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**Farmers' Suicides in Andhra Pradesh:  
The Response of Rural Political Institutions**

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## **Abstract**

This paper views the agrarian distress and farmers' suicide from Political Science point of view and attempts to assess the role of the rural political institutions in addressing the crisis. The underlying assumption is that the political community and political institutions at the grass roots level have to address and respond to the situation as institutions in the immediate reach of the small and marginal farmers. The paper attempts to study whether the rural institutions are responding? If not responding why they are not responding and what are the reasons for the non-response. The study proposes to delineate the various types of rural institutions in Andhra Pradesh and studies their role in addressing and alleviating the present agrarian distress. The study also proposes to delineate various policy processes on the part of the state government which have been involved in rural governance policy and attempts to see how the role of the institutions is crucial in addressing the agrarian distress. The paper also addresses the question as to what policy processes have gone into the present impasse in the rural governance in the state of Andhra Pradesh and attempts to suggest how the involvement of rural institutional structures in addressing the farmer's suicides can help alleviate the situation. Methodologically the study will involve both analyses of secondary literature on farmers' suicides in Andhra Pradesh and empirical field-work in Andhra Pradesh in selected locations.



# Farmers' Suicides in Andhra Pradesh: The Response of Rural Political Institutions

V. Anil Kumar

## Introduction

In the context of wide spread crisis in the Andhra Pradesh countryside this article raises the question as to how the rural institutions are responding to the prevailing situation. The article asks the question as to whether the rural institutions should respond to the situation and why they are not responding to the situation; the paper argues that the first institutions to respond to the crisis should be the rural political institutions and not only the State level institutions; and argues that if the former are not responding this raises questions about the institutions of local governance and more so of local self governance. In the following, the first section deals with the notions of village community and political institutions as they are conventionally envisaged in India. The second section deals with the theoretical rationale for the user groups or what came to be known as the 'second wave of decentralization' and the impact these have had on the countryside. Thirdly, we deal with the state of rural community and the reasons for the spate of suicides taking place in the countryside; the fourth section is a concluding section and deals with the questions as to what the rural institutions are meant to be doing in the context of the crisis discussed the preceding sections.

## Some 'Romantic' Notions of Village Community and Institutions

The present rural political institutions in the form of Panchayati Raj Institutions (PRIs from hereon) have gone through a tortuous and interesting course since their inception in 1959(Mathew, George 1996). Equally interesting are the visions of village community and the notions of their governance. Here we invoke two debates about these visions and notions. And these debates have their bearing all through the rest of the paper. The first one is the debate between Gandhi and Ambedker (Omvedt, Gail, 2000) on the nature of village communities and their social and political institutions. Mahatma Gandhi clearly lays down his notion of self-rule or self-governance in his classic the *Hind Swaraj*, which is a seminal text. Gandhiji also held on to a notion of village community as a village republic wherein the interdependent division of labour contributes to a self-sufficient

village community. While Gandhiji believed the self-sufficient village community of interdependence and social harmony as the true description of the village communities of his time, this notion has become a normative notion to build a village community on those premises for later Gandhians, Sarvodayists and followers of Gandhi. The Panchayati Raj as it was envisaged in the beginning largely followed this vision of eternally homogenous, harmonious and interdependent village communities. Ambedkerite notion of the village community on the other hand was in stark contrast to this and emphasized the iniquitous, hierarchical and oppressive nature of villages and their communities. The caste system and hierarchies are seen as the basic features of the rural communities and not the harmony and interdependence between castes. Village was a 'sink of localism' and worse. Despite the strong influence of Ambedker's critique of villages it was the Gandhian notion of village communities and their self-rule which carried the day and remained influential in shaping the policy and programmes of governance towards the Indian countryside. The Panchayati Raj institutions, however modified at present, indelibly trace their ideological lineage to Gandhian thought. We will return to this point.

The second debate that we invoke here is a more academic one that is between late Prof. M.N. Srinivas and Louis Dumont on the nature of village communities in India (Srinivas, M.N, 1996). This debate raised the question as to whether there at all existed some thing called a 'village community'. Dumont held that caste is the defining feature of the village and castes horizontally amongst villages formed objects for study rather than sociologically non-existent 'village communities'. To put in other words caste communities existed but not village as a sociological community. Prof.Srinivas sharply reacted to this position and argued that inspite of the hierarchical nature of castes and sub-castes, the village as a community, beyond the caste system, existed and therefore village as a sociological unit is a valid unit for study. And many village studies followed.

