastures and waste lands were distributed among the landless *Dalits* and other lower castes (Srinivasulu, 1988).

This gives a background for the class and caste composition of the current small and medium farmers of the region who belong to backward castes (BC), Scheduled Castes (SC) and Scheduled Tribes (ST). Within the Indian caste system BCs, SCs and STs form the marginalized groups. Their marginality is relative given the hierarchical positions of each caste group in the system. Small and Medium farmers in the Telangana region face layers of marginalization because of their caste and profession.

⁵ The Reddys are one of the powerful landlord caste groups in Andhra Pradesh. Historically, they were rulers between 1353 to 1448CE. Later they continued to be chieftains, village heads, village policemen, tax collectors and farmers in the Telangana region. Reddys dominate modern day politics in Andhra Pradesh as a majority of chief ministers and cabinet ministers over a period of time belong to this caste.

2.6 Farmer Suicides in Warangal district:



Figure 2.3. Warangal District Map highlighting Hasanparthy Mandal

Warangal is one of the districts from the northern part of Telangana. Rural poverty is generally high in this district. and 80% in Karimnagar, while it was only about 30% in most of the coastal districts (Menon, 2006) Out of the 51 *mandals* in Warangal, farmer suicides have been reported from a staggering 44 (86%) *mandals* of the district. In 1998, a disastrous tragedy struck rural Warangal. Following severe bollworm attacks and poor harvests, several hundred farmers took their own lives (Stone, 2002). The local estimates from 1998 till 2008 report a huge number, 1500 suicides by farmers in Warangal district (Business Today, 2008). The initial reports from a leading newspaper in the year 1998, has a maximum number of cotton farmers committing suicide from the Warangal district.

2.7 Entry into the village:

Entry into the village is an important event in any ethnographic research. It determines future course of the researchers stay. I scheduled meetings with people from different sections in the village for an initial orientation and rapport

building. Within a few preparatory visits and interactions, I realised that the village was clearly divided on caste lines. One of my initial key contact persons was a person, Mr.D working in a government rural development initiative. The district project office for rural development program gave me his mobile number suggesting that he would help me in giving more information and introducing me to the right contacts in the village. I called him to seek an appointment at his convenient time. After many attempts I could connect him on the phone. I explained the purpose of my call and requested for a meeting in the village. He was hesitant and reluctant to meet me in the village. I could not comprehend the reason for his reluctance meet me. After much persuasion that his help will serve my academic purpose, he relented and gave a time to meet after two days.

On the day of the meeting, I reached the village on a two wheeler and called on his mobile number. He gave me directions to his residence. I stopped by and asked an elderly villager for the address. He paused a while when I mentioned Mr.D. He confirmed asking whether it was *Madiga* D who lives in the in the SC colony. I was taken aback at that response, as he immediately linked the person to his caste. As I have grown up in a town and later moved to a city, I realised that my response was due to urban sophistication about knowing ones caste background. People do not make any direct reference to one's caste, but have ways to ascertain through probes regarding dietary habits, names of relatives and ancestral village one belongs to etc. The elderly man gave me directions but I could sense a discriminatory curiosity in him about why an outsider is asking about a villager belonging to a *Dalit* community.

This was one of the first incidents which gave me a peek into the way social relations in the village are structured. Locating the house of Mr.D also gave me an insight into the residential pattern in the village. Caste based structure and regulations in the village were also evident when I attempted to arrange a meeting with the villagers belonging to the scheduled castes associated with agriculture. Mr.SR, who was my point person in the village, discouraged me from going to that part of the village. Instead he said he will call them to the seed dealer's shop where I can meet and discuss. Despite my repeated attempts, I could not convince him that I have to go to all parts of the village

without any distinctions. He said they are not farmers and why do I have to talk to them to know about agriculture of cotton farming. He did not yield to my request to accompany me and I had to go on my own to the SC colony.

Surprisingly Mr.D also said that it is better to be talking to the farming communities in the village to understand the issues of agriculture and cotton farming. He also mentioned that my entry and associations in the village, if I plan to live for longer duration in the village will be better if I interact with the land owning upper caste in the village.

I realised very soon in my initial interaction about the caste based residential boundaries existing in the village. Upper caste villagers do not enter the SC colony if they have to meet any of the fellow SC villagers. They call for them to meet at a place not considered as 'polluting'. The advent of mobile phones helped to reinforce the caste based boundaries. The caste villagers meet in a neutral place like village center or a seed shop to do any business.

There were questions about what I was doing in the village. Villagers were quite inquisitive about me and had many questions in their mind. After my initial interactions, with various people in the village, I mentioned to my point person about my need to stay in the village for a longer duration. They were amused that I am going to stay in the village, away from my family and job. Women whom I knew in the village were more upset that I will be leaving my wife and two kids back in the city and live in the village for a year. After convincing them that it is important to live in midst them for a longer period of time to understand the lives of cotton farmers and their problems, I was advised to meet the village *sarpanch*.

Finally, after many enquiries in the village, the village elders identified a place for me – a room in a farmer's house, whose children were living in Hyderabad. They mentioned that the house is easily accessible as it was on the main road, has a toilet which is outside the house and there are only two elderly couple who are living in the house. I was taken to the house by Mr.SR, my point person in the village. He introduced me to them and explained the purpose of my stay in the village. House owners were traditionally agriculturists who owned land. Landlord Mr.LR owned 10 acres of land and grew paddy and cotton. He is 65

years old and as his sons left the village, he gave the land for tenancy to another villager. He is paid tenancy every year by the tenants. After listening me and Mr.SR, the old couple mentioned that they will think over it and let me know. After a couple of days Mr.SR called me to say that they have agreed to rent out their room to me with certain terms. I met the family once again to finalized and moved into the room with some basic things and books.

2.8 My identity in the village:

As I started to live in the village and interact with the farmers, I realised that most of them had varied notions about me and what my purpose of stay. After some time after of my stay, I started to ask people whom I meet about their understanding of what I was doing in the village. Here are some of the identities ascribed to me by the villagers:

1. A photographer: Since I was seen capturing images around the village with my camera during the initial days of stay in the village, some of them thought I work as a photographer. After some time, I realised that some of the villagers were not very comfortable with the idea that an outsider is capturing their lives in images. Therefore I stopped carrying a camera with me. However, some villagers were very enthusiastic about me clicking their photographs and they also wanted copies of it.
2. Journalist: Some youngsters in the village thought that I was a journalist, writing a story on their village. They started to tell the problems in village and wanted me to include them in my story. Despite clarifying that I am not a journalist, they were keen to share the problems of the village.
3. Seed company agent: since my conversations with villagers were largely around agriculture and cotton farming, most of them thought that I was a cotton seed company agent. Some of the farmers wanted my advice on better variety of cotton seeds.
4. Government officer: As I started to document the lives of the families of the farmers who committed suicide, most of the family members and their relatives thought I represent the government. They wanted me to represent their case to the government, for any financial assistance.

5. Researcher: Some of the educated youth in the village identified me as a researcher, who was working for the betterment of agriculture.
6. Health Professional: since my focus of enquiry during the discussions was around health and wellbeing and as I was meeting the health providers in the village, some villagers identified me as a health professional.

2.9 Some dilemmas:

As is the case of ascertaining identity of any new individual, many villagers were inquisitive about my caste background. I evaded many of the indirect queries to deflect the attention to their issues. I realised that the moment I disclose my caste, most of the relations in the village will be framed by my identity. It will have an impact on the way I will be received by various caste groups in the village. It was very difficult to do so but in retrospect, I think it helped me to interact with all the sections of the village.

One of the key dilemmas for me in my research was to deal with the expectation of the family members who were affected by suicides. They wanted my help in getting any financial assistance from the government. It was difficult to communicate to them about my incapacity in influencing any government agency for further financial assistance.

As I was enquiring about the agricultural practices and cotton cultivation, many farmers wanted my opinion on different varieties/brands of cotton. I had to mention to them that I was not an expert in these matters. Similarly some of them sought advice on health matters. I suggested them to consult appropriate health professionals in the district. These situations to some extent were not conducive for me initially to probe because of the attitude of the villagers who indicated "Why are you asking these questions when you say you cannot get us any help." As my stay in the village grew in months, I had more villagers approaching me for some advice or the other. Some families wanted my advice on their children's education, some on job prospects of different courses, opportunities in the city. The list was growing day by day. They looked up to me as an educated person from the city, a knowledgeable person who could advise them on various aspects of their lives. It was difficult for me to take on the role of an 'expert', though I saw it as an anthropological engagement in the village

setting. I was conscious of my role and ethics as a researcher, and I did try to refrain from being projected as an expert on these matters, but had to divert them to the people, practitioners and institutions. But in the process I started to question myself about how my subjectivity is going to influence analysis of the subjective categories(Scheper-Hughes, 1990)

2.11 Description of the village- Vangapahad



Figure 2.4 Hand drawn sketch of the village map

2.11.1 History of the village

Elderly residents of Vangapahad said the village got its name from a famous brinjal

(eggplant) plant in the erstwhile

feudal landlord's palace and the hillocks surrounding it (*vanga* brinjal and *Pahad*- hillock). The village was dominated by the village *Dora* who belonged to Brahmin caste till a few decades ago. *Dora*'s family owned vast stretches of lands in the village. Elderly villagers remember the magnificent wooden chair in which the *Dora* would sit in the courtyard of his *gadi* (palace). Villagers were forbidden from walking with footwear in front of the *gadi*. All other villagers including landed communities like *Reddys* had to sit down on the floor in front of the *Dora* while he sat on his magnificent chair.

In recent years descendants of the *Dora* sold away most of the lands. Just a few mud walls of the center of power are all left in place of a large palace. The villages symbolically demolished the power of *Dora gadi* by breaking the mud

walls to create a through fare for the villagers to pass through. The vestiges of the feudalism are now seen in two contrasting situations where the symbol of power *gadi* is in shambles and the *doras* migrating to foreign countries and cities to prosper and thrive. Another significant remnant of the feudal order of the village is the presence of *Dommara* community who were brought into the village by them.

2.11.2 Social Structure of the village

The village is divided on the caste lines with clear caste based regulations. Majority of the families belong to scheduled castes (*Madiga and Mala*), followed by backward castes (*Kummari, Golla, Yadava, Gowda, Kuruma, Padmashali, Tenuga*, etc.). Traditionally land owning and agriculturist caste *Reddys* are the next majority. There are a few families belonging to other communities like Muslims, and tribes like *Dommara* and *Yerukala* etc.

The village geographical layout is also divided on the caste lines. Most of the families from the Reddy community own a majority of land and are in the center of the village. Houses of other caste families are scattered around the center in clusters. Scheduled castes houses and *Dommari* houses are on the fringes of the village.

Among the backward caste groups *Kummari* whose traditional occupation was pottery are the dominant ones. As the demand for their craft was dying, they moved out to other occupations and some families have adopted agriculture as their primary source of livelihood with a great success. Among the scheduled castes there are *Madiga* and *Mala (Mannepollu)*. Population wise, *Madiga* are in majority in number. In discussions with the villagers it was noticed that the *Malas* are better accepted by other caste groups in the village in comparison to *Madigas*.

In the words of a Reddy farmer in the village, “*Malas follow Hinduism, do not mix with Madigas and they do not create problems to others. Madigas are Christians and problems creators. They have erected a start in the middle of the village near our hanuman temple which was not necessary. They are even*

building a church on the hillocks where we have our caste goddess. They have the support of local MLA and sarpanch who belong to their caste. And they are vote banks for parties. so no one questions them. Sarpanch belonging to our caste questioned this and he was booked under SC/ST act which is a non-bailable offence.” (Notes from an ethnographic Interview with a farmer)

Caste based restrictions are very evident in the common spaces of the village. The village has two hotels, one being run by a Muslim and the other by a backward caste group *Golla*. In both the places people from upper and middle caste groups do not sit on the table where a person from scheduled caste is sitting. They will wait for them to vacate the place and then sit. Though members of all caste groups access the hotels and have food, one of the owners said they are using disposable glasses and a plastic sheet on the plate. He said, *‘we are a business we can’t stop someone from having food in our hotel, but some of them don’t like it.* (Ethnographic notes)



Figure 2.5. A few Estranged houses of *Dombara* families

Vangapahad is famous known for brothels run by *Dommara* community members. The villagers say that the erstwhile *doras* allowed a few *Dommara* families to settle in the village many decades by giving them some land in the outskirts of the village. It is said that they used to entertain *Dora* and his guests. Traditionally *Dommara* community women were weaving mats from palm leaves and men were rearing pigs. Each man used to have 2-3 partners and the men used to do sex business with their partners. *Dommaras'* are de-notified nomadic tribes who traditionally were folk musicians and acrobats. They were patronized by the kings in olden days for their performances. Later as the kings and their patronage vanished, some of them settled in different places of the state; taking up prostitution as one of the occupations for subsistence. Feudal lords started patronizing this community in some places for their pleasures. Over a period of time as the feudal system was in decline, the *Dommara* community started soliciting customers from general public. In the village there are about 40 families of the *Dommara* community. Many clients from the city and other places were entertained in the brothel houses and as the demand grew, men started getting girls from other districts and states of the country.

There is a stark difference in the economic status of the rest of the villagers who are dependent on agriculture and other occupations and the *Dommara* community members. Some of the houses owned by them are large by the village standards and are with all the modern amenities. In recent years some families of the *Dommara* community gave up prostitution and started small ventures like hotels, shops and chicken centres. After the conflict between the *Dommara* and *Madigas*, a police outpost was setup in the village. This led to reduction in sexwork business. Police make money from the brothels and also vehicles which pass by. Due to enforcement, *Dommara* community is also changing. Some of the families are educating their children and are marrying girls off to distant places to job holders. Some of the current generation youngsters who are educated are working as software engineers in the cities.

Villagers despite all efforts could not stop the flourishing sex trade in their midst. In recent years, *Dommara* houses which were in the outskirts of the village became the entrance of the village because of the new road have. The prices of the lands they owned have increased manifold. This led to a conflict in the

village between the scheduled caste groups and the *Dommara* community. Another source of conflict according to some villager is based on concept of Hindu purity. *Dommara* sexworkers stopped serving customers from the *Dalit* communities as the other caste customers objected that they cannot sleep with the sexworkers after a scheduled caste customer.

Discrimination is also evident in the fact that caste villagers do not go to the hotels run by the *Dommara* community nor they go to the shops, but many men in the village do not have problem visiting sexworkers.

2.11.3 Land ownership and Agriculture in the village

Vangapahad is agriculture based village with majority of the families owning 1-5 acres of land. Cotton, Maize, chillies, vegetables, fruits and paddy are the major crops of the region.

Earlier most of the land belonged to *Dora* and three other families belonging to *Reddy* caste. Over a period of time, the descendants of the families moved to cities for education. They did not want to return to the village and sold their lands to interested villagers. There are three types of soils in the village according to the local classification *Ragadi*, *Chavuka* and *Gerre*. The future of the communities was shaped by the type of the soil they owned.

Caste	No. of Households	% of landholdings in Acers
Reddy	40	38
Kummari	178	26
Goud	127	8
Madiga	394	4
Mala	18	1
Kuruma	160	5
Yadava	321	8
Dommara	90	5
Padmasali	12	1
Tenugu	112	4
Others	24	--
Total	1476	1250

Table 2.2 Caste wise households and their share of agricultural land

Some of the very fertile lands were bought by Kummari caste group who traditionally are potters by occupation. As the demand for pottery has reduced and they had fertile lands, most of them started cultivation. They started with paddy and vegetables and fruits and make good profits. Not many of them have shifted to cotton farming and even if they have shifted they rotate the crops.

Cropping pattern observed in the village:

Water sources: The village has three water tanks and a sewage canal which runs from the city as a source of irrigation for the farmers



Figure 2.6. Common water sources in the Village

Water is an important element of current village politics. The upper caste groups have retained the command over the water sources by rallying to win the elections for the bodies which govern the water bodies, *neetidsanghalu*. In one of the words of the upper caste farmers “*we cannot forgo control of the water in the village. We do not mind losing the elections for the village panchayat but not the water bodies* (ethnographic interview with a Reddy farmer). This describes how important water is in the lives of the farmers and how politics revolve around water access to water in the village.

Cropping pattern: The following table summarises the cropping pattern followed by most of the farmers in the village.

Crop	Activity	Kharif(June to Oct)	Rabi (Oct-March)	Summer (March-June)
Cotton	Sowing	End of Jun(- End of Jul		
	Harvesting	End of Dec-Middle of Mar		
Maize	Sowing	Middle of Jun-Mid July		
	Harvesting	Mid Sep- End of Oct		
Paddy	Sowing	May-June	Nov-Dec	March-April
	Harvesting	Nov-Dec	May-June	July-Aug.
Vegetables				
Bhendi(Okra)	all around the year except Nov-Dec			
Tomato	Sowing	Mid May-June	Oct- Nov and Jan Feb	
	Harvest	sept-oct	Feb-March	
brinjal	Sowing	End of May- June	End of Oct- Nov	
	Harvest	August-Sep	Jan-Feb	
Chillies	Sowing	Mid May-June	Nov-Jan	
	Harvest	Sept-Nov	April-June	
watermelon	Sowing		Jan-Feb	
	Harvest		April-June	
Banana	Sowing	June-July	Oct-Nov	
	Harvest	Feb-March	July-Aug	

Table 2.3 Various crops and the seasonal pattern of cultivation

2.11.3 Facilities in the village:

The village has other facilities like a government sub center for health services, an upper primary school, a veterinary hospital, godown for storage of fertilisers of the cooperative society and a public distribution outlet for supply of rice, sugar, oil and other commodities.



Figure 2.7 Government Primary School in the village



Figure 2.8 Village Sub-center for Primary Health

2.11.4 Social Mobility:

According to the villagers, the village has witnessed a lot of change among the various community groups of the village. Some of the caste groups, by virtue of the lands they owned and economic status have started to command some influence in the village. Equally, one of the dominant scheduled caste groups *Madigas* started to assert themselves as they are empowered by the larger political representation and the legal protective measures. In the words of the local farmers:

“SC’s are more powerful now. We can’t talk to them nor touch them... they have built Ambedkar statues in the village center where we have built Hanuman. They are more assertive now. They put star in the center for the village during

Christmas. And play loud church songs. There is nobody to question them
(Ethnographic Interview, Pesticide dealer)

The assertion of their *Dalit* identity is visible among the scheduled caste groups. In the words of the scheduled caste farmer, *“Earlier doras and Reddy’s had stooges amongst us. They used to nominate them for any posts... they were under their total control. We have tolerated this for generations. Not anymore. Now we do not allow such things. We choose an active member and then contest. They have no other go but to support us. .* (Ethnographic Interview with a *Madiga* youth)

One of the most contentious issues for the village has been the proposed merger with the municipal corporation. The upper caste groups support this where as there is an opposition from the scheduled caste groups.

“We support merger with corporation but SC’s oppose it because they fear they have to pay more taxes. Everything is free for them. Our land will sell for more price. They don’t have anything to gain so they oppose. (Ethnographic Interview, Reddy farmer)

While the scheduled caste villagers mention that the merger of the village in the city municipal corporation meant paying more taxes, losing access to local authorities, consolidation of the upper castes in the village etc. This can be summarized in the discussions with a group of SC villagers:

“We have to pay more money as municipal tax if our village is annexed into the corporation, where as we are sure we will not benefit in anyway. Villagers who have land will become richer as the land rates will go high. There will be many outsiders who will pay high prices for lands. None of us can ever then dream to own a bit of a land in the village.”

“Now at least we can influence the local village politics, we can negotiate what we want. Once the merger takes place, it will be a different scenario. Things will be decided by larger issues and calculations.”(Ethnographic Interview with a *Madiga* youth)

Chapter 3

Suicide

“Suicide: the only truly serious philosophical problem”

(Camus, 1991)

This chapter reviews published literature on suicide in India and across the world. The review is divided into three sections. First section elucidates how the concept of suicide is understood historically across different cultures and religions. The second part deals with various theoretical perspectives on suicide and the third is about suicides from a public health perspective. The literature search was conducted using key words -- suicide, suicide in India, Farmers suicides in India, culture and suicide – in various academic search engines like PubMed, Jstor, Google scholar, SCOPUS, to identify research works published during 1999 and 2012.

This chapter addresses the following research questions:

- I. How different was the phenomenon of suicide across different historical and cultural contexts?
- II. What are the theoretical perspectives that define studies on suicide?
- III. How does public mental health deals with suicides?

3.1 Suicide in different traditions

Sir Thomas Browne was the first to coin the word “suicide” in his *Religio medici* (1642). A physician and philosopher, Browne based the word on the Latin *sui* (of oneself) and *caedere* (to kill) (Minois, 1999, p.10).

Suicide existed in all societies. A reference to suicide is found in ancient Greek legend where Jecosta who marries her son Oedipus without her knowledge, feels shamed and hangs her with a noose. In the writing of Homer, suicide comes across as a heroic deed. Suicide was considered a natural response to bereavement, sorrow or to uphold a high position (Crawford, 1994, p.40).

Response to the act of suicide was varied across cultures. The Greco-Roman viewed it as a logical act. Greek philosophers did not completely condemn suicide but accepted it in certain conditions. Prominent Greek philosopher Plato agreed to suicide as an option in cases of terminal illness, grief and extreme life conditions. In contrast, Aristotle was completely against the idea of suicide on ethical and social grounds. Some philosophers accepted suicides in the case of dishonour and incest. Romans valued honour over life and preferred suicide over disgrace. Therefore, suicide for higher causes was socially accepted in early Rome. In Judeo-Christian culture suicide was considered a sin. They believed that God created life and only He had the right over it. But early Jewish and Christian societies considered suicide in the context of religious persecution as martyrdom. Martyrs were accorded a venerated status by Christian theologians in the wake of Roman persecution of the church. St. Augustine (354-430) halted this by declaring suicide as crime and sin. Thomas Aquinas (1227-1274) combined arguments from biology and theology to denounce suicide against the love of God. The teachings of St. Augustine and Aquinas were institutionalized in the middle ages and the church and the government prohibited suicide arguing that life was sacred and suicide a crime against the God (Wasserman & Wasserman, 2009, p. 60).

Another major world religion Islam prohibits suicide. The holy book of Quran instructs the followers of Islam not to kill themselves and that the God is merciful. Statements about prohibition of suicide are also recorded in Hadith, the sayings of Prophet Muhammad. Various Islamic scholars formulated that suicide is a great sin and a person who commits suicide would go to hell and would continue to suffer forever (Chaleby, 1996). Interpretations on suicide in other major religions practiced in India are discussed in the coming sections.

Views on suicide started to change during the enlightenment and Victorian ages. A reflection of changing values around suicide can be seen in Shakespeare's writings where a number of characters commit suicide due to melancholy, disgrace and disappointment in love. A 17th century physician David Burton theorized that suicide occurred due to 'melancholia' a very similar concept of clinical depression in the modern world. In his book *Anatomy of*

Melancholy, he described melancholia as a disease of mind where the heart of a depressed person grows heavy, overwhelming thoughts crucify his soul and in an instant, he is defeated or tired of living and he wants to kill himself (Durkheim, 2002). Other 16th and 17th century thinkers like John Donne and David Hume argued that life should be determined by reason and rational thinking rather than superstition or emotion. Similarly, French philosophers Montesquieu and Voltaire supported the idea of an individual's right to commit suicide.

The advent of 19th century modernity brought about changes in the perceptions about suicide. Advancement in science and modern medicine decreased the control of church over the society. Important developments like theories of evolution proposed by Charles Darwin, Freudian psychoanalysis, and emergence of modern psychology and psychiatry as disciplines shifted suicide from a religious to modern medical framework. Psychiatry posits suicide as a medical problem predisposed by various forms of mental disorders. Mood disorders, Schizophrenia, and substance abuse are considered as major conditions associated with suicides (Bertolote & Fleischmann, 2001). Psychological approach to suicide was established by the works of Freud, the founding father of psychoanalysis. Freud proposed that unconscious mind is a source of suicidal act. Amongst influential theorists following the psychological approach, Shneidman proposed four key psychological features of suicide, acute perturbation, heightened inimicality, increase of constriction of intellectual focus and cessation of unbearable emotion (Shneidman, 1996). Psychodynamic theorists proposed that unconscious hostility as the key feature of suicide (Menninger, 1972), and extended it to include a mixture of destructive emotions such as, rage, guilt, anxiety and dependency along with predisposition to failure and hopelessness as psychodynamics of suicide (Crawford, 1994, p. 50).

3.2 Suicide in Hindu tradition in the Indian context

An analysis of Hindu scriptures throws light on how religions perceived suicide in the early history of Indian subcontinent. Sati in some parts of India was one such practice where a widow committed ritual suicide on her husband's funeral

pyre among certain communities. Self-immolation of by the widows was only ceremonious during the Vedic period. Hymns from *Atharvaveda* and *Rigveda* indicate that though the widow lied down beside the deceased husband on the funeral pyre, she was asked to rise and leave and live with a new spouse to a life of progeny and property. The pyre was set ablaze after that. In the later scriptures, namely in *Brahmanas*, one of the relevant concepts related to suicide is in the context of a man's duties and obligations towards Gods, perpetuation of the family and cultural heritage. Social obligations act as a deterrent against suicide. There is also a reference to *asramas*, an idea which emphasises that human need and aspirations must change over a period. In the later *Upanishads*, there are indications about choosing voluntary death in a heroic manner and emancipation from *samsara*, provided a reason for seeking a religious basis for committing suicide (Crawford, 1994, p.54).

Subsequently, under the influence of scriptures and traditions, norms of life regarding the morality of suicide were developed, which passed on through medieval and modern times. Sanskrit texts pertaining to religious and legal duty known as *Dharmashastras* consider suicide as a major sin. This is evident in *Parasara samhita* which mentions the confinement of the spirit of the person who commits suicide in hell for sixty thousand years, denial of rites of cremation, restrictions on survivors to express grief and performing liberation rituals to the soul (Brick, 2010).

Similarly, sage *Vasistha* defines suicide as "one who destroys himself by means of wood, water, clods of earth, stones, weapons, poison or a rope." He cites law to prohibit family members from performing cremation rituals and prescribes a penance to the priest who performs last rites. He also recommends that a survivor of suicide attempt should observe penance for twelve days as a penalty. To discourage people from committing suicide, Kautilya in his political treatise *Arthashastra* (ca. A.D 320-480) proposes that the body of the person who commits suicide be dragged through the streets by an untouchable and be denied of cremation rites. He further says that the person who performs funeral rites for a person who committed suicide will be denied funeral rites and will be excommunicated by the relatives. Other Hindu lawmakers like Manu, Yagnavalkya and Harita, propose some exceptions for committing suicide to

achieve merit. These can be in two circumstances-- where a person decides to take *mahaprasthana*, a great journey on the account of inability to perform ascribed duties because of an affliction leading to a sensing of death. Another exception is for sinners who want to atone themselves. Similar to the Judeo-Christian acts of sacrifice or martyrdom, in the case of religious oppression some sects of Hindus used suicide as a protest to blame their act on the perpetrators of oppression. Buddhism considers suicide as a negative act. According to the Buddhist theory of *Karma*, the past acts have an influence on current life and current acts determine future life. The negative thoughts which force one to commit suicide will haunt the person in the next life (Crawford, 1994, p. 54).

Some of the modes of suicide described in the Hindu scriptures are by fire, by drowning in holy rivers, leaping from a tower or a cliff and through fasting. Fasting or starving one-self to death was practiced by Jains in later years. The practice of self-immolation through the practice of sati was observed to have spread in the nations controlled by the Brahmins as they used it as a means to control the property of the widows by tweaking the passage in Rigveda. *Jauhar* or mass sati was performed by the wives of the defeated Rajput kings to protect themselves from degradation and humiliation in the hands of the victors (Arnold & Robb, 1995, p. 46).

In the colonial times, there are instances of legal restrictions enforced by the British on religion related suicide in India. Legislation was passed in 1802 prohibiting suicide by jumping in water in the island of Sagar. Though there was resistance from the Hindus citing non-interference in religious matters, the British government introduced conditional restrictions on the practice of sati, which increased during the early 1800s around Calcutta. The prohibition of sati was under the circumstances where the widow was i. unwilling; ii below 16 years of age; iii. Pregnant; IV. Drugged or intoxicated; v. mother of a child who was below three years. These restrictions also applied to another practice observed in East Bengal among Jogis, who buried the widows along with the husband. Raja Ram Mohan Roy, a social reformer, relentlessly campaigned against this practice and convinced the British government that it would not amount to religious interference, as sati is not enshrined in the scriptures. The

British government finally abolished this practice in 1829 under the leadership of a Benthamite, Lord William Bentinck (Crawford, 1994, p. 64).

A case of sati was reported in Rajasthan state in the year 1987. Roop Kanwar, an 18 year old Rajput woman immolated herself on her husband's pyre. The State government under a lot of pressure from various quarters charged her husband's family and other villagers and local politicians for abetment and arrested them. Though the trial did not indict any of them, it evinced a lot of interest from activists, law makers and civil society. Roop Kanwar's sati was reported to be the 40th incident of sati in post-independent India. Some attempts to sati were reported from some parts of Rajasthan and Madhya Pradesh after this incident. The ensuing debate highlighted that though sati law was successful in preventing the practice, religious glorification remains a concern (Divya, 2009).

3.3 Sociological theories of suicide.

Durkheim's path breaking work *Le Suicide* was published in 1897. He situated suicide from an individual-centric act to a social act, resulting from an individual's nature of relations with the community and society. He defined suicide as "any death which is the direct or indirect result of a positive or negative act accomplished by the victim himself" (Durkheim, 2002).

Research on suicide showcases the existential and socio cultural conditions of human beings in any society. This is evident in the perceptions around suicides at different points of time in history and cultures. Emergence of modern disciplines popularized the biomedical model of understanding suicide. Most research conducted in this framework focus on understanding risk factors, behaviours and prevention through clinical and public health interventions. However studies conducted in sociological perspectives led to a radical shift in the way suicides are understood both at the individual and society levels (Stack, 2004).

Some of the early works conducted in a sociological perspective were concerned with humankind's adaptation to modernity. Modernization, or the process of industrialization, urbanization and secularization, was at the heart of

the classical theories of suicide (Durkheim, 2002). Modernization process, described as a transition from traditional agricultural societies to modern industrialized societies in the developed countries has had an impact on the spurt of suicides. Thomas Masaryk in his book suicide and the meaning of civilization argued that the rise in number of suicides was due to the spread of civilization and due to increasing secularization in particular. "Suicide is the fruit of progress of education and civilization" (c.f Makinen pg 140). Durkheim's work "Suicide: A study in sociology" has had an immense impact on suicide research. He proposed that modernization and increased impersonality is associated with the increased incidence of suicide. He attributed this to the disturbed norms governing the social behaviour prevalent in a society at a particular point in time. Durkheim's main theory linked elevated suicide rates to the following circumstances: Deficient integration of society (*egoism*); Excessive integration of society (*altruism*); Deficient regulation of society (*anomie*) and Excessive regulation of society (*fatalism*). All these process have a considerable impact on individuals. Industrialization and urbanization create more opportunities and motivate people in the agricultural areas to migrate to urban areas in search of better opportunities. This destabilizes individual relations with the immediate culture and society one comes from. It propels people to cultural value systems entirely different from theirs.

Durkheim's paradigm continues to influence sociologists working on suicide. A review of empirical works on suicides was conducted during 1980 and 1995 to assess the support to traditional Durkheimian hypotheses on modernization and social integration. Findings from the review interpreted that the postmodern era has brought about changes in the association of modernization and suicide. After the initial shocks of modernization, future generations because of their adaptation can become less suicidal (Stack 2000).

Durkheimian framework of understanding suicide was critiqued by J. D. Douglas, who questioned the dominant sociological approach of studying suicides based on official statistics. He proposed a new sociological approach to study suicide-- intensive observation, description and individual cases of suicide, focused upon unearthing 'the whole complex of shared and individual

meanings of the actions involved in the suicidal process' (Pickering & Walford, 2000). Douglas was interested in the interpretation of the act of suicide in the framework of individual and collective meanings. According to him, any suicidal action involves something fundamental about self or about situation in which one commits suicide or it is a combination of self and situation. He further elaborates that the meaning of a particular suicide will depend on the imputations of causality, whether the onus is on the individual being responsible or the situation which drives one to suicide. He proposes that the social causality of suicide must be analysed from a perspective of meaningful conflicts rather than shared meanings (Douglas, 1966).

Studies on suicide in economic determinism framework highlight the influence of work and life conditions of an individual apart from the economic subsistence it provides. Some studies have linked occupation and social class, market and work with suicide (Wasserman & Wasserman, 2009). Some dealt with modernization, agriculture and indebtedness (Stone, 2002) and rationalization of agriculture (I. H. Mäkinen & Stickley, 2006).

Studies on suicides in the framework of cultural theory use culture as a critical determinant of human behaviour, form and existence of social institutions. They attempt to understand suicide as a behaviour influenced by culture (Hamlin & Brym, 2006; Hjelmeland & Park, 2012; I. Mäkinen, 1997; Tseng, 2001). Some works have attributed pathology to the cultures, and proposed that cultures can have *pathogenic* effects leading to circumstances for more number of suicides and also *patho-selective* effect pointing out to suicide as the only effective solution to the situation at hand (Tseng, 2001 and Colucci, 2006).

Sociological studies on suicides from a gender perspective have criticized the association of suicide behaviour with males. According to this theory women are immune to suicide as long as they 'act like women', and are subordinate to men subsumed within traditional institutions such as marriage (S. S. Canetto & Lester, 1998; Silvia Sara Canetto, 2008).

3.4 Suicide in modern India:

Suicide is an important public health challenge in India. According to a WHO report, India accounted for highest estimated number of suicides in 2012.

SEX	Number of suicides (all ages) 2012	All ages	5–14 years	15–29 years	30–49 years	50–69 years	Age-standardized suicide rates (per 100 000) 2012	Age-standardized suicide rates (per 1000 000) 2000	% change Age-standardized suicide rates 2000-2012
Both sexes	258 075	20.9	2.0	35.5	28.0	20.0	21.1	23.3	-9.2%
Females	99 977	16.7	2.4	36.1	17.2	11.1	16.4	20.3	-19.1%
Males	158 098	24.7	1.6	34.9	38.0	28.9	25.8	26.2	-1.6%

Table 3.1 Suicide statistics across all age groups among men and women. Source: (WHO, 2014)

Suicide rate per 100,000 populations is reported to be highest among young men and women falling in the age group of 15-29 years. Higher numbers of suicides are reported from the southern states of the country that have better indicators in health, education and social welfare.

There is a surge in reported number of suicides across the country. The suicide rate in 1978 was 6.3 per 100,000. It has increased to 11.2 according to recent statistics by NCRB it is for the year 2012. This amounts to an average of 371 suicides per a day (Pereira, 2013). The number of suicides being reported from the different parts of the country is varied. The state of Nagaland reports 0.5/100,000 whereas in the state of Sikkim it is 45.9 suicides. The southern states of Kerala, Andhra Pradesh, Karnataka and Tamil Nadu have been consistently reporting higher rates of suicides over the northern states in the last few decades. This is attributed to various factors such as higher literacy, better reporting system, lower external aggression, higher economic status and expectations. A majority of suicides reported across the country (77%) are men and women below 44 years. This imposes a big social, economic and emotional burden on the society (Vijayakumar, 2010).

Suicides across the country in India are documented by the National Crime Records Bureau (NCRB), an arm of Ministry of Home affairs, Government of India. NCRB is mandated to collect data on crime across all the states of the country. Since suicide and attempt to suicide is considered a crime according to the Indian Penal Code, NCRB collates reported cases of suicide and attempt to suicides from the police stations. The data is collated at district level by the district crime records bureau. It is then sent to the state crime records bureau and is further analysed and collated at NCRB. The earliest record of data on suicide available with NCRB is from 1967.

Most of the studies on suicide in India are conducted within an epidemiological framework aimed to capture the incidence and prevalence of suicides and identification of causal social factors. These studies highlight large variations in number of suicides reported in different parts of India. States and cities with rapid social change are identified to have higher suicide rates (Murthy 2000, Giridhar et al 2003). Some features of Indian suicide identified from other studies are that suicides among men are more prevalent than female, but the gap is relatively small by international comparisons (Banerjee, Nandi, Nandi et al., 1990; Mayer & Ziaian, 2002; Steen & Mayer, 2003); marital and interpersonal problems are prevalent in over half of the deaths (Rao & Mahendran, 1989), this is an especially powerful motive in young females (Mayer & Ziaian, 2002); and the use of poisons and fire as common methods (Lester, Aggarwal, & Natarajan, 1999). Despite limited studies, it is also easy to conclude following Rao and Mahendran (1989) and Vijayakumar and Rajkumar (1999), that the phenomenon of suicide in India is complex. It is suggested that human development variables which reflect social change need to be examined rather than the focus on economic development (Steen & Meyer, 2003). Suicide is a multidimensional malaise (Leenars, 2004) and greater study of the complexity is needed in India to understand suicide at micro level.

A review of articles on suicide published in the Indian Journal of Psychiatry during 1958 – 2009 identified several risk factors such as lack of social cohesion, family history of suicide attempts and mental illness, women with lower educational level and from joint families, men with higher education levels

and from unitary families, disturbed interpersonal relations, extra marital affairs, unemployment, presence of stressful life event in the last 6 months, presence of psychiatric and personality disorders, early parental deprivation, recent bereavement and alcoholism (Vijayakumar, 2010).

Some of the very few qualitative studies on suicides in the Indian contexts have attempted to understand the social and cultural factors that modulate risk related to suicide (Manoranjitham, Abraham, & Jacob, 2005). Explanations of suicides reported by the family members or close friends in the context of social, cultural and environmental conditions and challenges of life are examined by deploying cultural epidemiological approach and used verbal autopsy based on Explanatory Model Interview Catalogue (EMIC) (Parkar, Nagarsekar, & Weiss, 2009).

3.5 Suicide from a public Health perspective:

Current definitions of suicide are based on two factors-- intention and outcome of the act. Thus World Health Organization (WHO) has defined suicide in these terms-- "For the act of killing oneself to class as suicide, it must be deliberately initiated and performed by the person concerned in the full knowledge, or expectation, of its fatal outcome (WHO 1998)."

According to WHO, almost one million people every year die from suicide; a "global" mortality rate of 16 per 100,000, or one death per every 40 seconds. In the last 45 years suicide rates have increased by 60% worldwide. Suicide is among the three leading causes of death among those aged 15-44 years in some countries, and the second leading cause of death in the 10-24 years age group; these figures do not include suicide attempts which are up to 20 times more frequent than completed suicide. Suicide worldwide is estimated to represent 1.8% of the total global burden of disease in 1998, and 2.4% in countries with market and former socialist economies by 2020.

