

PLOUGHED INTO DESPAIR

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ACROSS THE PLANET, THE world's poorest people are struggling to keep their heads above water. Farmers who are lucky enough to have access land find themselves caught between rising costs of inputs and a crop price that, in the main, has been downward. Prompted by the need to squeeze more out of their land, farmers do as they always have -they innovate.

In a field outside Bangalore, this is what one farmer in Tamil Nadu, India - let's call him Kistaiah Masaya - did. To innovate, he needed money. The only place he could get some was from the local moneylender (and at exorbitant rates). He borrowed the money certain that he would be able to repay. He used the cash to hire a drill to bore a well, so that he could irrigate his crops. The well was dry. So he borrowed more and sunk another well. And another. And another. All were dry.

One night, late in August, when the rains had failed to come, Kistaiah reached for a packet of phorate, a pesticide used in despite its being listed as unsafe by the Food and Agriculture Organisation. He mixed a little with water and drank it.

The poison ran through his skin before it went through his stomach, paralysing his nervous system, choking his lungs and stopping his heart. Kistaiah can't have convulsed very hard: he died without waking his wife and two sons.

Kistaiah's death is one among many - indeed, it is hard to open a newspaper in India and not find some reference to a farmer suicide. Full figures are hard to come by -no national database is kept—but summing over a series of studies, it's safe to put the death toll at tens of thousands every year.

It has been suggested that the high risk of suicide among farmers may be related to the access they have to means of committing suicide –pesticides and firearms, for example—but it is the *whys* of farmer suicides that is arguably more important than the *hows*.

Invariably, these suicides correlate with high levels of debt. S S Gill, an academic at the Punjabi Agricultural University, has studied the issue. 'Show me a farmer with 150,000 rupees (about £1,800) in debt,' he says. 'I will say to you he is sure to commit suicide in the future.'

The precise reason farmers topple into despair varies, from crop failure to injury or wedding costs, but the outcome is invariably bleak with high debts.

Pesticide companies have been quick to capitalise on this despair. Many now trumpet their products as away out of poverty - in particular with genetically modified (GM) crops such as cotton. Far more expensive than their conventional counterparts, in some areas GM cotton seeds have done so badly that in one Indian state, according to the Associate Press federal regulator denied permission for Monsanto to sell three different varieties of GM cotton. The government was pressed into action precisely because of the high suicide rates of indebted GM cotton farmers.

Of course, suicide isn't the only recourse for farmers. Those in Shingnapur, a village in the Amravati district of Maharashtra, have opened up a kidney sale centre, which they invited their local politicians to patronise, in order to help repay their loans.

And this points to a key contradiction: as India's most important rural commentator, P Sainath, has observed, 'we are troubled by how people die, but not by how they live –and the majority of India's rural poor are doing, very badly indeed. Those doing worst are not farmers, but farm labourers, among whom malnutrition has gone up to levels unseen since British rule. Unlike farmers who die by their own hand, many more farm labourers die from hunger. All this happens at the same time as another epidemic: because of spiking levels of processed food snacking, India will soon be home to the world's largest concentration of diabetics'.

The unravelling of the Indian government's commitment to its poorest citizens began in earnest in 1990, when Manmohan Singh, the current Indian prime minister, was finance minister. He introduced a suite of economic policies that led to a fall in government spending on agriculture and let into the country agro-food companies such as Coca-Cola and Monsanto, together with their advertising dollars and their genetically modified seeds. The net result has been a steep increase in landless households, from around 35% in 1987-88 to more than 40% in 1999-2000. The net effect of this policy has been to drive the poor out of agriculture.

It is an economic policy that will soon be blessed by the World Bank and foisted on more impoverished farmers, not just in Asia, but worldwide. In its forthcoming World Development Report on Agriculture, the World Bank gives the green light to the shifting of poor agricultural workers to 'more efficient' sectors. Of course, an increased pool of unskilled rural labour does nothing but drives down wage rates. The countries that have implemented the Bank's suggestions most vigorously have also seen steep rises in urban poverty rates; yet the Bank's remedy to rural despair is to sigh and tell poor farmers that they're not destined to be on the land, and usher them on to menial work off the farm.

This rural crisis is one that is being vigorously challenged by farmer groups such as *Via Campesina*. The odds are steep, especially given the bank's international power, but one can only hope they succeed in stopping these kinds of economic savagery. And not just for the sake of farmers in India, but for farmers worldwide. □□□

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