The first debate that we mentioned above is a political one and the second debate is an academic one. But both are rich debates and need consideration while discussing the state of rural communities and the catastrophes that are visiting them with such regularity. The legacy of these debates is important in the sense that the Panchayati Raj Institutions even after the 73<sup>rd</sup> Constitutional Amendment still envisage and privilege village community in the form of Grama Sabha and other related provisions. And the Gandhian vision, which is also the nationalist vision, of village communities has been considered by critiques as a 'romantic' view of the villages and is seen as unrealistic. The above two debates, that between Gandhi and Ambedker and that between Srinivas and Dumont, though have taken place at two different points in time and in different spheres still have strong relevance.

While invoking these debates can we ask the basic question today, against the backdrop of pervasive crisis: do rural communities exist socially and politically? While we have touched on the aspect of village communities as social communities we have not discussed the political aspect of the village communities. Before moving on to the notions of ‘user groups’ we briefly dwell on the political aspect of the village communities.

There are two questions concerning the political existence of rural communities: the first one is the relationship of these communities to the larger, macro state both at national and regional levels and secondly the communities’ relationship to themselves as political communities. The first question concerning the relationship of village communities to the macro state is debated since the colonial times. The colonial civil servants who chronicled their rule in India have largely described these communities as untouched by the macro state (Madan, Vandana, 2002). According to this view village communities were part of larger states but were always also distant from the happenings in the macro state. The communities paid taxes, supplied men to the armies of the larger state, but were nonetheless retained their autonomy and relative independence from the larger state. They were not fully and completely integrated into the structures and processes of the macro state. This view largely informed the earliest studies of Indian villages and has projected the picture of an unchanging, immutable village community with its own customs and traditions and systems of governance. Even Marx, informed by the writings of British civil servants in India, took to the same notion of the immutable village community; despite the view that Marx held on British rule in India, as devastating and revolutionary at the same time. This view of immutable village community is interesting and provocative even today. What is the extent of the integration of rural communities into the larger state structures? How have all the drastic changes and modifications in governance since the Independence affected the relationship between the village communities, the regional state and the national state? This question appears to be a rarely asked question and often a taken for granted question in the discourse on the rural communities and rural development. If any thing, the changes in communications, information, transport and mobility of rural populations, and the reach of the state, have largely redefined this relationship and have contributed to the present situation of the rural communities (Breman, Jan, 1997).

The second part of the question, and of more direct relevance to this paper, is the constitution of rural communities as political communities consisting of citizens participating in their own governance. As mentioned above the Gandhian notion of self-governance which informed the PRIs has undergone many changes (Mathew, George, 1996) and the present

situation is that the communities are supposed to govern themselves within the three tier institutional framework which provides for positive discrimination and community participation (Jha, S.N. and Mathur, P.C., 1999). It is thirteen years since the 73<sup>rd</sup> Amendment is drafted and still the conclusive evidence that the PRIs are firmly in place and are successfully carrying out the local self-governance function is a debated one. All the more so because the PRIs are envisaged to function as the third tier of governance within the polity along with the State and Union governments. Thus both the questions concerning the political constitution of the rural communities as part of the larger macro polity and as well as inwardly constituent political communities within themselves are to be posed and explored in order to be able to understand as to how these communities operate in times of crisis such as the one we are discussing here.

Taking the above discussion as backdrop and Andhra Pradesh as example we argue in the following that the rural political institutions, specifically the Panchayati Raj institutions have not been able to form or constitute a political community out of the village communities because even before the traditional village communities could constitute themselves into modern democratic political communities, even before these institutions were allowed to take root, they were swamped by a plethora of ‘user groups’ which fragmented and fractured the political community at the local level. The theoretical rationale and logic behind these ‘user groups’ is different from that of the PRIs. Below we discuss the rationale and logic of the ‘user groups’ that resulted in the ‘second wave of decentralization’; for this logic and rationale has interesting relationship with the policy processes studies.

### **The ‘Rational Choice’ Notion of Communities and Institutions**

The creation of various user groups with connection to management of natural resources, school education, thrift and credit and so on can be seen from two stand points: one that it is expedient for government and donors to create such institutional structures. Second that though the expediency is to a large extent true there appears also to be a coherent theory behind the design of these institutions. Here we briefly dwell on the latter and return back to the impact of these institutions on village communities.