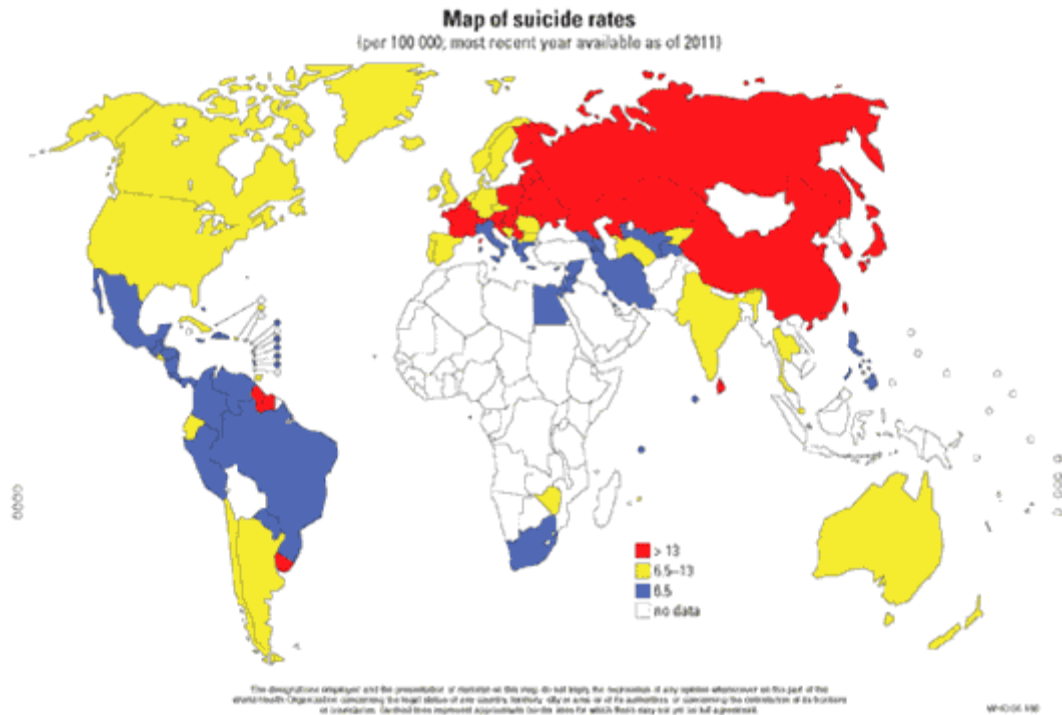


Figure 3.1 .Suicide rates per 100,000 population across the world, 2011. Source: http://www.who.int/mental_health/prevention/suicide/suicideprevent/en/

Suicide rate in India per 100,000 population for the year 2011 according to WHO statistics is 6.6-13, from the above figure. Suicide is an important issue in the Indian context. More than one lakh (one hundred thousand) lives are lost every year to suicide. The fact that 71% of suicides in India are by persons below the age of 44 years imposes a huge social, emotional and economic burden on our society (Vijayakumar, 2010).

Both WHO (1990) and United Nations (1996) have recommended their member states to set up national suicide prevention programs, linked to other public health policies. Most of the developed countries have constituted prevention programs and have been implementing and improving suicide prevention strategies through prevention, detection, and treatment of depression. This is particularly so in primary care, improving access to mental-health services, improving assessment of deliberate self-harm, supporting high-risk groups, improving control of disinhibiting, facilitating factors such as alcohol, influencing the media in the way they portray suicide to prevent the glamorization of suicide and the reporting of the method, auditing all suicides in

detail to learn the lessons for prevention, reducing access to the means of suicide, and encouraging essential research and development (Jenkins, 2002).

Two of the major components of current international suicide prevention strategies are the improved recognition and treatment of mental illness and restricting access to commonly used methods of suicide (WHO, 2004). For the first time, WHO in 1993 has published “Six basic steps for suicide prevention” These were-- the treatment of psychiatric patients; guns possession control, detoxification of domestic gas, detoxification of car emissions, control of toxic substance availability and toning down reports in the press (Goldney, 1998). In many agricultural communities of low- and middle-income countries, pesticide self-poisoning accounts for a large proportion of deaths. In rural China, pesticides account for over 60% of suicides. Similarly high proportions of suicides are due to pesticides in rural areas of Sri Lanka (71%),Trinidad (68%),and Malaysia (>90%) (D. Gunnell & Eddleston, 2003). In India, the total number of suicides reported due to poisoning are the highest and stand at 33.1%, out of which consumption of insecticides is found to be at 18.8% (NCRB 2010). Several studies have documented the use of pesticides in various states of India (Srinivas Rao *et al.*, 2005; Chowdhury 2007; Alex *et al* 2007) as a means of committing suicide. Initiatives restricting access to pesticides have showed positive results in Sri Lanka (Konrad Sen *et al.*, 2007) and some very small initiatives taken up by non-governmental organizations in India were found encouraging (Vijayakumar, 2007).

Farmer’s suicides from a public health perspective

Studies on farmer suicides from a public health perspective highlight a need to understand suicide in the larger context of public health (Behre and Behre 2008). Scholars have proposed a public mental health framework to address suicides among farmers (A. Das, 2011) and strengthening of National Mental Health Program (NMHP) at primary health care level for support and counselling the vulnerable farmers (Dongre & Deshmukh, 2011). Research on farmer suicides in India from a public health perspective is limited. Farmer suicides in India are discussed in detail in Introduction (Chapter 1).

3.6 Conclusion

Suicide is indeed a philosophical problem debated extensively in different religious traditions and cultural contexts. Despite religious, social and legal sanctions against the act of killing oneself, the number of suicides reported across the world is alarmingly high. Currently, suicide is largely framed as a bio-medical problem and is considered as a global public health problem. The statistical data collected across countries has pointed to the fact that among vulnerable groups, some occupational groups are more susceptible to suicides. Across various countries in the world, farmers have been identified as one such occupational group. Most studies have indicated that mental health problems are increasingly reported among the farmers, leading to suicides. Though problems amongst farmers are universal, the factors leading to suicide among farmers in high income and low and middle income countries are diverse. Though there is recognition that social and cultural factors play an important role in farmer suicides, there is a paucity of research in this area.

Chapter 4

Cultural History of Cotton: Resistance and Defeat

“You dare not make war on cotton. No power on earth dares to make war on it. Cotton is King.”

(Senator James Henry Hammond, 1858)

“Plants and Fibres have interwoven with the development of civilization, no less than fine spun theories of government”.

(Prof. Rojers, The Economic Interpretation of History. 1888)

This chapter discusses the cultural history of cotton, and addresses the following research questions:

- I. What is the role of cotton in Indian History?
- II. What are the factors leading to its transformation from being a metaphor of resistance to metaphor of death?
- III. What is the role of MNCs and neo-liberal economic policies adapted by the Indian government on small farmers cultivating cotton?

The main argument presented in this chapter through a review of literature is that the cultural history of cotton provides an insight into its role in the social, cultural and environmental history of human beings across various time periods and countries. By doing this, a historical agency (Foltz, 2003) is ascribed to cotton plant, as it is evident from the role it played in defining human development and progress.

In India, cotton embodied resistance to colonialism. It has played an important role in shaping the ideas of development and modernity in independent India. Cotton now has become one of the important agricultural products in India under the monopoly of Multi-National Corporations (MNCs). Influence of globalization and liberalization pushed rural economy to be embedded in the larger global market economy. Economic policies adopted by the government of India during the 1990s contributed to the increase in private sector influence in

cotton industry. Some of the factors like removal of licensing requirements, reservations on small scale industry and restrictions on foreign direct investment significantly facilitated the entry and establishment of the private sector in the cotton seed industry added to this. The process of globalization facilitated the entry of corporate companies that monopolised seed production. The entry of corporates into the seed industry resulted in many simultaneous shifts.

This chapter delineates the role of various historical and socio-cultural factors shaping the agency of cotton in India.

The power of cotton fibre is evident by its entanglement with historic human actions such as American civil war, industrial revolution, inspiring Communist Manifesto, Women empowerment, India's freedom movement and genetic modification of organisms. Cotton can be credited with ushering in modernity and progress in England and propelling America to an economic and international trade power. Cotton is everywhere. Cotton and various parts of the cotton plant are used to produce multipurpose and long-lasting things humans use in the day to day life. Cotton and its by products are present in a variety of things like clothes, currency notes, explosives, rocket propellants, cotton seed meal etc. Though artificial synthetic fiber polyester dethroned cotton from being the primary fiber for clothing for many decades, cotton fiber is being reinvented by the application of modern nanotechnologies.

Cotton is an important commodity in the world economy. It is also equally a political crop because the role it played in the world trade and policy relationship between high and low income countries. Cotton is grown on a commercial scale in 90 countries across the world. The list is led by China, India, USA, Pakistan, Brazil and Uzbekistan in order of production, which in total account for more than 80% of the total world's produce. Supportive agricultural policies adopted by some of the high income nations continue to have an impact on the global prices. For e.g., high subsidies for cotton growers; international trade policies adopted by USA led to an artificial reduction of cotton price in the global market. This artificial lowering of cotton prices had a negative impact on small cotton farmers from the Low and Middle Income Countries (LMIC) who did not provide

subsidies for growing cotton in their countries. Low returns for the produce is one of the important reasons for many small and marginal farmers across LMIC to be pushed into economic distress and debts. Brazil which was affected by subsidies to American farmers resisted by lodging a complaint in World Trade Organisation and won their case. This forced the USA to reconsider their subsidies and create a level field for cotton farmers from the LMIC nations (Gorter, 2012)

Though cotton has made an immense contribution to social progress of human beings it has also caused misery to a many. It has the dubious distinction of being responsible for killing more people than any other plant, pushing many into despair and suffering and is believed to have caused ecological disasters. On cotton's negative effect on humans, it played a key part in the American civil war, created a market for slaves from Africa who were uprooted from their countries and cultures, and was responsible for the exploitation of young children in cotton textile factories of Manchester in early 19th century. Coming to the ecological impact, water from the rivers feeding into the largest inland lake in central Asia, Aral Sea was diverted to grow cotton. This led to an ecological disaster which influenced the local flora and fauna and drastically reduced water table of the lake. Increased use of chemicals in growing cotton got accumulated in the lake leading to further damage. In recent times cotton emerged as a widely grown commercial crop across the world which requires high amounts of toxic pesticides to be applied on a regular basis. The genetic modification added a new dimension to the impact of cotton on ecology of the planet. These aspects are discussed in more detail in chapter 5 -- toxic landscapes.

The literature review that follows will give a broader framework to answer one of the research questions-- how does cotton symbolize a historical non-human agency (Foltz, 2003)? How does it personify social change by influencing human agency in the cultural and structural contexts of farmers cultivating cotton?

4.1 History of cotton in India

Cotton has played a historic role in the evolution of India as a modern nation. Mahatma Gandhi, a prominent leader of the Indian freedom struggle against the

British, projected *khadi*, cloth produced from hand weaving cotton fibres, as a symbol of resistance and self-sufficiency. Cotton has since then undergone an important transition, transforming into “white gold” and reaping benefits for some farmers. In recent years, cotton is infamous for symbolizing “debt and death trap” for many small and marginal farmers across the country.

Historic reference to cotton in India is as old as the *Vedas*⁶. *Rig Veda* believed to have been compiled between 4000 and 1200 BC has the first reference to threads in the looms, signifying the practice of weaving.⁷ *Vedangas*⁸ have reference to the stages of cotton spinning and weaving the yarn. There is some scientific evidence of cotton usage in India for over 5000 years (Santhanam & Sundaram, 2008).

According to *Manusmrithi*⁹ supposedly written in 2nd century BC, cotton was ascribed superior status than hemp and wool, other plant and animal fibers used for clothing. The code book of Hindu dharma stratifies the fibers corresponding to the hierarchical *Varna* system:

“The sacred thread of Brahman shall be of cotton, of right twisted three ply; of Kshatriya (shall be) of hemp and Vaisya shall be wool” (*Manusmrithi, Verse 44, Chapter 2*)

Another earliest reference is in the Bible, though cotton is not mentioned in the sacred volume. However in the book of Esther, the word *karpas* occurs in chap.i, v.6, in the account of the hangings in the court of Persian palace at Shushan, on the occasion of the great feast given by Ahasureus, where there were “white, green, and blue hangings, fastened with chords of fine linen and purple to silver rings and pillars of marble.” The word corresponding to *green* is in the Hebrew *karpas*. It seems to mean cotton-cloth, or calico formed into curtains, which were white and blue (Royle J.F. 1851. pg 118). Interestingly

⁶Vedas are amongst the oldest sacred texts of Hindus written during the Vedic period, during the mid-2nd to mid-1st millennium BCE (Flood, 1996)

⁷ Hymn 105, v.s.8. Cited by J.F.Royle in the Culture and Commerce of Cotton in India: London 1851. (Cotton as world power pg 16)

⁸ Vedangas are six auxiliary disciplines traditionally associated with the study and understanding of the [Vedas](#)

⁹ Manusmrithi

cotton with seed is still called as *kapas* in many parts of India including Telangana.

There is a reference to cotton and India in the Greek history. Alexander the Great, the Greek emperor invaded India during 327-323 BC. On the return from the conquest, one of his generals described cotton as “vegetable wool” which was being spun by the natives into fine clothing. Nearchus reported that the Greek soldiers were quick to use the “vegetable wool” for bedding and cushioning for their saddles (Scherer, 1916).

Greek botanist Theophrastus (372-287 BC) describes cotton plant and the practice of weaving cloth from the fiber as:

“The trees from which the Indians make their clothes have leaves like those of the black mulberry, but the entire plant resembles the dog-rose. They are set out in furrows on the plains, at a distance resembling a vineyard. These wool-bearing shrubs have leaves like the grape-vine, but smaller. They bear no fruit, but the pod containing the wool resembles a spring apple, while this pod is still unripe and unopened. When ripe it bursts open. The wool is then gathered from it and woven into clothes of diverse qualities; some inferior and some of considerable value”¹⁰

Greek admiration of the Indian cotton textiles initiated the trade of finished cotton goods and they started to import cotton cloth from India. When cotton plant was unknown to the European world, many thought of it as another species of wool as it resembled wool closely. This gave to the fable of ‘vegetable lamb’ which was imaginatively labelled ‘Scythian Lamb’ subsequently ‘Tartary lamb’. There are many myths regarding wool bearing plants during 16th and 17th century, poetizing the zoophyte, an animal growing tree and the vegetable wool (ibid pg. 7).

4.1.1 Cotton Production during pre-Christian era in Indian Subcontinent

Apart from the reference to the growth of cotton and cotton textiles by the Greeks, Roman General Marc Antony (83-30 BC) is reported to have written about the comfort of Indian cotton textiles. Manufacture of cotton goods is

¹⁰ De Historia Plantatum, iv, 4, 9. Cf. cotton as world power.

stated to have reached its excellence during the rule of King Chandra Gupta Maurya (321-297 BC). Kautilya in his *Arthashastra* has mentioned about the superior cotton textiles of *Vanga*, presently Bangladesh (Santhanam & Sundaram, 2008).

During the 15th and 16th centuries, production of cotton in the southern parts of India was widespread in the drier peninsular region of Mysore and on route from the ports of *Kanara* coast of *Vijayanagara*. The fact that textile production and related activities like spinning, weaving were the most prominent non-agricultural activities in south India reinforce the notion that there was cotton cultivation in some scale as there is little evidence of any sizable imports of raw cotton into the regional economy until the second quarter of the 17th century (Subrahmanyam, 2002). Textile producers in south India were scattered all over during this period, but certain parts of the *Coramandel* plain had some concentrated settlements. Textile production was also observed though in lesser concentrations in some of the interior regions such as Coimbatore, Mysore and between Hyderabad and Warangal. There seems to be a symbiotic relationship between the cotton growers of the drier interior parts of the *Coramandel* plain and textile production in the coast.

In south India, sub-regional specialization in the production activity had evolved by the mid of 16th century. Certain types of specialized weaving were concentrated in the eastern coastal strip, extending into interiors such as Coimbatore and Warangal. There is also a mention of cotton weaving in the Warangal region by Marco polo when he visited the Motupally port in 12th century BC during the regime of Rani Rudrama Devi of Kakatiya dynasty (Subrahmanyam, 2002).

Some researchers claim that Indian subcontinent had some wild varieties of cotton before being cultivated at agricultural levels. Wild and weedy types of cotton have found to be associated with *Gossypium arboreum* L and *Gossypium herbaceum* L which are two native species of India commonly grown across the country. The new world cottons *G.hirsutum* L and *G.barbadense* L were introduced into India for cultivation during the 16th and

17th centuries. The new world cotton are popularly known as American (*G.hirsutum*) and Egyptian (*G.barbadense*) (Santhanam & Hutchinson, 1974).

4.1.2 Trade routes of Indian cotton:

Alexander the Great is credited to have facilitated the trade of fabled Indian cotton textiles into the Europe by means of new trade highways both over the land and the sea. Alexander is said to have personally supervised the courses of Euphrates and Tigris to facilitate the transport of commerce from India to Alexandria which then spread out to the world. His successors have strengthened this further by building the port of Bernice, which established Indo-Egyptian traffic for centuries to come (Scherer, 1916). Needless to say, cotton goods of India reached distant regions with increased transportation. Arrian, a merchant and author of 'Periplus of the Erythrean Sea', is the first to mention cotton goods as articles of commerce. Writing about Indian cotton trade in 131 A.D., he says "Indian cotton of large width, fine cottons, muslins, plain and figured, and cotton for stuffing couches and beds," were brought by water from India and launched by way of Egypt toward the countries of the west. (ibid, p26). He describes Arab traders bringing cotton goods to Aduli, a port of the Red Sea, and that a trade was established with Patiala, Ariake, and Barygaza, which is the modern day Broach. Goods were brought there from Tagora and Masalia on the east coast, which is identified with modern Masulipatnam, which was then as it has continued of late, to be famous for manufacture and export of cotton-piece goods (ibid, pg.120).

Arab invasion of Europe affected the Egyptian maritime trade and cotton was transported by road through stately caravans. These caravans originated from Damascus and Cairo and met at Mecca as pre-arranged for the exchange goods and commodities. This led to the spread of cotton all through the east as the great caravans touched all ports en-route (ibid, pg. 32).

The Renaissance period witnessed a wide spread activity around cotton weaving into the history of Europe. This had a major impact on the cotton production and trade in India. Nations like Italy and Poland sent voyagers on the sea to reach India and establish links with commercial store houses. Vasco da Gama's success in reaching India established a Portuguese hold on the trade.

They consolidated their hold by routing the Venetians and establishing channels of commerce between India around Africa to Lisbon. This resulted in an increased market for low priced Indian cotton goods all over Europe and a momentum for cotton trade.

Discovery of Americas and the passage of Cape witnessed the development of maritime trade and British supremacy in later years. Though there was minimal import of cotton from India into England for manufacture of candle-wicks as early as 1298, it was in 1631 that Indian cotton fabrics arrived. East India Company presented a royal charter to the Mughal Emperor Jahangir in 1615 and established trading posts and factories to produce cotton goods. Their first factory was established in Surat and the second in Madras during 1639 AD. Direct trade of cotton goods to England began in 1640 through the port of Calicut. Until then the British Empire was the undisputed producer of wool and woollen textiles. The advent of cotton fabrics threatened the already established woollen trade in England. Under the increasing pressure from the native woollen industry, British parliament had to pass acts during 1700 and 1720 deterring usage of cotton goods with penalties (Santhanam & Sundaram, 2008). Subsequently, industrial revolution in England established cotton supremacy, dethroning the woollen industry. With the advent of steam engines and mills, along with other inventions in cotton industry, and the popularity of cotton fabrics despite restrictions, England encouraged the establishment of cotton textile mills. With technology at hand, the English people within no time produced more fine cottons than the Indians (Baines, 1835). The exponential increase in the use of cotton fiber by the English textile mills had a tremendous impact on the growth of cotton in India. In 1788, the governor general of East India Company in Calcutta was requested to encourage growth and quality improvement of Indian cottons to meet the requirement of British textile mills.

By 1793, British East India Company changed their trade strategy to maximize their profits. Courts of Directors of East India Company in London decreed to promote the import of raw materials into England and export of manufactured goods for the benefit of English cotton textile mills. Because of this policy India emerged as the largest exporter of raw cotton to England and then by 1850, it also became the largest consumer of British textiles. India accounted for almost

one-sixth of the total textile exports from England. This eventually reduced India from the position of a supplier of manufactured cotton goods to that of a supplier of raw cotton for the British textile mills (Santhanam & Sundaram, 2008). Fine textiles from India, which were desired objects of commerce for about 3000 years, were dominated by cloth produced by the gigantic cotton manufacturers of England even in the home market.

As the quantum of cotton export to England increased, the British focused on increasing the quality of raw cotton from India. They commissioned committees to study reasons for inferior quality and decreased cotton production in India. One such committee reported the reasons for underproduction of cotton during 1850's as-- depressing effects of fiscal regulations, lack of easy means of transit, baneful influence of middle men, and the extortionate demands of money lenders and seldom to the poverty of soil, or the unsuitability of climate (Royle, 1851). Royle's report describes the role of the farmer, middlemen and the East India Company representatives in the cotton trade in India during 1800s. The role of middle men in those days in western India was no different to any other agricultural region of India. In the words of Royle," the baneful influence of the middlemen is considered as the principal cause which impedes the extension and improvement of culture and cotton in western India, and which they characterise 'as the state of hopeless pecuniary bondage in which the *ryots* are kept from one generation to another to the *Wakarias* and village *Buniyas*. These middlemen make advances to the *ryots* to enable them to sow their cotton. They make their assessment and purchase the produce before it is gathered or more frequently before it is ripened and even some times before it is sown' (ibid, pg.30). It is fascinating to note that the scenarios depicted in the 1800s about the state of cotton farmer, the role of middlemen and traders is no different from the present condition of agriculture in general and cotton cultivation in particular.

4.1.4 British interventions to improve the cotton produce in India

Apart from commissioning studies to evaluate the conditions of cotton production in India, East India Company initiated a lot of experiments to improve

cotton production. Various activities were carried out during these experiments such as inquiries into the existing state of cotton cultivation, followed by distribution of the American seed to the farmers, establishment of government farms, bringing planters from America to India, and import of technology in the form of machines to clean, press and pack cotton. These efforts were supported by the co-operation of agricultural societies and individuals in different parts of India. The report mentions that these efforts did not yield much success as was the case with manufacture of indigo, sugar, preparation of silk and opium (ibid, pg.238).

East India Company (EIC) continued its experimentation regardless of failures and criticism as they realized that the increase in quality and quantity of Indian cotton will save them millions of pounds paid to the American traders. EIC considered experimentation as an investment for the benefit of a large population in England who were dependent on cotton industry.

The following table gives an insight into the efforts by the British to improve the cotton crop in the Indian subcontinent during 1788 and 1850.

S.no	Year	Various measures adopted by the British
1	1788	The court of Directors called for the attention of the Indian government to the cultivation of cotton in India, "with a view to affording every encouragement to its growth and improvement". 500000 lbs. weight of cotton was ordered to be sent. Reports were called for from the collectors of the districts.
2	1799	Nagpore cotton- seed directed to be tried in the Circars, and a bounty offered to the growers.
	1809	Cotton ordered from India. 30,000,000 lbs. received in the following year
	1811	Bourbon seed produced and distributed to collectors of Surat and Broach with directions for cultivation.
	1816	Drawback allowed of "whole internal and sea duties' on cotton exported to Great Britain.
	1818	Four Cotton Farms of 400 acres directed to be established at Tinnivelly, Coimbatore, Masulipatanam and Vizagapatanam.
	1829	The court direct attention to the growth of new and better species; send out machines for cleaning cotton; send out seeds of Upland Georgia and of New Orleans cotton; also Sea Island, Pernambuco, and Demerara cotton-seed, with accounts of methods of cultivation.
		Rewards to be offered both to Ryots and Wakarias for clean picking and cleaning.
		The Agricultural Society of India had an allowance of GBP 1000 a year, exclusive of rent until 1833, to attempt the culture of cotton. Rs.20, 000 allowed for premiums of cotton and tobacco.
	1839	The Court of Directors proposed undertaking a more complete experiment than any heretofore, by procuring

		planters from America.
		Capt. Bayles returned with ten planters from Cotton States of North America, bringing with him seeds and saw-gins ploughs and hoes with model of a gin-house.
	1841	Three planters, assigned to Bombay were sent to Broach, but shortly left India, Three planters were sent to Madras, first stationed at Tinnivelly, then at Coimbatore. Four planters, sent to Calcutta were stationed in the Doab and Bundelcund.
	1843	Mr. Price, an American Planter, employed to introduce American cotton into Bengal, had no success.
	1845	Cotton Committee appointed at Bombay to inquire into and report on causes of decline of cotton trade of India.
	1847	Ordered by the House of Commons to show what measures have been taken since 1836 to introduce the growth of American cotton, or to encourage the production of native cotton in India.
	1850	The India Government offers, through the Agricultural Society of India, a reward of Rs.5000 for an improved cotton cleaning machine

Table 4.1 Summary of measures adopted by the British to improve cotton cultivation in India. (Source: On the culture and commerce of Cotton in India and Elsewhere pgs. 86-90)

As it is evident from the table above, various initiatives were implemented by the British government to improve the supply of good quality cotton to their mills. As most of the indigenous cotton produced in India is consumed internally and some of it is also exported to China, British traders realized that introduction of American varieties for cultivation in India can meet their requirements. They bet on India while there was deficit in the American market. A regular supply of quality cotton also ensured them to maintain their superior position in the industry. Apart from introducing new varieties, the British also emphasized on better cleaning and packing of Indian cotton to suit the mills in England. One of the main complaints against Indian cotton was that it was laden with impurities and was not cleaned properly leading to a lot of wastage.

4.1.5 Difficulties in improving Indian cotton

Despite great efforts to improve the cotton crop in Indian sub-continent, the British had limited success. There were various reasons ascribed to this. One of the interesting reasons documented was resistance to any innovation that would challenge the socio-economic order of the society. Farmers in general and particularly Brahmins were opposed to any move to introduce changes in the traditional methods and ways. One such statement was recorded in the response of the district collector, replying to the question of cotton committee regarding the reluctance of *ryots* to shift to the American varieties of cotton. According to him, "*Ryot* has the greatest disinclination to every kind of innovation; it is not only that he has disinclination to change, but it is not in the interest of the Brahmin part of society to allow any innovation. He continues to say that Brahmins in southern Maratha were against improvements of any sort, even the introduction of new assessment, for the purpose of making reductions and removing inequalities" (ibid, pg. 95). This phenomenon of resistance is seen in other parts as well. In some other part of the country, the resistance to the conservation of the native varieties of cotton was led by Brahmins. Dr. Cleghorn, reports the resistance to the New Orleans seed variety when he distributed them in the villages of Mysore. He found that the Brahmins were

discouraging them as it would lead to the disappearance of the native plant and therefore “the evil eye” would befall upon them. He also mentions that to substantiate their prophecy, the Brahmins sent men in blanket cloaks in the night to uproot young plants in the fields (ibid. p.91).

The system of middlemen was reported as one of the most important reasons for the failure of British in improving Indian cotton. Middlemen did not pass benefits to the farmers and the cultivators were not very keen to adapt new seeds and techniques as they had little inducement to do anything. Middlemen who procured cotton from the farmers did not reward them for any efforts of improving the cotton. They were a shield between farmers and purchasers for the English market. Fluctuations in the American and European markets did not allow any permanent arrangements. Another important factor behind the failure of experiments to introduce new varieties of cotton was that the diverse soil and climatic conditions across India were never considered (ibid, p.115).

However there are success stories too of the nativisation of the American varieties introduced in some parts of India. In 1845 excellent cotton, from American seed was reported to have been cheaply produced in Dharwar on the southern Mahratta country because of the favourable climate. Local farmers sensing the success of the American variety of crop in the government farm adopted it. As the yield was larger, they increased cultivation. They received a better price even from the native weavers.

Indian cotton exported by the East Indian Company during 1840-50 varied in quality as it was obtained from different districts. Though all of it was short stapled¹¹, and generally sent in a dirty state to the market, it was valued for its colour. Large quantities of Indian cotton were bought only when the price of the American cotton was high. The varieties of cotton were known by the names of *Surats*, *Madras* and *Bengal*. *Surats* was often used as a general term for Indian cottons. All these varieties belonged to the *Gossypium indicum*. The cotton produced in the areas of Surat, Broach and Berar was included under the name

¹¹ The length of the fibre is an important characteristic of cotton. Long stapled cotton is considered superior in its quality over the short stapled cotton.

of Surat. Cotton from these areas was highly valued by the British traders. The other cotton which are usually of good quality were from Cutch, Candeish, cotton of Coompta produced in the Southern Mahratta country and Berar. Madras variety included cottons of Salem, Coimbatore and Tinnivelly, which were of higher value than the cottons of Bellary, Guntoor and Ceded districts.¹² Bengal cottons included those from the north-west provinces, from Bundelcund, Nagpur and Berar (ibid, pg. 131).

The experimental sites of the East Indian company stretched out across the provinces of the country including Bengal, north western India, Goruckpore, Doab and Bundelcund, Agra, Jullundur Doab, Saugar and Nerbudda territories, Nagpur Territories, Nizam territories, Shorapore, Bombay Presidency, Deccan, Dharwar, Belgaum, Candeish, Madras Presidency, Mysore, and Northern circars.

4.1.6 Cotton Production in India – World Wars

Both World War I and II had a decisive impact on cotton production in the Indian subcontinent. The total world production of cotton in 1914 before the World War I was about 22.5 million bales of lint. The highest contribution was from USA at 15 million bales¹³ and next was Indian contribution at about 4-5 million bales-- almost all of it being native short stapled cotton (Santhanam & Sundaram, 2008).

During the post war years, there was an increase in the local consumption of the US cotton by their textile industry. This resulted in severe shortage of raw materials for the British mills. Therefore the British Empire was more desperate to promote the cultivation of long stapled cotton in large areas in India. Building on their earlier efforts to improve quality of cotton in India, the Governor General setup “The Indian Cotton Committee” in 1917. It was headed by Mr. J McKenna, agriculture advisor to the government of India and six other members. The main

¹² Area in the Deccan region comprising of present day Bellary, Davanagere districts of Karnataka and Cudapah, Kurnool and Anantapur districts in Andhra Pradesh, which were ceded by the Nizam in 1796 to the East India company's Madras Presidency in exchange of protection from Marthas invasions.

¹³ One bale = 326.58 kilograms

task assigned to them was to explore the possibility of extending the long-stapled cotton in India.

McKenna's report had detailed description of cotton varieties, areas cultivated, production and staple length for all the provinces including Burma. They identified the total land where cotton was being cultivated to about 9.3 million hectares, out of which 95% comprised of native *arboreum* and *herbaceum* varieties (Mackenna, 1919). Along with recommendations around improving the quality and quality of the cotton in India, McKenna committee realized the importance of commercial aspects of cotton trade. The committee recommended the establishment of a Central Cotton Committee to be setup at Bombay on a permanent basis. This was setup in 1921 in the capacity of Technical Advisory Body to the Government. Indian Central Cotton Committee (ICCC) became a statutory body in 1923 by legislation. Cess levied on the cotton consumed locally or exported and the funds thus collected were spent by ICCC for promoting research on cotton.

Cotton production in India was under decline during World War II and Partition of India and Pakistan. During World War II, there was an increased need of food grains. Therefore food production was given a priority over growing commercial crops such as cotton. Partition of India and Pakistan is another important event that influenced cotton cultivation in India. Partition of the country led to most cotton producing areas in northern India, having irrigation facilities being on the Pakistani side.

4.1.7 Cotton and the Indian freedom movement



Figure 4.1 Gandhi and his spinning wheel.

As was discussed in the sections above, cotton was one of the primary reasons for the establishment of colonial British rule in India. In later years, cotton also played a key role in its fight against British colonialism / imperialism, in the form of *khaddar / khadi*, a home spun coarse textile. Interestingly, Mohandas Karamchand Gandhi, the leader of Indian freedom movement, popularly known as Mahatma Gandhi used the very same cotton as a symbol of resistance to subvert the authority of the British. He recognized the symbolic potential of *khadi* that emerged out of his personal experience and growing nationalist awareness. The term *Khadi* is inclusive of the pre-fabric stages of growing cotton and processing. Gandhi used *Khadi* as a visual symbol of Indian freedom struggle to unify and bring about a social and economic order of village based self-sustenance, which he calls *Grama Swarajya*. “To Gandhi, *khadi* was more than simply cloth. It was the material embodiment of an ideal. It represented not only freedom from the yoke of colonialism, but also economic self-sufficiency, political independence, spiritual humility, moral purity, national integrity, communal unity, social equality, the end of un-touchability and the embracing of non-violence (Tarlo, 1996).” Gandhi was trying to achieve unification of the society and build a collective resistance to the British by projecting defiance against colonial rule and rejecting modernity and its material base. Gandhi’s idea of *Khadi* went beyond the common notion of clothing. He used it as a

symbol of unification through promoting ideas of independence, dignity and harmony in eco-political, psycho-cultural, and socio-religious domains. It was for him “a symbol of unity of Indian humanity, economic freedom and equality”. However, Gandhi was not successful in taking the unification further as he could not expunge caste-based inequalities reflected in the quality of *Khadi* (Gonsalves, 2012).

Fisher, in his autobiographical work documents Gandhi’s observations on British exploitation of raw material from India for their economic benefit. He identified the following steps in the British economic exploitation of Indian cotton.

Step 1. English people buy Indian cotton in the field, picked by Indian labour at seven cents a day, through an optional monopoly

Step 2. This cotton is shipped on British ships, a three-week journey across the Indian Ocean, down the Red Sea, across the Mediterranean, through Gibraltar, across the Bay of Biscay and the Atlantic Ocean to London. One hundred per cent profit on this freight is regarded as small.

Step 3. The cotton is turned into cloth in Lancashire. You pay shilling wages instead of Indian pennies to your workers. The English worker not only has the advantage of better wages, but the steel companies of England get the profit of building the factories and machines. Wages, profits, all these are spent in England.

Step 4. The finished product is sent back to India at European shipping rates, once again on British ships. The captains, officers, sailors of these ships, whose wages must be paid, are English. The only Indians who profit are a few lascars who do the dirty work on the boats for few cents a day.

Step 5. The cloth is finally sold back to the kings and landlords of India who had the money to buy.

One of the main objectives of Gandhi was to revive the native cotton textile industry destroyed by the machinations of the British East India Company and British government. The economic exploitation of the British instigated Gandhi to propose a model to revive the Indian village economy towards self-sufficiency and at the same time target the economic base of the British. In the words of Gandhi, "I feel convinced that the revival of hand-spinning and hand weaving will make the largest contribution to the economic and moral regeneration of India. The millions must have a simple industry to supplement agriculture. Spinning was the cottage industry years ago, and if millions are to be saved from starvation, they must be enabled to reintroduce spinning in their homes and every village must repossess its own weaver(Fischer, 1997)."

Gandhi's idea was to elevate the activity of spinning cotton to a spiritual status to appeal to the large Hindu population. He found it an effective medium to encourage large masses of the country towards *khadi*. He mentioned, "If we have the '*khadi* spirit' in us, we would surround ourselves with simplicity in every walk of life. The '*khadi* spirit' means illimitable patience. For those who know anything about the production of *khadi* know how patiently the spinners and weavers have to toil at their trade, and even so must we have patience while we are spinning 'the thread of Swaraj'. The '*khadi* spirit' means also an equally illimitable faith. Even as the spinner toiling away at the yarn he spins by itself is small enough, put in the aggregate, would be enough to clothe every human being in India, so must we have illimitable faith in truth and non-violence ultimately conquering every obstacle in our way. The '*khadi* spirit' means fellow-feeling with every human being on earth. It means a complete renunciation of everything that is likely to harm our fellow creatures, and if we but cultivate that spirit amongst the millions of our countrymen, what a land this India of ours would be! And the more I move about the country and the more I see the things for myself, the richer, the stronger is my faith growing in the capacity of the spinning wheel" (Gonsalves, 2012).

4.2 Cotton in the post-independent era

Cotton continued to be an important commercial crop during the post independent times. Indian Central Cotton Committee established by the British continued to play a large role in rolling out research and development schemes in collaboration with various state governments. ICCC was replaced by All Indian Coordinated Cotton Improvement Project (AICCIP) in 1967, led by Indian council for agricultural research (ICAR) with a mandate of all crop sciences research. The infrastructure for cotton research further received a boost with the establishment of the Central Institute for Cotton Research (CICR) at Nagpur in 1976. Research and development activities for development of high yielding, long stapled varieties, continued in the recent years through agencies like Cotton Corporation of India, Indian Cotton Mills Federation and development wings of the Textile Industries Association.

An important landmark in the history of cotton production in post-independent India was the development of a first ever commercial cotton hybrid, known as Hybrid-4 (Sankar-4), in 1970, by a cotton scientist Dr.C.T.Patel at the Surat agricultural experimental station at the Gujarat Agricultural University. This variety which was grown in Gujarat and Maharashtra became highly successful because of its adaptability and yielding quality fiber in double the quantity than other varieties (Santhanam & Sundaram, 2008).

During 1970 and 80s, public sector research agencies, funded and managed by the government of India focused on developing hybrids to suit the different agro and geo-climatic regions of the country. The success stories of the hybrids produced in the public sector and wide up-take by the farmers across the country attracted private sector to the business of developing cotton seeds for commercial purposes. The first cotton hybrid to be developed in the private sector at a commercial scale was MECH 11 by Maharashtra Hybrid Corporation (Mahyco) in 1979. However, it was not until 1990s that other private seed companies started to produce and market cotton hybrids. (ibid, pg.13)

Though the public sector led the production of the cotton hybrids initially, it was superseded by the private sector very soon. They saw an opportunity for

business as the seed from the hybrid-seeded crops could not be used as the seeds of native varieties, because of the reduction in the yield. Farmers had to inevitably procure seeds for the market.

Several factors helped the rise of private sector in the cotton seed market during the 1990s. Their growth is attributed to technology diffusion and learning. Private sector has better marketing strategies as they have produced cotton varieties bred by the public sector, attracting retired public sector breeders with good salary packages, developing early duration hybrids as against middle to late duration varieties produced by the public sector and effective resource allocation for development of their own proprietary hybrids as selling hybrids developed in the public sector offers lesser margins (Murugkar, Ramaswami, & Shelar, 2007).

First, the giant corporations began to control the local seed companies leading to seed monopoly. Second, transfer of seeds as the intellectual property of few corporate companies generated profits through royalty payments and pushed the farmers into debts. Third, seed was being transformed from a regenerative resource to a non-renewable commodity. The progress of this is evident in the development of hybrids, genetically modified seed and terminator seeds. These technologies perpetuate non-renewability, compelling the farmers to buy seeds every season. Fourth, imposing regulations on seeds and varieties being produced by the farmers all these centuries and deregulation or self-regulation and patenting of the seeds being produced by the corporate companies. Fifth, corporate seeds impose monocultures on farmers replacing mixed cropping (Shiva, 2008).

4.3 Genetically modified crops- cotton - India

The human desire to conquer nature by extracting maximum benefits from other natural beings has resulted in what Darwin calls “artificial selection” (Darwin, 2003). The idea of selective breeding has been put to use by humans in both animals and plants.

