

DEATH OF TWO FARMERS

N Divakar

Manjunath, a small farmer from Hosur village of Nanjangud Taluk of Mysore district committed suicide, unable to bear the burden of a loan he had availed from ICICI bank to purchase a tractor. The family sources say that the Bank officials had harassed him for recovery and tractor was seized for non-repayment and Manjunath took his life out of disgust and frustration. Farmers' Associations, have been picketing the offices of ICICI bank throughout the state. Even the DC and Police officials have failed to placate the agitated farmers who are demanding a compensation for the loss of life while the Bank refuses to own up the responsibility. The agitation, while picking up momentum, with progressive groups lending able support, has stopped the bank from functioning, at least in Mysore.

Considering the fact that Karnataka has the dubious distinction of being one of the leading states, in number of farmers' suicides, the present incident has triggered widespread discontent among the farmers. Though the protest started, against the backdrop of strong arm tactics of Private sector banks in recovery of loans, in the larger context it depicts the frustration that has crept in among the rural populace. The waiver of loans by Co-operative Banks under previous government has not helped to tide over the agrarian crisis plaguing the state over the years. Large scale acquiring of agricultural lands for industrial and real estate sector by state agencies like KIADB coupled with onslaught of Special Economic Zones has made the farming community helpless spectators against the economic repression of the state. Lack of infrastructure facilities and capital support, lower price for the finished products and advent of MNCs in agricultural markets has also demoralised the farmers at large.

On the other side of the fence is the recent spurt in large borrowings by farmers from Banks for purchase of Tractor, Trailer, Power Tiller and what not. The UPA government's plan to increase agricultural credit through Banks has resulted in the Banks offering Loans for purchase of Tractors with lesser hassles. During the past two and a half years major commercial and Private Banks have sanctioned huge amounts of loans for purchase of Tractors across the state and to make the schemes attractive, many concessions have been offered regarding quantum of land holding, margin money and rate of interest. In some cases even the revered service area approach was given a go by to attract potential borrowers.

The tractor companies made the hay while the sun shone. The dealers too came up with attractive schemes and offers, to woo the farming community and had tie-ups with many banks. The farmers belined the banks to have a new tractor without going into the economics of its maintenance and viability. Even farmers with 5 acres of land purchased tractors and some times paid inflated prices to the tractor dealers. A loan availed to purchase a tractor costs Rs 15000 pm towards instalment and interest. A farmer with 5 acres of land cannot bear this burden. But there was no one to guide the gullible farmers in the rural side. Farmers' Associations were silent spectators when thousands of tractors were

roaming in the villages. It was a clear debt trap for the poor farmers ultimately resulting in death traps like the present instance.

It is true, some private bankers resort to strong arm tactics to recover their dues. But Indian banking is going through a transition phase with strong competition at International level. Better recovery and more profits have become the modern motto of the industry. Entire Banking industry is on a profit drive and recovery of loans becomes the benchmark of this exercise. The present instance can be seen from this angle. But it should be the bounden duty of the farmers' associations to educate the farming community about the nuances of bank loans and fighting for better loan facilities. Farmers' suicides would continue as long as agrarian crisis persists.

The story of Siddaraju of Harave Village in Mysore district is no different. He was induced by an agent of ICICI Bank to take loan from the bank for purchase of Tractor. The open well situated in his land prompted the agent to depict the same as irrigated one and Siddaraju was made to sign on Loan documents in English, which obviously he was unable to understand. The agent encouraged Siddaraju to take loan so that he can clear of his private debts. But he was not supplied with the trailer even after 8 months but for the bank authorities, a different trailer was shown as security. Siddaraju was operating his tractor to supply sand and stones to construction sites on rental basis. When the Bank authorities issued notice to Siddaraju for recovery of instalment, unable to bear the depression he committed suicide on 19th Dec 2007 by consuming pesticide. Later Farmers' Associations led by KRRS and Green Brigade protested in front of ICICI Bank demanding compensation for the dead farmer and stopping the practice of using coercion tactics for recovery of loans. Till date no bank official or government representative has visited the village. The police are visiting the village regularly everyday. Harave village has got 17 tractors in all out of which 15 are financed by Canara Bank, 1 by Syndicate Bank, 1 by ICICI Bank. □□□