The theory that coherently explains the need and functioning of these ‘user groups’ is the *Institutional Rational Choice* theory and the frame work developed within the theory named ‘Institutional Analysis and Development (IAD from hereon) Framework’<sup>1</sup> developed by

<sup>1</sup> The framework distinguishes between two notions of institutions: one that is a structure and second that is a routinised practice. Though the IAD framework as explained by Elinor Ostrom emphasizes the latter, the entire discussion collapses both meanings and connotes more often the former.

Elinor Ostrom (Ostrom, Elinor, 1999) and her associates. This framework is an influential framework, which seeks to explain the behaviour, incentives and responsibilities of individuals particularly with reference to what she calls ‘common pool resources’ and common property resources in general. The framework follows a positivist approach which models upon the laboratory experiments of human behaviour and tries to extend the same positivist logic to field realities concerning the institutional structures of common pool and property resources. Besides being positivistic the framework also models the human behaviour upon neo-classical economics and presumes the human nature as that of *homo economicus*. Individuals and communities in the context of the theory appear to be utility or incentive maximizers of resource use; and the individuals’ ‘pay offs’ and returns from the common pool resources are supposed to be proportionate to their investments in the common pool resources. All others who depend on the common pool resources appear as ‘free riders’. The framework clearly explains the logic behind the institutions such as water users’ associations and watershed committees and even primary schools (if we extend the analogy) all of which are seen as common pool resources. The fact that the natural resource management institutions (known as NRMIs) occupy so important a position among ‘user groups’ alerts us to the usefulness of this IAD framework in understanding the theoretical rationale behind the institutions and how they can be justified on theoretical grounds. The IAD framework is applied for analysis and prescription of institutional designs not only in India but worldwide.

The important point is that the ‘community’ as defined in this framework is the community of users of common resources but not as community of users situated in larger social and political communities. Every common- pool resource in the village can have a community of users but these users are part of a larger village and /or Panchayat community and are part of larger political structures. The problem with the IAD framework of looking at institutions becomes acute when the community of users of common pool resources build institutions based on that usage, first to exclude others and second also commanding more material, financial resources than are the other political institutions. In both terms, namely a) excluding certain other communities who can not be exactly defined as ‘users’ or ‘community’ in the sense used in the IAD framework and b) when these ‘user groups’ or user ‘communities’ command large financial resources by virtue of being part of a larger polity and development strategy, in both these cases they bypass local democracy and political, democratic institutions.

Prof. James Manor in his article 'User Committees: A Potentially Damaging Second Wave of Decentralization' (Manor, James, 2005) argues that what is happening in the name of user committees amounts to a 'second wave of decentralization' and this wave, in contrast to the first wave of decentralization all over the world in eighties and nineties which created momentum for democratic decentralization, has damaging potential to the concept of decentralization itself. Prof Manor in a rigorous analysis of user committees with empirical information from South Asia and Africa argued that what is needed is an integration of these myriad 'single-purpose' user committees with 'multi-purpose elected councils' (Manor, James, 2005) Prof. Manor also suggests that most of these user committees are donor driven, malleable to pressures from *realpolitik* and have deleterious impact on bottom-up participatory democracy. What Prof. Manor says is accurately reflected in Andhra Pradesh too as some of Prof. Manor's data is from Andhra Pradesh and some other Indian States such as Madhya Pradesh, Uttar Pradesh and Gujarat. Below we discuss the situation of PRIs and user committees in Andhra Pradesh.

### **The State of Rural Institutions in Andhra Pradesh**

In the past one decade Andhra Pradesh earned a reputation of being front-runner in economic and governance reforms. Given this image one would expect vibrant and well functioning rural governance in place. But contrary to such expectations the Panchayati Raj Institutions are languishing in Andhra Pradesh. Elections are conducted to these institutions but after that not much attention is paid. The Eleventh Schedule in the 73<sup>rd</sup> Constitutional Amendment requires that a total of twenty-nine subjects be devolved to Panchayats. Panchayati Raj however is a State subject and it is the will and interest of the State government to devolve functions, functionaries and finances. The previous TDP government claimed on paper to have devolved seventeen subjects. In reality except drinking water, streetlights, and internal roads and to some extent sanitation, none of the twenty-nine items are devolved. Instead, programmes such as *Janmabhoomi*, created and operated in terms of what is known as bureaucratic 'nodal system', has reversed the devolution process and concentrated powers in the line departments of State bureaucracy. This was particularly so the case with the TDP government's policy of 'de politicizing' the development. Mr. Naidu supposed to have openly said that he is in favour of development and not politics and would like to keep 'politics' out of 'development'. Following this approach many 'user committees' were created in rural areas and functioning of these was coordinated through 'nodal system' and *Janmabhoomi* Programme. Contrary to such policy pronouncements of 'depoliticizing development'<sup>2</sup> what took