While the hybrids were targeted for better yielding varieties of cotton, Bt Cotton was a response to the increased pest infestations of cotton plants. Introduction

of genetically modified Bt cotton in India has created a large debate on its advantages and disadvantages. The history of Bt cotton in India during 1990 and 2010 is summarized in the tables below.

Bt Cotton: Importation and bio-safety Regulation	
Year	Key Events
1990	Monsanto refused permission to back cross Bollgard into Local varieties to get Bt Cotton
1996	Mahyco ¹⁴ was given permission to import and back cross Bollgard into Local varieties to get Bt Cotton
April-May 1998	Monsanto acquires 26% stake in Mahyco
27 July and 5 August 1998	Mahyco was given permission to plant Bt cotton
June- July 1998	Bt cotton planted (in AP, Karnataka, Haryana Punjab and Maharashtra)
15 July 1998, 2 nd December 1998	Statements from the ministry of Agriculture: No terminator genes present in Bt cotton
16 November 1998	Bt-Cotton trails become public knowledge
Terminator Technology	
March 1998	Rural Advancement Foundation International, a Canadian organization, exposed the details of terminator genes.
June 1998	Publicity in Indian Press
29 December 1998	US Department of Agriculture files patent plea for terminator gene in India
Cotton Farming in Andhra Pradesh	
1980s	Extension into non-traditional areas
1997, 1998, 1999	Farmer suicides in Warangal district, 500 deaths by May 1999
Protest against Mahyco-Monsanto Field Trials	
28 November 1998	Burning of Bt cotton crop trial field in

¹⁴ Maharashtra Hybrid Seeds Company Limited, a private seed company founded in 1964 is one of the largest in India with both national and international collaborations.

	Karnataka
2 December 1998	Burning of Bt cotton crop trial field in Warangal district of Andhra Pradesh

Table.4.2 Timeline of Bt Cotton in India. (source: Bt- Cotton in India: Anatomy of Controversy, Geetha Bharathan, Current Science, Vol.79, No.8, 25 October 2007)

As is evident from the above table, Monsanto, an America based multinational corporation (MNC) was pioneer in introducing Bt cotton into India. The government of India gave approval for commercial cultivation of Bt cotton in 2002, after successful field trials by the regulatory authorities, review of bio-safety data and unofficial cultivation of Bt Cotton in some areas of the country in 2001.

Bt Cotton rapidly spread across the county with MNCs aggressively marketing their seeds to the farmers. The rapid progress of the Bt cotton propagation in the country since 2000 is tabulated below:

Year	Activity
2000	Mahyco is given permission to conduct large scale field trails of Bt Cotton including seed production in six states
2001	Genetic Engineering Approval Committee (GEAC) extends field trials by another year. Mahyco conducts field trials in 100 hectares in seven states. Illegal Bt cotton plantations were discovered over thousands of hectares in Gujarat. Source of seeds are traced back to Navabharat seeds, a company that used Bt cotton event (MON 531) illegally imported from US.
2002	Department of Biotechnology (DBT) declares that the field trials of Bt cotton were satisfactory and GEAC and Ministry of Environment and Forests (MoEF) can decide on a date for commercial release. GEAC approves the use of MON 531(Bollgard I) in three Mahyco Bt cotton hybrids after taking into account their performances in field trials.
2004	GEAC approved a fourth hybrid transformed with MON 531
2005	GEAC approves 16 more hybrids transformed with MON 531
2006	GEAC approves three events: MON 15985 (Bollgard II) from Monsanto, Event 1 from the Indian company JK Seeds, and GFM event using a Chinese gene from Nath Seeds. 42 additional hybrids

	are approved.
2007	GEAC approves 73 more hybrids transformed with one of the four events.

Table 4.3. Progress of Bt Cotton approvals in India. (Source: Gruère, G. P., P. Mehta-Bhatt, and D. Sengupta. 2008.)

4.4 Cotton and Multinational Companies

One of the most important aspects of the history of cotton is the involvement of the Dutch and English East India companies, which are considered as precursors to the current multinational companies. EIC in particular, benefiting from the profits created by cotton trade, strengthened itself to control vast areas of Indian continent. This model of business control and colonization is emulated by the modern day MNCs albeit in a more sophisticated way.

This part of the chapter deals with the power of a few multinational corporations like Syngenta, Monsanto, and Bayers that control cotton production all over the world. Monsanto is an important player in determining the history of cotton in India. It is credited to have introduced Bt Cotton into India. Brand Monsanto is identified with high yielding varieties of cotton and maize, herbicides, and as an aggressive marketer, lobbying through unethical means of influence and with farmer suicides in India. I have discussed the impact of aggressive marketing strategies of MNCs in another chapter. In this section I shall focus on the history of Monsanto to illustrate the influence of globalization being realized through neoliberal policies adapted by the State.

Monsanto was established in 1901 by John Francis Queeny, a chemist. He started the company with a personal loan of \$5000 to produce saccharine, and is now worth billions of dollars. Monsanto transformed itself overtime responding to the business opportunities of the times. Since its inception, with in a period of few decades, it grew into the largest chemical company of the twentieth century that produces highly toxic chemicals. Monsanto made its empire by producing chemical compounds like polychlorinated biphenyl (PCBs), dioxins which were used to manufacture Agent Orange an infamous defoliant used by the American military in the Vietnam war, DDT, Aspartame and bovine growth hormone. In recent years it took to the development of Genetically

Modified Organisms (GMOs) by applying principles of biotechnology to plants. Genetic modification involves altering the genetic material of organisms through genetic engineering techniques.

Monsanto was the first company to take up genetic modification of plants, field test and release the seeds for commercial markets. Monsanto successfully introduced genes from soil bacterium *Bacillus Thuringiensis* into Cotton, Maize, Potatoes and Soya to produce these GMOs on a commercial scale. Scientists and institutions working on genetic modification among plants maintain that this would increase the productivity of plants, reduce susceptibility to pests therefore reducing the quantity of pesticides being applied. They argue that this technology is in principle similar to genealogical selection practiced by farmers over centuries.

Monsanto bought agricultural seed companies across the world to emerge as the largest company producing seeds, to deal with the patent timelines of their products and to deal with growing competition from other biotech companies. Monsanto was successful in officially announcing the release of their first roundup (a glyphosphate herbicide widely used across the continent) resistant soybean seeds in 1993. During the same time Monsanto was in discussion with Mahyco seeds, the biggest seed producing company of India to form a joint venture. In 1998 they floated a joint venture Mahyco-Monsanto Biotech (MMB), which sub-licensed Bt technology to other Indian seed companies.

MMB introduced Bt cotton seeds through their dealers across the country, subsequent to the government's approval to conduct field trials. The government of Andhra Pradesh was the first state in India that approved the sale of genetically modified Bt cotton seeds in 2002. MMB aggressively promoted Bt Cotton seeds leading to a massive uptake among farmers growing cotton. Incidentally there was a spurt of suicides among the small and marginal cotton farmers in some parts of the state in the same year. Civil society organizations working on farmers' issues conducted field studies in various cotton regions of the state with a primary objective of establishing the veracity of

MMB's claims that Bt cotton gave higher yields and benefited the farmers. The details of the study conducted are mentioned in the literature review presented in chapter 1. Findings from these studies forced the government of Andhra Pradesh to conduct an independent enquiry to look into the plight of cotton farmers in the state. Results from the government commissioned field studies corroborated with the findings of civil society groups, pointing at the failure of Bt cotton seeds in producing high yields. In response to these damning reports which raised questions about efficacy of the seeds produced by them, Monsanto sought help from scientists who published success stories of Bt cotton in academic journals. However, this did not stop the Andhra Pradesh state government to direct Monsanto and Mahyco to pay compensation to the tune of 4.5 crores rupees to the farmers under the purview of Protection of Plant varieties and Farmers rights act, as they failed the farmers on the promises of better yield. Mahyco and Monsanto failed to comply with the state orders and the government retaliated by enforcing a ban on three varieties of cotton seeds produced by them in 2005. There were wide spread protests in the state against Monsanto for not paying compensation to the farmers. Conflict between the state government and Monsanto escalated in the forthcoming year. The government of Andhra Pradesh (GoAP) decided to regulate the prices of Bt cotton seeds fixed by Monsanto and Mahyco. GoAP wanted the price to be reduced from Rs.1850, to Rs.750, for a 450gms sachet of seeds being sold in USA and China. As the company did not respond favourably, the agricultural ministry of GoAP approached the Monopolies and Restrictive Trade practices Commission, which looks into monopoly and commercial pricing of products. After a protracted resistance, Monsanto and Mahyco had to comply and reduce the price of cotton seeds in the state. While this was happening in Andhra Pradesh, about 90% of the cotton growers in India shifted to Bt cotton because of the propaganda of Bt cotton as a panacea for their problems. I have discussed these media strategies of the MNCs and how they influence popular culture, farmers and policy makers in chapter 6.

Similar stories of Bt cotton failure in states like Maharashtra, Karnataka, Madhya Pradesh and Chhattisgarh and increase in suicides rates among farmers have been reported. While most of the civil society organisations

associated suicides among farmers to the introduction of Bt Cotton, there were competing studies to disprove that. This is discussed in detail in the next chapter on farmer suicides.

Meanwhile, there was growing resistance among the pests for the toxins being produced by the Bt cotton plants. But by then, because of the propaganda adopted by different strategies, Monsanto and Mahyco emerged as the largest Bt cotton seed supplier in the country. According to the current estimates, Monsanto and Mahyco control about 90% of the seed market in the entire country.

4.5 Conclusion

Cotton played an important role in different phases of Indian history. This chapter shows how cotton interspersed with the prevalent political, socio-cultural and economic facets of the lives of the people. Cotton plant since its evolution from the wild varieties catered to the local population. It soon rose to a position dictating the economy of various nations across the globe.

Cotton has competed with other commercial crops and emerged stronger with advanced scientific techniques being used to propagate it. Cotton cultivation currently involves technological changes which can have immense ecological influence. Technological advancement gave capitalist nations and MNCs to gain control on cotton cultivation. Cotton is being used to mediate neoliberal policies in the era of globalisation. Excessive use of fertilizers and chemicals led to changes in the composition of soil where the crop is cultivated. In rain fed areas, cotton is competing with humans and other species of plants and animals for scarce ground water resources. The study attempts to explore the agency of the assemblage of cotton, soil, water and chemical fertilizers (Bennett, Cooper, & Dobson, 2010) and their impact on the human wellbeing.

Chapter 5

Agriculture, Ecology and Wellbeing

The uptake of cotton cultivation across India is part of larger project of agricultural modernisation in India. This chapter focuses on how the initiatives such as green revolution and gene revolution as a part of modernizing agriculture affect the wellbeing of farmers in rural areas of India. Data on knowledge and perceptions of farmers on agrochemicals, Bt cotton and its perceived toxicity, local ecology, alternative practices and health impact is analysed in a broad framework of wellbeing is adapted which includes individual subjectivity in the context of family, community and society and a range of environmental, geographic, socio-economic and political factors (La Placa, McNaught, & Knight, 2013).

The key questions addressed in this chapter are:

1. How did agriculture evolve in India?
2. What is the impact of modernisation of agriculture?
3. What is the ecological impact of large scale cotton cultivation?
4. How does modernisation of agriculture impact the wellbeing of the rural community?
5. What can be done to turn toxic landscape into healing landscapes?

5.1 Agriculture in India

India is largely an agricultural nation. Majority of the population (56.6%) are dependent on agriculture and allied occupations for their livelihood (Census 2011). Due to various factors, Indian agriculture production during post-independence period fell short of the country's needs. Extreme drought prevailed in most parts of the country during mid-1960, forcing Indian government to import grain from United States (Fitzgerald-Moore and Parai 1996). Existing global development paradigms promoted application of science and technology to agriculture as a solution to this food crisis (Davies, 2003). There was a lot of debate to modernise Indian agriculture after independence, which until then was largely limited to subsistence based crops and practices.

As food stocks of the country were depleting and threats of famine were looming, India had to seek external help in improving agricultural practices to generate more output. Indian government adopted the Green Revolution (GR) during the 1960s in collaboration with international governments and development agencies (Sebby, 2010). This involved introduction of water management practices, agro-chemicals, mechanisation, high yielding varieties¹⁵ (HYV) of rice and wheat, and provision of credits (Parayil, 1992). GR transformed traditional subsistence based farming in India into a capital intensive, modern, surplus producing agriculture. GR technology drastically increased overall food grain production by 140% over the period 1960-2000 (Davies, 2003; INSA, 2001).

Though GR is credited to have increased the output of the crops immensely, the spread and application of GR had an asymmetrical impact on the farming community across the country. The GR technology principally benefited large farmers who had access to input investment, information and resources, and state support (Sebby, 2010). One of the key features of GR was the introduction of HYV. Several morphological traits were introduced in HYV of rice and wheat resulting in shorter height of the plants, photo period insensitivity, reduction in growth duration, and greater pest and disease resistance. Despite these changes, HYV depended on large quantities of nitrogenous fertilisers for generating expected crop outputs. Without these fertilisers, the produce from HYV was considerably lesser than indigenous varieties (Shiva, 1991).

For about four decades after GR, increase in crop yields corresponded with increased fertiliser and pesticide usage (Pimental, 1996). Long term application of high quantities of fertiliser led to a decrease in natural soil fertility. Eventually the crop returns from GR came down as increased application of fertilisers did not result in corresponding yields. Narrow genetic based varieties of HYV of rice and wheat and mono-cropping led to high vulnerability to pests and diseases. Continuous application of pesticides also led to resistance among pests. This resulted in excessive dependence on pesticides to limit crop loss (Shiva, 1991)

¹⁵High-yielding varieties are defined as short, high yield producing early maturing types in comparison to traditional varieties, under intensive agricultural practices including ensured irrigation and application of chemical fertilizers.(Parayil, 1992)

resulting in a drastic increase of pesticide use in India-- 154 metric tonnes in 1954 to 88,000 metric tonnes in 2000 (Mathur, Agarwal, Johnson, & Saikia, 2005).

5.2 Pesticides and Wellbeing

Excessive usage of pesticides affects human and animal health; causes loss of biodiversity, degradation of natural ecosystem and irreversible changes in the environment (M. Khan, 2012; Pimental, 1996). The impact includes: 1. Health impairment due to direct or indirect contact, 2. Contamination of water, both surface and ground, 3. Circulation of pesticide residue in the food chain, 4. Resistance among the pests, 5. Elimination of beneficial organisms, such as insects and birds that are natural predators of the pests and 6. Reduction in micro-organisms which maintain soil fertility (Pingali & Roger, 1995).

Pesticide poisoning resulted in fatal and non-fatal illnesses together with contamination of food. It is estimated that more than 800,000 people may have died in developing countries due to exposure to pesticides since the onset of green revolution (Gupta 2010). Pesticide poisoning is a major public health concern in India.

More than 80% of staple food such as rice and wheat in India are found to have high levels of pesticides in some areas resulting in contamination of breast milk with higher pesticide dosages than the WHO recommended levels, putting infants at high risk (Ashok Kumar, Baroth, Soni, Bhatnagar, & John, 2006; Mishra & Sharma, 2011; Nair, Mandapati, Dureja, & Pillai, 1996; Rai, Dua, & Chopra, 2012; B. Singh, 1993). About 32% of bovine milk samples collected from 12 Indian states have shown residues of Dichloro Diphenyl Trichloroethane (DDT) above the tolerance limit of 0.05% mg/kg (Aktar, Sengupta, & Chowdhury, 2009). High levels of DDT have also been reported from the samples of maternal blood, breast milk and cord blood collected from mothers and infants (Nair et al., 1996).

Farmers are regularly exposed to pesticides in their efforts to protect crops from pests. This can result in chronic ailments such as cardiopulmonary disorders, neurological and skin disorders, foetal deformities, miscarriages and lowering of sperm count (Bag, 2000). Chronic low dose of pesticides toxicity among

humans and animals can have carcinogenic, teratogenic, mutagenic, immunotoxic, immunopathological and neuropathic effects (Chauhan & Singhal, 2006). Most women and children in rural areas are also exposed to such pesticides. Women who work in the fields take part in agricultural activities like mixing pesticides, disposal, washing the containers, weeding and harvesting. Such activities increase their contact with pesticides and adversely impact their health (London et al., 2002). Commonly used pesticides are known to have potential health consequences such as disruption of hormonal function, effect on fertility, spontaneous abortion, still births, premature birth, low birth weight and developmental defects among children (Bretveld, Thomas, Scheepers, Zielhuis, & Roeleveld, 2006). In utero exposure and early exposure to pesticides amongst children increases their susceptibility to lymphoma, mutagenesis, birth defects like cleft lip, limb reduction and neural tube reduction (Mathur et al. 2005). Tests on children exposed to Endosulphan (a broad spectrum pesticide) in Kerala, a southern Indian state, showed delayed puberty and low levels of serum testosterone (Saiyed et al., 2003).

Pesticide use for deliberate self-harm has been identified as an important public health issue worldwide (David Gunnell, Eddleston, Phillips, & Konradsen, 2007; Jeyaratnam, 1990; Mohamed et al., 2009). In India, most agricultural families store pesticides at their homes. Easy access to pesticides resulted in high pesticide usage for deliberate self-harm (Sohini Banerjee et al., 2009; Chowdhury, Banerjee, Brahma, & Weiss, 2007; Chowdhury, Sanyal, Dutta, & Weiss, 2003; Kiran, Shobharani, Jaiprakash, & Vanaja, 2008; Srinivas Rao, Venkateswarlu, Surender, Eddleston, & Buckley, 2005; Zadoks & Waibel, 2000).

5.3 Environmental impact of GR and Cotton

Excessive usage of agro-chemicals (fertilisers, herbicides and pesticides) are known to cause environmental damage. Implementation of the GR led to environmental degradation in many ways: i. Monoculture¹⁶ led to the extinction of the native germ plasm and loss of genetic diversity, ii. Increased plant vulnerability to pests; iii. Long term usage of fertilisers led to increased levels of

¹⁶ Mono culture refers to the practice of cultivating a single variety of crop in all seasons instead of crop rotation.

nitrates and phosphates reducing oxygen in water; iv. Declining water table; vi. Soil erosion; vii. Deforestation; and vii. Exploitation of fossil fuels (Chamala, 1990).

Most of these agrochemicals remain as residues in the environment. They infiltrate soil and water thus getting into the food chain. Tests for pesticide contamination of water from various rivers in India have shown to contain traces of agrochemicals higher than permissible levels (Kumarasamy, Govindaraj, Vignesh, Babu Rajendran, & Arthur James, 2012; Kumari, Sinha, Gopal, & Lata, 2002; Malik, Singh, & Ojha, 2007; Malik, Verma, Singh, & Singh, 2004; Muralidharan et al., 2007; Rajendran, Imagawa, Tao, & Ramesh, 2005; Ramesh, Tanabe, Murase, Subramanian, & Tatsukawa, 1991; Rehana, Malik, & Ahmad, 1995; Subramanian, Madhavan, Saxena, & Lundin, 2003).

Tests conducted on food products grown in India have shown traces of chemicals pesticides. Similarly fruits, vegetables, milk, fish, bottled water and processed foods such as sugar, jams, jellies have all been found to have residues of pesticides above the maximum residue levels (Tholkappain and Rajendran 2011; Roshini 2003; CSE 2006; Martin 2013).

Increasing global concerns about pesticide residues and their health impact led to a ban on grain import from India (Jagannathan 2010; Down to Earth 2007; Sally 2013). India experienced one of the worst human made environmental disasters in 1984 following a gas leak from a pesticide factory. A MNC was given licence by the Indian government for production and storage of extremely hazardous isocyanates and diisocyanates. The possible hazards of these chemicals were well known. Despite that, neither the MNC nor the Indian government were prepared for any eventual mishap (V. Das, 2000). This led to the death of 20,000 people and 200,000 more were exposed to poisonous Methyl Isocyanate in the Indian city of Bhopal (Varma & Varma, 2005).

The returns from the GR started to diminish from the 1980's. Dwindling returns from the staple crops together with State encouragement led farmers shift to cash crop activity. This led to increased acreage of cash crops grown for producing bio-fuels, cotton, sugarcane, soya, flowers, fruits and medicinal and aromatic plants. This shift also led to an increased role of corporate sector in

developing and introducing new technologies into agriculture and resulting alignment with the global market (Gulati, 2009).

It has been suggested that India is witnessing second GR-- sometimes also called as Gene Revolution-- with the introduction of GM Bt cotton (Kumbamu, 2006). Introduction of Genetically modified crops add a new dimension to the issue of toxicity of the landscapes. At a broader level, GM crops raise ethical, environmental and health concerns. Environmental concerns due to these crops include: i. development of super weeds because of genetic transfer to wild species; ii. Resistance among pests, and iii. harm to other organisms in nature (Dale, Clarke, & Fontes, 2002).

While the pesticide use on cotton has reduced, there are larger concerns of resistance to pests, emergence of secondary pests, increasing pesticide usage, decreasing genetic diversity by promoting mono-cropping, escalating seed costs that benefit large farmers (Stone, 2011).

The outspread of GR varied over the agro-climatic zones of A.P State. The early phase was largely confined to resource rich coastal region. In more recent periods farmers from the semi-arid, rain fed areas adopted GR practices and cultivated high value commercial crops (Galab.S, Revathi.E, & Reddy, 2009). Larger patterns of agrarian transition in the country are reflected in the changing crop profile of A.P. State. Farmers during 1979-82 and 1998-02 shifted from cultivating food grains to commercial crops such as oil seeds, sugar cane, chillies and cotton. Small and marginal farmers shifted from subsistence farming to commercial farming thus exposing themselves to risks of the market (Bhat et al., 2006).

The prevailing agrarian crisis in the country has resulted in farmer suicides. Adverse climatic conditions, failure of cotton crop, and growing debts in the rain-fed cotton growing regions of Andhra Pradesh (A.P), Maharashtra and Madhya Pradesh States led to suicides among cotton farmers. According to National Crime Records Bureau (NCRB), the number of suicides in these regions amount to 68% of the total 284,694 farmer suicides during the period 1995-2012 (Sainath 2013). Data from NCRB show that during 1995-2012, AP state reported 35,898 farmer suicides. Suicides among farmers were first reported

from AP during mid-1980's, became persistent since mid-1990s (Galab.S et al., 2009) and continue to rise (Sainath, 2013a). The conditions of cotton farmers and suicides continue unabated. 2,572 farmers in A.P State killed themselves in the year 2012 (Ramoo, 2013).

After the failure of hybrid varieties owing to their vulnerability to pests, genetically modified Bt Cotton was introduced in AP around 2002. Farmers switched to growing Bt cotton rapidly. A.P State leads cotton cultivation in the southern region with 18.79 lakh ha in 2011-12 (CCI, 2013). Bt cotton was aggressively promoted by MNC's who projected high financial returns because of higher yields and reduction in pesticide costs (Sainath, 2012). There are competing claims on the effectiveness of Bt cotton.

Some of the key problems identified in cotton cultivation that led to diminishing yield and distress in A.P State are: i. multiplicity of cotton hybrids, ii. Mono-cropping, iii. Extensive use of chemical fertilisers leading to soil imbalance, iv. Excessive chemical pesticide, v. spurious seeds, fertilisers and pesticides, vi. Adverse climatic conditions (Gopalakrishnan, Manickam, and Prakash 2007). These factors along with drought, increasing input costs, indebtedness caused due to high interest rates for loans from non-formal credit sources, government policy on subsidies and import, and promotion of cotton varieties unsuitable to market conditions drove affected farmers to commit suicide (Cariappa & Cariappa, 2004).

5.4 Farmers perception of Pesticides & Bt Cotton

1. Bt Cotton: Alien and Toxic

Discussion on the introduction of Bt cotton elicited varied and contradictory responses. Farmers had different opinions regarding the efficacy of Bt cotton and its impact on the environment. Most of them mentioned a reduction in the quantity of pesticides and frequency of spraying pesticides. They added that cotton was prone to other pests and justified the continued use of pesticides. Interestingly, for most of the farmers and their families, the concept of Bt cotton meant there was a toxic (*visham*) foreign entity inserted into the cotton plant.

This makes the cotton impure. They do not use cotton from the Bt plants for making wicks used to light lamps for religious worship, this suggest local cultural resistance to the Gene revolution.

“In my family, we do not use Bt cotton for lighting the god’s lamp. The wick made of this cotton burns faster with a black soot. It smells also. People say there is something mixed in it. We grow some cotton in the back yard from the seeds we got from our relatives. It is even difficult to get pure cotton seeds these days.” (F4, 55 yrs, FGD2)

“Bt cotton stalk can’t be used for cooking. It generates a lot of smoke and burns very fast. So we do not use it as firewood for cooking.” (F3, 32 years old, woman, interview with agriculture labourer)

Some villagers, who are shepherds by profession, mentioned they are careful about not allowing their sheep to graze in the Bt Cotton fields as they felt that grass in those fields was toxic. They mentioned that earlier, farmers used to shelter sheep in their farms during the fallow period so that the sheep dung would organically rejuvenate the soil.

“We have heard of cattle dying after eating Bt. [cotton]. As far I know there are no instances in our village. But as a protective measure, we do not allow the cattle to graze in the Bt cotton field, but it is everywhere... so we graze our sheep and goats in areas further away, where there is grazing land...” (50 years, Male, Shepherd, questions on Bt cotton effect on Sheep, Interview notes)

“No farmer wants to have sheep shelters in their farms. Everyone uses fertilisers now. Farmers want to grow as much they can from their fields. They do not keep the land fallow for it to rejuvenate. This I think will eventually deplete all the goodness of the soil.” (45 years, Male, Shepherd, questions about changing agricultural practices, Interview notes).

Some small farmers fearing bollworm infestation sprayed insecticides in increased quantities, mixed different pesticides in various ratios, often as a preventive measure. However, other pests like sucking fly and white insects increased. This led to increased use of pesticide.

“One should agree that Bt Cotton changed the pesticide scenario. Earlier we regularly sprayed huge quantities of pesticides. Now it has reduced. The money spent on the quantity of pesticides is decreased. However the new pesticides are more concentrated, can be used in smaller quantities, more powerful, but expensive too. (M3, 40 yrs, Male cotton Farmer, FGD1; response to questions on Bt cotton and pesticide)

“Even after Bt farmers are forced to spend money on pesticides because of other pests. White flies and sucking pests cause more harm now. Farmers spray pesticides sometimes as a preventive measure. They see their neighbours spraying and they do it too even if it is not required. The anxiety of losing crops pushes them to do so. (M6, 48 yrs, Male cotton Farmer, FGD1; response to questions on impact of agrochemicals on environment).

“I think the power of Bt cotton is reducing. The yield from these is also reducing over the years. Seed companies do this to make more profits by introducing more expensive seeds. Farmers have no other option, but to buy them”. (M1, 38 yrs, Male cotton Farmer, FGD1; response to questions on efficiency of Bt cotton).

Women farmers were of the opinion that biodiversity decreased as everyone in the village wanted to cultivate cotton. They lamented that returns from cotton sales were spent to buy other grains, pulses and vegetables.

“During olden days there was a saying that it was impossible to name neither the varieties of paddy nor the types of fish in the lakes. All these are gone now. There are not many types of paddy left and so is the case of fish.” (F5, 50 yrs, Female Cotton Farmer, FGD2)

“These days everyone wants to grow cotton. We are forced to buy everything else from shops. Most of the money is spent and we are not sure of the quality of things we buy.” (F7, 44 yrs, Female Cotton Farmer, FGD2)

“We never had to buy some things earlier, we used to exchange anything required among neighbours and relatives-- the things each of us did not grow and did not have. That sharing and exchange is largely disappeared. Everything has to be bought and money has to be paid. There are small shops to sell

things now in each corner of the street. We are no different from towns and cities. I think people forgot to give and take things now.” (F1, 50 yrs, Female Cotton Farmer, FGD2; for questions on impact of agrochemicals)

2. Agrochemicals: Attitudes, impact on soil and local ecology

Discussion on the need for agrochemicals in agriculture, led to most farmers mention that they are essential to ensure production of crops and protection from the pests. They opined that fertilisers make the produce better suitable for the market, be it food grains, vegetables or cotton. The farmers emphasised the aesthetics of buyers in the market as a yardstick for their produce. Buyers in the market decide the selling price for vegetables and cotton based on the looks of the produce taken to the market. If the appearance of the farm products does not please them, they reduce the buying price drastically. Most small farmers cannot afford to return without selling their products. Therefore they sell at the price offered by the buyers despite not making any profit. This relegates small farmers further into debts and penury.

“The buyers are keener to see how the produce looks. Vegetables should look healthy and gleaming, paddy should look full and dark brown, cotton bolls should look well formed. Unless we please the buyer, we cannot sell our produce. Therefore we are more concerned about the look of the product than the chemicals. If we don’t sell after all our hard work, we will starve. We know fertilizers make the product look nice” (M1, 38 yrs., Male cotton Farmer, FGD1; response to questions on role of agrochemicals)

Farmers were aware of the impact of excessive agrochemicals on nature. Explaining the impact of the fertilisers and pesticides on the soil and environment:

“All these fertilisers have killed the soil. Nothing can grow in these lands now. Only with fertilisers can we grow anything. But the escalating costs of urea and other fertilisers have broken the back of the farmers. We small farmers can’t apply these many fertilisers now because of the increased costs. Soil got used

to these chemicals.” (M3, 40 yrs, Male cotton Farmer, FGD1; response to questions on impact of agrochemicals on environment).

The ecological impact of agrochemicals was well known by farmers. They identified sophisticated links between increased usage of agrochemicals and local ecology. For example, the decreased sighting of common birds in the vicinity of their farmlands was connected to the use of chemicals.

“The impact of increased application of pesticides can be seen in the village. Many birds which we saw during our childhood are not seen now. House sparrows have vanished. For Dasara festival, it is auspicious to sight Palapitta (Indian Blue Roller) and Nalla Poli Pitta (Black Drongo). Earlier it was easy to spot them. Now there are not seen. We heard that in cities these birds are caged so that people can go and see them. We have reached that stage. Birds which feed on grain sometimes are poisoned because of the pesticides and other birds which feed on insects do not have food to eat, as pesticides kill all the insects. There is no doubt that these insects are killed but many other living beings are also killed. Which nobody these days is bothered? Everyone wants their own prosperity. (F2, 48 yrs, Female Cotton Farmer, FGD2; for questions on impact of agrochemicals)

Farmers were also aware of health risks due to increased agrochemicals. However, they expressed their inability to continue agriculture without using agrochemicals.

“If a man consumes mandu¹⁷ for long, we all know it has a negative impact on his health. Similarly, if soil is fed with fertilisers and pesticides that are sprayed continuously, soil will be dead. Nothing will grow there.” (M1, 38 yrs, Male cotton Farmer, FGD1)

3. Effectiveness of Agrochemicals

Farmers' perception of effectiveness of agrochemicals was based on the notion 'the more the better'. In practice, this translated into additional quantity of agrochemicals used in excess of the official quantity prescribed; additional

¹⁷Mandu in Telugu language refers to alcohol, medicine, and pesticide in different contexts.

number of sprays and pesticides mixed to form a cocktail, and purchase of more expensive agrochemicals. The effectiveness of agrochemicals was also assessed by the farmers in terms of number of farmers who used them. The more number of farmers using a particular brand, the more effective are the agrochemicals.

“Most of the farmers go by approximate measures. Generally we add a bit more proportions [of pesticides] as we feel it will work better. We have seen paddy, vegetables and cotton crops growing beautifully when fertilisers are used. What else does a farmer want?” (M1, 38 yrs, Male cotton Farmer, FGD1)

“At one point most farmers in the village were convinced that applying potash will make the produce look appealing. So everyone started to apply potash repeatedly. It was also cheap then. But excessive potash burnt the soil.” (M3, 40 yrs, Male cotton Farmer, FGD1; response to questions on impact of agrochemicals on environment)

“We farmers are like sheep. One does something and if it works, all of us do the same. If a farmer benefits from using a particular company’s pesticide or fertilisers, all others follow and buy the same things. Sometimes, smaller farmers [borrow] loans to buy products from the same company. They would not opt for other company products although they are equally effective and less expensive.” (M2, 32 yrs, Male cotton Farmer, FGD1).

“If as a shopkeeper, I suggest other alternatives, the farmer grows suspicious and might go to another shop to buy. For the fear of losing customers, we also do not try to convince. We try and stock up that particular company’s products to cater to the farmers.” (35 yrs, Male, pesticide shop owner, Interview notes).

Most farmers believed that mixing pesticides resulted in increased efficiency. The farmers developed their own sense of various agrochemicals through trial and error.

“We mix a lot of pesticides in approximate quantities. Sometimes it works and if it works for whatever reasons all the farmers will follow that.” (M2, 32 yrs, Male cotton Farmer, FGD1)

“Most of the pesticide companies supply manuals along with their products. They list the compatibility of each fertilisers and pesticides with other products. They mentioned if we could simultaneously use them or mix them. We refer to the catalogues and then look for the suitability and tell farmers. But most of the farmers follow their own experiential practices than following prescribed combinations and measures.” (40 yrs, Male, pesticide shop owner, Interview notes)

4. Alternatives to agrochemicals

When asked about alternatives to the practice of excessive usage of agrochemicals, most respondents could not think of any other options. Some of them mentioned that they have heard about organic farming and vermicomposting¹⁸. Most of them expressed doubts about the efficacy of these methods. One important concern with these methods was the burden of labour on farmers and their families.

“These days there is a shortage of labour. Small farmers and their families are forced to do all agricultural activities by themselves. Taking up anything more which involves extra effort is not an incentive. The farmers feel it is better to invest the same effort in getting extra income. Therefore many of the young men of small farming communities prefer some petty day jobs in the city. In these situations, who will take up organic farming?” (M2, 32 yrs, Male cotton Farmer, FGD1; response to questions on organic farming).

5. Sources of knowledge

Farmers in the study area were dependent on seed dealers and fellow farmers for information on the right variety of pesticides, combinations and quantity to be used. It was observed that peer pressure and a preventive outlook encouraged farmers to apply pesticides and fertilisers even if it was not required.

“Most farmers come to us for advice. We are in touch with new developments in the field because representatives of the seed and fertiliser companies come and discuss with us. They sometimes organise meetings and they invite us to

¹⁸Organic farming emphasises holistic soil and crop management using natural methods and techniques. Vermicomposting is a method of making composting organic material using earthworms.

participate. Since the same company markets the seeds, they know what are the fertilisers required, the quantity, and the time of application. They are more aware of the likely pests, different pesticides, and combinations.” (40 yrs, Male, pesticide shop owner, Interview notes)

“Most of the farmers in the village are illiterates. They believe that more fertilisers result in good produce and more pesticides are better effective. Therefore they apply fertilisers and pesticides in excess. We try and tell them but their peer influence is strong. We also do not want to lose business. As such farming is reducing and in a few years’ time there will not be many farmers left.” (35 yrs, Male, pesticide shop owner, Interview notes).

“We trust the pesticide dealer as he is a fellow villager, a farmer himself. So we know what he is using in his farm. We also learn from watching other successful farmers in the village. These days, pesticide and seed companies are setting up demonstration plots in villages and supply farmers with seeds, fertilisers and pesticides. These plots are closely monitored by the staff of these companies. They pass on this knowhow to the farmer. This helps us to decide on which company seeds, fertilisers and pesticides to use. We see the output practically and get to know details from our fellow villagers.” (M8, 60 yrs, Male cotton Farmer, FGD1)

“These scientists do farming in ideal conditions. They do not know the actual situation in the fields. They are not updated. It is their job. But for us it is our life. The scientist gets paid his salary even though he fails but we can’t afford to do that”. (M5, 30 yrs, Male cotton Farmer, FGD1)

“Many farmers do not know the right pesticides, proportions and application methods. We follow the advice of the pesticide dealer.” (M8, 60 yrs, Male cotton Farmer, FGD1).

6. Health impact- signs and symptoms

The farmers were aware that continuous exposure to agrochemicals lead to illness, both physical and psychological. They reported that during hot summer and windy seasons, many farmers who spray pesticides experienced dizziness, nausea and itching of the skin. Some of them associated these chemicals to

rising instances of cancer among farmers and their families, diabetes, greying of hair, mental instability, lack of physical strength and rise in alcoholism amongst youth.

“These chemicals are very powerful. A small capful can kill a person within minutes. If ingested accidentally it will lead to nausea, headaches, blurring of the sight, skin itching. These things keep happening.” (M8, 60 yrs, Male cotton Farmer, FGD1).

“There are increasing instances of cancer. In the same family, a 22 year old woman had throat cancer and her father had colon cancer. They do not have any [bad] habits, how can you explain this? These are the cases we know. There are many other cases that people do not disclose.” (M5, 30 yrs, Male cotton Farmer, FGD1).

“My mother has cancer in stomach. She is 65 years old. We do not have anybody in the family who have had cancer.”(M2, 32 yrs, Male cotton Farmer, FGD1).

“I think these chemicals also cause madness. A few years ago, one of the villagers few years ago was spraying pesticides and he fell unconscious. He never recovered completely. The family went to doctors, healers and everyone but there is no change. He is normal but talks to himself and laughs”. (M8, 60 yrs, Male cotton Farmer, FGD1).

“Eating this mandu kudu (food laced with chemicals) is leading to a lot of problems like diabetes, greying of hair even among the younger people and also causing many new diseases. The youth these days can’t even work as long as we do in the farms. They lack strength. They get easily tired. That is why I think most of the younger generation are drinking too much.” (M7, 58 yrs, Male cotton Farmer, FGD1).

7. Risk and safety; link to family health; women and children

Most farmers were aware of risks involved in handling pesticides. However, it was observed that risk perception did not translate into practices of safety, protection and safe disposal measures. Protection gear was not worn while

mixing and spraying pesticides. Most small farmers mixed pesticides at home where they are stored, and carried them in spray tankers to the farm. Sometimes farmers mixed agrochemicals in the fields, and washed the containers in nearby water sources. The empty cans and packets with traces of chemicals were left strewn in the fields or near water sources. It was also observed that the concept of risk was linked to gendered ideas related to risk behaviour. Cultural stereotypes of men being 'reckless', women 'careful and cautious' influenced their perception of safety and protection measures.

"Many of us are careless when it comes to taking safety precautions though we know about the side-effects. We have been doing this for years and feel nothing will happen to us. If someone tries to be more cautious there are instances of others making fun of them saying: why you are wrapping yourself like a woman?"(M5, 30 yrs, Male cotton Farmer, FGD1).

Some farmers highlighted that they were not trained in handling pesticides. They followed what others did. Any attempt to implement safety measures was ridiculed. For a small farmer, it was expensive to buy and maintain protective gear and it was viewed as a worthless investment.

"We don't have training on pesticide and fertiliser use. All these protective gloves, masks are expensive and are not easily available. Small farmers can't spend money on these fancy things and also maintain them." (M2, 32 yrs, Male cotton Farmer, FGD1).

The role of women in pesticide application decreased with the advent of newer agrochemicals which required smaller quantities and less water. Earlier, women were largely involved in fetching water, and in preparing the pesticide mix. Application of herbicides reduced the exposure of women to harmful chemicals. Their involvement in weeding and exposure to pesticides was reduced. However, they continued to be exposed to agrochemicals as these were stored at homes, and they continued to be involved in harvesting food grain, vegetables and cotton.