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<sup>2</sup> Prof. James Manor calls it an important justification given for 'user committees' and calls such an attempt at separating politics and development 'a myth'.

place was the packing of these 'user committees' with party cadre and using the user committees for party building (Powis, Benjamin, 2003). Interestingly this policy was in contrast to both the early record of Telugu Desham Party which abolished hereditary village officers, created smaller Mandals out of bigger Taluks as sub-district, intermediate tier of governance and projected an image of a populist political party. Secondly, this policy was also in contravention to the liberalizing thrust of the government. The liberalization, privatization and globalization set of reforms are closely associated with the idea of drive towards decentralization and moving away from centralization of power. In Andhra Pradesh, on the contrary the reforms were associated with centralization of power in the bureaucracy and at the State level. This policy trend has marginalized Panchayats. In addition to this the policy environment over the past decade was also markedly hostile towards attempts of the civil society to rejuvenate PRIs and strengthen local self-governance. Thus reforms and liberalization in Andhra Pradesh have taken place reversing the trend of decentralization; concentrating decision making authority in bureaucracy and discouraging civil society from actively pursuing the strengthening of Panchayati Raj Institutions. The focus to a large extent was on 'user committees' that were created at the village level. Andhra Pradesh witnessed 'second wave of decentralization' before people at village level could fully comprehend the significance of 'first wave of decentralization'. We discuss some of its details below.

The situation in Andhra Pradesh is compounded, with the introduction of user committees at the village level. Some of them are statutorily introduced and others through executive fiat. The Water Users Association, the Watershed Committee, the Parents and Teachers Committee the Vana Samrakshana Samiti the Mothers' committee and added to this are the numerous self-help thrift and micro-credit groups. The institutional landscape in the countryside is certainly complex and this is far from being advantageous. The complexity has become a disadvantage in mobilizing the community in times of crisis. This multiplicity of institutions has actually contributed to the fragmentation of the social, and more so, political community.

Unlike the expectations, these user committees have also acquired the negative attributes of the representative institutions at other levels. Money and muscle power are used in their elections; liquor and meat are generously provided to the clientele to secure success in the elections. And the victory in water user committee election or the parents and teachers' committee election has political rewards. As for the aspects such as protective discrimination and gender equality go even in these institutions the posts reserved for women are

dominated by men and where Dalits or Backward class candidates are supposed to occupy the positions it is the upper caste individuals who dominate the institutions either by proxy or by other means.

Another important aspect of these parallel institutions to PRIs is that, as Prof. Manor suggests, most of the time these are created with the support of, and following the dictates of, the donors who provide funds to these institutions. For example, in Andhra Pradesh, Parents and Teachers Committees are created through an organization called DPEP (District Primary Education Programme) and are supported by the DFID. Like wise the Watershed Development Committees are created and run with the support of DFID. Water Users Associations and Vana Samrakshana Samitis (VSS) are supported by the World Bank. The argument that while PRIs provide opportunity for people to participate in decision making process in one context while the user committees provide opportunities for participation in other more specific contexts does not seem to explain the problem because both user committees and PRIs operate in the same social and political context.

The major problem with the institutional landscape described above is that there is lack of horizontal connection between any of these institutions. It is the contention of this paper that these institutions being disparate and distinct do not help foster social solidarity or social capital. These bodies lack horizontal connections with each other and also lack connection with the panchayats; most of the time the user committees are under the control of local bureaucracy. What the prevalence of this multiplicity of user groups has done is to take away some crucial functions from PRIs, which would otherwise provide PRIs with authority, legitimacy and resources. This aspect, as Prof. Manor notes, creates confusion among the ordinary citizens about the genuine source of leadership for the community. Some of the functionaries of these institutions are in practice more powerful and generate more patronage than PRI leaders because they are better funded for one single aspect e.g. watershed, while Panchayats as 'multiple use councils' are less funded.