8. Treatment seeking behaviour

Most farmers said they would not seek any medical attention for minor incidents of pesticide poisoning. They said the impact would subside after a period of time. However, with increased awareness they were concerned the health effects of chronic exposure to agrochemicals but were unsure about how to mitigate these effects and decide about when to consult a doctor.

“Even if we are exposed accidentally to any chemicals, we immediately wash the area. We do not go to a doctor for these small things. The symptoms like redness of the eyes, dizziness, and skin rashes go away by themselves.” (M8, 60 yrs, Male cotton Farmer, FGD1).

“These things are ok, but we do not know what these chemicals are doing to our organs inside the body. As he [another subject in FGD] said they all might get accumulated and lead to cancer. These things we do not know until one is very sick and goes to a doctor.” (M2, 32 yrs, Male cotton Farmer, FGD1).

The study village has three unqualified doctors, locally known as RMP doctors and a qualified Ayurvedic practitioner providing allopathic services to the villagers¹⁹. Interviews with RMP and mental health professionals in the nearby town indicated wider social determinants linked to health problems and suicides among farmers.

“Many elderly people come to me with body pains. Old age could be one reason but the worries and agony they face is translated into pain. Their inability to take care of their agricultural lands, children moving out of the village, all [this] affects them. I give them some vitamin tablets and an injection for pain relief. This makes them feel better.” (38 yrs., Male, RMP 1, Interview notes).

RMP's in the village offer basic primary health services to the villagers. They refer patients with medical complications to qualified doctors in the nearby town. This comprised a nexus involving referral networks to private diagnostic centres and nursing homes for which they get paid a commission. RMPs do not administer any treatment to subjects with pesticide ingestion, either accidental

¹⁹ It is common for many Ayurvedic practitioners to provide allopathic biomedical care

or wilful. This is because attempted suicide is a punishable offence under Indian Penal Code²⁰. Suicide victims have to be taken to government hospitals as most private hospitals decline to admit them.

“Most of the common ailments in the village are seasonal. We deal with them. We do not treat any case of pesticide poisoning because it could lead to medico-legal problems for us. It involves dealing with police. It is also risky for us as we can’t save the patient. We immediately ask them to rush to the government hospital.” (RMP1; RMP2; RMP3, interview notes suggested similar practice amongst all 3 RMPs).

9. Changing landscapes

Modern agriculture has transformed the agricultural landscape of the study village. This transformation resulted from a range of factors such as cash crops linked to the market economy, changing aspirations and outlook to material conditions of the villagers, migration, rising alcoholism, and youth unwilling to follow agriculture as an occupation. All these factors have major consequences on the social fabric of the village.

“Most of their children would have migrated to the nearby cities and towns in search of livelihood. Youth these days do not prefer to live in the village and pursue agriculture. If they are even a little educated, they move to cities like Hyderabad, and if not, they go to nearby towns to look for opportunities.” (P8, 60 yrs, Male cotton Farmer, FGD1).

“Earlier we used to be satisfied with three meals a day, a decent house and a good crop. Nowadays the needs of the young are many. They need all they see in the city-- bikes, phones, clothes... They spend a lot of money.” (P7 58 yrs, Male cotton Farmer, FGD1).

“The relationships have also changed in the village. Collectiveness is gone. Getting together in the evenings and during festivals is scant. Almost every house has a television and all of them sit in front of it all the time. People who

²⁰ According article 309 to Indian Penal Code (IPC) attempt to suicide is an offence, punishable with one year simple imprisonment or fine or both.

do not have television go to their neighbours house but do not miss these [soap] serials” (F1, 50 yrs, Female Cotton Farmer, FGD2)

“Everybody is after money now. When people meet, they enquire about the price for that day. This has become the centre of our lives. One wouldn’t talk about it if the prices are stable. They [prices] dance up and down leading to worries.” (P7 58 yrs, Male cotton Farmer, FGD1).

Who will take care of the elders left behind in the village? The older generation is used to a particular kind of life which is close to the land they own. Most of us do not want to go to these cities and live. With children being away, decreasing [cotton] yields, we are not able to manage fields because of shortage of labour. Added to this we all have health problems (M4 68 yrs, Male cotton Farmer, FGD1)

Advent of market economy into the village changed the social structure of the village. GR benefited a few large farmers. Most medium and small farmers experienced fluctuating returns, as a lot depended on availability of input loans on time, favourable climatic conditions and market prices. At the time of field work, land value in and around the study village increased manifolds as there was a proposal to merge the village with the city municipal corporation.

“The land value is increasing day by day. Our children want to sell it and move on to the city. Some of us are doing it, but many of us do not want to as land is the only thing we have. There is a proposal that our village will be a part of the greater city. Land prices and demand will go up even further. We will be under more pressure to sell. All this will lead to conflict within the families.” (P7 58 yrs, Male cotton Farmer, FGD1).

“Big farmers can sell some of the land for huge money and invest money somewhere else to make more profits. We small farmers with small bits of land will lose everything if we sell our lands. That is why although there is a demand we are not willing to sell. We can never buy the land back.” (F2, 48 yrs, Female Cotton Farmer, FGD2).

“Some rich upper caste farmers in the village want the village to be merged with the corporation. They have land. They can sell and make huge amounts of

money. Many farmers who belong to backward castes and who have little land, and a majority of the villagers who belong to scheduled castes, oppose this as we do not benefit in any way. Rather, we will lose as we will have to pay more taxes to the corporation.” (M8, 60 yrs, Male cotton Farmer, FGD1).

5.5 Conclusion

The application of science and technology in agriculture has been posited as a global solution for human development (PRM 33. 1978; Alain de et al. 2005). This approach influenced agricultural policies adopted by the government of India during its post-independence era (Sebby, 2010). India had to adopt the green revolution in the context of shortfall of food grains and impending famines in some parts of the country, and pressures from Malthusian projections of population explosion (Ehrlich, 1968), and political pressure from the United States of America (Shiva, 1991). Responding to rapid globalisation, India’s agricultural policy aligned with neo-liberal policies and promoted cash crops, pushing farmers prematurely into a precarious global market (Suri, 2006). These agricultural policies resulted in GR and Gene revolution and lead to an adverse impact on the cultural landscapes and wellbeing of the population.

Village and rural life in India is popularly considered as unpolluted, green, pure, and idealises a collective harmonious social bond amongst villagers (Nandy, 2001). This concept is synchronous with the notion that such landscapes promote health and wellbeing and are therapeutic in nature (Gesler, 1992; Rose, 2012). But, GR and gene revolution proclaimed by agricultural scientists as the second GR, reproduces and amplifies transformation of rural landscapes into “counter-therapeutic” (Jadhav and Barua 2012) and ‘toxic’ landscapes, impacting upon their wellbeing.

As discussed earlier, chemical intensive agriculture apart from having an impact on ecology, wellbeing of farmers, also had an impact on the social fabric of the village. Use of agrochemicals largely benefited big farmers who were endowed with surplus land and input capital. This phenomenon accentuated existing marginalities in the village, as discussed in the following chapter.

Chapter 6

Cultivating Distress: Marginality & Suffering among Cotton Farmers

The chapter deals with various facets of marginalization in the study area namely geo-political marginalization of the region, marginalization by the state resulting in resistance, caste based marginalization and policy marginalization. Various arguments about the nature of marginality like relative structural marginality and perceived marginalities are factored into the context of cotton farmers (Polit, 2005).

The main argument presented in the chapter is based on the hypothesis that marginalization has played an important role in suicides among cotton farmers in the study region. Albeit, farmers represent a majority of the Indian population but historically have been marginalized and exploited by the ruling classes. In an attempt to reason the defeatist tendencies and suicide amongst farmers, I hypothesise that the state policies and global market expansion led to the depriving agency to the farmers.

6.1 Marginality

Marginality is a complex condition of disadvantage that individuals and communities may experience because of vulnerabilities arising from unequal or inequitable environment, ethnic, cultural, social, political and economic factors (Mehretu, 2000). Marginalization and resultant social exclusion has psychological, social, economic and political consequences on people who are at the margins. Marginality is described by two major conceptual frameworks-- societal and spatial or geographical marginality. In most cases they overlap producing a compound effect on the population (Gurung & Kollmair, 2005).

Marginalization is possible because of the “power” espoused by the dominant in all the domains of everyday life including social, cultural, political and economic. Multi-layered marginality in Indian context is based on many factors such as caste, religion, gender, geography, ideology, political capacity to represent etc.

Social and cultural conflicts between different groups produce syndromes of marginality (Gist, 1967). The impact of marginality on physical and mental health is well documented (Ecks & Sax, 2005). Agricultural lands were in the control of state representatives during the colonial times and continued to be so in the post-independence period. Feudal landlords controlled vast tracts of land and collected repressive taxes from the farmers. This situation led to marginalization of large sections of the population over many decades in many parts of the country. A shift in the nation building strategy-- with greater emphasis on industrialisation and service oriented sectors contributed to the neglect of agriculture and farming community. The agrarian policies adapted by the state in the country (discussed in earlier chapters) in the context of liberalised economy, globalisation have pushed the small and marginal farmers into a further disadvantaged situation.

6.1.1 Geo-Political Marginality

The history of Telangana shows innumerable peasant movements-- the anti-Nizam struggle or the Telangana Armed Struggle in the 1950s and the anti-feudal struggle under the leadership of naxalite parties in the 1970s. However, defeatist tendencies like that of suicides by the farmers is quite a new phenomenon to the region (Revathi, 1998).

The concluding statement of Revathi's article on the missing focus in the research on farmer suicides in Telangana formed the basis for analysis of this chapter. To understand this paradox, I attempt to explore farmer's consciousness by tracing a cultural history of peasant²¹ resistance movements in post-colonial India.

6.2 Peasant marginalisation and resistance movements in India

Historically, peasant movements in India were a reaction against exploitation by the rulers, money lenders and land lords. The following are some of the

²¹ The term peasants is used as an inclusive category: small and marginal cultivators, tenants, share croppers, land less agriculture labour, poor artisans who belonged to the socially deprived scheduled tribes, scheduled castes and backward castes and women

important resistance movements of peasants in various parts of the country (Sumanta Banerjee, 1980)

1. In 1770, peasants of Bengal and Bihar in the wake of a famine and resultant hunger rose in revolt against East India Company. This was also known as 'sanyasi revolution' as sanyasis led the movement. Most of the silk weavers of the Bengal region who were exploited by the British merchants and thousands of jobless members of the erstwhile Mughal army joined the movement.
2. In 1800-01 local chieftains in south India under the leadership of Maradu Pandyan of Sivaganga and Malappan of Ramnad organised peasant resistance against British soldiers and Indian Feudal Princes.
3. In 1820, Ho tribal peasants of chotanagpur in Bihar organised a resistance movement against the British, local zamindars and money Lenders.
4. Many Adivasi peasant movements were recorded during the 1800s. Oroans in 1820, 1832 and 1890; Kol peasants in 1831
5. Wahabi resistance movement under the leadership of Titumir in West Bengal in 1831.
6. Santhal uprising in 1855-57, in which poor and landless peasants, village artisans participated, was one of the important sources of inspiration for future agrarian struggles. British forces crushed this movement and according to documented figures, about 10,000 people were killed.
7. Sepoy mutiny of 1857, in which peasants participated.
8. Indigo farmers of Bengal in 1850 started a resistance movement against the British planters who forced them to grow Indigo under a lifelong bondage system.
9. In 1895, Birsa Munda lead a resistance against the British and Hindu landlords who alienated local Adivasis from their right to lands. There were other peasant movements during the same time. Bhils and Meo peasants in Rajasthan fought against landlords and money lenders. Mapalah peasants in Malabar region fought against the peasant oppression.
10. In 1946, peasants of undivided Bengal demanded the reduction of share of the land owners from one half of the produce to one third, popularly known as Tebhaga (three parts) movement. This movement was led by Kisan Sabha's established by the undivided communist party. Though initially intended to fight

for economic upliftment, the movement resulted in the creation of liberated areas from which landlords and representatives of government were forced to leave. This was possible because of the communist ideology and organisation of the movement.

11. Telangana movement has a distinct place in the history of peasant movements in India because of its militant organisation and achievements. This is discussed in more detail in the coming sections of the chapter.

Peasant movements continued in post-independence era. The politics and policies influencing agriculture in India changed after the end of Nehruvian period. The emphasis shifted from the developmental model which emphasised on industrialization model to agrarian model, with the introduction of modernization of agriculture. Green Revolution, discussed in detail in the previous chapter has created a strong farmer community (albeit constituting mostly large farmers who had access to large tracts of land, capital and who could benefit from GR) who played a role in shifting a focus from urban centric issues. The consolidation of farmers into organisations and movements was most visible during post 1970s in states like Punjab, Uttar Pradesh, Gujarat, Maharashtra, Tamilnadu, and Karnataka. These new farmer movements (Brass, 1994) have had an impact on the national and regional politics through the 1980s. Activities of protests by farmer movements included staging mass demonstrations in the state and nation capitals, refusal of payment of electricity bills, bank loans, taxes, not allowing the government officials into their villages and not selling their produce, etc. The origins of these farmer movements in different parts of India is attributed to plateauing returns from GR, increased exposure of medium and small farmers to market fluctuations, crossover of rural-urban business interests, and ideological position regarding protection of local economic and cultural interests from the onslaught of capitalist international markets, and the need for forming agrarian capital by circulating agricultural surplus in the rural region itself.

To understand the motives and the intended outcomes of these protest movements, it is inevitable that we understand the social composition of the participants. Though there are some regional variations, most of the farmer movements are dominated by surplus producing large and middle farmers. Most

of these farmer movements which were led by upper class peasantry did little to address the socio-economic conditions of the lower strata of poor farmers and agricultural labour.

Neoliberal economic policies and the changing pattern of political mobilization based on caste and religion during the 1990s saw a decreasing impact of the political clout of the farmer organization and movements.

6.2.1 Cultural history of Peasants movements in Telangana Region:

As mentioned in chapter 2, the princely state of Hyderabad until 1962 was under the rule of Nizam-ul-mulk, Mir Osman Ali Khan belonging to Asaf Jah dynasty (Briggs, 1861). The basic feature of revenue system under the *Nizam* rule was the oppressive feudal order. About 60% of the total land in the state was under the government revenue system called as *diwani* or *khalsa* area, 30% under the *jagirdari* system and 10% was Nizams own estate. *Jagirdari* land was under the control of different sovereigns appointed by the Nizam, such as *Jagirdars*, *Paigahs* and *Samsthanams*. Most of them had their own police, revenue, civil and criminal systems and were sub-feudatory states paying taxes and revenues to the Nizam state. Tax officers appointed by the Nizams, *deshmukhs*' and *deshpandes*' were repressive in their methods of revenue collection. Most of these officers usurped lands of many farmers who could not pay taxes because of bad harvest or adverse prices. *Deshmukhs* and *deshpandes* in many areas also doubled up as money lenders who collected excessive interest pushing many farmers into debts. As many farmers defaulted in their repayments, they were tortured and their lands were confiscated (Puchalapalli, 2006). Another socially oppressive system followed by landlords during the Nizam rule was *Vetti*, a form of forced labour and extraction. Under this system, all caste groups in a village had to serve the landlords. Service included providing free labour, services at home and agricultural fields, providing them with the products if they were artisans like cobblers, potters, weavers, blacksmiths, and sheep or goats if they were shepherds, household groceries if merchants and hens or vegetables if they were poor farmers. The landlords never paid for these services and products and were brutal if anyone

refused to pay their respects in kind. Some of the more abhorrent practices which were a part of the *vetti* were the system of maintaining girls as slaves in the houses of landlords. These girls were also sexually exploited. The situation of workers in the 500 industries in Telangana region was no different. Many of these factories like textiles, paper mills, mines were big and were owned by families close to the rulers. The owners benefited from heavy subsidies and loans from the government, whereas the conditions of the workers were pitiable. These oppressive measures gave rise to popular discontent among the peasant community against the Nizam government. The discontent brewed over a period of time and evolved as the Telangana armed struggle which was led by communist parties between 1941 and 1951. Peasants from the Warangal district played a historic role in the Telangana armed struggle (Puchalapalli, 2006).

In 1947, during the partition of India and Pakistan, the British gave three options to all princely states. They could decide to merge with Independent states of India or Pakistan or choose to remain neutral and Independent. Hyderabad state, which was one of richest and largest in size, opted to be independent. The Indian government sent military troops in September 1948. The Police action, codenamed as Operation Polo resulted in the surrender of Nizam and annexure of the Hyderabad state into the Indian Union. The land revenue system followed by Nizam rulers was abolished by the Indian union soon after the annexure.

In 1956, the princely state of Hyderabad was merged in Andhra state, carved out of Telugu speaking regions of Madras Presidency. It was the first state to have formed on the linguistic basis in post independent India. The merger of Hyderabad state in India and the success of Telangana armed struggle improved the conditions of landless and small peasants by freeing them from *vetti*, the tyrannical bonded labour system. After the merger of Hyderabad and formation AP, successive governments failed to keep up the promise of land redistribution. Congress party managed to keep a monopoly in the state by retaining power until 1982. Most leaders in the congress party were from upper caste Reddy and Velama landlords, who had a control over large tracts of

lands. Failure of state systems in providing effective governance, policy bankruptcy and increased consciousness among the rural masses led to unrest. This was taken as an advantage by the idealist communist parties, who promised social change leading to a more inclusive and just society.

The communist factions who believed in armed resistance against the state are popularly called *naxalites*, named after the Naxalbari village in West Bengal where the movement originated. There were about 18 active naxalite groups operating in Andhra Pradesh during the 80s. In the Telangana region these parties were successful in creating a social base as they could reach out to the marginalized sections of the population with their successes in the earlier movement against Nizam ruler. They could recruit large support from the landless and marginal sections like *Dalits* and *Adivasis*²² with their campaign for increasing minimum wages for labour and support prices for people engaged in the collection of minor forest produce namely *tendu*²³ leaves.

PWG established themselves among the Adivasis by taking up constructive programs like improving irrigation facilities, providing education, health facilities and creating awareness about their rights to demand better services from the government. PWG undertook a set of comprehensive community based activities along with coercive measures and action against government functionaries belonging to Police, excise and revenue, and land records; feudal land lords, elected representatives and whom so ever they declared as class enemies. The main activities of this group were: 1. Redistribution of land, 2. Ensure payment of minimum wages for the farm labour, 3. Imposing taxes and penalties 4. Holding *praja* court (people's court) to address grievances of the people, and 5. Enforcement of social code. According to the government records, they have occupied and re-distributed 80,000 acres of agricultural land and 1,20,000 acres of forest land (P. Singh, 2006). PWG succeeded in increasing the daily labour charges from 15 to 25 rupees and doubled the

²²Adivasi, literally means 'first inhabitants' indicating indigenous population of India. They are classified as scheduled tribes (STs) according to constitutional classification.

²³Leaves of Coromandel Ebony (*Diospyros melanoxylon*) used for rolling tobacco into a Indian cigarette, known as *beedi*.

annual fee for *Jeethagadu* from 2000 to 4000 rupees before government implemented minimum wages for agriculture labour. PWG was also involved in the implementation of a social code, taking a strong stance against what they considered as social vices-- alcoholism, gambling, eve teasing, dowry system, domestic violence, hooliganism and prostitution. They reached out to people on these issues thorough wall writings, posters, pamphlets, people's courts and songs and performances by their cultural troupes (Dixit, 2010).

Failure of promises made by the government and enforcement of agrarian justice by PWG contributed to PWG's increasing popularity among the people and their support base both in rural and urban areas increased. Alongside these populist activities, PWG and other naxalite parties resorted to violence, killings, kidnapping and damaging government offices and properties in line with their ideology of action against the class enemies. After PWG killed some political leaders and top police officers, government of AP banned PWG and all its frontal organisations in 1992. Severe repression of the movement by the state ensued by forming special police forces. This lead to a retreat of PWG from the plains to *Adivasi* dominated areas bordering neighbouring states of Orissa, Jharkhand and Madhya Pradesh. Police were given a free hand to suppress *naxalites* and their sympathizers. This led to brutal violence and human rights excesses by the police in Adilabad, Karimnagar and Warangal districts as a majority of the top leaders and militia of the naxalite parties were from these districts and they had a large social base in the region.

PWG merged with Maoist Communist Center (MCC) to form a new outfit called Communist Party of India- Maoist (CPI-ML) affirming their commitment to protracted war against the state to establish a democratic state based on the principles of socialism and communism. CPI-Maoist party is believed to have a presence in about 156 districts spreading across 13 states of India. As the influence of Maoists is spreading across many districts and mainly in the areas naturally rich with resources, the governments of those states and at the centre stepped up their tactics to control them. The current Prime Minister Manmohan Singh declared that Maoism represented the "gravest internal security challenge". Though there is an opinion among state representatives that

naxalism is a social and economic problem the path to solve the problem has always has been the use of police force (Jha, 2007).

The peasant movements after the advent of GR and percolation of markets into the rural areas under the impact of globalization shifted the focus on demanding land redistribution to seeking supportive prices for their produce, subsidies on electricity and water charges.

There is a transition in the basis and organization of social movements in recent years. They shifted from being ideologically informed and highly organized with large agendas like social change to issue based and time bound movements. Some important reasons for the decline of farmer unrest also include hereditary division of land, mutual dependency of small farmers, middle farmers and agricultural labour, developmental policies like National Rural Employment Guarantee Scheme (NREGS) etc. (LaRocque, 2006).

The naxalite movements have been fighting against oppressive landlords who mostly belonged to the upper castes. This has led them to have a following from the deprived and discontent masses constituting people from the lower castes. However, it is worth noting that a majority of the naxalite ideologues and top leaders were and are from upper caste groups like Brahmins and Reddys. In most villages, it can be observed that the upper castes were against the naxals and they machinated with the police in keeping them away from their villages. They kept a vigil on any naxalite activities in their village and reported to the police.

The study village was also governed by the Reddy landlords locally known as *doralu* who owned vast stretches of land. The police representatives called *Patel* was also from the Reddy community and owned large tracts of land as well. *Dora* and his family lived in a large house in a huge compound in the village, locally called *gadi*. *Dora gadi* was a power centre as the *doras* exercised magisterial powers and it was where most of the village conflicts were resolved. Most upper caste landowners belonging to Reddy caste were also subservient to *Dora*. This was evident in the following words of a present village elder: “*we used to be summoned to Doravari gadi for any decision making process. Only Dora and his family members used to sit in chairs. All of us had to stand.*”

Only in later years there were benches and we were asked to sit. Doravaru was very authoritative. All decisions taken by Dora on any issue was final. We did not have any say and we had to agree.”

“Dora and his family were also patrons of the village festivals. The next generation during 60s and 70s and their children were not keen on village matters and moved to the cities, selling their lands to others in the village.”

As the *Dora's* power and hold on the village weaned away, the other Reddy landlords consolidated their position in the village. They filled in the vacuum created by the exit of *Dora* and his family members and emerged as the most powerful group and reinforced the existing caste based hierarchy.

Naxalite movement also had an impact on the village. *Dora* and many other landlord of the village were affected by them. During the 80s *naxalites* had planted red flags in the lands belonging to the *Dora* which were lying vacant and he was warned to distribute the land to the poor. In the ensuing years, *Dora* sold off his lands to many villagers. Most of the Reddy farmers were unhappy that the *Dora* sold his lands at nominal prices to other caste villagers who could afford to pay. They feel that they had a right to *Dora's* lands which was denied. This led to emergence of other caste groups mostly backward castes, as landowners and cultivators in the village.

Given this background, the villagers had divergent views about *naxalites*. It was observed that the views were dependent on the person's caste background and the nature of his/her landholding status. Most villagers who belonged to the lower and backward caste groups had positive things to talk about *naxalites*. While some of them rued about their impact, some felt at least they had someone who addressed their grievances and hope for justice:

“Earlier naxalites were there for us to feel that some justice could be done. If not them do you think these landlords would let us live as human beings? Many disputes were settled by them in these hillocks. They used to call both the parties and conduct enquiry. They had their own sources of information and in most cases justice was done very soon and people obeyed them. They had to obey them because they feared for their life” (EI, 38 yrs. male, Farmer)

“Before annalu (brothers) and even after them these days most disputes be it civil or land related issues are settled by the village caste heads (kulapeddalu). People go to police if they feel that they have not had a fair deal. But I should say these village elders are not always impartial. They are also influenced by money and liquor. Annalu were at least above these things. They were not corrupt and partial. “Government cannot do anything for us, because these leaders are busy to cater their own party people or relatives.” (EI, 40 yrs, male, Farmer)

But some of the upper caste elders disclosed that they made all efforts to stop the influence of *naxalites* in the village. They said only a couple of youth belonging to backward and scheduled castes were active and went underground into the movement to join the armed *naxalites*, and one of them was killed by the police in an encounter.

“We never allowed naxalism to grow in our village. We cooperated with the police and informed them if there was any suspicious activity. Of course some villagers were attracted to them because of their guns and power. But we can say that none from our community were involved. We always made sure that we encourage our children towards higher education and we believed in the government” (Caste elder from the Reddy community).

It was observed that the upper caste groups had better access to the government machinery for various reasons. Many of them were educated and had somebody belonging to their community employed in different departments of the government. The village revenue and police officers in the pre-independence Nizam period in the village belonged to the Reddy caste group. Many of them therefore had good access to these key departments even today. Even farmers from other caste groups consulted them for any advice on these matters. Police and revenue portfolios in the state government were mostly represented by the ministers belonging to the Reddy community. This influenced the ease of access of people belonging to the same community to

these two key departments which are intricately related to the farming community in the village.

Many villagers were not very keen to talk about *naxalites* as they feared being branded as sympathisers and persecuted by the police. Only after repeated assurance of complete confidentiality did some of them expressed their views about queries on *naxalite* movement and their influence. Probe regarding why some people approached the *naxalites* for settling their disputes rather than the police and other government grievance redressal systems elicited interesting responses. These reasons largely related to the lack of access to the government system.

“Police and government officers are always in favour of the rich and powerful. Many of us do not even know how to approach them. They do not treat us with respect. At least we could approach annalu as they were people like us. They too belonged to the disadvantaged sections.”

“They did not have any vested interests as many government officials would have. They neither work for salaries nor are corrupt. Things changed in later years among the annalu. Some of them collected big amounts of money using their position. But at least the poor were spared.”

The *naxalites* organised *prajacourt* (people’s court) periodically to resolve any matters that were brought to their attention. They resolved conflicts of any nature and were strict about the implementation of their ruling. Most of the disadvantaged sections who lacked support to engage with the state machinery approached *annalu* for their issues. At one point this feature became a regular means of seeking justice, thus creating a parallel system to that of the state. There were many instances in the village where people accessed the *prajacourt* to seek justice. Lack of imaginative state policies alienated many poor people from the state as *naxals* provided them with an agency to solve their problems without being subjected to the bureaucratic procedures. *Naxalites* have suffered a setback in the Telangana region during 2005 and 2007. One of the key reasons for this was the greyhound police force. They infiltrated the ranks of Maoists, and with the use of mobile phone technology tracked down senior

Maoist leaders and eliminated them. These factors led to a total withdrawal of Maoists from public engagement.

In the recent years, a new movement which caught the imagination of the peasants is Telangana movement. The focus shifted to the identity politics, where Telangana culture and society was seen as being exploited by the Seemandhra (term used to denote rest of the state excluding 10 districts of Telangana) politicians and people. One of the key contentions of the movement was the allocation of natural resources like water, power and other benefits for farmers from Seemandhra region. Farmers in the Telangana region feel that farmers from coastal region maximized from the unfair diversion of water resources at the cost of Telangana region. Because of better irrigational facilities, farmers in the coastal region adapted modern agricultural practices. In Telangana, only 15% of the irrigation is through canals and rest is from the tanks and bore wells. Farmers from the coastal Andhra Pradesh especially from the Krishna basin region have prospered by cultivating paddy. Farmers from the seemandhra region migrated to the fertile Telangana regions and successfully introduced chemically intensive farming practices and commercial crops such as groundnut, chillies and cotton. Eventually this led to the proliferation of commercial crops in the dry and arid regions of Telangana. Over a period of time, returns from the commercial crops diminished and caused hardships to the small farmers and marginal farmers.

All these factors did contribute to the peasant participation in the Telangana resistance movement. Another important factor that emotionally charged the Telangana people is the denigration of local culture in popular media. The language and culture was shamed by the people and the Telugu popular films. This was effectively used as a means of consolidation to rake up anger among the supporters of the Telangana movement.

Almost all the villagers in the study village spoke in support of the need for separate Telangana. People, cutting across caste groups and political affiliations support the Telangana movement. During the last few years, the village saw emergence of support to a regional party which was formed for the

cause of separate Telangana, though the dominant party in the village has always been Congress.

The village witnessed two suicides for the cause of separate Telangana. In both cases it was young men who actively took part in the agitations in the village.

The first case happened in January 2010 when a young man aged 22 belonging to the Dommari community immolated himself in the centre of the village. He



Figure 6.1. A flexi poster of the youth who immolated for the cause of Telangana in the village

was educated until class 6 and was working in a local wine shop. He lost his parents when he was young and was living with his grandparents, and has two younger siblings.

The villagers recalled that he actively participated in village level meetings organised in support for Telangana and also used to go to the city to be a part of agitations. Another

incident happened in February 2011. A young man of 16 years studying in ninth standard in

the local school and also working as a newspaper agent committed suicide in support of

Telangana. His family mentioned that he took

part in a protest in the village against a government meeting and was very agitated after that. He consumed pesticide and collapsed in the fields nearby his village. He wrote a suicide note that said government was cheating people by delaying the formation of a separate state. These two incidents convey to what extent the village supported the cause of Telangana and how the larger politics of state formation impact the villagers. As discussed in chapter 3, suicide as an act of support was reported in the Hindu tradition. There were claims that a large number of youth have committed suicides in Telangana region to support the cause of a separate state. In contrast, the farmer suicides are considered as acts of desperation and despondency.

It was observed that though there was no explicit mandate for farmers in this separatist movement, most of them were keen to use this opportunity to participate and express their concerns. The farmers felt most of their problems would be addressed if a new state is formed.

Though there are farmers' bodies in the district, it is conspicuous that there is no consolidation of farmers to represent agrarian issues. Most protests now happen at the cotton market, where there is a congregation of cotton farmers, and the protest revolves around the offering price of the traders or CCI. Sometimes these protest lead to violence where by the farmers have reported to have damaged the weighing scales and offices of the market officials. On the whole it occurs that there is no peasant mobilisation by any of the political parties to address agrarian problems seriously. Even from among the farmers, there are no major initiatives to come together and form a body of resistance. This phenomenon also can be understood in the larger political and economic contexts in India which saw a rise and fall of rural farmers' ability to influence policy and state.

Though most farmers did not comprehend the ideology and actively participated in the *naxalite* movements they had a sense of belonging to the idea that there is somebody concerned about their cause and that resistance works. They have seen and experienced the immediate outcome of aligning with these forces as it meant quicker social justice without involving state. The state response through its institutions on issues like inequity, land alienation, oppression, and other grievances was inadequate. Farmer and *naxalite* movements in Telangana gave an opportunity for majority of the population to express their dissatisfaction and hopelessness about the states' role and ability to represent their democratic rights. State and its institutions co-opting the existing hegemonic framework of the society alienated a large section of the marginalized and disadvantaged sections of the society.

Warangal district has been one of the epicentres of resistance movements during the Telangana peasant revolution, Maoist movement and the current movement for a separate state. To attempt to reason the question on the defeatist tendencies and suicide among the farmers in Warangal region, I suggest that the state policies and the expansion of global market led to the depriving agency to the farmers. Any social movement for resistance is related to the emotions of the people involved. There is a shift of emotions from anger to fear and humiliation among the majority of the poor farmers.

6.3 Socio-Cultural Marginality

Cotton being a part of the neo liberal strategy primarily segregates people because it promotes an individual's success based on market. Cotton has also led also led to a creation of a collective identity albeit with layers.

When asked about the extent of cotton cultivation in the village, one of the Reddy farmers very sarcastically mentioned that "*Pattulochinakanchelli oorle pitchakuntlollukooda raithu lai pothiri*" (after the introduction of cotton in the village, any Tom, Dick and Harry in the village is now a farmer). This reflects the notions around the identity of 'farmer' which was earlier associated with a certain caste group which had access to land and the knowhow of the cultivation practices. Farmers took pride in being generators of food etc. The emphasis on agriculture through green revolution also consolidated the position of landed farmers. These upper caste landed farmers benefited largely from modernization of agriculture and diversified into other areas like business, education and employment. In the study village, people who were dependent on agriculture and allied professions can be classified as agriculture labour, marginal farmers, small farmers and big farmers who owned more than 5 acers of land.

Introduction of cotton crop in the village created a new identity-- *Patti raitu* (cotton farmer). As discussed earlier, cotton mediated the entry of modernity into the village. Most villagers were cultivating either *vari* (paddy) or *kooragayalu* (vegetables) prior to cotton. The pattern of cultivation of crops also varied according to the communities. Most Reddy farmers cultivated paddy in their lands. *Kummari* and *Kuruma* farmers cultivated both paddy and vegetables. The Reddy farmers traditionally had families of lower castes serving them as *jeetagadu*. It is a form of a bonded labour where the man is paid an advance amount for his expenses and is expected to serve only the farmer who pays him. *Jeedagadu's* responsibility includes day to day activities in the farm, gathering labour for weeding and harvesting, etc. Most farmers from *Kummari* and other caste groups with their family members work in their farms unlike the Reddy farmers and their family members.

Cotton cultivation did have an impact on the social structure of the village. Many communities, who were not agriculturists earlier, started cultivating cotton. According to a farmer-- *telivi unnodavadaina patti saagu cheyyochu. Annitki mandule dorukuthaunde..neellaku motorlunde.. inkamigavale.* (Anybody with some common sense can cultivate cotton, there are agrochemicals for everything and water supply is ensured because of motor pumps).

This created a new category of farmers in the village which transcends earlier classification of farmers. New set of cotton farmers varied from all the caste groups and the extent of ownership of land varied from 25 acers to half an acer. Some farmers who owned little land and some of them who did not own any land also took up tenant farming.

Pesticide and fertilizer shops in the village became a convergence point for all these 'cotton farmers' who would exchange notes on farming practices. Having mentioned fragmented nature of the village despite cotton superimposing a market unity among the famers, it was evident that differences prevail.

Neoliberal market ideology has fragmented the society more. It is established that GR introduced in the 1960's benefited farmers who had access to land, credit and other resources. In the words of the farmers belonging to a backward caste:

"After the departure of the big Reddy landlords, other smaller farmers belonging to the Reddy community grew richer and replaced them. They owned the majority of lands and thus had more power. They spend their money for village elections and ensure that they control the water committee, agriculture cooperative and village panchayat. After the introduction of cotton and vegetables in the village many families started to have some money at least as they could go and sell their produce in the market. Some of they made good money. Cotton did make a difference in the lives of some successful farmers."

Many young farmers echoed the sentiment that cotton cultivation did create a change in the village. It had contributed to the formation of a new identity for farmers cultivating cotton and it had a psycho social consequence. Cotton gave some farmers a sense of mobility and achievement. It became a symbol of pride

to be a cotton farmer in the village. For some it became a symbol of aspiration involving risk, gamble, success and pride.

“The situation in the village is such that everyone wants to be a cotton farmer. It has become a status of symbol, though it involves risk. It is like a gamble.

Sometimes the produce is very good and the prices we get are very low. If the price for cotton in the market is high, invariably the produce would have been less. It is very unpredictable. The trick is holding the sale of cotton for an appropriate time. And one has to regularly keep track of the prices.”

“Advantage after cotton is that more money started to flow in the village.

Everyone is happy as it gave a sense of success. In a year, if the crop is good and price is also good, a person can buy a bike and a good mobile phone”

“Cotton cultivation indeed brought money to some families. But not for many. People who were lucky could save some money, and see off a leaner period.”

Though at one level it seems that cotton has contributed to the creation of a collective identity of cotton farmers it was observed that it has created more fractures. Cotton consolidated the class differences among the farmers. In the initial years of hybrid and Bt cotton, cotton farmers from the Reddy community formed as a group to go to Maharashtra to get Bt seeds. This gave them an advantage over other farmers as they adapted well to growing the crop. The success of these larger farmers who cultivated Bt cotton in the village motivated others to follow. There is a competition among the farmers to procure the seeds well in advance. Many of them try to win over others by getting seeds. The allocation of seeds by various companies is based on the regional projections of the agricultural departments. However, it is observed that most cotton farmers vie to procure seeds of only two or three varieties of Bt cotton. This leads to an artificial crisis and black-marketing of the seeds by traders and dealers. Despite measures by the agriculture department most sellers hoard the cotton seed resulting in artificial scarcity. Then they resort to selling the seeds for exorbitant prices illegally—a seed packet costing 950 rupees is sold for more than 2000 rupees.

“For a cotton farmer, getting seeds is the key. This is an anxious phase. We have to get the right variety of seeds and that too in proper time.

One of the young farmers had drawn an analogy of seeds and masculinity connecting it to procreation and producing the right kind of progeny.

“It is like seeds represent a man’s ability to procreate. Without seeds how can one propagate? A farmer has to be therefore careful in choosing the seeds. If one cannot get hold of them, then one is not manly enough” (Ethnographic interview, cotton farmer, 28 years)

This conveys the anxiety among the farmers as cotton cultivation is linked to the ideas of masculinity, success and pride. These notions play an important role in shaping the response of cotton farmers to a crop loss.

Important steps that follow harvest of cotton crop are storing, transporting and selling of the cotton crop in the nearby market. Most large farmers, who have roofed houses and extra space, store cotton in their homes in gunny bags and wait till they get a good price. Whereas, in the case of small farmers, who do not have storage space in their homes, have no option but to take the cotton in the available transport and then sell it at the earliest to the buyers at whatever price they can manage. Since some very small farmers were unable to take their produce to the market, the seed dealers act as agents for the buyers in the market for buying from these farmers at the lowest price possible for their margin.

This market is full of *adthidaars* (private traders) and representatives from Cotton Corporation of India. Most farmers sell their produce to *adthidaars* for they would have cultivated relations with them over many years and more importantly, for the ease of transaction. Most of the *adthidaars* in the market have inherited the trade from their parents. Many upper caste farmers who are traditionally cultivators have longstanding relationship with these *adthidaars*. Increased exposure of small cotton farmers to the market brings out an interesting dimension of a conflict between the values of village moral economy and the market economy.

Most agrarian villages have merged into the market based economy as green revolution brought the market to the villages. Same was the case with the study village. Many farmers who cultivated paddy and vegetables had a steady

relationship with markets. Farmers who grew paddy had the rice millers in the nearby village and town giving advance loans to farmers for paddy cultivation, to buy seeds, fertilisers and pesticides. Farmers then have an agreement with the rice millers that they have borrowed money from. They have to sell their produce to the miller at a pre-set price. The advantage the farmer has is that the money much needed for cultivation and the money after selling of the produce is usually immediately dispensed. Most small farmers rely on this method as it gives them input costs and saves them the need for storing the produce in their homes, which is very difficult because of lack of space in their homes.