What implication does this institutional landscape hold for rural governance? The governance of water resources becomes separated from that of watershed; Anganwadi from that of the school; watershed from that of forest committee; and local Panchayat from all these. This is a confusing landscape of institutions for an ordinary farmer. The pertinent question in this context is what is the one institution that listens to the plight of the farmer? Certainly the votaries of the user committees—that are also known as 'CBOs' i.e., Community Based Organizations—appear to claim that it is none of the tasks of any of these institutions.

The point that is considered is that in the context of the above governance at the local level has become no body's task. The political institutions and the individuals that occupy them do not see that the minimum welfare of their citizens is their concern. The leaders of these institutions do not think that the tragic state of affairs has to be dealt with by coming together, by representing, lobbying, putting pressure, protesting or by agitating. None of the Sarpanches in any of the villages, where suicides have occurred, ever seem to have felt this. Sarpanches association of Andhra Pradesh or even ZP chairpersons' association has not bothered themselves to make any statements about the agrarian distress or suicides. What is of concern is that not only that empirically they have not done anything but the normative standards of the larger society and polity which do not expect the rural institutions that are in the immediate vicinity of the farmers to respond.

This situation is particularly so with the case of Andhra Pradesh. If thousands of farmers are committing suicides, if regular reports of suicides are coming from all parts of the state then why the rural institutions are not responding to these occurrences? Are they not responsible for governance of rural areas?

### **The State of Rural Community and the Reasons for the Suicides**

As it comes out from the reports of the farmers' suicides it is economic, ecological and social reasons, which are driving farmers to suicides. The economic causes for suicides as are reported: the faulty inputs such as spurious seeds, pesticides and fertilizers, their high prices; the low and widely fluctuating prices and inadequate marketability of the output; the failure of yields and lastly the only economic *institution* that is cited as reason is failure of the institution of credit. Private moneylenders and non-institutional credit is often the reason for suicides. The other less cited institutions are the leasing in and out practices. These are the main economic reasons. The iniquitous distribution of land forms the agrarian backdrop. Often these reasons can be traced to the macro-economic policies of the Indian state, which has been neglecting agriculture. That the state intervention in promoting primary education, primary health and land reforms has always been minimalist is the argument forcefully made by Amartya Sen and Jean Dreze (Dreze, Jean and Amartya Sen, 2002). While the state presence in these aspects has been relatively less, the neglect of agriculture and allied sectors in Andhra Pradesh was particularly glaring. In Andhra Pradesh the State was increasingly becoming minimalist in some aspects such as agricultural extension and animal husbandry aspects in which the state machinery did provide some support in earlier period of time till mid eighties.

The ecological reasons are drought, the fluctuating yields associated with drought and the devastation caused by the natural-scientific establishment, or the facade of it, that is associated with the intensive farming. Mono-cropping associated with the green revolution technology is frequently cited as one among the major reasons for the crisis. The shift from multiple-cropping and food economy to mono-cropping particularly towards the crops such as cotton and chilly is the major reason for the vulnerability of the farmers. Here the one institution that comes under scrutiny is the Agricultural Extension Department that has been invariably a failure. Increasing desertification of parts of Andhra Pradesh is also a reason for falling levels of ground water and creation of a hydrological crisis as a sub-set of ecological crisis. This set of ecological reasons can also be traced to the gradual withdrawal of the state from irrigation, extension and regulation.

The less asked reasons are the social reasons. How is that these individuals who are driven to commit suicides are not prevented by the rural community. Not supported economically or socially or psychologically by the members of their community? Here we are sure that the 'community' in the countryside is caste divided and class divided and is also gender divided. Sociologists, as discussed in the beginning, have always held that the rural communities are caste divided and further divided into sub castes; but they have also informed us that there are institutions of caste endogamy, commensality, kinship, consanguinity, caste panchayats and caste associations. Where have all these social institutions gone in the face of the dilemmas of the farmers? Have the communities with their social ties dissolved? Has development of market economy in the rural areas with its social logic dissolved the community relations and supports? Has individualization proceeded thus far? It is often observable that the farmers are not facing the crisis collectively in organized protests but are only committing suicides. Often these questions as to what happened to the community ties, however primordial one would like to describe them from modern point of view, are the less asked ones. The following section discusses these questions with reference to brief fieldwork conducted in Warangal District of Andhra Pradesh.