Cotton changed this. The input costs for cotton cultivation are relatively more when compared to other crops. This has led to farmers cultivating cotton depend on money lenders. Access to institutional credit has been limited for many small and marginal farmers. Only few farmers in the village have access and linkages with local banks for loans. The borrowing practices of the farmers and the source of credit determine the interest rate and the repayment schedule of the loan. Institutional credits are beneficial to the farmers as the interest rates are lower and there is no undue pressure of repayment when compared to private money lenders. However, the procedures laid out to access institutional credits are cumbersome for many small farmers. Speaking about the difficulties in accessing institutional debts for a small farmer, one of the villagers mentioned:

“The loans become a right for some. Others have to beg for loans. We have to make many rounds to the banks and most small farmers are illiterate. Though government claims about making credit accessible to farmers, it is not true. (Ethnographic Interview)”

Many farmers are dependent on the local money lenders who are readily accessible, without much process involved and they know exactly when a farmer needs money and at what stage of the crop. Though the interest rates are higher, the farmers take loans from private lenders as they are accessible, they are one amongst them and there is an element of trust.

Most money lenders are from the village who owned large tracts of land, and have generated surplus money to be circulated in the market. They charge

compound interest anywhere about 20-30%. The seed and pesticide dealers in the village also double up as money lenders and they either advance cash, seed or pesticides to the farmers depending on their need. It was evident from discussion with the seed dealers that they look at various factors like ownership of land, earlier records of produce and repayment history before lending. One of the seed dealers said that “they are now scared to give loans to the farmers belonging to scheduled castes as they feel it is high risk of non-payment or timely payment. There is also a fear of slapping of atrocities case if you try to pressurise them for repayment. I know a trader in a nearby village who was arrested and implicated on caste abuse when he demanded repayment of the loan.”

Cotton cultivation also contributed to the creation of a category by the state as ‘cotton farmers’ and further a category of suicides among farmers. The epidemic of cotton farmer suicides emerged as an artefact to represent the larger agrarian distress in the country.

Marginalisation of farmers:

“Agriculture in many parts of the country is in a state of crisis. Dividends of growth from the booming economy are yet to trickle down to the rural poor and farmers” (Manmohan Singh, former Prime minister of India).

Agriculture in India has witnessed immense changes during the post independent period. Neo-liberal reforms during the 1990s focused on urban centric industry, foreign trade, information technology, banking and capital markets. This phase also witnessed government’s withdrawal of state support to agriculture sector and a distinct slowdown in agricultural productivity-- this has had an impact on the livelihoods of majority of the population dependent on agriculture. One of the salient features of the impact of these policies is an increase in the percentage share of small and marginal farmers to 82% leaving only 18% farmers to be economically sustainable (Deshpande & Arora, 2010) . These policies had a large impact on farming communities resulting in marginalization of peasantry.

Despite bringing about changes in the social fabric, cotton could not bring about any positive effect in the status of farmers in general. State apathy towards the agriculture sector, resulted in agriculture as a failed occupation. Chronic devalued position in the society has contributed to the social and cultural marginalisation of the farmers. They feel that it is not a respected occupation and that is the reason for many young men are not being keen on agriculture, but they choose to migrate to nearby cities and take up petty jobs. Continued devaluation and marginalisation of farmers is contributing to their distress. Most farmers feel that they are marginalized in the society and have the lowest position in the village as farmers. Marginalisation experienced by the farmers is relative as some of them face multiple marginalities by the virtue of the caste and social position, economic status, political and policy level etc.

Most farmers from upper caste groups mentioned as an occupational group that they feel marginalized by the attitude of the state. They are of the opinion that the farmers do not have a social status in the current society. It is reflected in the attitude of people as well, since they do not consider this as a respectable occupation. While talking to the farmers about their position in the society, they summed it up in the following statements:

“Government is not bothered about the farmers.” (FGD, Farmers, Male 35)

“A farmer is looked down upon. Nobody these days wants to marry their daughter to a farmer. Earlier, marriage alliances were based on how much land a family owned. Now it is based more on the job, income and other properties in the town (FGD Farmer Male 45)

“Young farmers do not get good alliances as the girls and their families prefer an auto-driver to a farmer. (FGD, Farmer, Male 55)

“We do not want our children to continue in agriculture. There is no respect for farmers in the society. The officers wouldn’t even offer us a seat. (FGD, Farmer, Male 40)

“Officers see us as illiterate vermin. They don’t even offer us a seat. (FGD3 F M37)

“Farmers have grown silent because of the continuous discrimination.” (Key Informant Farmer and Pesticide Dealer, Male 34)

“Nobody is bothered about us but everyone wants what we produce. Will a scientist who produces something useful to all human beings be treated like us?” (Key Informant Farmer and Pesticide Dealer, Male 34)

“We are indeed mad that we continue doing agriculture (FGD Farmer Male 45)”

“Even though I am a graduate, if I say my occupation is farming, any government officer, or bank official will deal with me as I am illiterate. Any other profession than being a farmer has more respect”. (EI, 38yrs, Male Farmer)

“Girls in our village do not prefer to marry a farmer.” (EI, 28 years, Female)

Agriculture traditionally operated within the hegemonic social order. Caste system was the backbone for agriculture in India. Agricultural modernity replaced the so called traditional subsistence agriculture but did not make any substantial change in the existing social order. Instead, it strengthened relative positions both economically and politically for the upper castes in the village. Cotton growing has led to cultural marginalisation. This is apparent by the fact that it is leading to the caste based consolidation of upper caste farmers who have better access to both natural and financial resources.

Though the beginnings of the caste systems are not clear, there is a broad consensus that it evolved from the *Varna*²⁴ system between 600 and 200 BC. Its laws were codified between 200 BCE and the second century CE in *Manusmrithi*²⁵ (Doniger & Smith, 1991).

Caste in Indian society is a major social divide organized along axes of purity and occupation (Fuller, 2003). Outside the hierarchical order are groups considered socially, psychologically & physically ‘untouchable’ predicated upon

²⁴ The caste system is based on the Chaturvarna system of social segregation. The Hindu scriptures classified the society into 4 groups, Brahmins, the priests; Kshatriyas, the rulers and warriors; Vaishayas, the traders and Shudras, the artisans, agriculturists etc.

²⁵ Manusmrithi is the code of conduct for the Hindu religion supposed to be first written by a mythological sage Manu.

their 'polluting' occupations (Teltumbde, 2011). Untouchability is expressed in three domains: social exclusion, humiliation, & economic exploitation (Jodhka & Shah, 2010). Untouchables are largely excluded from full participation in everyday social life (Goffman, 1963), have poorer health outcomes compared to the general population, and are subject to violent atrocities (Anand, 2003; Jodhka & Shah, 2010; Teltumbde, 2011; Webster, 2007). *Dalits* and other lower caste people are now officially described as Scheduled Caste and Scheduled Tribes (SCs and STs) and categorized as such within the constitution of India. Despite being accorded special privileges through positive affirmation policy within India's public sector and education, they continue to be oppressed in everyday life (Jodhka & Shah, 2010).

There were speculations that caste categories would wither away with successive stages of modernization. However the resilience of caste as both a social category and academic subject continues to pose challenges to a country striving for a healthy and vibrant democracy (Dreze & Sen, 1991).

India started witnessing the impact of globalization and neo-liberal policies during the early 1990s when social mobility became possible for certain caste groups. At the higher end of the caste gradient, the occupational caste categories remain fluid. This has been possible in an urban context where caste based identities can be effectively masked. Social class defines cultural identity in such instances. A large majority of India is rural based and has a very different context for caste compared to its urban counterpart. It is difficult for lower caste groups to adapt and shift to a different occupation other than their traditional roles. In most of cases, lack of the social, cultural and economic capital has an adverse impact on the families which makes such efforts lead to excessive social stress. Individual's psychosocial context and stressors like financial hardships, lower education and unfulfilled expectations at work have been identified as most common correlates of suicide (Kuruvilla & Jacob, 2007).

Dalits experience multiple marginalities. These include access to services, economic opportunities, and exclusion from policies when actualized. These result in poor literacy levels, low purchasing power, and difficulty in accessing proper housing, resources and other entitlements. Like most marginal

communities, they are forced into readily available occupations such as landless labourers attached to rich landowners from generations or casual labourers. In an urban context they are employed as wage labourers at several work sites, vendors, small service providers, domestic help and beggars, living in slums and other temporary shelters without any kind of social security (C. Chatterjee & Sheoran, 2007).

Marginalization is a different experience for the farmers who belong to the scheduled castes. They face both social and cultural marginalization in the hand of the larger society. This is evident in the way upper caste farmers react to scheduled castes taking up agriculture:

“What do those people who eat cows know of farming?” (Ethnographic Interview Male 40).

“Can you expect a person born in mud to know of agriculture?” (Ethnographic Interview Male 40).

The following case of a *Dalit* cotton farmer who committed suicide depicts how caste determines the lives of t people in the village.

Case study 1:

Mallesham is a thirty year old unmarried male farmer belonging to *Madiga* caste.²⁶ His elder brother Yellaiah, a cotton farmer committed suicide in 2007. Mallesham and his family live in the SC colony²⁷ on the outskirts of the village. Mallesham studied until 7th class in the government Telugu²⁸ medium school. He discontinued further studies as this would have meant travelling to Hanamakonda or going to a private school, which the family could not afford. At the time of the interview, Mallesham was viewed as a drunkard (*Tagubothu*) in the village. He would be seen consuming large quantities of alcohol throughout

²⁶The traditional occupation of Madigas is leather work (cobblers). The Hindu caste system places Madigas out of the Varna system. They are considered as ‘untouchables’ based on the principle of ritual purity and impurity. According to the Indian constitution, Madigas are categorised as a scheduled caste (SC). Currently the former untouchable caste groups prefer to call themselves as Dalits.

²⁷ In most of the Indian villages, housing patter is based on caste based segregation. The higher castes dwell in the center and the lowest caste in the outskirts of the village. The government housing scheme meant for constructing pucca houses for Dalits conformed to this segregation. We can see this group of houses meant for Dalits in the outskirts and are commonly termed as SC colony.

²⁸The local language spoken in Andhra Pradesh.

the day and on a regular basis. NK himself observed Mallesham drunk during several meetings with his family.

The interviews took place four years after Yellaiah killed himself. Discussions with Mallesham explored his alcoholism, antecedents of suicides in his family and their perception about caste identity and mental health morbidity.

Under the government land distribution scheme, Mallesham's father was allocated nearly two acres²⁹ of barren land on the outskirts of the village.

Mallesham's father and his three brothers wanted to shift from their 'traditional' occupation as this was perceived to be economically less rewarding.

Mallesham's father also wanted his children to shift from their caste based occupation, considered to be stigmatising by other high caste groups.

Bt cotton was introduced into their village by a local upper caste seed dealer and farmer, Srinivas Reddy. This dealer encouraged all farmers to shift to cotton cultivation arguing that it would be more profitable. He sold hybrid cotton seeds that promised high yields and floated schemes that offered a rebate on pesticide costs. After three years of good yield, there were fewer rains and a new variety of pest attacked the crop. Heavy usage of pesticides did not salvage the crop. By the fourth year, Mallesham's family was pushed into debt following extensive borrowings from private money lenders. Sensing their distress, an upper caste farmer offered to pay off Mallesham's debts in exchange for his land. Faced with this difficult dilemma, Yellaiah (eldest brother) became deeply distressed and claimed moral responsibility for his family's predicament. One day he went to the fields and never returned. Later it was known that Yellaiah committed suicide by consuming pesticide, ironically bought to save his crop. Within three months, Yellaiah's wife committed suicide. His old father died within six months. The entire family was deeply distressed.

When discussing problems related to caste identity and the related shift of occupation from cobblers to farmers:

²⁹ 1 acre = 43560 square feet.

“I don’t think all this would have happened if we belonged to some other caste. My brother wouldn’t have committed suicide. He wanted to see us in a better position by shifting to agriculture, a more respectable work than our caste work involving leather and dead animals.”

“The Reddys and other upper castes never endorsed our effort to shift from caste work to agriculture. They even made fun of it saying that we low caste fellows know nothing about agriculture.”

Whilst explaining problems related to the shift in occupation including the use of Bt cotton and access to natural resources and debts:

“My father was not willing. But as the government allotted land, my brothers became ambitious and wanted to venture into agriculture. We started growing paddy and shifted to cotton cultivation like everyone else in the village.”

“Water was always a problem as we had to pump it from the canal through the lands of the big farmer from the Reddy caste.” When the crops failed, only the private money lender was accessible and ready to give us loans. We knew the interest rates were high but there was no other source.”

Finally, when drawing the link between his brother’s suicide, deaths in his family and his alcoholism, he had to say:

“Our loans mounted and my brother started blaming himself for the situation. One day he went to the fields and never came back. His body was found in the fields the next day. He died consuming pesticides. My father who was old could not bear this and he died heartbroken. My brother’s wife committed suicide after some time again consuming pesticide.”

“I don’t do anything. I sometimes drink ‘mandu’³⁰ as it gives me relief. If we were from any other caste we could have got loans and support, and we wouldn’t have been in this situation.”

³⁰ Mandu is a local term of liquor. This term is synonymously used for medicines and pesticides. Most of the villagers consume toddy, an extract from Borassus palm tree; locally brewed illicit liquor and Indian made foreign liquor. For toddy, most men go to the nearby toddy groves. Locally brewed country made liquor is

(Interview with Mallesham; February, 2011)

The case study clearly represents marginalisation of the scheduled castes in terms of access to resources like land, water, services like credit and loans, and also in the socio-cultural milieu. Some *Dalits* converted to Christianity to escape from the caste based hierarchy. But that did not enhance either their social position or the attitude of the religious majority. One of the *Dalit* farmers highlights the fact that even the seed and pesticide companies who give printed calendars of the year for customers as incentives, do not consider Christians as farmers.

“Why don’t these companies put Jesus Christ on calendars, can only Hindus be farmers?” (Key Informant Scheduled Caste Farmer Male, 39)

Social mobility across the occupational group is widely seen in the village. Most other occupation groups traditionally had agriculture as a side occupation but now as traditional occupations are not viable anymore, they are forced to shift to agriculture as a primary occupation. The difference is in the fact that earlier it was subsistence based agriculture that grew vegetables and paddy and, now it is commercial crops like cotton and chillies. Though there are new hubs of agriculture knowledge in the village communities, the farmers of the upper caste do not think high of other caste groups who pursue agriculture as their livelihood. There is a resistance among the upper caste farmers to part knowledge or accept the fact that other caste groups are able to pursue their traditional caste occupation. As was noticed in the village, members from the *kumara* community were doing exceptionally well by not just cultivating cotton, but by rotating the crops with other crops. One of the upper caste farmer commented on the ability of the *Kummari* caste farmer as--

Mattila puttintonki emerka vyvasayam, edo vallaku manchi bhoomi kalisochindi

(What the people born in the mud know? They are lucky to have brought that fertile land-- a statement by a Reddy farmer, about other caste groups taking up agriculture)

sold in sachets in a shack hotel farther from the village. The village also has a small liquor outlet commonly known as “belt shops” to sell a range of cheap liquors.

A woman farmer from the upper caste Reddy community however differed from the above statement. She said-- "*alumogalu vangi panti chestaru... poddunavoyyi sayanthram vostaru. Duty laagane, anduke valla baaguvaddarua.*" (Both husband and wife work hard. They go to the field early in the morning and come back in the evening, like a job. That's why they have prospered.)

Efforts by the scheduled caste groups to take up agriculture are not encouraged. One of the upper caste farmers referring to the food culture of the *Dalit* farmers said- *goddu mamsam thinetoniki vyavasayam telustada.* (Does a person who eats beef know about agriculture?) (Ethnographic Interview with an upper caste farmer, Male 45)

Most of the pesticide shop owners are now operating more on cash and carry basis. Earlier it was mostly on loan or advance basis. But still they lend pesticides to larger farmers as the shopkeepers are confident of repayment. The discrimination towards small and scheduled caste farmers is evident in the way the pesticide shop owners deal with them. In the words of a pesticide shop owner--

"We hesitate to give products on loan to *Dalit* farmers... they are illiterate, *notilekkagandlu* (people who cannot keep written accounts but only oral accounts)...have only small bits of lands-- we can't ask them to repay the loans back strongly. If they decide not to repay we can't do anything. Because of the SC/ST act. We give them loans if they bring in assurance from any of the upper caste farmers from the village." (Pesticide shop dealer when asked about the repayments)

6.2 Social suffering

Various levels of marginality of the peasants leading to inequality in the study region led not only to material deprivation but also to despair. Bourdieu's framework is used to discuss social suffering that captures the lived experiences of domination and repression such as humiliation, distress and the psycho-social impact of such experiences: suicide, trauma and alcohol abuse (Frost & Hogget, 2008).

6.3 Humiliation: Ethnographic cases

Most reports on farmer suicides in popular and local broadsheets mention that farmers committed suicide because of humiliation caused by their inability to repay loans. The English word humiliation is derived from the Latin word *humiliatus*, which means 'made to lose self-respect'. The local terms used by telugu newspapers indicating humiliation related to debts are: *appulabadhatoto*³¹, *avamanabharam*³², *avamanam*³³, *paruvupoyi manasthapamto*³⁴ etc. Honour in the local terms is represented by a variety of terms like *Izzat*³⁵, *paruvu*³⁶, *maryada*³⁷ etc. whereas humiliation is represented in the terms depicting loss of honour and causing shame. To be humiliated means to be rendered inferior or deficient in some respect by others in a deliberate and destructive way. It can be a deeply distressing experience. One can't get over it easily and if one is exposed to humiliation every day it can erode the sense of self-worth (Palshikar, 2009). The social emotions of everyday existence, humiliation, shame, embarrassment are interrelated to each other and each of them interact differently with the issues of honour, pride and guilt (Strawson, 1994). Humiliating situations signify intense feeling of powerlessness as a result of publicly observable power asymmetry (Leidner, Sheikh, & Ginges, 2012).

In the narratives of farmer suicides across the country, notions of honour and humiliation come across as key causative factors. However, there is little theoretical work to address the phenomenology of humiliation in India (Gopal Guru, 2009). The concept of honour and humiliation are multi layered and are relative in the cultural context of Indian society. For e.g., an upper caste farmer may feel offended that his honour is at stake if his ritual position in the village is challenged. Whereas a *Dalit* or lower caste farmer may perceive it differently

³¹ Worries due to debts

³² Burden of insult

³³ Insult

³⁴ Loss of respect

³⁵ Honor in Urdu language

³⁶ Honor in Telugu language

³⁷ Respect

when the same happens due to the relative position they occupy in the cultural hierarchy of the village.

As discussed earlier, caste is entrenched in the study village deep into the lives of people. Caste based prejudices and practices of purity and pollution were codified in the daily lives of the people and each of them play their roles differently. The only tea hotel in the village came up with an innovative practice to address this. They spread a thin plastic sheet on the plates on which the food is served for the *Dalits* and disposable plastic cups are used to serve tea. The upper caste villagers avoid sharing the table in the narrow and smoky hotel room. They would rather wait or stand and eat in front of the hotel. The instances of such discrimination are innumerable.

If a person belonging to a *Dalit* community wears anything which symbolises political power like a pressed *khadi* shirt, he is mocked at openly; if *Dalit* youth are having a drink in the bars, the upper caste men avoid going there; not asking contribution or involving the Hindu *Dalits* in temple construction—are just some incidents. In an extreme manifestation of caste based discrimination, it was mentioned that the sexworkers in the village declined to cater to *Dalit* clients stating that other upper caste clients may refuse them because their bodies are polluted. The upper caste attitude to the *Dalits* is reflected in the statement by an upper caste villager who said “*how can these people belonging to the Madiga community have pride and honour? Cattle eaters will remain like cattle.*”

Despite constitutional prohibition of such discrimination and legal acts to prevent atrocities these practices continue. Though there is some resistance from the scheduled caste youth in the village to challenge, it is not a concerted effort. Caste system thrives by inflicting continuous humiliation. When one’s corporeal and spiritual existence is considered as an evidence of one’s lower status, and when one is deprived of integrity and self-respect, it has a negative impact on the self (Geetha, 2009).

As described above, lived experiences in local socio-cultural settings shape the experience of humiliation. During discussions about the possible reasons for suicides among farmers, most of them felt that it is humiliation a man undergoes

of not being able to live up to the expectations of the family. According to the patriarchal value system, a man's role is to provide for the family. In most cases men are distressed when they think they are unable to fulfil this.

"Paisala kannu paruvu mukhyam..aee mogodikayina vaani pella pillala mungata ijjat teesti vani paruvemegavale.." (Honour is more important than money. Any man will feel humiliated if he is shamed in front of his children and wife)

"We value our culture and tradition. If a man is humiliated in front of his woman and children, or if he cannot provide for them, he values death over life (FGD with farmers, on question about humiliation)

Chinappatinundi manaku paruvu maryada mukhyamani peddolantaru..eppudayite avi potayo, adi manishini samputundi. We are raised to believe that one has to live with honour. Shame and humiliation haunts one to death. (Ethnographic Interview, a male Farmer 56, on values)

Mogodu eppudayina ijjat poyindante batakaledu. A man can never take shame and humiliation (Ethnographic Interview, Woman 45 years old on Suicides)

In all the cases of suicides among the farmers reported in the village, it was observed that humiliation played a major role.

Among all the cases of farmer suicides, a lack of social and cultural space to share their experience of humiliation, poverty, and caste identity together with paucity of culturally responsive health care services leads to psychiatric morbidity including suicide. The following case studies show a complex relation between humiliation, caste, cotton, access to financial resources and alcohol.

Kumar:

Srinu is a thirty two year old male farmer of *Mudiraju* caste³⁸. His elder brother Kumar, a cotton farmer, committed suicide in 2010. Fishing was the traditional

³⁸ According to Hindu caste system, Mudiraju community are classified as Shudras, the fourth category of the Varna system. Indian constitution categorises Mudiraju as a backward caste (BC).

occupation of *Mudiraju* community in the village. Until a couple of decades ago, his community were primarily dependent on fishing for their livelihood.

The deceased farmer Kumar, started to cultivate Bt cotton in 2008. The family owned 2 acres of land. Kumar leased 3 additional acres adjacent to his land in tenancy from an upper caste family in the village. Though the returns were not as high as expected, he continued investing in cotton cultivation by borrowing money from his relatives and villagers. His expectations of a good harvest and remunerable price were not fulfilled for two years in a row. He was under increasing pressure from the money lenders to return the money he borrowed with interest. He was unable to pay the agreed tenancy amount for the extra land. He was upset when one of the money lenders came to his home and demanded repayment in front of his wife and family. He committed suicide within a week of this incident as he was unable to arrange repayment of his debts. During the interview his younger brother Srinu mentioned that Kumar had felt humiliated and unable to interact with family members after the incident.

Whilst discussing their shift of occupation from fishing to cotton farming, Srinu commented:

“Traditionally we used to raise fish in the village tanks... that was our primary activity agriculture was mostly secondary ... as there were less rains ... there aren't many fishes ... unlike earlier years fish do not grow and weigh less in the lakes in the village ... most of us do not know anything else ...

“We do not have any option available other than agriculture. We are not skilled or trained to do anything else. Agriculture is the only option. Either we float or sink.”

Later, when exploring the role of Bt cotton, market rates and his brother's tenancy:

“We took up cotton cultivation in small bits of land we have and took tenancy ... we could not do anything else as agriculture is a full time activity.”

“Some years rates were good ... and some people made some profits ... seeing them many of us started cultivating cotton ... either the yield is more and price less or the price is more and we do not have much yield.”

“Tenant farming is waste ... my brother lost all his investment in tenancy ... input costs have grown so much but prices remain low ... small farmers cannot progress with agriculture. They can barely survive.”

Srinu and Kumar’s widow, Rani were asked to narrate the antecedents of suicide and its impact on the family.

Furthermore, when reasons for his brothers suicide were probed:

“People who don’t care about what others say... People with little Izzat (honour) will live. Once the money lender pressurizes for repayment, they lose their face amongst the community... this they can’t tolerate and they commit suicide.

‘This happened in the case of my brother. He felt humiliated³⁹ and could not face all us. Many of us are in a similar situation”

(Interview with Srinu; March, 2011)

Rani recollected that despite her apprehensions, her husband Kumar was keen to take up land for tenancy. She mentioned that he began drinking alcohol during this phase, but never indicated that he might end his life. She also expressed concern about her 10 year older son who had become socially withdrawn after his father’s death.

When Rani was asked to narrate the antecedents of her husband’s suicide:

“He took land for tenancy and invested heavily on cotton. He loaned about one lakh rupees (~1000 GBP) from the village people. He could not repay as cotton failed consecutively for two years. People who lent him money started to put pressure on him. He could not tolerate that and consumed pesticide and died.

“He started to drink ‘mandu’ more than usual before he killed himself. But he never ever showed a sign that he will commit suicide.”

While discussing the impact of suicide on her and their children:

“I have repaid some part of the loans. Now fifty thousand more (~500 GBP) ... how can a woman repay so much money?”

³⁹ The common phrases denoting humiliation in Telugu are : Izzat teesindru, siggu poyindi, paruvu teesindru.

“My elder son doesn’t study well ... he is mostly lost ... mostly silent ... will not listen to us ... He doesn't speak much. He was close to his father. He is not studying. He just stares at someone if they speak to him. I do not know what to do with him.”

(Interview with Rani, March, 2011)

Rami Reddy:

Rami Reddy aged 28, committed suicide by consuming pesticides in his farms in 2001. He is the only upper caste farmer who committed suicide in the village. His father Anji Reddy left to Dubai as a construction labour, leaving his wife and children. Rami Reddy has a wife and a child.

“Both my sons have committed suicide. Younger one died first... he was upset that we scolded him that he was not regular to his school and he is neglecting his studies. He went to the fields consumed pesticide and died. He was 14 years old.

My elder son, who studied well but could not get a job, He took up farming our land 3-4 acres and planted cotton. We got him married to a girl across the road. They had a small baby boy when he died. He planted Bt cotton hoping for good returns. His wife wanted them to go to city leaving agriculture. But he was sure he can earn better with agriculture on our land than working in the city. That year in 2001, the crop failed totally despite spraying and fertilizers. The price was very low in the market. My son borrowed from our own villagers. Could be around 60 thousand rupees. He never told us about the amount. But we know that he was under pressure from the people he had borrowed money because they came home sometimes. This used to cause a lot of friction between wife and husband. She used to blame him for not listening to her and shifting to the city.

One fine morning he went to the fields, never to return. He consumed pesticide and died.

We got some compensation from the government with which we repaid some of the debts. We sold little land we had to pay the debts. This house is the only property we have.

Now I can't work as my eye sight is poor. My wife goes for agriculture labour in the season and we live on it.

I regret leaving and going to Dubai as a construction labour. I blame myself. If I was also here the children would have been raised properly” (Anji Reddy, Father of the farmer who committed suicide)

“My children come into my dreams and sometimes they speak to me. It feels so bad that we do not have any support in our old age. I am also weak now. Can't work as before. I have joint pains. Future seems bleak. No hope. My old mother also lives with us. We take care of her. It feels bad that we will not have anyone to take care like that. I think death will be the only respite for all of us. (Susheelamma, Mother)

Komuraiah:

Rajender is a twenty-eight year old cotton farmer. His father too was a cotton farmer who committed suicide in 2001. He belongs to the Kuruma caste⁴⁰. Traditionally they are shepherds who tend sheep and make woollen blankets. Many families over the last decade gave up sheep rearing. Grazing sheep was increasingly difficult as most of the lands in and around the study village were converted into agricultural lands. Some Kuruma families in the village owned small bits of land in which they had grown paddy, vegetables and cotton. There was a demand for meat but there was no demand for the woollen blanket (*gongadi*) which they wove. Consequently, most of the Kuruma families in the village shifted to agriculture as a primary occupation and grew cotton.

During interviews with Rajender, discussions centred on difficulties of shifting occupation, growing commercial crops like maize and cotton, impact of father's suicide on his family, his alcoholism, his mother illness, and his attempt to commit suicide.

Whilst discussing antecedents to his father's suicide:

⁴⁰ According to Hindu caste system, *Kuruma* community is classified as Shudras, the fourth category of the Varna system and a backward caste (BC) community group according to the Indian constitution.

“My grandfather had a big herd of sheep. He bought three acres of land. After he passed away, my father was not keen on tending sheep and he sold them off. He started cultivation of maize and cotton seeing that everyone in the village had done the same. Later he shifted completely to cotton.

“This was before Bt cotton was introduced in the village. But now, most of the cotton farmers in the village grow hybrid cotton. He planted hybrid cotton in our land and also took two acres of land for tenancy. During a particular season, cotton was heavily infested with American bollworm and this led to heavy damage.”

“He borrowed an amount of fifty thousand rupees (~800 GBP) from our relatives. He did not want to go to others. My relatives gave him a loan as we had land. He went on paying interest upon interest as cotton crop failed in consecutive years. He was very upset that he was unable to support the family despite all the hardships.”

“Relatives who gave loans to him started demanding the money. A couple of them asked him about it a few times. He had never faced such a situation in his life. We can never tolerate somebody mocking us. He felt humiliated. One day he went to his father’s grave near our field and consumed pesticide and died.”

Commenting on his mother’s illness, Rajender said:

“Soon after hearing about my father’s suicide, my mother fainted and fell down. She started to have bouts of severe headaches since then. She complains about a numbing sensation in her head, dizziness. With this condition, she is unable to go to our field to work. We are forced to pay for an extra labour. We have taken her to good doctors, and spent a lot of money. Recently we went to a big hospital and they have scanned her head. All of them say there is no problem. The doctor gave her some medicines. She doesn’t take the medicines regularly. She forgets, and takes whenever she remembers. We are at loss. Don’t know what to do. I think my father’s death has got into her head and affected her.”

On questions about his own life:

"I stopped my education after 9th class because I had to work to support my family. I have learnt driving. I can drive heavy vehicles and auto. I was working as a tractor driver in the village. My brother is studying in Hyderabad. I support him. He wants to go for higher studies. We all want him to study and become something. I got married to my maternal cousin. I was managing the farm and started to drive an auto⁴¹. Somehow I got into the habit of drinking. It got so worse that I was driving auto mostly drunk. One day I was driving auto with passengers and met with an accident. I broke my leg. Passengers escaped with small injuries. I was hospitalised. Most villagers looked down upon me. I felt humiliated and thought I should die. I consumed pesticide meant for cotton. My wife spotted me and the villagers rushed me to the local government district hospital immediately and I survived. I am unable to give up alcohol completely.

Sagar:

Pramila is a thirty year old woman whose husband committed suicide in 2010. She has two young children aged seven and five. Her husband, a cotton farmer, committed suicide after consuming pesticide following consecutive years of crop failure. They too belong to *Mudiraj*, traditionally a fishing caste.

Pramila's husband owned two acres of land which he inherited from his father. His father used to grow paddy, vegetables and a small amount of cotton. Her husband shifted from growing vegetables to Bt cotton after seeing his friends and fellow farmers doing well. He borrowed money for the initial investment from a private money lender, and though the crop yield was good in the first year, the price was not enough to clear his debts. He continued farming cotton and over a period of 4 years, the cotton yield decreased. He was forced to buy more fertilizers hoping that it would help him get better yields. Over time, he came to owe money to both the local village seed and pesticide dealer. His mother was diagnosed with heart condition which required surgery. He borrowed some money for getting her operated. This added to monetary pressure on him. Mounting debts and decreasing returns from cotton pushed him to suicide. His wife mentioned that he was a kind and sensitive person and never expressed frustration to her or their children.

⁴¹ Auto is a three wheeler motor vehicle commonly hired as a means of transport in India

“He took some land for cultivation and planted Bt cotton. And he lost money in that. i don’t think he got back his investment... we did not have any support. Soil was not good. He could not take pressure from the people whom he loaned. He started drinking heavily for relief. He never used to talk about his problems with anyone. Not even me. In my eight years of marriage he never shouted at me nor beat me. I cannot lie invoking a dead person now. He was very kind with the children. People who gave him loans started pestering him and he kept all of them in his heart...he lost money in construction also. One day he came home after an argument and consumed poison and died. He borrowed money mostly from our caste people. But what can they too do.”

“I am sending both my children to private school. My son did not want to go alone. He was crying so I had to send my daughter also to the private school. School text books were donated by a youth group in the village. I will send the children to government school from next years. All my labour for transplanting 6000 rupees goes to the school fee. This year cotton is also less so picking. No hope for income this year. Village panchayat wrote a report that he is a farmer. But no compensation was granted as they did not own land. He was a tenant farmer. There was no land on his name.

(Interview with Pramila, April 2011)

Ramesh:

Jyothi is a twenty-four year old woman whose husband Ramesh, a cotton farmer committed suicide in February 2013. They have a 6 year old daughter. They belong to *Kummari* community⁴², who traditionally made earthen pottery.

Two decades ago some *Kummari* families in the village bought lands from the family of *Dora*, the village landlord belonging to Reddy caste. *Dora* and his family owned most of the lands in the village. As the land was more fertile and had water sources for irrigation most of the *Kummari* families prospered and bought more land from others in that area. Most farmers from this community

⁴² According to Hindu caste system, *Kummari* community is classified as Shudras, the fourth category of the Varna system and a backward caste (BC) community group according to the Indian constitution.

work hand and grew vegetables, fruits and paddy along with cotton. Some small farmers who had less land shifted to growing cotton.

Discussion during interviews was largely around cotton cultivation, source of credit, antecedents of her husband's suicide and impact on his family.

While discussing occupation shift and agriculture, Jyothi has to say this

“Traditionally we belonged to a community of potters. But we left that occupation some decades ago as making pots was not profitable. My father in law brought one and half acres of land and started cultivation. He was able to support the family's needs with agriculture. My husband who inherited the land started to grow paddy and chillies as we have a well as a source of water.”

When discussing about cotton cultivation and causes of debts:

“A few years ago, as everyone was planting cotton, we also planted cotton. From the last few years, the yield from cotton was minimum. We did not make any money out of cotton. This year too we have borrowed money. Our debts were about ninety thousand rupees (~900 GBP).”

“Our crop was destroyed because of heavy rains. My husband tried to borrow from relatives to repay the loans but was unable to raise enough money. My brother who loaned us money said he could support us but my husband was not willing to accept his help as we already owed him. Though the government officials visited and promised compensation for lost crops, my husband was not convinced that it would help him repay the loans.”

“During his last days he was always worried about money. We could not do anything but suffer. When we went to attend a marriage of our relatives, one who loaned us money asked us about repayment. All the men were drinking ... after returning home, he went to the fields, consumed pesticide and died. We never thought he would do this ... he did not talk to any of us about taking his life.”

“I don't know what to do now. I am worried about the future of my daughter and myself. I will have to live like this. I don't get sleep and I don't sleep for many nights. I cry and I am nervous all the time about my life ahead. My daughter is

too young to understand. But she will not have a father. I am worried how I will take care of her.”

(Interview Jyothi; February 2013)

6.4 Conclusion:

This chapter attempts to establish a link between marginalisation and social suffering. The case studies that are presented in this chapter highlight the link between marginality, social suffering and emotions such as humiliation for not being able to live up to their role expectations as men, providers. In case study 1, Mallesham's family lacked the social power to sustain the occupational transition that they attempted. Although one might argue that they could have developed skills to cultivate land, this was unachievable in the face of adversities of their "new" occupation. Apart from the waste land that they were provided through government enacted policies, they simply lacked in social and cultural capital to challenge emerging market forces such as the real estate agent, and private money lenders. The family faced distress because of their attempt to move up the social order. Structural and social discrimination was evident in the family's inability to generate capital. Mallesham and his family aspired for a respectable occupation but they could not move beyond the boundaries of the caste system. The humiliation and bereavement experienced by the family resulted in three deaths. Case studies 3, 4 and 5 signify a larger aspect of transforming rural sectors. Most of the artisan castes are forced to shift to agriculture as they are losing market for their traditional crafts. They attempted an occupational shift as agriculture is the closest profession they can relate to. Shifting to cotton cultivation and modern agricultural practices pushed them to debts and humiliation. Case study 5 illustrates how issues which were reported by the above caste based scenarios, also are similar to the lower class among the upper castes. Though this is the only upper caste farmer suicide case reported in the village, it is important to explore this further.

Agriculture in India embodies the larger social structure. To initiate and sustain farming as a profession requires cultural, social, economic and symbolic capital.

Capital in general parlance is associated with economic terms of production-- financial investment and human investment to compliment it. Garnering capital involves sustained efforts at both individual and societal levels. Bourdieu (1986) teases out various forms of capital-- cultural, social and symbolic. Cultural capital encompasses a broad array of linguistic competencies, manners, preferences, and orientations, which he terms "subtle modalities in the relationship to culture and language." He identifies three variants of cultural capital: first, in the embodied state incorporated in mind and body; second, in the institutionalized state, that is, in institutionalized forms such as educational qualifications; and third, in the objectified state, simply existing as cultural goods such as books, artefacts, dictionaries, and paintings. Furthermore if social capital is "Sum of resources, actual or virtual, that accrue to a group by virtue of possessing a durable network of more or less institutionalized relationships of mutual acquaintance and recognition (Bourdieu and Wacquant, 1992)." It could be argued that this factor is germane to understanding the hardships and mental health morbidity that affected this family. Being in the lowest position of the caste hierarchy, *Dalits* lack symbolic capital available on the basis of a person's position, honour or prestige, which function as an authoritative embodiment of cultural value.

It is extremely challenging for a *Dalit* family to shift into agriculture as the latter replicates social hierarchy. Similarly, backward caste groups who were traditionally non-cultivator artisans also face problems of occupational transition. Agriculture like other occupations needs a language as currency in managing the day to day business of farming. A farmer has to deal with other communities, through different activities of farming such as procuring seeds, cultivation of land, weeding, harvesting, storing and negotiating a price for their produce. The case studies of *Dalit* and backward caste families presented here lacked in this language of power necessary for an economy that involves agricultural commodity exchange. In part, this relates to centuries of subjugation and absence of social structure to allow for a smooth transition to a new language of power that offers an opportunity to shift their social position. In addition they are impoverished in cultural, social, and symbolic capital.

Marginalisation manifested in socio-cultural and geo-political realms, gives rise to resistance movements. These movements provide an agency to the farmer to negotiate the oppressive order with no effective governance. Marginalisation results in social suffering as was evident in the context of cotton farmers in the Warangal region. After the *naxalite* movement there is no other movement which gave an opportunity to resist the government. This development has denied an agency to small farmers. The emerging social movements like separate state movement, has provided some hope for the farmers. But as there is no explicit farmers' agenda incorporated into this movement, it offers little hope.

Chapter 7

State and Media response to farmer suicides

“The farmers need to be patient and do not lose hope”

Maharashtra Chief Minister, 7th Dec, 2014.