### **A Field Report from Atmakur**

Fieldwork was undertaken in Warangal district of Andhra Pradesh keeping the above realities in mind. Warangal district is most affected by the suicide epidemic and suicides have been taking place in the district since 1997. The district is most advanced district in Telengana in terms of agricultural practices and commercial crops such as cotton and chilly are grown regularly on its fertile black soils. The district also fares relatively better

in terms of rainfall compared to other districts of Telengana and therefore makes interesting case for study. Within Warangal we have chosen Atmakur Mandal for fieldwork. Among all the mandals that are affected by suicides Atmakur mandal is worst affected and this made us chose for fieldwork. Atmakur mandal headquarter i.e., the Atmakur village itself has seen as many as nine suicides of farmers. We have interviewed five cases out of these nine in addition to interviews with the Sarpanch, the mandal Agricultural Officer (AO) and others. Firstly we briefly discuss the main highlights of each of the five case studies of suicides and then discuss some common points that emerge.

### *Case Study –I*

Basboina Sudhakar committed suicide on 28<sup>th</sup> November 2002. Sudhakar was a farmer owning two acres of land and was from Mudiraj community. Mudiraj community is a backward class community. He owned these two acres and cultivated rice on the land with water for the crop being pumped from a nearby stream. But two years prior to his death he has leased in additional three acres from another backward class person and cultivated cotton crop. He died owing to the burden of accumulated debts owing to the cultivation of cotton crop and failure of paddy crop. On the eve of his death he cultivated paddy on his two acres of plot and cotton on the three acres of leased land. The lease per acre per year was Rupees 5,000. Prior to shifting to cotton crop on leased land, he was a rice farmer. Interview with his family members show that he accumulated debts owing to the failure of cotton crop and drying up of water for paddy crop. As for the cotton crop the seeds, fertilizers and pesticides have all failed. Recurring failures of rice owing to drought and of cotton owing to faulty inputs has led to the suicide. The accumulated debts were about 1, 50,000 Rupees. Sudhakar borrowed all this money from his close relatives of the same caste.

There are about 200 families of the same caste and all are marginal and small farmers and they also conduct petty trade. After the suicide the family did not have money for the funeral expenses and the caste community bore that expenditure. The close relatives who lent Sudhakar the money however expect the money to be paid back to them. Sudhakar himself never shared his psychological pressure and situation with his wife and family members when he was alive.

After the suicide the family sought help from the local Panchayat and Mandal Revenue Office for compensation or exgratia. So far they have received none. The officials have

taken note of all the details of the occurrence and promised support. The only support the family received so far is twenty kilos of rice given under food for work programme in two installments. The village has a Grama Panchayat, a Water Users Association and a Parents and Teachers Association. These institutions, however, have been of little help. The caste community now provides social and psychological support for the family. The Mudiraj community still has practices of caste endogamy, commensality, kinship and a caste Panchayat that settles disputes within the community. Sudhakar's family members inform us that the caste community did not matter when the economic crisis came.

### *Case Study –II*

Jannarapu Komuraiah suicided on 14<sup>th</sup> December 1999. He owned one and half acre of dry land and cultivated two acres of leased in land. He leased land from a local land owner from Reddy caste at the rate of Rupees 2000 per acre per year. Komuraiah was a Scheduled Caste farmer. He cultivated cotton crop on the total three and half acres of land. He was cultivating cotton for past eight to nine years prior to his death. Komuraiah died owing to debt burden that accumulated owing to cultivating cotton. He owed around Rupees 80,000 at the time of his death. The cotton crop failed continuously for two years prior to his death: first year owing to excessive rains and the consecutive year owing to drought. Komuraiah borrowed all the money from his relatives both in this village and in neighbouring villages. The lenders never pressurized him to pay back but he himself went into depression owing to debt and committed suicide by consuming pesticide. Local institutions were of no help any time. So far Komuraiah's family has not got any compensation or exgratia. The Mandal officials and the Grama Panchayat have promised exgratia and the family is waiting.

### *Case Study-III*

Manda Sammaiah died consuming pesticide on 17<sup>th</sup> December ,2001. He owned two acres of dry land and leased in another two acres from an upper caste landowner at the rate of Rupees 3,000 per acre per year. Sammiah was a Scheduled Caste farmer who cultivated cotton on his own and the leased land. His family along with the other caste members lives in the caste-demarcated street till now. At the time of his death Sammiah had debts amounting to Rupees 1, 00,000. Of this, 40, 000 Rupees were borrowed from the same land owner who leased out the land at four percent interest. And the remaining amount was borrowed from his relatives. Those who lent money pressurized Sammiah to pay back; and under the

pressure he suicided. Exgratia was promised and the family is waiting. The Mandal Development Officer and Mandal Revenue Officer say the compensation will come soon.

#### *Case Study- IV*

Parikirala Sadaiah died of pesticide consumption on 16<sup>th</sup> September 2000. He was a backward class farmer owning three acres of dry land and 0.75 acres of wetland. Sadaiah died owing to accumulated debts of about 1, 15,000. The debts accumulated because of the failure of the cotton and chilly crops and owing to a failed attempt to dig a well in his dry land. The well failed owing to a rock layer that came after digging into some depth. The interest on the loans has multiplied. Sadaiah brought money for his crops and well mostly from his relatives. And the lenders pressurized and humiliated.

The major reason for the crop failures was failures of the cotton seeds to germinate and because of the pesticides that did not work on the pests. As his family members say seeds failed, fertilizer failed and pesticides failed. There was no help from any side. Local Sarpanch and other village elders contributed to the funeral expenses.

There are caste related practices and institutions such as caste Panchayat, endogamy and commensality. But the members of the caste were not of much help because they are also small and marginal farmers and could not have afforded to help Sadaiah in paying his debts. The caste community has a caste chit fund and Sadaiah borrowed some money from the chit fund too. That money too is to be paid back. There is no exgratia or compensation from the government so far. The family still cultivates cotton; apparently owing to the reason that the crop withstands drought condition better which the other crops do not.

#### *Case Study – V*

Reguri Gopal Reddy died on 17<sup>th</sup> February 2000 consuming pesticide. Gopal Reddy had land about two acres and leased in two acres of land. He cultivated cotton on four acres. He died of pressures from accumulated debts and other losses owing to digging of a well and death of plough animal. The relatives of Gopal Reddy are well off farmers and do not care about the situation of his family. The wife of Gopal Reddy now gets the field cultivated by employing an annual farm servant. The family still cultivates cotton crop. No exgratia or compensation of any kind reached the family so far.

The five case studies that we discussed above share some common points. They are:

- ❑ All the five farmers are small/marginal farmers cultivating two to five acres and almost all except one have leased in land in order to cultivate cotton; their caste composition is that two are from backward class; two are from Scheduled Castes and one farmer is an upper caste person.
- ❑ All the farmers are cotton farmers and died because of accumulated debts owing to cotton crop failure, drought and failure of wells, and some contingent factors. The villains of the piece prominently were the cotton crop and drought.
- ❑ One interesting feature is that all the farmers discussed above have borrowed money from their close relatives and caste members. Caste solidarity did work in getting loans but failed when the paying back could not result.
- ❑ One important observation that is discernible from the case studies is that agricultural extension has totally failed as far as the crops go and none of the farmers whose cases we discussed above availed any extension services. None of them knew what seeds, pesticides, weedicides and fertilizers should be used, when, in what quantity and how. There is also a big question mark on the quality of the all of above inputs on which there was no advice.
- ❑ The last and most significant observation that emerges is that in none of the cases did the local institutions matter in any way. Not even to expedite the reach of compensation or exgratia.

The discussion with the Sarpanch of these cases also did not yield much in terms of the understanding of the relationship that the Panchayats can play in such circumstances. He said that he has not convened a Grama Sabha to discuss the situation but discussed the farmers' distress when the mandatory Grama Sabha was conducted. The Sarpanch has issued a broad appeal to the farmers that they should not commit suicides when faced with adverse agricultural conditions. The Sarpanch however contended two points: one the user committees have fragmented the political community and that these user committees have largely been floated to strengthen the cadre of a particular political party and secondly, that the requisite awareness to come together, discuss a way out of the impasse does not exist among the farmers and villagers in general. According to him that process may

take time. At present, the Sarpanch claimed, the Grama Sabha attendance is only 100 persons out of 9,000 odd voters in the Panchayat.

The case studies presented above also show that agricultural extension as an important aspect of intensive agriculture has failed. Following this observation we conducted detailed discussion with the Agricultural Officer of Atmakur Mandal, which resulted in some interesting insights the main points of which are presented below.