“Like in that Hindi film, [Peepli Live] suicides are being reported among farmers, because of the compensatory packages being doled out by the government. If that policy is abolished, I am sure suicides will stop.” – (Interview notes, district revenue official)

This chapter discusses the position of Indian state⁴³ in light of continuing spate of farmer suicides in the country. It analyses the way exclusionary policies are created by a means of “data collection” and “categories”. The specific points of discussion are: i. parameters employed by the state while reporting farmer suicides ii. Creation of categories and definitions and, iii. Impact of neo-liberalism on mass media. The main argument presented in the chapter is that the Indian state is shifting from a welfare economy to a free market economy. This transition influences the way state addresses the problem of suicides among farmers. The state generates a consensus among various agents and institutions that shape popular notions on issues such as farmer suicides. The broad questions this chapter attempts to answer are:

- How does the government respond to the problem of Farmer suicides?
- What defines the response of the state?
- How does popular culture represent the state response?
- How does it mediate the discourse on farmer suicide?

⁴³ State is defined as a political organisation that forms a government and maintains a control through legitimate use of power.

Data for this chapter was collected from interviews with government officials in the study region. Material was also sourced from representation of agrarian crisis and farmer suicides in print media, select Hindi films from electronic mass media and documentary films on farmer suicides. For the purpose of the analysis, newspaper reports from web archives of the leading English dailies and e- magazines from the last 5 years were scanned with key words – farmer suicides, names of the state, government response, and state wise statistics. Once the relevant material was identified, textual analysis of the content was conducted. Apart from the newspaper sources, popular Hindi movies and documentary films which represented farmers suicides both in Hindi and English screened during 2005-2012 were analysed.

7.1 Some statistics on farmer suicides:

As presented earlier in chapter 1, a total of 2,84,694 farmers committed suicide in India according to data available with NCRB. Amongst the big 5 states, Maharashtra, Andhra Pradesh and Madhya Pradesh have reported increase in farmer suicides in 2012 whereas Karnataka and Tamilnadu reported a marginal decline. The last of the five states, Chhattisgarh which reported 18,375 farmer suicides during 2001 and 2010 has been reporting near zero figures for the last couple of years (Sainath, 2013b). The idea of “zero reporting” of suicides by the state machinery indicates a strategy to cover the systemic failure by covering up the issue of agrarian distress and resulting suicides.

NCRB statistics for the year 2010 projected onto the India map illustrates the spread of farmer suicides across the states (Chapter 1). It also shows the concentration of numbers in central and southern India. NCRB has drawn a baseline of 15000 suicides per year since 2001 and the data shows 15964 farmers have committed suicide in 2010. The age segregated data from 2010 highlights that the majority of them are in the age group of 30-59 years and 15% of the total farmer suicides were among women farmers (Editorial, 2001).

7.2 ‘Data-ed’/numbered by the State

The epidemic proportion of farmer suicides was first brought to public attention by some concerted journalists and researchers. They systematically analysed

the data collated by NCRB. It is one of the “authentic” / “official” sources of information currently available on suicides among farmers. Even the data collected by NCRB is erroneous according to many. It is very likely that the suicides are underestimated because of the way a farmer is defined at the ground level. This leaves out tenant farmers and particularly, women farmers (Nagaraj, 2008).

As newspaper reports in leading English daily quoted the official data from NCRB to establish that more than 20 million farmers have committed suicide in the last decade, the national government and various state governments were forced to respond. Alarmed at the number of suicides being reported in their states, most state governments denied the veracity of the NCRB data and started to collate their own data. This count had a bearing on the number of families identified as beneficiaries for compensation from the Government. More often than not, the data collected by the government is in contradiction to the one collected by NCRB (also an organ of the government).

Following are some excerpts from national newspapers depicting the conflicting statistics on farmer suicides.

1. In Delhi, Union Agriculture Minister Sharad Pawar informed Rajya Sabha on May 7, 2010 that there had been just six farmer suicides in Vidharbha since January. The same day, around the same time, speaking in Vidharbha in Maharashtra, Chief Minister Ashok Chavan said that the figure was 343. This is 57 times greater than Mr. Pawar's count. Mr. Pawar's numbers came in a written reply to a question in Parliament. Both stories were reported by the Press Trust of India (PTI). Further, five days earlier, the Minister of State for Agriculture K.V. Thomas pitched his count of suicides in Vidarbha since January at 23. In the same week, in the same Rajya Sabha, Mr. Thomas said his source was “the government of Maharashtra” whose Chief Minister had said the number was 343. Meanwhile, before Mr. Pawar gave the figure of 'only six' in four months, the government's Vasant Rao Naik Farmers' Self Reliance Mission in Vidarbha put the number at 62 for January alone. Can estimates of farm suicides — all of them official — vary by over 5,500 per cent? (Sainath, 2010).

2. West Bengal: NCRB records put Bengal sixth among states with the highest number of farmer suicides in recent years. Erstwhile CPIM government which ruled WB for many years and the recent TMC government vehemently denied the count of NCRB. The farmers' wing of the CPM, while in power rubbished the NCRB report. Tarun Roy of the Paschim Banga Pradeshik Krishak Sava said: "There have been no farmer suicides in West Bengal under the Left rule." He said there was no truth in the report and it was "published with some vested interest" (Bhattacharya, 2010).

Similarly, the West Bengal Chief Minister Mamata Banerjee very recently denied reports on farmer suicides in the state, after CPI(M) general secretary Prakash Karat held the Trinamool Congress led government responsible for suicides. Mr. Karat blamed the policy of the present state government for the suicide of "at least 21 farmers in West Bengal in recent weeks". Ms. Mamata said "Twelve persons died due to some disease and they were not connected to farming, while reports said that some others took heavy loans from banks for personal purposes." (PTI, 2012)

Echoing the Chief Minister, Food and Supplies minister Jyothi Priya Mullick, told The Sunday Standard that the investigation into the deaths had been completed and allegations of suicide have proved to be baseless. Therefore, there was no question of compensation. "Only one farmer died due to agricultural debt, the rest took bank loans for children's education, wedding and so on." (Farmer suicides spiked in November 2011, 2012)

3. Tamil Nadu: Opposition parties raised the issue of farmer suicides only to receive an apathetic reply from the revenue minister who said that TN was the only state where no poverty stricken farmers were killing themselves. Newspapers quoted NCRB numbers of farmer suicides in TN to be around 1060. The minister ascribed zero farmers' suicides in the state to the loan waiver of about 7000 crores. (Express Buzz, 12 Jan 2012)

4. Madhya Pradesh: In a response to the adjournment motion on farmer suicides in the state assembly, the current BJP Chief Minister blamed the congress mis-rule in the state during 1993-2003 for the suicide of 9471 farmers

in the state. He was quoting NCRB statistics. This was strongly refuted by the erstwhile Chief Minister Digvijay Singh. (Daily Bhaskar, 2011)

5. Karnataka: In November 2011, the Chief Minister of Karnataka declared that they had successfully arrested farmer suicides in the state. The statistics of the state crime record bureau give us a different impression. According to the data obtained under RTI by TEHELKA, a tabloid, more than 2,500 farmers committed suicide in 2010 — an average of seven farmers per day. In the previous two years, the numbers were 2,282 and 1,737 respectively. However, the state agriculture department rubbishes these statistics. If its data is to be believed, only 900 farmer suicides have been reported since 2008, out of which it found only 385 suicides to be “genuine”. In reality, compensation has been given to families of only 111 victims. “We take note of the deaths of those affected by the farming sector. But we don’t record the deaths of farmers who commit suicide due to reasons like love affairs,” argues agriculture department Director KV Sarvesh. “NCRB numbers are less. This is the data collected by the police. In reality, the numbers are very high,” says Shantha Kumar, chief of the Karnataka Sugarcane Growers’ Association (I. Khan, 2011).

6. Orissa: The government of Orissa firmly denies any farmer suicides in the state, despite NCRB’s data that suggests that at least 162 persons engaged in farming and agriculture ended their lives, indicating a trend in suicides among farmers in the state (Exress Buzz, 2011)

7. Gujarat: NCRB’s data highlights that on an average 500 farmers have committed suicide in Gujarat over the last decade. Incidentally, the NCRB figures are in direct contrast to what the state government had provided in reply to an RTI application. *Bharat Jhala* of Action Aid, who had filed the RTI, said, “As per the reply, during the period between 2003 and 2007, the number of farmer suicides in the state was recorded at 489.” Also, on March 29, 2007, the Gujarat government had mentioned on the floor of the state Assembly that 148 farmers had committed suicide in the state between January 2005 and January 2007, a figure which was immediately challenged by the Bharatiya Kisan Sangh (BKS), the farmers’ wing of the ruling BJP. Praful Sanjelia, the then Gujarat president of BKS, had said in a press conference that the Gujarat government

was hiding the truth as BKS own estimates exceeded 300. Meanwhile, authorities in Gujarat continue to be in the denial mode regarding the issue of farmer suicides. Brushing aside the NCRB data completely, Principal Secretary (Agriculture), Gujarat, said, "I have no knowledge of any such NCRB figures but will certainly look into it." He added: "The data can only be authentic if all the stakeholders i.e., the government, NGOs, media and the kisan unions together develop a collective surveying mechanism." Even the BKS has taken a complete U-turn from its earlier position. Denying NCRB figures, Jivan Patel, National Secretary, BKS, said, "There is absolutely no issue of farmers committing suicides in Gujarat" (G. Sharma, 2009).

8. Chhattisgarh: Despite having the highest rate of farmer suicides per 100,000 population, Chhattisgarh government is in denial. Like elsewhere, no one talks about farmer suicides in the state. Chhattisgarh Chief Minister Dr Raman Singh recently said in an interview to a local newspaper, "I have checked with all the collectors and there are no farmer suicides in the state due to debts. It is not the issue of farmer suicides which needs to be investigated but the people who are writing about it. NCRB figures for farmer suicides in year 2007 are 1593 (Choudhary, 2008).

9. Andhra Pradesh: During the decade of 1998-2008, NCRB reported that a total of 22,182 farmers were forced to take the extreme step. But a compilation of the State's statistics for the period shows the number as 7,683 suicides or just 34.6 per cent of the NCRB's figure. Less than 4700 of those suicides were treated as genuine or eligible for compensation -- that means just 21% of the total suicides as per NCRB data.

Chandrababu Naidu, during his tenure (1995-2004) as the chief minister of Andhra Pradesh withdrew compensation to farmer suicide victim families. His government reasoned that any death in the rural areas is being 'classified' as farmer suicide. The Congress, then in opposition, had strongly criticized it. Ironically, now in power, the Congress is singing the same tune as Naidu. D. A. Somayajulu, Advisor, Government of Andhra Pradesh, said, "There is a tendency on the part of people to classify every suicide as agricultural suicide, because they will get some benefits. Eventually, the local MLA, the local RDO,

agricultural extension officer form a team. They go to the place the moment a suicide is reported to find out the truth, whether it was due to personal reasons or farm-related suicides. This scheme is only for farm related suicides" (NDTV, 2010).

10. Kerala: Even as the state government was dealing with the spurt in farmer suicides in Wayanad in 2011, officials informed the central government that no farmer suicides were taking place in Kerala, during 2009, 2010 and 2011 (Express Buzz, 21 January 2012)

Largely, the process of collecting "official" statistics by the state is seen as a routine process with importance only for academic analysis. In India, evidence based policy making is seldom done. Therefore, the numbers are largely ignored. But my contention is that the numbers being collected by the state are mostly misused. Conflicting numbers are being used in most of the instances to guise ineffective governance or to protect the interests of the powerful corporate / people with power. Some of the recent examples where government fudges numbers in order to protect the interests of the powerful are: green clearances for big industrial projects, health statistics released by central bureau of health statistics, which is a part of Ministry of Health and Family Welfare, government of India and calculation of official poverty line by the planning commission. A recent statement by the health minister indicates that 40% of the data collected by the state governments is faulty. Examples can be many.

7.3 Categories of genuine and non-genuine:

Apart from the number game, another important strategy of the state is to create categories of genuine and non-genuine. In response to the growing number of farmer suicides, most state governments devised categories like 'genuine farmer' suicides so as to skim the numbers. State certified genuine cases were only considered eligible for compensation packages declared by the government. To prove their genuineness, the family of the farmer who committed suicide had to deal with various levels of bureaucracy and produce

about 13 documents for a compensation of Rs.1, 00,000 and a onetime settlement of 50,000 for loans.

How does the state get to decide which is an “official” or “genuine” farmer suicide? Through what means does the government determine the category of the genuine? (Sainath, 2010)

1. Five documents have to be obtained from the local police station: a first information report, a *panchnama* report, a post-mortem report (which has to be paid for by the family), a forensic science laboratory report and a final report.

2. Other documents required are: private loan documents and/or bank loan documents as proof that the farmer was indeed indebted, the land passbook, dependents’ certificate, ration card and agriculture *pahani* (revenue records) of the past three years.

3. Besides all these documents, there has to be a report from the *Mandal* level verification committee, which consists of the *Mandal* revenue officer, a police sub-inspector and the agriculture officer.

4. Finally, a division level verification committee report is required from the revenue divisional officer, deputy superintendent of police and assistant director of agriculture.

One can imagine how this bureaucratic paper work in itself would discourage people from claiming the death as suicide and the ordeal and humiliation the bereaved have to undergo. This would directly imply that the number of deaths reported would be much lesser than the actual number of deaths considering that not many farmers would have the wherewithal to get the paper work done.

7.4 State Definitions: Categories of Exclusion

As seen above, defining a death as a ‘genuine farmer suicide’ is determined by the state-run bureaucracy. This can lead to a negatively inclusive category– a suicide is recognized as a farmer suicide only when the death fulfils the criterion laid by the government. But then the category of ‘farmer’ itself becomes

problematic (Ministry of Statistics and Programme Implementation, 2005). This category of a 'farmer' is defined by the government in terms that are exclusionary. The categories of inclusion and exclusion work in a way that erases and narrows down the numbers.

1. Women are not included as farmers since most of them don't have land *patta* (registration). (The death of these women is counted under suicides but not under farmer suicides). This is the reason why women constitute only 15% of the total farmer suicides.

2. Tenant farmers are also excluded from farmer suicides as they don't have any land *pattas*.

3. *Dalits* and *Adivasis*⁴⁴ never had any *pattas* for their land and so their deaths are also not counted under farmer suicides.

4. Family members of the farmers are excluded.

5. Suicides of agricultural labourers and other allied professionals dependent on agriculture are excluded.

The fact that the categorization of genuine and non-genuine suicides is so well adapted by various levels of bureaucracy and also by common people shows how the state establishes and inculcates common forms of categories and frameworks which Bourdieu terms as state forms of classification (Bourdieu, 1994)

As it is evident, numbers of farmers suicides collated by different sections of the state machinery are conflicting and varied. From the above instance one can understand how sometimes there is a complete denial of suicides among farmers by the state governments, or drastic differences in the state collected numbers.

Alarmingly, nearly 16 state governments denied the occurrence of suicides among farmers, and had written to the union agriculture ministry that there were no farmer suicides in their states.

⁴⁴ Tribals

Denial of the phenomenon of farmer suicides by the government results in a policy stagnation towards farming and allied sectors. Policy makers in their effort to cover up policy failures, limit themselves in formulating proactive measures to contain suicides and to deal with the concerns of the majority rural Indians dependent on agriculture in a sustainable manner .

7.5 Calculative practices of the State:

Modern governments -- rationalist and problem solving as they are in orientations -- imbue statistics with political power by charting their policies against them. (Eberstadt, 1995)

Modern state is an edifice built on numbers. Numbers cannot be a basis of any realistic design and this leads to a situation where government decisions confer benefits to the citizens only by a chance. It is a tyranny of numbers, a dangerous realm where every individual is subjected to misrule and she could be a victim of state policies (Eberstadt, 1995).

The power exercised by the state plays a key role in modern day governance. An analysis of the actual instruments that form and accumulate knowledge, the observational methods, the recording techniques, the investigative research procedures, the verification mechanisms unravels the power of governance. The delicate mechanisms of power cannot function unless knowledge, or rather knowledge apparatuses, are formed, organized, and put into circulation (Foucault, 1991).

The interventions by the state are designed based on carefully chosen numbers. The calculative practices not only establish technical requirements of government, but also form a calculative foundation of rule, the basis on which information is gathered, knowledge assembled and 'truths' verified so as to guide and manage a population's interests. Different calculative practices thus give rise to different calculative foundations, or epistemologies, of government (Ghertner, 2010). Governments design various categories in inclusion and exclusion as a means of calculative practices. One of the major powers of the state is to produce and impose categories of thought what we spontaneously

apply to all things of the social world (Bourdieu, 1998). To understand the logic of the calculative practices of the state, it is important to contextualize them in the economic domain of the governmentality. The essential issue in the art of government is introduction of economy into the political practice-political economy (Foucault, 1991).

Contextualizing these formulations in the case of agrarian distress and farmer suicides, it can be said that the Indian government is subscribing to the neo-liberal prescriptions and has set different priorities ignoring the larger agrarian question concerning a majority of its citizens.

The government of India has undertaken a series of measures as part of liberal economic reforms that had a negative impact on the rural population dependent on agriculture. Some of the recent measures taken by the government as a part of the reforms are listed below:

- Actual decline in Central government revenue expenditure on rural development, cuts in particular subsidies such as on fertilizer in real terms, and an overall decline in per capita government expenditure on rural areas.
- Reduction in public investment in agriculture, including in research and extension.
- Very substantial decline in public infrastructure and energy investments that affect rural areas, including irrigation.
- Reduced spread and rising prices of the public distribution system for food. This had a substantial adverse effect on rural household food consumption in most parts of the country.
- Financial liberalization measures, including redefining priority sector lending by banks effectively reduced the availability of rural credit, and thus made farm investment more expensive and more difficult, especially for smaller farmers.
- Liberalisation and removal of restrictions on internal trade in agricultural commodities, across states within India.
- Liberalisation of external trade, first through lifting restrictions on export of agricultural goods, and then by shifting from quantitative restrictions to tariffs on imports of agricultural commodities. A range of primary imports was decanalised and thrown open to private agents.

- Import tariffs were substantially lowered over the decade. Exports of important cultivated items, including wheat and rice, were freed from controls and subsequent measures were directed towards promoting the exports of raw and processed agricultural goods (Ghosh, 2005).

The state devised strategies to absolve itself from the failure of policies and from the responsibility of distress suicides among farmers. One of them is to minimize the number of suicides through muddling the numbers and creating exclusionary categories. The state in turn blames the climate, mental state of the farmers who committed suicide and other personal problems. This depicts flawed political rationalities reflecting in failed technologies of the government.

7.6 State – mass media as an agent for popular culture

By extending the argument to the impact of state on media, it can be said that state thought is reflected in the mass media that acts as an agent of popular culture. State has an ability to impose and inculcate in a universal manner, within a given territorial expanse, a *nomos*, a shared principle of vision and division, identical or similar cognitive and evaluative structures. The state is a foundation for ‘logical conformism’ and ‘moral conformism’ of a tacit, pre-reflexive agreement over the meaning of the world which itself lies at the basis of the experience of the world as “common sense world”. (Bourdieu 1998)

State on its part creates a network of agencies and agents who conform to the *nomos*. These actors work together in propagating the existing state thought and they get co-opted in representing the realities. Mass media as a state appendage is an important agent in propagating dominant aesthetics and ideologies. Media has always been integrated into the political economy of the dominant economic model. It is an important source of information which formulates popular realities based on the prevailing definitions and categories at both global and local levels. It is therefore important to understand the broader cultural conditions which facilitate media processes and products and the political economies that drive them.

Globalization, rapid technological advancements and foreign direct investment in media, pushed media into economic and commercial compulsions.

Ownership monopolization by corporates increased in all segments of the

media. An example of this phenomenon is the recent acquisition of 27 news and entertainment channels including most national and regional by Reliance Industries Ltd, one of the largest corporate conglomerates of India. Some of the large media houses have also diversified into mining, real estate, textiles and power generation (A. U. Khan & Debroy, 2002). The proliferation of various forms of media in recent decades dominated by an open market ideology has led to a great surge in the number of newspapers and electronic news media channels. This led to the emergence of new forms of films-- made for multiplexes and social network sites and tools.

One of the key aspects of media that is important is the power of mass media as vehicles of representation. It can be said that the aesthetics of mass media representation over a period of time had been socially exclusive in its content and form. Mass media largely caters to the aesthetic demands of the burgeoning middle class audience. Social issues of the rural are not sellable to the corporate owners of the media (Sainath, 2008).

The media response to suicides among farmers across various states of the country is a good example of media apathy. This is reflected in the continuous oversight of issues concerning the majority of Indian rural population like agrarian distress and farmer suicides. Though there has been a recent thrust mostly in electronic media; representation of these issues in the print media has been very limited. While regional media in states like Andhra Pradesh and Maharashtra responded to the continuing spate of farmer suicides in their states, it was the “national” media which did not respond initially.

This draws us to the aspect of the content of media that has reported farmers' suicides. Many a time, media has resorted to sensationalisation of the suicides. Some of the recurrent themes highlighted by the print media are 1. Financial problems as driving farmers to commit suicide, 2. Method of suicide-- mostly consumption of pesticide, 3. Localised frame of reference, and 4. Crop failure. “The Hindu” is one of the very few newspapers in the national media that dwells into larger structural issues, international, national and regional policies etc., through the writings of its rural correspondent P.Sainath. In one of his articles on commercialization of media and resultant structural compulsions he points

out that not only can the media not report this, but because of hyper-commercialisation, it is forced to report the very opposite (Sainath, 2008). While writing on the connection of media and agrarian crisis, he says that the moral universe of the media has shifted with outrage and compassion being dead. He makes four basic assertions in this context, 1. There is a growing disconnect between mass media and mass reality; 2. There is a structural shutout of the poor in the media, 3. There is a corporate hijack of the media agendas and 4. Of the so called four estates of democracy, media is the most exclusive and the most elitist (Sainath, 2008).

7.7 Ethics of media reporting:

In a recent episode of paid news scandal, a leading newspaper of India has published a media report as news item singing peons about the success of Bt cotton in a village. The same news item was published again after a few months as an advertisement. This showcases the collusion of the media and the corporate in spreading a false propaganda about the success of the Bt Technology. The following news clippings are an example of how the multinational companies co-opt the media for furthering their business interests.



Figure 7.1. Monsanto propaganda of happy families cultivating their brand of cotton



Figure 7.2. Propaganda of Monsanto Uncovered

7.8 Hindi Films and Documentaries on Farmer Suicides as a case:

A certain kind of cinema exists only because a certain kind of state exists

(Saeed Mirza. in Ideology of the Hindi film)

Films more than any other form of popular culture, reflect the socio economic milieu and changes in policy (A. U. Khan & Debroy, 2002). Locating Indian cinema vis-a-vis the western cinema, Indian cinema can be placed simultaneously on two overlapping grounds: (1) The socio-political formation of the modern Indian state, with its internal structure as a determining factor in cultural production, and (2) the global capitalist structure within which this modern state and the cinema we are dealing with necessarily enter into relations of heteronymy, dependency, antagonism, etc. (Prasad, 1998). This summarises how different conventions of Indian popular cinema evolve as a medium of cultural production.

Hindi films with their vast reach represent the prevailing socio-cultural, political, economic and ideological milieus of their times. The aesthetics of Hindi films represent the developmentalist trajectory of the state. Hindi films during forties portrayed narratives mainly around struggle for independence, changing social mores, Bengal famine and partition; during 50's Humanism, poverty, unemployment, Industrial policy, agricultural and food grain crisis, property issues, rural-urban migration and national developmental landmarks like dams (Ganti, 2004).

Documentary films highlight the relative freedom as a genre being out of the ambit of the corporate controlled market compulsions. They do not fit in the conventional mass media form. Documentaries engage the audience and their subjectivities differently than the commercial films. The fact that they do not carry any disclaimers regarding the similarities of the characters to anybody living or dead reveals a lot.

Unlike the mainstream commercial films, which have a very clear agenda to project a narrative as an entertainer for profit, documentary films in India as a

genre have been largely committed to the political critique and social efficacy. Many of the documentary film makers have provided alternative perspectives on the socio-political representations of the mainstream media in the society (Matzner, 2012).

It is not to say that sources of production do not have any influence on the content of the documentaries. Most of the critical themes are produced by international donors. Some of the documentaries depicting 'Indian culture' are produced by the state institutions such as public diplomacy division, ministry of external affairs. Few characteristics of documentaries such as no profit motif; no audience determinism of form and content allow freedom of expression in documentaries.

The following films and documentaries are analysed for this chapter: *Peepli Live* (2010), *Kissan*, (2007) and *Summer* (2008) are recent films produced by the mainstream Bollywood/Hindi cinema. Select documentary films produced by various film makers *Bitter Seeds*, (yet to be released); *Neros guests* (2010), *Cotton for my shroud* (2011), *I want my father back* (2009), and *Harvest of grief* (2010) are analysed to contrast with the commercial cinema.

The key focus of the mainstream films chosen for analysis was on the economic determinism of suicides among farmers. All the commercial films that dealt with agrarian crisis and farmer suicides focused on indebtedness as a main cause of suicides among the farmers

Peepli live: had successfully brought the issue of the suicides among farmers into the midst of urban middle class. It weaved realism with commercial elements, adding appropriate aesthetics to please urban viewers which it targeted. Commercial success of this unconventional popular cinema can be attributed to the deft post production handling of the film by the producers. Though this movie was successful in highlighting the issue of the states' neglect of rural India and the mess that has become of the electronic media, one can sense the indifference in delving in-depth into the manifestations of the state, political society and social structure it chooses to critically to look at given the compulsions of the commercial cinema.

Summer 2007: portrayed farmer suicides as a central theme. Failure of banks to provide institutional loans and usurious money lenders driving farmers to suicides is well captured. The film failed to go beyond this and confined to the stereotypes of urban/ rural, class attitudes, etc. Too many sensitive issues like capitation fees, carefree attitude of the urban elite, urban aversion to political participation, media priorities and inaction, connivance of political leaders, police and money lenders, Marxian inspired activism, idealism and *naxalism* were presented that shifted the focus from farmer suicides. The director in his efforts to weave realism in melodrama failed to do justice in delving deeper into the malaise of agrarian crisis. The focus was on the economic determinism, with a passing reference to state inaction. The film proposed micro finance as a panacea for the poor farmers. Ironically micro finance failed in many states. Microfinance led to many farmer suicides because of the pressure from micro-finance companies to repay the loans.

Kisaan: was set in rural Punjab. It symbolized conflict between the urban and rural through two sons of a family. Issue of money lenders and their usurious practices was touched upon. The film critically portrayed the government's policy of promotion of Industries through land acquisition and the means through which the land is sought. The message it conveyed was that, under the influence of development and modernization rhetoric, farmers should not sell their lands. The end of the film was marked by the "return" of the son symbolizing victory of the tradition over the modern. Though the film was set in the context of agrarian crisis, it was framed in the conventions of commercial cinema. It failed to project larger issues of agrarian crisis plaguing rural Punjab.

Documentaries: all the documentaries analysed had attempted to be holistic in their focus while trying to unpack the issue of agrarian crisis and farmers suicides.

I want my father back: Directed by an Indian-American journalist and film maker, Suma Jasson, this documentary was about cotton farmer suicides in the Vidharbha region of Maharashtra. The film is narrated from the point of view of a social worker. The narratives of the families of cotton farmers who committed

suicides were interspersed by farmers espousing organic farming, field level activists who work against Bt crops, and environmental activist Vandana Shiva. The film was critical of the phenomenon of globalization. Vandana Shiva analysed the negative impact of globalization. She framed globalisation as see a conspiracy of the state to annihilate small farmers/farming eventually paving way for corporatization of agriculture. According to her, “the official reason for farmer suicides is debt, but debt is a last straw”.

This summarizes the perspective of the film maker on agrarian distress and farmer suicides.

Harvest of Grief: This film by Anwar Jamal is set in rural Punjab. The film tried to locate the issue of agrarian crisis through the history of Punjab, during the turbulent times of partition, green revolution, extremism and farmer suicides. Opinions of activists, farmers, social scientists on agrarian crisis are shown along with interviews with families of farmers who committed suicide. Dr. Pramod Kumar of Institute for Development Communication highlights paradoxes in Punjab society, which is agriculturally developed with high per-capita income but scores least in development indicators. He mentions that farmers always were indebted, but, due to the rising input costs of agriculture, the farmers are caught in the complex phenomenon of accumulation of cumulative debts. Vandana Shiva speaks about the increasing influence of globalization and mechanization on the rising costs of farming inputs.

The film maker highlighted gender aspects of farmer suicides, where most widows of farmers who committed suicide had to forgo their lands as they could not repay loans. She blamed the agricultural policies of the government and MNCs for the state of affairs. The documentary is critical of the government response as it denied that farmers committed suicide due to distress. The state attributed deaths to personal afflictions of the farmers.

Nero's Guests: directed by Deepa Bhatia, this was a narrative of P.Sainath, rural affairs editor of Hindu. He talks to the families of farmers who committed suicides, addresses a meeting in institute of social science and others institutes as part of the film. He talked about Nero's Guests – the title of the film-- and what it symbolizes in the context of agrarian distress. He used statistics from

the government sources to highlight the distress in the rural sector. Sainath critiques the role of government, media, corporates, and policies of developed nations which fuel agrarian distress resulting in suicides among the farmers. He quotes poems written by a farmer who commits suicides and talks about how families are affected by suicides. According to him, many a time he has seen the widows of farmers driven to suicide and young boys who are pushed to be men had fear in their eyes. He was very critical of the media and its role in reporting rural issues. He points to the fact that there are no correspondents working fulltime on poverty in any media. He summarized the situation of the Indian media - "it is politically free and fastest growing media, but imprisoned by profit. According to him agrarian crisis is caused by – "the drive towards corporate farming which is operationalised by predatory commercialization of country side, resulting in biggest displacement in Indian history". He is critical of the role of western trained consultants in policy making. He laments that human value is reduced to exchange value. He deconstructs the whole issue of the policy of exports, subsidies for the farmers of developed countries, market influence and WTO on the issue of farmers' suicides to a spell bound audience in a lecture. He points out that the time taken by the state is 10 years to respond to the issue of farmers suicides while it responds within hours to a Sensex downfall. He asks a very pertinent question – "who does the state exists for?". He concluded by drawing an analogy of Neros guests and 'us' who were not bothered by the suffering of fellow human beings. Sainath presents a holistic assessment of the situation but does not come up with any solutions.

Bitter seeds: As a part of his trilogy on globalization, film maker Micha.X.Peled, came up with Bitter Seeds, a critical take on MNC's control of the seeds, which is a major cause for farmers' suicides. He explored the issue through participatory action research framework where a young girl from the family of a suicide victim conducts research by talking to family members who faced suicides, activists, money lenders and seed dealers. She highlighted the double trauma of the children of the victims who lose their father and how subsequently it mars their childhood. This narrative captured the reflexive subjectivities of the researcher and eventually empowers her. This process gives a very realistic portrayal of farming and the factors leading to farmer suicides. A small farmer's

family is closely followed to unfold the complexities of cotton farming through various stages like preparing the land, discussing seed options, trying to seek loans from a government bank, approaching money lenders, seed dealers, sowing, eagerly awaiting rains, pests, cotton plucking, selling the produce in the market, managing only to get Rs.2000 as profit, inability to repay the money lender who threatens to take their land, negotiation and acceptance to repay the loans for compound interest, etc.

The film showed how the seed companies aggressively market Bt cotton seeds to the farmers. One realizes that there is no option other than Bt cotton seeds in the market. The representative of Monsanto Company says that every Indian should thank Monsanto for bringing in Bt technology. He continues to say that the farmers' economic condition has improved drastically after Bt. They are now able to afford vehicles, educate children, get daughter married etc. Film captured the reactions of the seed companies on suicides--

A representative of seed company mentioned- "if one gets into the details of the suicide case, the family members themselves will say he was a very lazy man".

According to the representative of Monsanto-- "*Suicide is a common phenomenon in any society. There are so many larger societal issues. There is no connection between Bt and farmers suicides*".

Interviews of activists like Vandana Shiva and Kishore Tiwari as part of the documentary portrayed corporate deceit in annihilating local varieties of seeds by promoting hybrid and Bt varieties. They hold American Monsanto as responsible for rising input costs, and farmer suicides. They demand that government should make conventional seeds available and ban Monsanto.

The representative of a seed company advises farmers as to see agriculture as a business enterprise and that farmers should make a note of all their expenses by keeping a register. Activists point out that agriculture is always a loss making enterprise. Farmers in developed nations survive because of heavy subsidies.

The film ends with a note that Monsanto has increased its revenue by selling cotton seeds from 58 million to 750 million USD within 5 years during 2007-11.

Cotton for my shroud: This documentary was about the journey of two journalists into the tribal regions of Vidharbha in Maharashtra. The film described the situation of Kolam tribal farmers cultivating cotton. The attitude of the government towards the tribals was captured in the words of a villager “we are treated like animals”. The film makers lament that “it’s strange how a life is reduced to mere statistics.” The film tries to go beyond economic determinism by focusing on the macro picture by delving into the lives of the families left behind after suicides.

The film makers interviewed Mr. Kishore Tiwari, an engineer by training who runs *Vidharbha Jan Andolan Samithi* and is fighting for the rights of tribals and farmers. He was critical of Bt cotton and decries the promotion strategies of MNCs. Advertisements in the media promote Bt cotton as a panacea for all their problems. They show that by planting Bt cotton, farmers can marry their daughters, construct houses and cover medical expenses of their ailing parents. All these draw gullible farmers into cultivating Bt cotton with high input costs and uncertain returns. Agricultural extension officers have been reduced to stooges of MNCs. Cotton which was the white gold 30 years ago is now a death trap. They are critical of the state in saying, how government attempts to manage the crisis rather than addressing the root causes. The basic issue of commercialization of agriculture is not addressed. Vandana Shiva discusses loss of diversity of crops, and the domination of Monsanto a multinational seed industry. She mentions that the prime minister in his response to the suicides in Vidharbha region in 2008 had released 200 crores for “seed replacement”. This she says is a code used by seed industry to replace the native seeds!

7.9 Conclusion:

The Indian State is on the course of transformation into a market oriented state in a globalised context. The state has generated a form of embedded neoliberal consensus among all institutions including some sections of its citizens. This results in what Foucault calls new powerful forms of state governmentality (Foucault, 1991). The inability of mass media to represent social issues effectively and its role in legitimization and promotion of neoliberal values of the

state is adding to the problem. State governmentality in a neo-liberal framework has led to what is called “advanced marginalisation” of the rural population (Vasavi, 1998). Socio-cultural sensibilities of the state and mass media are under the spell of developmentalities based on neoliberal calculative practices. Among the media forms, documentary films are closer to representing the reality.

To conclude, neoliberal frameworks adapted by the state determine the way social problems are constructed and interventions are designed. Mass media that plays a key role in transmission of popular culture is aligned with the state in marginalizing the interests of the majority. It is currently catering to the interests of a powerful few. The power of media in shaping people’s perceptions was revealed at all levels of the society including farmers. They are made to believe that *“cotton can never kill anyone; it’s only individual factors which are pushing one to suicide.”* (Key Informant Interviews with District Revenue officials and Focus Group Discussions with farmers).

Unless agrarian crisis and farmer suicides are addressed in alternative holistic frameworks it may not be possible to avert the disaster. Mass media has a critical role to play in this exercise by reflecting on transforming rural realities.

Chapter 8

Cotton in the Clinic: Farmer Suicides and Health System

“Farmers are not committing suicide because of financial debts. Suicide is a psychiatric disease” (Mr. Kiran Kumar Reddy, Chief Minister, Government of Andhra Pradesh, October 2013.)

“Farmers suicide is a health problem triggered by larger socio-economic conditions.” (Psychiatrist, Government hospital)

“Suicides are due to a chemical imbalance in the mind. Not all farmers are committing suicide. Only those who are not mentally strong are dying.” (Psychiatrist, Private sector)

“Farmers are unable to adapt to new technologies. Most of them resist change. That is the reason their debts are increasing and they are committing suicide” (Agricultural scientist, Private Seed Company)

These contrasting statements made by the key stakeholders such as politicians, policy makers; agricultural scientists and mental health professionals reflect their attitude towards farmer suicides. They locate the problem in an individual farmer by editing out the prevalent social, cultural and political conditions that impact upon the wellbeing of farmers. As discussed in chapter 6, agrarian policies promoted by the state led to rural distress. This situation begs a question: can the state policies that have negative impact on the farmers be reconfigured to mitigate the problems? How do we address the impact of new policies that led to drastic social changes as discussed in chapters 4 and 5?

The emphasis of this chapter is on how health professionals and the health system respond to an issue as grievous as farmer suicides. The chapter attempts to answer the following questions:

1. How and why is the clinic impervious to cotton farmer suicides?
2. What shapes the response of health professionals to an issue such as farmer suicides?

It is important to contextualize the statements expressed by the health professionals at the beginning of the chapter into the historical background that shaped health system and mental health services of the country. This helps in tracing the evolution of health systems and policies in India and their response to emerging public health challenges like farmer suicides.

8.1 Cotton in the clinic

To understand the perceptions on farmer suicides and the mental health services, interviews were held with psychiatrists (one psychiatrist working in the government sector and two psychiatrists working in the private sector), two Registered Medical Practitioners, a priest and a pastor and with farmers. An assessment of survivors was conducted using mhGAP guidelines. Quotations from the interviews cited in the beginning of the chapter indicate the broader understanding and opinions of mental health professionals. During the discussions with most of the health professionals it was observed that the issue of farmer suicide is reduced to social, financial and personal family problems or as a manifestation of chemical imbalance. A key factor that influenced the position of mental health professionals was dependent on the sector they work. It was observed that mental health professionals in the government setting tilt towards a social determinant explanation of farmer suicides whereas the private psychiatrists locate the problem in a bio-medical framework. This interesting paradox in their viewpoints is largely shaped by work conditions of the institutions they operate. According to psychiatrists working in the government setup, they are over worked and have minimal institutional support.

The setup of psychiatrist in the district hospital:



Figure 8.1. Mahatma Gandhi memorial Hospital, Warangal

An extract from the field notes describing the psychiatric clinic in the government hospital:

The clinic is nested in a small corner of the 1200 bedded district hospital. The district hospital is very large, bustling with people, wheel chairs, stretchers, moving in all directions. People come to this general hospital from across the district and other nearby districts for treatment of advanced psychiatric conditions. Upon stepping into the hospital, I could feel the strong odour of medicines, bleach and stench from a drainage line nearby. Doctors and nurses walk past the patients and their families expectantly look at them. The doctors do not make an eye contact with any one. They look into the air and walk past. Ambulances were parked nearby. The outer wall was lined with juice stalls, teashops and tiffin centres that were making brisk business. Three wheeled auto rickshaws were parked outside the main gate of the hospital, with the drivers looking for passengers. A police van brought in a prisoner patient, who was handcuffed for a hospital check-up, I presumed. I could see the relatives of the patients admitted in the ward waiting outside. Some kids were running around not bothered by the cacophony surrounding them.

I had to meet the hospital superintendent to seek his approval for interaction with the only psychiatrist in the hospital. I gave my details to the attendant seated at the door of the hospital superintendent. He went in and returned

saying “Sir is in a meeting and will call you in some time”. I was called in after ten minutes. The hospital superintendent enquired the purpose of research, details about my fellowship, the nature of work we do in our institute etc. He was not very keen to discuss my research topic. He was listing out the developmental activities initiated in the hospital during his tenure. After sometime, I reminded him that I need to talk to the psychiatrist in the hospital and I required his approval. He called the psychiatrist on his mobile and told me that he was on leave. He informed the psychiatrist regarding my visit. After speaking to the psychiatrist, he asked me to note down his number and contact him directly to fix up a meeting.

I contacted the psychiatrist after two days and requested for an appointment. He said he was willing to meet me at a clinic where he runs his private practice. The psychiatrist from the government hospital was not keen for us to meet in the premises of the government clinic. I tried to negotiate for an appropriate time to meet him in the government hospital premises after his clinic hours, but sensing his reluctance, I chose to meet him in the place he suggested. He mentioned that it was very difficult for him to spare time at his clinic in the government hospital. While describing challenges in a government setup, the psychiatrist mentioned:

“I am the only psychiatrist in this hospital which is a tertiary care center for three districts. Outpatients accessing services on the allocated day Monday are about 50 to 60. The consultation hours for the outpatients are between 9.00 a.m. and 12.00 p.m. Patients come from far off places to access outpatient services. Sometimes they travel 6-7 hours by bus to reach on time. Many patients and their care givers travel in advance and sleep either in a bus stand or in the premises of the hospital to be on time for the clinic. Though the drug supply is good, it is limited only to certain medicines. Many times medication for patients has to be specific. But I have to prescribe drugs which are available and ask the patients to buy the rest from a medical shop. I am sure many of them cannot afford so they leave out the drugs which they have to buy and consume whatever is available for free from the hospital.” (Interview notes, psychiatrist in government sector).

On the scheduled day I reached the private clinic to meet the government psychiatrist. The difference in the setting of the hospitals was telling. The clinic was in a multi-storied building with a large waiting hall and a receptionist. The place was sanitized; a television was placed high on the wall for patients and attendants in the waiting hall. I went to the clinic in mid-afternoon and there were not many patients. I went up to the receptionist and asked for the doctor. She said he is yet to come in and asked me to wait in his cabin. The cabin was small and tidy. The psychiatrist came in after a few minutes. I explained to him about my research. He listened to my description keenly. He called the receptionist and asked her not to disturb him for the next half an hour.

During the discussion, he described issues around the mental health system; issues such as shortage of mental health professionals, state of community based services, socio-economic background of the patients in the context of farmer suicides:

“The overburdened government staff members lack any systemic support and therefore there is a lack of motivation for them to work. Community based supportive social services are poor, leading to over burdening and stretching the limited government personnel and services.”

“Almost all the families who access mental health services are poor. Each member of the family has to be economically productive and contribute to the finances. As mentally ill person in most cases becomes unproductive, this leads to family apathy towards the treatment.” (Interview notes, psychiatrist in government sector).

Farmer suicides are linked to larger social determinants such as access to resources, occupation, money, changing landholdings, and ecological determinants such as scanty rainfall-- that do not directly fall in the health system's domain. The inability of the health system to handle issues like farmer suicides was articulated by the psychiatrist in the government sector.

“Suicides among farmers largely have economic and social triggers. I do not completely rule out underlying predisposition. The present mental health system is not equipped to deal with issues like suicides among farmers.”

During the discussion he reiterated *“Suicides among farmers are largely because of the debts and their inability to repay. I do not completely see it as a public mental health problem.”*

As suicide is a criminal offence, deliberate self-harm cases are also reported as ‘accidents’. There is no follow up of treatment. This left many patients untreated and vulnerable.

“There are instances of patients coming in after an accidental exposure. Reports of young children accidentally ingesting chemicals are also there. Sometimes deliberate self-harm cases are also brought in as accidental exposure fearing police cases. Most patients who consumed pesticides reach [us] at an advanced stage. They are beyond any chance of revival. I think easy access to pesticides is an important issue. In most of the suicide cases, victims take decisions impulsively. If the access to pesticides is restricted then I presume we can contain the numbers. (Psychiatrist from government hospital, Interview notes).

Discussions with psychiatrists working in the private sector gave insights into their ideas about cotton farmer suicides. According to their assessment, most patients approach them for schizophrenia, bipolar disorders, dementia, obsessive compulsive disorders and depression. While agreeing that social determinants do play a role, they feel that suicides are largely due to individual susceptibilities. Farmer suicides are not considered as a special case that needed attention. One of the psychiatrists from the private sector interviewed for the study felt that farmer suicides is a category created for administrative purposes.

“Why is it that there is more concern about farmer suicides? Suicides in general are a problem. We have to accept that bio-medical approach is the only way in the current context. Patients and their families who approach us also want this. Patients who visit me will not return if only counselling is provided. We have to prescribe medications. That is what makes them happy.” (Psychiatrist, Private sector)

He went on to say, “*Most suicides are a result of social and financial matters. Farmers commit suicide more because of their inability to clear their debts.*”

Local perceptions about mental health are important to determine health seeking behaviour of the people. In the words of a private psychiatrist,

“Most people in the rural areas do not consider themselves ill till they are completely debilitated. Same is the case in the context of mental health. Added to that, the notions of supernatural causation have an impact on treatment. Moreover, I think I have never come across a single case of a farmer coming to me with suicidal ideation in my 10 years of experience.” (Psychiatrist, Private Sector)

The interviews discussed so far suggest that community perceptions on health, mental health, disorders and treatment were not very different from what the psychiatrist mentioned. One of the key things I understood during my conversations with the villagers was the absence of expressions regarding the concept of mental health. When I spoke to the villagers asking about health, they all mentioned about *paanam*, *aarogyam*, etc which referred to the physical state of health. The general words they used to describe illness were:

“Paanam manchigaledu” which meant – body isn’t feeling well. Most commonly, the symptoms were described as *“jaramochhindi”* (Fever), *“noppulu”* (aches and pains), *Chakkar ochinndi* (head is spinning, weakness), *vaantulu* (vomiting), *naraalu gunjudu* (nervous weakness), etc.

While discussing about how descriptions of mental health, an elderly villager mentioned that mental illness issues were not discussed openly because of the stigma. *Picchi unnadani teluste, valla intlaku pillaniyyaru, techhukoru.* (If people know that someone is mad in a household, it is difficult to get children of that household married. I realised it was difficult even for me to ask questions about ‘mental health’. I had to ask about health in general and then ask about psychological conditions through descriptions of some symptoms.

The aetiology of mental illness is culturally embedded and largely supernatural. Most of them mentioned common reasons like evil eye (*dishti, nazar*), bad air (*gaali sokindi, hawa*), and possession by spirits (*dayyam pattindi*), etc., as

reasons for mental illness. Treatment seeking behaviour also conformed to their beliefs about cure. They preferred to consult a person who can mediate a divine intervention. Some villagers mentioned that the spirits (*atma*) are because of dead people's dissatisfaction with their lives whilst they were alive. When asked about the mental illness, most of respondents identified tensions among family members and resultant stress as one of the key factors. Land and property issues led to contentious relations even amongst the close family members. One of the villagers claimed that she felt mentally ill because she felt a breach of trust by her close relatives.

I think I have this problem because of tensions between my husband's family and his sister's family related to land issues.... I raised her and now she has turned against us. (Interview notes, 45 years old woman, agricultural family)

In most agricultural families, land is a sensitive issue and it was observed that despite Indian laws ensuring legal share for daughters in ancestral property including land, neither is practiced nor enforced by the state. However as women are educated and are aware of their rights, they have begun to demand for their rights. In most cases, it is a futile assertion. The land values in and around the study village have sky rocketed because of the proximity to the city. This has led to immense friction between different sections of the village and also within family members and relatives.

According to farmers who are in their mid-50s, modernisation induced expectations and aspirations among the youth are leading to dissatisfaction, sense of frustration, and friction within the families.

Earlier we used to be happy with whatever we had. These days one is not satisfied easily. That creates tensions in one's mind, between father and sons, husband and wife, etc. (FGD notes with men farmers)

Escalating input costs for agriculture, pressure to get loans and later repayment, fluctuating prices, are identified as constant stress factors among farming families.

Farming (Vyvasayam) is now like a game of cards (pattalata). There is no guarantee on the returns (Paisalu vaste vastayi pote potayi). One cannot

depend on the banks or other sources. If we don't take money from the money lenders, they will not provide us with loans the next time when we need. So we have to take at least some loans to keep them happy and only then they will oblige when we are in need. If not they will say, "Go to banks. They will give you loans. Why do you come to us? So there is no escape!!"

Rising input costs for cotton farming have been identified as a critical concern for an average small farmer. Despite the presence of other institutional options for loans, private money lenders still remain the most accessible and timely loan providers for the farmers.

During my fieldwork, I discussed local cultural conceptions regarding health, mental health, mental disorders, causes and solutions for problems with men and women farmers, traders, local health care providers, priest in the village, RMP who doubles up as a priest, a pastor and other acquaintances in the village. I have consolidated wide ranging opinions about mental health in a table below:

s.no	Causes	Local term	Symptoms/manifestation	Their Solutions
1	Evil Eye	<i>Dishti, Nazar, Gaali</i>	Stomach pain, sleeplessness, Restlessness	Amulet
2	Spirit possession	<i>Dayyam pattinidi, Ammavaru poonindi.</i>	Screaming, uncontrollable excessive physical power, Restlessness	Propitiation of goddesses, traditional healers, temples and Dargahs
3	Nervous Weakness, Fits, Low BP	<i>Naraala balaheenata, Pidsu Lobipi chakkarochnidi</i>	Severe headache, pain in legs and hands, Seizures, Dizziness,	Medicines
4	Worries/Tension/	<i>Baadhalu,</i>	Being alone, worrying,	Talking and

	Stress	<i>Randhi, Bugulu, Kashtaalu, Gabara</i>	being anxious Sleeplessness Consumption of alcohol Suicide ideation	sharing. Finding ways to alleviate their problems
5	Witchcraft/Sorcery	<i>Banamathi</i>	Loss of speech Paralysis Madness	Witch doctor, Dargah
6	Fate	<i>Karma</i>	Hereditary mental illness	Temple priest, propitiation of gods and goddesses

Table 8.1 Local world views about mental health and illness

Most villagers mentioned that the first option for treatment for any mental health condition was places and people who could invoke supernatural interventions. *Dargah*, a *Sufi* Muslim shrine, is said to be the most preferred choice among the villagers for consultation regarding mental illness. Irrespective of religious background, most families and patients of mental illness consult *Dargah*. Other sources of treatment mentioned were healers who offer both herbal and magico-religious treatment for mental illness, and priest of the local temple.

Echoing community based folk beliefs and perceptions regarding the mental health, psychiatrist from the government also mentioned that they play a key role in health seeking behaviour, and adherence to the treatment.

“Most of the villagers ascribe supernatural reasons for [their] mental health problems. Therefore they seek treatment from temples, babas and dargahs rather than mental health professionals. The shortage of mental health professionals also adds to this.” (Psychiatrist, Government hospital, *Interview notes*).

The socio-economic background of the patients also has an impact on the ability of the patients and their families’ adherence to the treatment regimen.

“Many mentally ill patients do not adhere to the treatment. After taking one month free supply of medication, they do not return if they feel better. If the condition of the patient does not get better, or rather becomes worse, many a times, the family members come to us to collect medicines in proxy. I have to make a judgment on the dosage of the medication based on their description of the condition, assuming that the proxy is acting in the best interest of the patient, though not always sure. Knowing the expenses for food and travel involved for many of the poor, it is difficult to ask patients themselves to come and collect the medicines. (Psychiatrist, Government Sector).

According to the health professionals interviewed, the field of psychiatry is emerging in the urban settings. One of the key propellers identified by them is the proliferation of psychiatric drug companies. Pharmaceutical companies across the world are deploying strategies to increase their share in the market. Pharma companies are popularising symptoms of various conditions to increase the demand for the new generation of antidepressant drugs. Indian pharmaceutical industry is rapidly growing by producing low cost generic medications. This is contributing to the fast spread of antidepressant drugs in India (Ecks, 2005).

“Many big companies have entered the production of psychiatric drugs. Drug companies are only concerned about their market share and sales. They use similar strategies for drug promotion as they do it for other drugs. It involves many things. From gifting expensive gadgets like mobile phones to sponsoring trips to conferences and meetings for psychiatrists. (Psychiatrist, Government sector)

Some pharmaceutical companies resort to more perturbing strategies to influence the psychiatrist in making for ensuring a market for the drugs they manufacture.

Some companies start early, they pick students while they are studying psychiatry and sponsor their books etc., with a hope that they set up private practice and stick to their make of drugs. Usually, if a patient is put on a particular drug from a manufacturer, it is likely to be continued for long periods.”
(Psychiatrist, Pvt Sector)

Pharmaceutical push is leading to extensive medicalization of the mental health conditions. But according to health professionals, this is in line with the patient expectations. Other approaches like psychotherapy based management of mental illness are not very popular in India. According to the psychiatrist:

“Therapists are also not trained well in India. Most doctors prefer prescribing drugs as therapy and counselling is time consuming and less paying. Moreover, patients will not return to you if you try to talk it out. They expect medicines”.
(Psychiatrist, government sector)

According to one of the psychiatrists, medicalization of the rural lives is not too far, as the idea of mental illness has percolated to the rural sector through hospital advertisements and media propaganda.

“These days everybody is talking about tension, stress. It is increasingly common in rural areas too. How do you think people know these things? It’s all because of media and hospitals.” (Psychiatrist, Government sector)

According to psychiatrists, medication plays an important role in treatment of mental illness.

“Unless we give medicines, there is no cure for mental illness. Though we do discourage patients seeking other forms of healing from non-medical people, we insist on compliance to our treatment. In the government hospital, we have limited medications of Risperidone and Olanzapine for psychotic problems. But there are many drugs commonly available in medical shops outside for anxiety and depression: Amisulpride, Aripipazole, Olanzapine, Quetiapine (anti-psychotics); Escitalopram, Desvenlafaxine, Paroxetine, Fluoxetine (mood disorders).”

Though India is thought to be lower in consumption of prescription antidepressants, the market is growing fast because of indiscriminate prescriptions and unregulated over the counter sales of prescription drugs (Sanchita Sharma, 2011). Added to this phenomenon, the psychotropic drugs have percolated into the formal and informal markets as the unlicensed RMPs have started prescribing these drugs. The nexus between the government, private doctors, RMPs, medical representatives, wholesalers and retail sellers

is leading to proliferation and unregulated use of psychotropic medications in India (Ecks & Basu, 2009b).

While commenting on the types of drugs commonly prescribed by psychiatrists in Warangal region, the government psychiatrist mentioned that few psychiatrists does not mean less amount of psychiatric drugs being sold.

“Not only psychiatrists, but physicians in government and private sector do prescribe psychiatric drugs to patients. Though they are not trained to identify conditions like psychosis, they prescribe drugs like Prozac (Fluoextine) or Restyl (Alprazolam). These two drugs are quite popular in this area. Even the medical shop fellows would give these tablets to patients who come with symptoms. More over the success of a drug in being sold also depends how aggressively the pharma companies push their products. Most patients will not even know that they are put on anti-psychotic. If the patient says she feels anxious (gabaraithandi) for no reason or that she is unable to sleep, the doctors prescribe Alprazolam.” (Psychiatrist, Private Sector)

Another doctor mentioned that *“self-medication is very high among the patients. If they feel that a particular drug is providing them comfort, they use the same prescription for many years and continue that particular drug without even approaching a doctor. RMPs also do their bit in promoting drug sales. They are the first point of contact for many rural patients. They too prescribe antipsychotics initially and then refer the patients to a psychiatrist if they think they can't handle the patient anymore. All these things add up to the sale of drugs in this region.”* (Psychiatrist, Private Sector)

Discussions with the priest and a RMP doctor who propose a spiritual dimension of mental health revealed an interesting perspective about treating health problems of the villagers.

According to the priest: *“there is a lot of anxiety among people. Mental tensions (maanasika othilldu) are increasing day by day. Added to this, younger generation do not believe in traditions, rituals and the power of god. This certainly has an impact on mental peace (manasika prashanthta).*

He mentioned that to develop spiritually among the youth, the villagers decided to build a huge Hanuman statue in the center of the village. They collected donations from all the villagers and erected a 27 feet, 5 faced (panchmukhi) statue in 2004.

According to the priest of the temple, *“this campaign to build the statue generated a sense of community oneness in the village as most Hindu families took part in the process. Otherwise we are increasingly becoming confined to our homes. Youth prefer to go out of the village to study and work leaving behind elderly members in the village; women and men are increasingly glued to televisions without interacting with others. Community spaces and village*



festivals do not see much participation these days.”

Figure 8.2.invitation card for the inauguration of the hanuman statue distributed as a wall hanging to promote spirituality.



Figure 8.3actual statue on the roof top of a temple in the center of the village

He mentioned efforts by the Hindu villagers to divert youth from alcohol and other vices by promoting *hanuman deeksha* (initiation into worshipping the monkey god Hanuman) and *aiyappa deeksha* (initiation to worship lord Aiyappa).



Figure 8.4. A young farmer in *Aiyappa deeksha* in his chilli fields.

During this *deeksha*, men have to follow rituals, a list of 18 do's and 18 do-not's including abstinence from sex, alcohol, meat and other corporal and daily pleasures for a period of 41 days (*a mandala*). The priest in the hanuman

temple mentioned that youth who take up *deeksha*, sincerely observe the dos and do-not's but return to their older selves with a vengeance “(*deeksha chesinnanni rojulu baganeuntaru. Taruvatha malla eppatilagane*)”.



Figure 8.5 .Men congregating at a devotees place early morning to perform puja

The priest continued, “*taking up deeksha has positive effects on the young men's minds as it reinforces spiritual cleanliness (adhyathmika parichunratha) and bodily cleanliness (Bhouthika parishubratha).*”

According to one of the young farmers who took up *Aiyappa deeksha*, “*deeksha has a lot of benefits for youth. It keeps negative thoughts (chedu alochanalu) away from the mind. The rituals practices reinforce mental peace, camaraderie and a sense of support from fellow humans and god.*”

According to a priest in the church who offers prayer services to people who approach him with ‘problems’ including mental health,

“I think mental problems arise because of alienation from God. Most people who deviate from the divine path are bound to have mental stress. To get relief from mental stress, most men indulge in drinking and gambling etc.”



Figure 8.6. Prayer meeting in progress

The RMP doctor belongs to the scheduled caste and has been providing primary health services in the village for more than 10 years. According to him, he conducts prayer meetings in the families who approach him for various problems including mental health and anxieties. He says, *“most patients come to me for their regular health needs and in that process*

discuss their other problems. Sometimes I pray and give simple paracetamol after blessing it and it works for them. Most of the times I give an ear to their problems and suggest organizing a prayer (prarthana) to seek divine blessings (prabhu deevena) for the family. However, it is only in the case of believers in the lord (prabhu bhaktulu). Most of the times the families invite their close relatives or neighbours to take part in these prayer meetings. This builds a positive mentality among the people who interact with them”.

He and the other RMP in the village mentioned that they refer any difficult patient to other private doctors in the nearby town. “I have referred few alcoholic patients and other psychological problems to a doctor in the city. I do not treat them. I understand they need proper medication to get well” (Discussions with RMP).

Somatization of day to day life stress was also reported by another RMP in the village. During my many visits to his clinic, I noted a woman who lived across the street who was in her early 60s was a frequent visitor to the clinic. She mostly complained of heaviness and head ache (*talkaya baruvugundi*), not feeling like eating (*annam sainsthledu*), and stretching sensation in the nerves in her neck (*medanaraalu gunjuthai*).

RMP used to listen to her, check her blood pressure and administer a vitamin injection and give paracetamol tablets for pains. He charged Rs.20 from her and



Figure 8.7 .RMP checking blood pressure of an elderly woman patient

usually she wouldn't have the money to pay. The RMP mentioned that she is known to him since many years and she keeps coming to talk to him and seek medication for her problems. I noticed that the discussion started with the old woman asking about her son. "Have you seen my son in the town son?"

(Patnam la na koduku kanbaddada bidida)." The RMP lives in the nearby town and comes daily to his clinic in the village. He replied in the negative. Listening to him, the old woman had tears in her eyes. Then she proceeded to list out her symptoms. The RMP listened to her, checked her blood pressure using a sphygmomanometer and said it was ok. He gave her a few tablets and administered a vitamin injection. After the patient left, when I asked him what her problem was, he said "nothing much, only age related problems" and added that "whenever she feels weak she comes to me." When I asked him to narrate her story since he mentioned that he knew her for many years, here is what he said: *"They belong to Tenugu community and have two sons and a daughter. They had a small bit of land in which they grew vegetables and sold in a stall in the village center. They also had a cow which was an additional income. After the old man's death, she lived alone. Their sons were not keen to live in the village or do agriculture. One of them was trained as an electrician and other was running a food mess. The daughter was married into a family in a nearby village. Both her sons migrated to the nearby town for better opportunities. Since her children left home, she and her husband lived in the village all by themselves. Though her sons asked her to move with them, she did not want to leave the village. She is supported by her younger son. The old lady misses her son and every one. She would have been alright if she moved with them, but she is possessive about her land and house."*

Apart from having physical health related issues, it was evident that the old lady was psychologically distressed⁴⁵. But the cultural expression of her emotional problems⁴⁶ was masked by her physical symptoms⁴⁷. The RMP who is an untrained medical practitioner responds to her somatic manifestations within a biomedical framework by giving her medications.

As a part of the study, mhGAP guidelines were used to elicit possible psychiatric problems of the farmers who committed suicide and the survivors. A case study of farmers who killed themselves was constructed through semi-structured interviews with the family members. The narratives including presentation and behaviour were extensively discussed with a clinical psychiatrist and medical anthropologist. This helped establish a formal psychiatric diagnosis as appropriate in each family, including a retrospective psychiatric assessment and diagnosis classification amongst farmers who completed suicide according to ICD-10 classification. This exercise was undertaken to juxtapose community narratives and biomedical explanations about farmer suicides.

These cases were discussed in detail in chapter 6. A brief background of the cases and the summary of mhGAP assessments are presented below to contrast community based beliefs and ideas about mental health and illness.

- In the case of Kumar, a cotton farmer who killed himself in the year 2010, the subject committed suicide within a week of an extremely humiliating incident. It is unclear whether this was preceded by a prolonged period of depression. However, there seems to be an evidence of Alcohol Abuse (F10.1). I could also cautiously interpret this as an Acute Stress Reaction, Severe type (F43.02) leading to suicide. The subject's 10 year

⁴⁵ There are semantic and conceptual problems in translating local manifestation of distress. The expressions such as psychological distress signify author's effort to frame them in the context of mental health literature.

⁴⁶ The term emotional problems were expressed by the informant in the local language as --- *randhipadutunata*, which the author has translated as emotional probs.

⁴⁷ During a workshop on "Distress and the Body: Anthropological and Clinical dimensions" organized by UCL and Banyan Academy of leadership in Mental Health, during 3-5 September 2012, a vignette was presented on how the educated Dalit women were using words such as 'stress' and 'tensions' to express distress they face in their lives. The vignette showcases how modernity is giving way to newer ways of expressing emotional problems ("Case discussion," 2012).

old son showed symptoms suggestive of a Moderate Depressive Episode (F 32.1).

- In the case of Komuraiah, he appeared to be experiencing severe financial stress as a result of incurring huge debts, in order to invest in hybrid cotton. It is unclear whether he experienced severe mental health problems prior to the experience of being humiliated by his relatives, which led to his suicide by consuming pesticide. His wife's description suggests extensive somatic symptoms and psychological anxiety. Based on this limited collateral information, a diagnosis of Somatisation Disorder (F45.0) is most likely. Rajender, their son, appeared to be experiencing a prolonged depressed mood together with alcohol dependency. A diagnosis of Alcohol Dependency (F10.2) with a probable Moderate Depressive Episode including a serious suicide attempt (F 32.1) is considered appropriate.
- In case of Sagar, based on the narrative of the deceased farmer's wife, there appeared to be no obvious behavioural problems preceding his suicide. In fact he was described in premorbid terms as 'kind, sensitive and never expressing his frustration'. Thus it is difficult to establish a formal psychiatric diagnosis prior to suicide. Pramila, the surviving wife of deceased Sagar, never had any health problems until her husband died. Distress caused by her husband's death and continuing demands from her husband's family to possess her house and land, caused her to develop an anxiety disorder. She appeared to suffer from episodes of pseudo-seizures, recurrent thoughts about hopelessness and a wish to die. She also experienced multiple somatic symptoms, ideas of reference and low self-esteem, together with extensive somatic symptoms such as headache and fatigue. There is some indication that she experienced transient psychotic symptoms in the form of thought insertion on the background of prolonged depressed mood, loss of appetite, sleeplessness and weight loss. Treatment with the psychiatrist and partial recovery after a month together with paranoid ideation suggests a Depressive episode with psychotic symptoms (F32.3). Difficulties in

assessing her psychiatric case notes preclude ruling out a Dissociative Conversion Disorder (F44).

- Mallesham's case demonstrated existent social and cultural barriers inhibiting their attempt to move up the social order. They could not move beyond the boundaries of the caste system. The humiliation and bereavement experienced by the family resulted in three deaths. This pushed Mallesham to a state of despondency and alcoholism. The signs of Acute Stress Reaction, severe type (F43.02) leading to suicide amongst 2 out of the 3 deaths in the family and Prolonged Grief Reaction leading to Alcohol Dependency (F10.2) were evident in the family.
- In case of Ramesh a farmer who committed suicide in 2013, he appears to have killed himself following a prolonged period of depression and psychosocial dysfunction, with a background of severe financial stress, suggesting a diagnosis of Moderate Depressive Episode (F 32.1). His surviving wife Jyothi continued to experience acute grief symptoms, when interviewed a few weeks after her husband suicide.

Assessment of the survivors and a retrospective analysis of the possible mental health condition of the deceased farmers from a psychiatric lens indicated a biomedical explanation of farmer suicides and distress among their family members. This signifies a huge gap in the worldviews of the community and professionals. To understand the context which shaped the psychiatry and mental health services in India, an analysis of the history is presented in the following sections.

8.2 History of Mental health services in India

Concepts of mental health are discussed since ancient times in India.

Description of mental health can be traced back to the *Vedas*,⁴⁸ the ancient Hindu scriptures. *Ayurveda*, the ancient tradition of medicine in India is credited to have roots in *Atharva Veda*.⁴⁹ *Agastya*, a sage considered as father of Indian medicine, has described 18 mental disorders and their treatment in his treatise.

⁴⁸Vedas are amongst the oldest sacred texts of Hindus written in Sanskrit during the Vedic period, during the mid-2nd to mid-1st millennium BCE (Flood, 1996).

⁴⁹*Atharva Veda* one of the four Vedas is a collection of apotropaic charms, spells, and incantations, describes notions of health and mental illness

In *Unani*⁵⁰, Najabuddin Unhammad describes seven types of mental disorders in 1222 AD. Mental Asylums were reported to have been constructed during the Mughal rule, particularly during rule of Mohammad Khilji during 1436-1469 (Nizamie & Goyal, 2010).

The next notable era in the context of mental health services was during the British rule in India. Mental health problems of employees of the Queen, military and civil servants working in India were one of the main concerns of the British. Therefore, a number of asylums were established based on the idea of segregation of mentally ill during the 1700s. The political and social situation in India during this period also had an impact on the psychological state of the population. Weakening of Mughal empire, rise of the British, conflict between the French and English, and constantly warring states lead to a social and psychological turmoil (Sridhar Sharma, 2006). The colonial impact on the evolution of psychiatry in India was initiated by the establishment of the first mental hospital in India in Bombay in 1775. The next set of hospitals were established in Calcutta during 1787, Monghyr in Bihar and in Kilpauk, Chennai during 1794 (Anant Kumar, 2004). These hospitals mainly catered to the needs of the British Army. Common people with mental illness were largely treated by the practitioners from Ayurveda and Unani. This arrangement continued for the ensuing decades. After some years, British patients demanded better care and were shifted to England for treatment. Two private 'mad houses' were established in England in 1818 and 1892 to treat the returning English patients from India and other colonies under the control of East India Company (Ernst, 1998). As the pressure on the asylums was less, they started to accommodate mentally ill Indian patients. Historically, developments in psychiatry during 1858 to 1947 have been credited to have shaped modern Indian psychiatry. During this phase two key advances which influenced psychiatry were establishment of a network of asylums and hospitals across the country and development of a legal framework (Mills, 2006).

⁵⁰A system of medicine popular during Mughal rule (16th to mid-18th century) in India. It is based on Greco-Arabic system of medicine later developed by Arabian and Persian physicians (Rahman, 2001).

The Indian army played an important role in establishing modern psychiatry during the First World War. During and post-world war I, many Indian army members fighting for the British in various parts of the world, who were traumatised in the war were reported as 'shell-shock cases'. Some of these patients were treated in England but many were sent to hospitals in India. Over a period of time treatment was considered a burden because of the chronic nature of illnesses and treating the patients for many years, without a possible cure.

By the year 1918, the need for opening hospitals for cases of shell-shock was acutely felt as "mental cases" were reported in hundreds in Bombay. Existing facilities in that presidency proved inadequate to support them. The Indian Army lobbied hard with the government of Bombay and with the government of India to systematically expand psychiatric treatment in the country for the soldiers. More and more facilities were opened and more beds were reserved in psychiatric wards for treatment of Indian soldiers. The Indian military was credited to have introduced "The Indian Army Act" of 1911 amended in 1923 for the benefit of soldiers who had mental illnesses. The provision for continuation of service after treatment or honourable discharge with full retirement benefits was introduced to such soldiers. By the 1930s, Indian Army's lobbying had ensured that psychiatry was integrated as a full course in the syllabi of medical colleges across the country. Investments in new institutions and reforms in the existing ones were all pushed by the army (M. S. Sharma, 2014).

One of the modern institutes for mental illness, Ranchi European Lunatic Asylum with a capacity of 174 male and female patients was started by the British in 1918 for the benefit of European patients. It was renamed as European Mental Hospital in 1922, indicating a shift in approach from that of an asylum. This institute is credited to have introduced key ideas of western psychiatry in India including medical education and treatment. Some of the firsts at this institute were: in 1922, it offered a diploma in psychological medical examination in collaboration with the University of London; a department of occupational therapy was established in the same year; hydrotherapy was started in 1923; focus on mental hygiene and prophylaxis and psychotherapy;

Cardiazol induced treatment for seizures in 1938; Electroconvulsive therapy (ECT) and many more (Mills, 2006).

Act XXXVI of 1868 was formulated to give British the right to imprison mentally ill people in India who were not criminals. In 1912, this act was replaced by Indian Lunacy Act VI. This act was influential in the legal handling of people categorised as insane till as recently as 1987 (Anant Kumar, 2004).

After the end of WW I, medical and psychiatric realms were hugely influenced by the British drive to Indianise services. The British started to co-opt the rising middle class in India in the wake of increasing nationalism in the country. Most mental health hospitals were being increasingly served by British trained Indian personnel. Western psychiatry was being established in India as part of rationalising medical systems by importing concepts, education and treatment methods from England (Fabrega, 2009). Even many of the existing structures which house mental hospital across the country are dated to the British era. By the end of 1949, India had 26 fully functional and recognised medical schools which were established during the British rule. Health Survey and Development committee, popularly known as the Bhole Committee was constituted in the 1943 to evaluate the health systems in post independent India. Bhole committee influenced the mental health care scenario in the country (Park, 2013). Recommendations of the report proposed a mixture of both top down and bottom up approaches to mental health in India. The present National Institute of Mental Health Sciences was established in 1954 as a part of these recommendations. The foundations for community mental health in India were laid by the Bhole committee's report, which was ahead of its times in recommending integration of psychiatry and mental health care in community oriented primary health care services (Desai, 2006).

The Bhole committee assessed the paucity of trained professionals and mental health services available since 1940s. The report mentions that based on population projections of then, it required accommodation for 800,000 patients but only about 10,000 were actually available. Similar observation was made about the availability of trained mental health personnel. The committee requested the then superintendent of the Ranchi European Mental Hospital to

evaluate the situation of mental health hospitals in the country. To summarise the situation in the words of Col.M.Taylor, “every mental hospital I have visited is disgracefully understaffed. They have scarcely enough professional workers to give more than cursory attention to the patients” (Bhore Committee, 1946). The situation is no different even now. Though the numbers of mental health institutions and professionals have increased, there is still a huge gap. The current proportion of mental health professionals in India is about one psychiatrist per 200,000 to 300,000 populations as against the ideal 1 per 100,000 (Thirunavukarasu & Thirunavukarasu, 2010). Many factors contribute to this situation. A large number of psychiatrists trained in India are known to move to the west and Arab countries (Carstairs, 1980), inadequate training infrastructure to produce required number of mental health professionals were the key factors. The existing training infrastructure in India produces about 320 psychiatrists, 50 clinical psychologists, 25 psychiatric social workers and 185 psychiatric nurses per year (Murthy RS, 2011).

The WHO influenced mental health field in India since 1970. In one of the national workshops conducted in collaboration with WHO on mental health services in India in 1971, the acute shortage of trained professionals was discussed. It was recommended that there should be an emphasis on training mental health professionals for the next two decades to augment the numbers. As this was a time taking process, some alternative strategies were proposed for the next few years. In 1973, WHO supported programs that involved medical auxiliaries and psychiatrists to provide mental health services in the rural areas. These initiatives fed into community psychiatry initiatives over a period of time and evolved into a path breaking National mental health program (NMHP) in 1982. NMHP was formulated by an expert group formed by the Government of India (GoI) after extensive consultations with various key people in the country and with WHO. The committee took the need for inclusion of mental health in national health planning for better delivery of health services (Nizamie & Goyal, 2010).

The objectives of NMHP as delineated by the expert group were:

- i. To ensure availability and accessibility of minimum mental care for all in the foreseeable future, particularly to the most vulnerable and under-privileged sections of population;
- ii. To encourage application of mental health knowledge in general health care and in social development;
- iii. To promote community participation in the mental health service development and to stimulate efforts towards self-help in the community.

The policy document states that mental health did not figure in earlier health planning for various reasons such as misconceptions regarding the incidence and prevalence of mental illness in India and available treatment options. Acute mental disorders, chronic or frequently recurring mental illness, emotional illness, alcohol abuse, psychiatric problems among children and elderly were identified as conditions reflecting psychiatric morbidity during 1980s. Apart from drugs, physical methods of treatment, psychotherapy and behaviour modification techniques; the policy proposed involvement of non-medical health professionals. The policy document further proposes the following aims in planning mental health services for the country:

- i. Prevention and treatment of mental and neurological disorders and associated disabilities.
- ii. Use of mental health technology to improve general health services
- iii. Application of mental health principles in the scheme of national development to improve quality of life.

Some of the key strategies identified for implementing NMHP towards achieving the identified aims and objectives were developed by NIMHANS. The key features of the plan which emphasised on treatment, rehabilitation and prevention were (Anant Kumar, 2005) :

1. Programme of community mental health at primary health care level in States/ Union Territories;
2. Setting up of regional centres for community mental health;
3. Formation of a national advisory group on mental health;
4. Setting up of a task force on mental health;
5. Prevention of mental illness and promotion of mental health;

6. Integration of multipurpose training schools in NMHP;
7. Involvement of voluntary agencies in mental health;
8. Mental health education for the undergraduates;
9. Evaluation of community mental health programmes;
10. Preparation of manuals and records; and
11. Training programmes for mental hospital staff.

One of the pilot initiatives of NMHP was to rollout District Mental health plan (DMHP) in select few districts across various states in the country. DMHP was designed by National Institute of Mental Health and Neurosciences (NIMHANS) based on its activities in Bellary district of Karnataka. It was implemented in 125 out of the 652 districts of various states in the country in a phased manner during 1997 and 2010. The key objectives of the DMHP were:

- a) To provide sustainable basic mental health services to the community and to integrate these services with other health services;
- b) Early detection and treatment of patients within the community itself;
- c) To ensure that patients and their relatives do not have to travel long distances to go to hospitals or to nursing homes in cities;
- d) To take the pressure off from mental hospitals;
- e) To reduce the stigma attached towards mental illness through change of attitude and public education; and
- f) To treat and rehabilitate mental patients discharged from the mental hospital within the community.

Though the NMHP and DMHP have detailed strategies for achieving their objectives and aims, it is established that implementation of these strategies was a failure. Some of the reasons identified for the high emphasis on curative than preventive and promotional aspects of mental health care were-- community resources such as families were not given enough importance, short term goals were given more importance than realistic long term goals, lack of financial planning and administrative planning (Murthy RS, 2011).

After a critical evaluation of the program, there was an effort to repackage NMHP in 2003. The focus was on creating a balance between various

components of mental health care delivery system and clear budgetary lines.

The revised strategy comprised of five interrelated components:

1. Redesigning the DMHP around a nodal institute- a zonal medical college
2. Strengthen human resources of psychiatry in medical colleges, provide services at secondary level and promote general hospital psychiatry
3. Streamline and modernise mental hospitals into centres of excellence with social orientation to provide leadership for research in community mental health.
4. Strengthen central and state mental health authorities for better monitoring and intersectoral coordination and linkages with other national programmes.
5. To carryout research and build epidemiological database of mental disorders; research and training on therapeutic needs of the community; develop cost effective intervention models; promotion of intersectoral coordination for policy development; focussed Information Education and Communication (IEC) activities for eradication of stigma around mental disorders.

However, field studies conducted to evaluate the effectiveness of DMHP have shown that the program has not been effectively implemented for various reasons such as:

1. Limited development of operationalization aspects
2. Limited trained human resources at the state level
3. Lack of coordination between the medical college and the DMHP team
4. Lack of regular and adequate technical support from the concerned professional bodies
5. Lack of emphasis on creating community awareness
6. Lack of mental health indicators focusing on the clinical outcome, and
7. Lack of monitoring by the assigned state and national level bodies.

Summarising the critiques of DMHP (Sarin & Jain, 2013) present some of the viewpoints expressed by various research studies: DMHP, despite good intentions has failed to deliver as other national programs (Jacob, 2011); there are many administrative, managerial and implementation problems such as shortage of trained human resources, high turnover of the staff, access and utilisation of funds, delay in program initiation, excessive emphasis of pharmacological solutions to psychosocial problems, not accommodating

community perceptions, reinforcing existing barriers to health care (Jain & Jadhav, 2008) and DMHP remains ineffective in practice to a large extent (Murthy RS, 2011).

Involvement of WHO in Indian mental health scenario has contributed to the propagation of bio-medical approach. In one of the key WHO reports on mental health (WHO, 2001), mental illness was equated with brain disorder. This report put an onus on the governments to be equally responsible for mental health as physical health. Though the report mentions that physical, mental and behavioural disorders are the result of complex interaction between biological, psychological and social factors, it goes on to state that “mental and behavioural problems are based in brain and affect people of all ages and of all countries causing suffering to families, communities as well as individuals” (WHO, 2001). Culture was alluded to in the context of considering it along with other factors such as age, sex and social contexts for designing interventions and developing culture specific tools to help understand the nature and management of disorders.