- ❑ One of the main reasons for the agrarian distress is the increasing adverse seasonal conditions such as droughts and excessive rainfall and these conditions are particularly acute since 1994-1995. In the presence of favourable seasonal conditions the extension services, as they exist now, can help attain good return from the crops with ninety percent assurance. But in the presence of adverse seasonal conditions extension services can only help recover the investment with great difficulty.
- ❑ As the agricultural conditions exist cotton is the only crop, which can give minimum guaranty of crop return and monetary returns. That is what makes farmers to stick to this crop and farmers are continuing this crop even after suicides are taking place in their families owing to the failure of the same crop. Agricultural scientists have suggested to extension workers that they should advise farmers to shift to crops such as soya bean instead of cotton but soya bean also cannot withstand drought conditions when compared to cotton.
- ❑ Presently the extension services are working with meager staff. Presently one Agricultural Officer and two extension workers cover twenty seven Gram Panchayats in the Mandal and there is virtually no field staff or infrastructure to reach out to the farmers. Present strength of extension staff is grossly inadequate. The policy of employing multi- purpose extension officers (MPEOs) at the rate of one worker per every 1000 hectares of cultivated land in the Mandal needs to be implemented. In the absence of field staff the agricultural officer at the mandal level is only running a 'one man show'.
- ❑ The spurious seeds and other inputs is a major problem. To curtail impurity in seeds there should be a separate 'seed inspector' at a mandal or division (cluster of mandals) level'. This is important because faulty seeds cause loss of entire crop in a season. Monitoring of seed supply needs to be strengthened.

- At present the seed producers and marketers themselves do not know the plant characteristics and duration of the resultant crop etc. These people influence farmers to purchase by informing whatever they think is correct. Often both the buyer and seller both do not know any thing about the seed/pesticides/inputs they are dealing in.<sup>3</sup>
- As the situation exists now details of seventy percent of the seeds and pesticides, as they are available in the market, are not known to the extension department officials. Sale and purchase of the seventy percent of the seeds and pesticides and fertilizers takes place out side the purview of the extension department. Therefore the technical aspects of whatever seeds, pesticides newly enter into the market should be made available to the extension staff.
- At present the extension department at Mandal level lacks both field staff below to operate and scientific guidance from above. And there is often no coordination between Panchayats and existing extension staff.

The details of suicides, the views of elected representative and the situation of the extension department as they characterize the crisis are presented above. Role of these institutions has been crucial to the complex situation.

### **In Lieu of Conclusion**

In the foregoing we have discussed the notions of village community and institutions; the reasons for suicides and the role and the situation of the village level institutions. It comes out clearly that village and village community as social and political communities do not matter as far as addressing the conditions that drive farmers to commit suicides are concerned; and so is governance at that level. The faith in PRIs as foremost institutions for rural governance has been placed by the 73<sup>rd</sup> Constitutional Amendment because they are the immediate institutions to the local social and political communities consisting of citizens. While it is obvious that these institutions are not able to take up the issues at the local, village level, leave alone at any higher level, what is lamentable is not only the empirical fact that they are not addressing themselves to this issue but the fact of normative standards in the discourse about institutions that do not raise this question. Even in the

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<sup>3</sup> These aspects clearly show the reasons for calling the natural –scientific knowledge regime, which is operating in agriculture a facade, and has contributed to the distress.

neo-liberal paradigm of development and governance, it is the triad of market, civil society and the decentralized governance that are supposed to take care of the economic, social and political welfare of the local communities. The situation of routine occurrence of the suicides indicates that while the older paradigm of centralized state has been discontinued that has not been replaced by efficient and accountable market, strong and well developed civil society and effective, decentralized local self-governance that cares about the welfare of its communities. The interesting point that emerges is also that while the Panchayats as political communities continue to be a) loosely integrated into the larger regional and central state structures b) as political communities constituting the third tier of governance they are still not fully 'mature' to take decisions collectively to address the problems facing its citizens. The idea that the local self-government, in the form of PRIs, will lead to decision making on the part of the citizens to arrive at decisions that affect their lives is still, a far cry. Sociologically the communities are not totally dissolved and caste loyalties to some extent are present. The case studies show that in all the cases discussed the farmers have mobilized loans initially from their relatives from within the village or out side. But these identities and loyalties are in a transition and the force of the market is increasingly individualizing the farmers. The situation is such that while the traditional community ties, which Gandhians admire so much, are giving way, new modern political communities where the citizens are aware of their citizenship and exercise that citizenship to take decisions that affect their lives is still not born. It is difficult to write conclusions in such situations on a democracy and self-governance that is only thirteen years young. Whether the local communities assert themselves to address and solve their problems at that level is a question only time can answer.

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