WHO played a key role in universalising mental illness across the world and in reducing mental disorders to functions of human brain. This led to an excessive emphasis on medical management of the mental health at the cost of other approaches to deal with mental health concerns. Interviews with psychiatrists trained in bio-medical model ascertain these dominant world views propagated by institutions such as WHO. Within the discipline of psychiatry the technological paradigm and biomedical identity that medicalised everyday life is being aggressively promoted at the cost of social, cultural and psychological dimensions (Bracken et al., 2012).

This is in contrast with the local worldviews on mental health and illness in the community. Therefore community acceptance and participation in the NMHP and DMHP was limited. This is identified as one of the key reasons contributing to the failure of these ambitious programs.

The influence of the biomedical model was evident on the policy makers and scientific fraternity who were trying to locate a genetic predisposition to the problem of farmer suicides in the country. Former chief minister of the erstwhile

Andhra Pradesh state sent teams of psychiatrists to counsel farmers while promoting commercial agriculture in the state (D. Sharma, 2004).

Anthropological Survey of India, a Government of India body undertook to study by collecting DNA samples from the families of cotton farmers who committed suicide in Vidharbha region of Maharashtra state to establish the genetic link (Arya, 2007) .

8.2.1 Glocal?

As discussed in earlier chapters on agriculture, cotton and media, globalisation has had a big impact on Indian culture and society. Similarly, mental health and care are not out of bound to the global forces. As noted earlier, psychiatry and mental health care in India were shaped by colonial influence and the still continue to be influenced by global institutions. The dominant biomedical mental health paradigm framed by WHO and other global leaders are being pursued with vigour in India.

WHO defines mental health as “a state of wellbeing in which the individuals realize their own abilities, can cope with the normal stresses of life, can work productively and fruitfully and are able to make a positive contribution to their community (World Health Organization, 2001).”

This definition ironically reflects an idealist perspective which excludes a majority of the marginalized populations who are being negatively impacted by neoliberal policies adapted by most of the states. If we extend this definition to farmers in rural India, a majority of them could be considered lacking in mental health.

This takes me back to one of the farmers’ statements while I asked him about mental health. He said, *“Farmers are mad indeed for practicing agriculture. Would any sane person pursue agriculture knowing pretty well that agriculture is a gamble and it is not going to be remunerative? But most of us have no other option”*. (Discussions with a farmer on mental health issues among farmers)

Against this backdrop of contrasting sets of values, it is critical to understand the role of culture in defining the wellbeing amongst rural farmers and

professionals including policy makers. Culture mediates the practice of values, beliefs and practices people hold in their day to day lives. Why is culture important to address mental health and wellbeing? Is culture relevant in these global times where there is a thrust towards universalization rather than focus on cultural variations?

Culture according to a recent report on culture and health is defined as “The shared, overt and covert understandings that constitute conventions and practices, and the idea, symbols, and concrete artefacts that sustain conventions and practices to make them meaningful. The report recommends a broad view of culture that encompasses social systems of belief, and also presumptions of objectivity that permeate views of local and global health, health care and health care delivery (Napier et al., 2014)”.

Cultural values about mental health and wellbeing amongst lay population are rooted in local contexts, whereas professional views are increasingly being synchronous with the global. Mental health professionals and health care system constitute a cultural system of symbolic meanings anchored in particular arrangements of social institutions and patterns of interpersonal interactions. The structure, function and relative position of health care system in any society has social and cultural origins that integrate all health-related components of a society. Culture shapes explanatory models of health and illness among the rural population and health professionals. People and clinicians acquire different language and meanings that connect their social and cultural contexts due to a variation in social and symbolic realities. Reliance of mental health professionals on medical model of disease (Kleinman, 1980) and dominant framework of disease than illness (Littlewood, 1991) is creating a chasm in the way they deal with farmer suicides. Symbols of western medicine-- prescriptions and pills are being conflated as alternatives to local cultural manifestations, beliefs and practices in the context of mental health. In the words of a psychiatrist *“I do not have much time to listen to patients and to counsel. I prescribe antidepressants and a combination of other drugs. That cures the patients of their symptoms and that is what the patient wants. If they do not respond, then I treat them with electroconvulsive therapy (ECT). Patients want*

medications and not just talk. They will not return to my clinic if I do not match their expectations.”(Interview notes, Private psychiatrist)

These statements were corroborated with other psychiatrists during their interviews. The fact that there is a wide usage, easy access to psychiatric drugs in the study region is alarming. Indeed the ‘pill’ holds symbolic and curative power in popular Indian conceptions of illness (Jain & Jadhav, 2009). Mental health professionals and institutions embody global ideas about mental health and treatment based on biomedical paradigms which are being pushed as a way forward. For e.g. western ideas of depression are being eagerly adopted adapted to the Indian context. In the process, dominant language of medical assessment in the clinics, edits out the suffering rooted in local cultures (Jadhav & Barua, 2012; Jadhav, 1996b). As discussed earlier (Chapter 7), state policies and dominant biomedical discourse pushed by burgeoning pharmaceutical industry influences the language of the popular culture.



Figure 8.8. Seed company advertisement suggesting that their brand of seeds prevent mental distress among cotton farmers.



Figure8.9. Delayed rains? Stop “worrying”. Use our brand of seeds!

Advertisement campaigns by popular Bt cotton seed companies promoting their brands of ‘magic’ seeds⁵¹ that promise to address distress symptoms such as ‘BP’ (blood pressure) and tension, reflect the permeation of medical discourses into a farmer’s everyday life through the market.

The dominance of the biomedical way of framing mental health has percolated into local cultures with drugs and ECT is also being appropriated by folk medicine (Jadhav, 1996a). According to psychiatrists in the study area most people who approach them want them to prescribe medications, and RMPs do adapt medications and treatment practices followed by the psychiatrists in their clinics. It is therefore important to understand that excessive reliance by the psychiatrists on drugs and techniques such as ECT in mental health care settings is determined and constrained by cultures they represent (Nunley, 1996).

Reach of the global far into the local cultures is translating it into local semiotics. This process is being facilitated by the policies and professionals to reach and influence the local. However there is no reverse permeability of larger socio-cultural, political and economic realities of a majority of rural population in India

⁵¹ Seed companies aggressively promote their brand of seeds ascribing them near magical powers. Incidentally one of the seed companies named their brand ‘magic seeds in fig. 8.8. Most of the advertisements talk about increasing the bank balances of the farmers manifold, relieving the farmers from their worries etc.

into the realms of the clinic. How do we reconcile this paradox? Could there be a symbiosis of global and local emerging as 'Glocal'?

8.2.2 New Pathways, New Hope: National Mental Health Policy of India, 2014

The Ministry of Health and Family Welfare, Government of India has constituted a policy group in the year 2011 to frame a National Mental Health Policy and Plan. The committee set out to formulate the policy by interacting with as many stakeholders as they could including persons with mental illness, family & non family care-givers, health professionals, professional bodies, activists, non-governmental organizations and those working on health systems, community health and development, etc. The committee broadly used the WHO definitions of Policy, Plan, and Programme when drafting the National Mental Health Policy and Plan.

The Terms of Reference of the Policy Group were:

- a) To prepare a situational analysis of the need for mental health care in the country and the current provision of mental health care in the country, including issue of human resources, essential drug procurement and distribution, advocacy, prevention of mental illness, rehabilitation and care and promotion of mental health and rehabilitation.
- b) To carry out a systematic review of the evidence base for the policy measures proposed below.
- c) To take the draft Mental Health Care Act into account when drafting the National Mental Health Care Policy and Plan and recommend changes to the proposed draft Mental Health Care Act. If necessary, to support the National Mental Health Care Policy and Plan.

- d) To prepare evidence based National Mental Health Care Policy for the Ministry of Health and Family Welfare stating guiding values, principles and objectives of such a policy and identify priority areas for action.
- e) To prepare a National Mental Health Care Plan with specific reference to the National Mental Health Programme and the District Mental Health Programme with specific strategies and activities to implement priority areas of action identified in the National Mental Health Care Policy and to further prepare an estimate of financial resources required to implement the Plan.
- f) To conduct broad-based consultations on the above issues with mental health stakeholders in the country before finalizing the Situational Analysis, the National Mental Health Care Policy and the National Mental Health Care Plan (“MENTAL HEALTH POLICY GROUP,” 2011).

Dr. Harsh Vardhan, the Union Health Minister, after visiting a 155 year old mental hospital in Agra on 7th of October 2014, stated that the country’s mental illness burden has grown to such proportions that the government has decided to frame the first ever official national policy on mental health. He identified that stigmatization of routine mental illness despite considerable progress in treatment methods is leading to denial or delayed treatment. Therefore he proposed to release the national policy on mental health on October 10th and celebrate it as the national mental health day to raise people’s awareness on mental illnesses and remove false perceptions attached to them. He mentioned “we want a nation that upholds the human rights of mental patients. Also, it will be an occasion to generate awareness against stigmatisation of people with mental illnesses and highlight the symptoms and remedial opportunities for

those with depression, schizophrenia, bipolar syndrome etc.”

The minister referred to the WHO prediction that 20% of Indian population would suffer from mental illness by 2020. Alluding to the treatment gap, he mentioned that there are only 3500 psychiatrists and

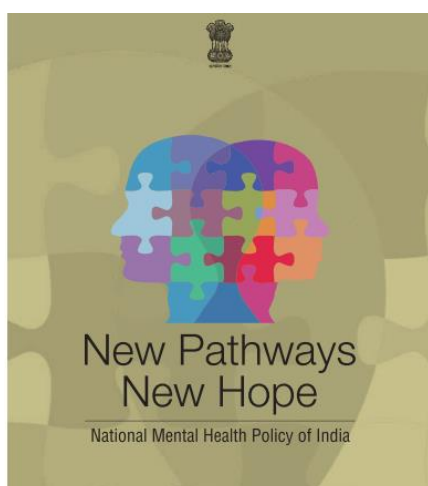


Figure 8.10 Cover page of the new mental health policy of India

the government shall address this gap by training more mental health professionals, improving funding for hospitals and include mental health under the proposed universal insurance scheme to cover treatment (Press Information Bureau, 2014). Subsequently, when the policy was released the minister stated that it is backed by the “Mental Health Action Plan 365” that spells out specific roles for the Center, States, local bodies, and civil society organisations.

The national mental health policy document was titled “New Pathways, New Hope” (Ministry of Health And Family Welfare, 2014). Stating that mental health is not just absence of mental disorder, the policy document goes on to define it “as a state of wellbeing in which the individuals realize their own abilities, can cope with the normal stresses of life, can work productively and fruitfully and are able to make a positive contribution to their community.” The document continues to say that mental health refers to a broad array of activities directly or indirectly related to mental wellbeing keeping in line with the WHO definition. And, mental health is also related to the promotion of wellbeing, prevention of mental disorders, and treatment and rehabilitation of people affected by mental disorders.

The policy calls for recognition of mental disorders and a more accessible and holistic treatment of mental illnesses and takes a fresh look at the health services being offered for mental illnesses, lays down the guidelines for mental health care, and recommends changes in the law that criminalises suicide, now considered a major cause of death among people with a mental illness.

8.3 Recent debates in mental health: Movement for Global Mental Health (MGMH) and NMHP 2014

According to the Global Burden of Disease study 2010 (GBD 2010) mental and substance abuse disorders were identified as 5th leading contributor of burden measure by disability adjusted life years (DALYs) and they are projected to be the second biggest cause of ‘disease burden’ by 2030 (White & Sashidharan.S.P, 2014). WHO in its report on access to mental health in LMIC had projected that 4 out of 5 people who need mental health care do not receive them (World Health Organization, 2008). In response, WHO initiated Mental Health Gap Action Program (mhGAP) in 2008 with an aim to scale-up services

for mental, neurological and substance use disorders for countries from low and middle income countries. mhGAP intervention guide was developed by WHO to take its agenda forward by defining what should be scaled up. WHO is currently evaluating mhGAP implementation in Ethiopia, Panama, Nigeria and Jordan. Concurrently, a five country program for improving mental health care is underway to create evidence for 1. Integration of mental health care in primary health care settings, 2. Evaluate the feasibility, acceptability and impact of integration into primary health care and 3. Scaling up to other places (Lund et al., 2012).

Arguments against WHO's method criticise the approach introduced by mhGAP in low and middle income countries. Scale up of services has led to unequal thrust on biomedical intervention at the cost of socio-cultural approaches, local evidence and development initiatives (White & Sashidharan.S.P, 2014). However, WHO and MGMH are pursuing scale-up of clinical treatment services including pharmacological and psychosocial to address inequity in access to medications in global south.

To take forward the agenda of closing the gap, MGMH was launched on 10th October 2008 as a coalition of individuals and institutions. The main aim is to close the gap for people living with mental disorders among the people living in lower and middle income countries who face the largest gap (Patel et al., 2011). A group of mental health professionals including researchers and clinicians proposed a call for urgent action and investment of funds. According to them, the global burden of schizophrenia, depression, epilepsy, dementia, alcohol dependence and other mental, neurological and substance use constitute about 13% of the global disease burden. The arguments they put forward in support of their approach are: 1. Mental disorders cause a big economic burden 2. Clinical means to treat mental disorders is cost-effective, 3. It contributes to justice and helps realize the rights of patients to receive better treatment, and 4. Mental health is a developmental priority (A. Das & Rao, 2012). Claiming to launch a new social movement to strengthen mental health, "new Movement for Global Mental Health (MGMH)" the editor of leading general medical journal Lancet urged WHO, World Bank and international donor agencies, and professional

bodies to pledge more support to mental health by making it a central theme of their strategies and financial flows (Horton, 2007).

The goals of MGMH as agreed by most of its supporters was that “*The Movement aims to improve the availability, accessibility and quality of services for people with mental disorders worldwide – especially in low and middle-income countries – by scaling up services based in scientific evidence and human rights.*” (“Movement for Global Mental Health”). In pursuance of their objectives, the team proposed a Grand Challenge in Global Mental Health to identify mental health priorities for a period of 10 years (Collins et al., 2011). MGMH plans to operationalise its aims through two principles: scaling up services for mental disorders based on evidence for effective treatment and human rights for mentally disabled. They base their model on successful global health initiatives such as HIV and AIDS and MDR TB programs. However it is suggested that scale-up is a major challenge despite some good programs around the world because of the absence of political commitment, inadequate funds and bias of the health policy makers against mental health (Kleinman, 2013).

8.3.1 Critiques of GMH movement

Over the years, MGMH pursued its goals by running academic courses, trainings, tying up with institutions such as WHO and creating an evidence base to substantiate their approach. This led to a lot of criticism from various quarters as it was seen as an attempt to promote a western framework that could produce universal knowledge base (Summerfield, 2008).

There is resistance to MGMH’s attempts to universalize biomedical approach through focusing on “low and middle income countries” to address the “treatment gap” by exporting dominant western medical ideas, medications, and technologies (Fernando, 2011; Summerfield, 2014). Very recently, a group of researchers, mental health professionals, activists and survivors of psychiatry have come together to issue a statement on global aspects of mental health. Key points of concern they expressed in the context of rapid spread of MGMH were: 1. MGMH evidence reduces complex problems of living to molecular and

cellular mechanism in brain, 2. Local cultures and socio-cultural context of mental health services in LMICs are being undermined 3. It establishes domination of western ideologies at the peril of local knowledge rooted in cultures and traditions of LMICs. They suggest MGMH should include considerations such as: 1. Learn across nations and cultures to accommodate local worldviews of mental health and wellbeing, 2. Abuse of human rights of people with mental health problems such as holding them under solitary confinement, or given ECT and excessive medications, 3. Obscuring of social, spiritual and psychological problems to be cured by psychotropic medications leading to excessive usage of psychotropic medications and medicalization of social problems, 4. Policies for community interventions are being transformed into psychotropic treatment at the ground level, and 5. Biological explanation of mental illness leading to more stigma. (“Statement on global perspectives on mental health,” 2014).

In the wake of growing polarization among the proponents of MGMH and cultural psychiatrists, suggestions are made to explore possible synergies between MGMH and cultural psychiatry to address concerns expressed on the MGMH model. Four challenges were identified to take this forward: 1. distinct lineage of MGMH and cultural psychiatry, 2. existing classification system for mental health problem, 3. discordant approaches to improve mental health globally, and 4. lack of adequate models to guide mental health action and research. It is suggested that despite these challenges it is important for MGMH to engage with anthropology and cultural psychiatry, to develop mathematical models towards developing effective mental health interventions (Jong, 2014).

In the context of the larger historical background of the discipline and services provided above, the following section discusses the responses of the mental health professionals in the study area.

8.4 Conclusion:

This chapter shows divergent worldviews of the community and of the mental health professionals. Community perceptions are more grounded in local cultural meanings of being healthy and ill. The problems of suffering, psychological anxieties and mental illness are located in the spiritual realm of

local cultures. This determines the health seeking behaviour of the people. The villagers could not relate to the idea of a redressal of their anxieties emerging from their lived realities in a clinic. Similarly, mental health professionals trained in a 'modern' system of medicine do not relate to the realities of the patient outside the clinic. This indicates an impermeability of sorts from both the community and the clinic. Some of the systemic factors such as lack of trained human resources at the level of psychiatrist, nursing staff, lack of knowledge among people, budgetary overlay and above all, inadequate priority of the government to mental health across different states of the country remain key hurdles. However, if the policy makers choose to take the MGMH's route of scaling up of services, it could lead to a situation where rural distress would be constructed exclusively in biomedical terms. Results from the mhGAP assessment of the farmer suicide survivors are a good example how everyday suffering could be reduced to psychiatric disorders. In this context, scaling of services could mean administering psychiatric medication as a solution. It has been established that pharmaceutical companies are keen to use this opportunity to push more medicines into the health system. Research studies in India show that antidepressants are already being prescribed in high quantum by psychiatrists and untrained health care providers and pharma companies have stake in this proliferation (Ecks & Basu, 2009a; Ecks, 2005, 2013). Researchers worldwide have raised concerns regarding evidence on the efficacy of psychiatric medicines and influence of big pharma in a neoliberal, globalized world (J Moncrieff & Leo, 2010; Joanna Moncrieff, 2006, 2007).

The recent introduction of a mental health policy would be an important milestone that determines the future course of mental health services in India. Can Indian government walk the talk (P. Chatterjee, 2012) when it comes to the operationalization of the policy is the question. The policy document rightly acknowledges that the impact of poverty, social exclusion; growing disparity and unequal opportunities exacerbate mental conditions among the vulnerable. There is a focus on the decriminalization of suicide and rights perspective and condition of care givers which is on a positive note. But a critical consideration could be the way policy addresses 'local cultures' when designing mental health interventions and health care services.

Chapter 9

Conclusion

A summary of the main arguments of my thesis are presented in this conclusion, together with suggestions for future research. This thesis details the predicament of an agrarian population in India. People who are at the receiving end of a top-down policy approach. The primary purpose of examining cotton farmer suicides was to critically analyse how global and national policies impact on the majority rural population of India who are dependent on agriculture. The thesis focussed on unpacking the consequences of these policies on public mental health and wellbeing. The key findings and arguments are summarised below:

1. Agricultural modernisation and social change are identified as the two main factors that have had a considerable impact on the rural population. State and market subsidies for cotton encouraged farmers to cultivate Bt cotton. Despite repeated failures of the cotton crop, farmers continue to bet on it for revival of their fortunes as exemplified by the classic 'gambler's fallacy' (Tversky & Kahneman, 1971). Unfortunately, for most of the small farmers, this turned to be their nemesis.
2. An ethnographic research method enabled in-depth analysis of farmer suicides in the selected field site. This approach helped the researcher to gain access to social and cultural forces underpinning the phenomenon of rural distress and suicide. A long stay in the village helped develop a trust with survivors of farmer suicides and enabled them to share their personal stories. Living in the village challenged the popular imagination of the rural village as clean and green, and happy and peaceful place where life is better than in urban spaces. The ethnographic approach helped the researcher to understand that multiple layers of marginality exists in the village, including the impact of market penetration into the villages and into the inner world of rural farmers, the consequences of the increasing rural and urban divide, and associated distress.

Ethnographic interviews and group discussions also helped validate inferences derived from participant observation. Although this method may result in difficulties generalising the findings, it was effective in unpacking hard-to-reach and hidden dimensions of the phenomenon of farmers' suicides. Further limitations have been elaborated in chapter 2.

3. The changing landscapes of villages have had an impact on the wellbeing of people. Landscapes are extensions of the communities and societies to which we belong. These landscapes are embodied within us (Casey 2009). They define our cultural identities and activities, and are generated as a consequence of human engagement with the world. They represent the totality of human experience (Newman, 2009). Thus, landscape as a 'non-human' agent and human agency mutually shape each other. The green revolution and the gene revolution in the form of Bt cotton farming rapidly transformed rural landscapes into "counter-therapeutic" spaces (Jadhav and Barua 2012) by accentuating existing social inequalities. In the process, they emerge as culturally 'toxic' landscapes that impact on human wellbeing.

4. Modernisation can be advantageous for some sections of the society who are "centrally" positioned as compared to people at the margins. 'Marginality' determines how modernisation is experienced by people in disadvantaged positions. Marginality in the Indian context can be experienced both in social and spatial realms. Social marginality refers to the existing hierarchical social order based on a hegemonic Hindu caste system and associated religious practices. Spatial marginality signifies the position of disadvantaged communities in Indian society by virtue of their location in the village or their access to services which are usually located in the 'center', and are controlled by the people who socially belong and own such 'centers' (Ecks & Sax, 2005). For the communities at the margins, globalisation and the free market led to a decrease in patron relationships and increased pressure on their traditional occupations. This phenomenon led to the deskilling of non-farming caste groups and artisans leading to further marginalisation. As many families from

traditional landowning and farming communities moved out and diversified, families from backward communities shifted to agriculture as their main source of livelihood. For many, this shift did not yield success as it requires cultural, social, economic and symbolic capital (Bourdieu, 1986) to initiate and sustain farming as a profession. Insensitive state policies pushed them further into the periphery.

5. The links between social marginality, social suffering and mental health in India need to be understood from the perspective of the caste system, which enforces stratification and social restrictions. Being in a lower position of the caste hierarchy, Dalits and 'backward castes' lack symbolic capital available on the basis of a person's position, honour or prestige, which functions as an authoritative embodiment of cultural values. The Hindu caste system enforces a chronic sense of inferiority, inadequacy, humiliation, distress and insecurity, which blocks the universal urge for self-expression and superiority. This leads to rage and anger manifested in actions against the perpetrators, or on oneself (Webster, 2007).

6. The state mechanism of generating data on suicides among cotton farmers masks the gravity of distress in rural India. This thesis argues that 'Farmer's suicide' is a false category that excludes a substantial number of marginalised communities, including the landless and women, who are dependent on agriculture and allied occupations. The bureaucratic procedure for validation of a 'real' farmer suicide imposes a burden on their survivors to 'prove' it. The State propagates an ideological consensus through various agents and institutions, such as media and bureaucracy, in shaping popular notions about farmers and suicides. Thus farmer suicides are reduced to an artefact⁵² by the media in popular culture. In the process of packaging this artefact as a commodity for urban consumption, their actual suffering and distress are

⁵² Indian media instead of revealing complex dimensions of suicide amongst farmers has been truncating their coverage of rural distress. Rather than representing holistic aspects of this phenomenon, farmer suicides have been projected as mere artefacts of a much more deeply rooted agricultural pathology.

sanitised. This narrative is further normalised by bureaucrats and other dominant actors in the society. Each of these factors contribute to a state of 'learned helplessness' (Abramson, Seligman & Teasdale, 1978) amongst the farmers caught in a web of despair.

7. State obliteration of any act of resistance by the farmers led to a curtailment of their agency to collectivise and to protest. In a region known to be a hot bed for resistance movements (Singh, 2006), a systematic annihilation of agency has replaced farmers' ability to launch resistance movements culminating in a general sense of 'social defeat'. Ever since the process of liberalisation was initiated in India, farmers lost their political clout to influence local and national politics. Added to this, a lack of civil society engagement to give voice to distress faced by the farmers further weakened farmers' agency.

8. Explanations of mental health and illness varied amongst both groups: communities and mental health professionals. The community's idea of 'the clinic' is shaped by and within a cultural framework of illness, more as a place where one goes for treatment for physical conditions. Problems of suffering, psychological anxieties and mental ill health are addressed through recourse to spiritual healing. This edits the social suffering of patients' presentation in the clinic. Social stigma attached to mental illness further complicates the problem. Ironically, the clinic and mental health professionals mirror this self-editing of distress presented by patients. The exclusive focus of the clinic is to diagnose and provide treatment. This distances the clinic and community from each other, widens the gap along the gradient of the 'traditional and the 'modern'. The contradiction between the language of the 'traditional' and the 'modern', the rural-urban divide, the class, gender and caste background of clinicians shape discourse in the clinic. These factors further alienate clinicians from patients. This process turns the clinic into a site of conflicting ideologies that perpetuates existing structural violence experienced by farmers (Farmer, Nizeye, Stulac & Keshavjee, 2006).

9. Other practical challenges faced by the clinic also shape the way it responds. A lack of orientation within the clinic to engage with wider social problems, and the acute shortage of mental health professionals that limits the time and reflexive space for them to engage with the patient have a considerable impact. Alternative strategies, such as the National Mental Health Policy which emphasises community participation to provide access to mental health services, are certainly potentially promising ways forward (Sarin & Jain, 2013). However, in practice, there is increasing emphasis on pharmacological treatment over community participation and psycho-social approaches (Jain & Jadhav, 2008). A recent launch of the new Mental Health Policy (Ministry of Health And Family Welfare, 2014), amidst calls for scaling-up of services to address 'the treatment gap' (Lund et al., 2012), is of interest as plans to operationalise this policy are eagerly awaited. In this context it is important to consider critiques of Global Mental Health; these argue for the incorporation of locally embedded concepts rather than uncritically importing dominant bio-medical frameworks and interventions (Summerfield, 2012).

10. Family survivors of suicide subjects are amongst the worst affected sufferers. Their existential suffering and grief are embodied and expressed in somatic conditions, indicating the possibility of 'hidden' psychiatric morbidity. Local coping mechanisms are rooted in spiritual and folk healing practices in the community. A psychiatric diagnosis by the clinic is possible for a 'survivor', but there is a risk that issues such as 'cultural bereavement' (Eisenbruch, 1991) could be masked during the interaction between patients and clinicians. It is quite possible that such interactions occurring within a bio-medical framework and ambience may result in medical prescriptions and fail to appreciate or intervene into wider social origins of their distress.

After liberalisation of Indian economy during early 1990's, most state polices aligned with the process of globalisation. This exposed the rural population to

the perils of an open market. To mitigate the impact of these policies on changing landscapes, a multi-pronged approach is necessary. The study argues for multi-sited research on a larger scale in regions reporting suicides amongst cotton farmers to elicit and document local cultural factors. This is both crucial and urgent to prevent the loss of large numbers of India's farming community in the context of a rapidly growing 'food insecurity' crisis (National Bureau of Asian Research, 2014).

Within an academic context, there needs to be a richer and more intense dialogue between social mental health sciences in order to generate a cross-fertilisation of ideas which are more inclusive and have a stronger impact. The existing and rather impermeable boundaries which define medical disciplines in India are a major obstacle to generating an integrated knowledge base. Recent research has indeed highlight challenges for both training and research in India's mental health programme (Jain & Jadhav, 2009). Additionally, the development of a culturally-sensitive pedagogic content within India's mental health training remains a largely neglected field of enquiry (Jadhav, 2012).

Although there has been a tremendous focus on policy and scaling-up of empirically tested models (Eaton et al., 2011; Patel et al., 2007), the actual clinical encounter between mental health clinicians and farmers remains a 'black box' that requires to be unpacked. Future research could analyse how clinicians assess, interpret and intervene into cotton farmer suicides. This could be addressed through recently developed research techniques and instruments, such as the Cultural Formulation Interview (APA, 2013; Jadhav, 2010; Lewis-Fernandez et al., 2014; Napier et al., 2014). In addition a systematic study that maps out how political ecologies, policies of mental health and agricultural institutions, and clinician-farmer interact to develop such landscapes is germane for developing more practical interventions (Jadhav, Jain, Kannuri, Bayetti, & Barua, 2015). Such studies, integrating perspectives from medical anthropology and mental health, have tremendous potential to inform culturally responsive and effective public health interventions. This may also suggest ways of rethinking the impact of health and agricultural policies and practices, and may help reshape 'toxic' terrains into 'healing' landscapes, and positively influence wellbeing of cotton farming communities, and motivate them to continue

cultivating cotton on a landscape that is both productive and healing (Abraham, Sommerhalder & Abel, 2010).

Taken together, these conclusions are difficult to blend into a unified framework. However, this thesis has attempted to show discrepancies between bureaucratic formulations and clinical conceptualisation in dealing with rural distress. These are clearly asynchronous and have led to a fragmented understanding of agricultural distress in rural India. Furthermore, such fragmented and disjointed articulation of rural distress leads to a dilemma for all the stakeholders, each viewing the problem in a manner that projects causal factors to other sources. A seamless coordination of various disciplines and series is only possible if there is a coordinated will and effort to link various stakeholders. Such a linkage requires rural distress amongst farmers to be the central and focal target in order to help restore the farmers' agency.

Moreover, a checklist cannot capture the logic that operates amongst those affected. However, an ethnographic approach can succeed in unpacking the nature, logic and causal links. In this instance, cotton farmers alone hold the key to educate service providers.

In addition there is a broader issue at stake; social sciences in India have developed sophisticated concepts to appreciate such distress. Yet clinicians are forced to operate within a paradigm that focuses on instruments and scores. This leads to a large gap. Connecting the two paradigms in a language that is able to address distress experienced by farmers and their families continues to elude service providers including health professionals and policy makers.

Future research directions

This thesis also generates questions that could be addressed in future research. However such challenges and possible solutions require to be tested.

What has not been established is whether a culturally-appropriate response improves outcomes for the people who suffer. This can only be demonstrated through systematic research that involves a re-consideration of both theoretical and empirical relationships amongst various stakeholders identified by the

people who suffer. One of the possible ways is to test out whether an integrated approach impacts upon the outcome of interventions to prevent suicides, (as well as a whole range of mental and physical health morbidities associated with rural distress). Although this thesis was not aimed at examining the physical consequences of rural distress such as the toxic effect of pesticides and fertilisers; these variables together with more biological vulnerabilities to suicide, would need to be factored-in, to ensure that a Cartesian split does not lead to reproduction of the classic mind-body dichotomy.

Public health research has long argued that there is a conspiracy of 'proximal' and 'distal'; as a metaphor to understand why psycho-social issues are relegated to the periphery. This thesis proposes that such metaphors need to be extended beyond established causal pathways. This would require an in-depth analysis of local ideas and power structures that shape such pathways in order to reverse the valorisation of the 'proximal' and 'distal' (Krieger, 2008).

In conclusion, culturally-sensitive health care systems that involve policy makers, clinicians, researchers and public health professionals are vital. A much needed inter-disciplinary space is necessary to understand and address local ecologies of wellbeing that may well differ from more universal conceptualisations of distress (Napier et al., 2014, p. 1628).

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Appendix 1

Information sheet

Provisional title of PhD research project: Clinical Ethnography of Farmer Suicides in Andhra Pradesh: Developing a Culturally Sensitive Public Health Framework for Intervention.

This study has been approved by the UCL Research Ethics Committee (Project ID Number): 2846/001 and PHFI-WT ethics committee.

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We would like to invite you to participate in this research project.

Please be assured that it is not obligatory to participate in the study. Choosing not to participate in the study will not cause any disadvantage to you. Before you want to take a decision about your participation, it is important to know why this study is being conducted. You could take your time if you would want to discuss about this with anyone you want to and get back to me. I am always available for any further clarifications needed.

Details of Study: This study is meant to understand the phenomenon of suicides among the cotton farmers in the region. We will focus on identifying socio-cultural determinants of suicides, impact of the suicides on the family members and the community at large. The study results will inform the policy makers at different levels and particularly the health policy makers to develop effective interventions to prevent and deal with the impact of suicides. As a part of the study, I would be staying in the community for extended periods of time and will talk to different stakeholders upon their consent.

If you are willing to be interviewed as a part of the study, it would require about 1-2 hours of your time. If this lead to a loss of your income in anyway, you will be sufficiently compensated. If you are willing for the interview to be recorded, the interview will be written up and the digital recording will be destroyed.

Our discussions during the interview will be around cotton farming, factors leading to suicides among the farmers, the impact on the families and communities and your views to deal with the situation. All our conversations would be confidential and I shall not disclose anything to others. I shall use the information collected from you in writing up my PhD thesis and will ensure that all the participants will be anonymous. Only my research supervisor and I will have access to any information I have about you. If you wish, I will be happy to send a copy with key research findings from the research.

It is up to you to decide whether to take part or not; choosing not to take part will not disadvantage you in any way. If you do decide to take part you are still free to withdraw at any time and without giving a reason.

Please discuss the information above with others if you wish or ask us if there is anything that is not clear or if you would like more information.

All data will be collected and stored in accordance with the Data Protection Act 1998.

Appendix 2

Informed Consent Form for Participants.

Provisional PhD Research Topic: Clinical Ethnography of Farmer Suicides in Andhra Pradesh: Developing a Culturally Sensitive Public Health Framework for Intervention.

Consent form no _____

This Study has been approved by the UCL Research Ethics Committee . Project ID no. **2846/001** and PHFI-WT ethics committee.

Thank you for your interest in taking part in this research. Before you agree to take part, the person organising the research must explain the project to you.

By completing and returning this form, you are giving us your consent that the personal information you provide will only be used for the purposes of this project and not transferred to an organisation outside of UCL. The information will be treated as strictly confidential and handled in accordance with the provisions of the Data Protection Act 1998.

If you have any questions arising from the Information Sheet or explanation already given to you, please ask the researcher before you to decide whether to join in. You will be given a copy of this Consent Form to keep and refer to at any time.

The interviewee agrees as follows.

I have been informed about the project in detail and have been made aware of the purpose of it. I am willingly taking part in the research study.

I understand I can withdraw from the process at any time if I wish so.

I consent to the processing of my personal information for the purpose of this research study.

I understand that the information I have submitted will be published as a report and the findings will be shared to us.

Confidentiality and anonymity will be maintained and it will not be possible to identify me from any publications.

I understand that my participation will be audio recorded and I consent to use of this material.

Signed:

Date:

Appendix 3

Sample Focus Group Discussion Guide With Community Members

Total Participants- 8-10

Time required: 1 Hour 15 minutes

Break: 10 minutes

The purpose of the FGD is :

- To generate a comprehensive list of issues surrounding farmers suicides.
- After a list has been generated, to review for clarity and accuracy and completeness.

Below is a general guide for leading our focus groups. We may modify this guide as needed as each focus group will inform the subsequent groups.

Introduction:

The purpose of the study is to understand the phenomenon of suicides among farmers cultivating cotton in this region. The researcher would like to understand the social and cultural determinants of the suicides, explore the local contexts of marginality, distress, trauma and resilience. In the process I will discuss the history of agriculture in the region, social structure, cotton farming, suicides and their impact on the survivors and the community, mental health, health care services etc.

I would like the discussion to be informal, so there's no need to wait for me to call on you to respond. I want you to respond directly to the comments other people make. If you don't understand a question, I shall repeat. Please do not hesitate to say so. I am here to ask questions, listen and make sure everyone has a chance to share.

If we seem to be stuck on a topic, I may interrupt you and if you aren't saying much, I may call on you directly. If we do this, please don't feel bad about it; it's just a way of making sure we obtain everyone's perspective and opinion is included.

I assure that confidentiality will be maintained and I request that we all keep each other's identities, participation and remarks private. We hope you'll feel free to speak openly and honestly.

As discussed, I will be audio recording the discussion, because I don't want to miss any of your comments. No one outside of this room will have access to these audio recording and they will be destroyed after our report is written.

At point in time during the discussion, if you think you are stressed and will not be able to participate further or you might need some professional help, do not hesitate to ask.

Refreshments will be provided during the break and reimbursement of any travel expenses will be done after the completion of the discussion.

Issues for Exploration

I. On Agriculture:

- a. What are the crops grown in your area traditionally
- b. What are the cultural importance of the crops grown in your area
- c. What are the resources required for agriculture
- d. When was cotton introduced in the village and who introduced
- e. What are the types of cotton grown in this area
- f. What was the acreage initially and how had it changed over the years
- g. Does cotton have any cultural importance
- h. When was BT cotton introduced into your village
- i. What do you think is the difference between regular and BT cotton
- j. What are the problems associated with growing cotton
- k. What are the problems associated with selling cotton
- l. Who do you think anybody can help cotton farmers and How.

II. Health

- a. How do you define health
- b. Can you list down some common ailments
- c. What are the nearest health care services available
- d. Can you define mental health
- e. What are the common mental health conditions
- f. Any specific conditions for men and women
- g. Where do you seek treatment

III. Suicides

- a. What do you think of suicides
 - b. Why are farmers who are cultivating cotton committing suicide
 - c. How did the families who have experienced suicides deal with the situation
 - d. How do the family members of the person who committed suicide cope up.
 - e. Who commits suicide the most. Men or women. why
 - f. How did the village/community respond to the series of farmer suicides
 - g. What is the means of suicide in the majority of cases? Why do you think so
 - h. Can we identify if someone is thinking to commit suicide. How
 - i. What was the government's response to suicides
 - j. What was the amount of compensation declared for the families who experienced suicide
 - k. What was the process of certifying a death as a suicides to be able to get compensation
- l. What do you think can be done to prevent suicides among cotton farmers
 - m. What do you think could be the role of local health services in prevention of suicides and providing support to the families who have committed suicide

Closing Remarks

Thanking the participants

Appendix 4

Sample Interview guide with mental health Professionals

1. Name:

(optional)

2. Educational Qualifications:

3. Years of Service:

BROAD THEMES OF INQUIRY:

I. On Mental health:

- What are the common perceptions around mental health and illness among people in this area?
- What are the most common mental health conditions that are reported in this area?
- What are the health seeking patterns among the people in the context of mental health conditions?
- In your opinion why do you think people get mentally ill?
- What are the common mental health conditions you find among the farmers in this area?
- How do patients comply with your advice to medication
- Do the patients seek treatment from others such as traditional healers whilst being under treatment with you?
- What is your opinion about alternative community based healing practices available for the community members?

II. On suicide:

- In your opinion, what are the main reasons for suicides reported in this area?
- Why do you think farmers commit suicide?

- What do you think can be done to deal with growing number of suicides among farmers?
- Is there any way that mental health professionals can contribute to efforts in stopping the epidemic of farmer suicides?

III. On health system:

- What do you think are the issues with mental health services in your area?
- What are the challenges you face in your clinic while dealing with your patients
- Do you have a regular supply of mental health medications in your hospital?
- What are the problems faced by the patients to access mental health services?
- Any other information you find relevant to our discussion I may have missed out?