

Continuing Farmer Suicides in Vidarbha - Report on Underlying Reasons and Action Plan for Stopping Suicides

Introduction

Farmer suicides continue even after the Prime Minister visited Vidarbha and announced Rs 3,750 crores in relief. The number has crossed the figure of 750 by 19 August 2006. How and when could this chain of suicides be broken? We need to analyze as to who is responsible for continuing suicides. Who can break the chain?

Farmers?

Society?

Government?

Big business promoting anti-land practices?

To seek answers and also to comfort families of farmers who committed suicide, Prakrui and Vidarbha Organic Farmers Association organized a five day Vidharbha Sadbhavana Yatra along with a number of concerned citizens and non-government organizations participating in studying the situation in depth. This group visited villages and met community leaders in addition to victim families to understand the genesis of suicides and is now presenting hereunder its observations on the underlying reasons and the prevailing situation as well as recommendations for change in the state policy and delivery of relief to farmers as well as for transformation in the societal response to farmer woes and limitations putting an end to recurring suicides

The signatories strongly feel that government policies at global level, non-delivery/partial-delivery at the ground level of relief and facilities announced from time to time by the Central and State Governments and general societal disregard to farmer problems as well as evil practices employed by big business giants with the active support and encouragement of the Central and State Governments are responsible for creation and continuation of this human tragedy of unparalleled magnitude.

The report is in two parts. Part I covers observations and findings of the situation created by public policies and societal responses faulty prevailing report to present a comprehensive outlook. Part II lays down the Action Plan for stopping the continuing farmer suicides.

PART I: Observations and Findings

1. Participants in Vidarbha Sadbhavana Yatra

First ever programme for organic cotton cultivation in India was initiated in Vidarbha by Prakruti, a signatory to this Report, in the year 1995 Kharif season with 135 farmers cultivating cotton organically on 1200 hectares of their land. This campaign was later internationally acknowledged to have been the largest successful programme in the world in the area of organic cotton cultivation for that year. Prakruti assisted participating farmers to constitute themselves into Vidarbha Organic Farmers Association (VOFA), another signatory to this Report, for continuing organic cultivation not only of cotton but of all agriculture produce. The VOFA members are pursuing organic cultivation practices all along.

2. Green Revolution and Compulsions on Indian Farmers

In India 70% of the population is still dependent on land for survival as alternate job opportunities do not exist. Large number of suicides taking place every year shows that policies laid down by the state are working against the interests of this vast majority of our citizens mainly those working on the soil while constraining conditions created by the society are proving to be difficult for them to meet. Hence farmer suicides continue unabated.

For a number of decades now, the state has created compulsions and conditions that have adversely affected the farmer's inherent right to choose the crop and the way to cultivate the land relying on the traditional knowledge and experience acquired over centuries. Introduction and maximization of synthetic fertilizers and pesticides have taken away his right to deal with his land. Continuous imposition of conditions have either totally destroyed or severely eroded his confidence in himself beyond the point of redemption. The farmer is subjected to maximizing of inputs in the name of Green Revolution, the adverse effects of which on the soil, farmers and living beings are too well known needing any further elaboration. The state is pursuing an approach of maximizing inputs of chemical substances and of introducing mechanization in areas all along more efficiently managed hitherto through human and animal labour. Though yields from the soil increased in the beginning, they have stagnated with the soil losing its fertility. Large areas of fertile land have become and are continuing to become useless for cultivation. Most damning impact of maximization of synthetic inputs, heavy mechanization and resulting change in farming practices from multiculture to monoculture on the farmer is the loss of confidence in his capacity to grow and in the potential of the soil to provide optimum returns. Farmer is told continuously that it is not the soil with millions of micro organisms but maximum application of synthetic fertilizers and hazardous pesticides and the use of heavy agricultural machinery as well as

hybrid and now Genetically Modified (appropriate phrase Genetically Manipulated) - GM- seeds that enable the otherwise sterile soil to give high yields.

Big business backed by the government has made him dependent on awfully expensive and undoubtedly hazardous inputs. This has increased the cost of cultivation and consequently the debt on farmer. The disclosure that farmers of Punjab, India's most prosperous state for agriculture, were under a crushing debt of around Rs 50,000 crores (equivalent to US \$ 11 billion) in 2004 is a sure indicator of farmer dependence on external inputs. Business giants with the active support of the state and the multifarious global agencies have taken farming as an area for exploiting the most vulnerable sector of the society for maximizing their profits. Swindling farmers by introducing patented products through wrong claims and misinformation has become the regular practice of modern business.

The fact that eight giant business houses control the production and distribution of food and food items globally shows the extent of over concentration of food production and distribution with individual farmers becoming totally dependent to the business giants. Business giants like Monsanto and Syngentia as well as Cargil and Unilever monopolise in every sector from producing seeds of doubtful quality to retailing of processed junk foods. Farmer dependence on business giants has become total in consequence.

3. Hazards of GM Bt Cotton Seeds Cultivation

Business giants have introduced GM Bt series of cotton seeds the use of which they claim would give higher yields. Farmers however have observed that these seeds fail miserably resulting in substantial losses. Vegetation that comes out is incapable of providing seeds for the following year's cultivation forcing farmers year after year to go to the same giants for acquiring seeds discarding the erstwhile well maintained tradition of sowing with their own seeds saved from earlier year's crop.

Monsanto GM Bt cotton seeds are priced at exorbitant levels to mop up heavy amount as monopoly patent fees and this high price has prompted many local seed producers to market spurious seeds as Bt cotton seeds amongst farmers, incapable of understanding the intricacies of the trade. The ministers and bureaucrats actively advocate the use of GM seeds by declaring them to be superior to traditional seeds.

Studies have recently shown that Monsanto GM Bt cotton seeds are no guarantee against attack of pests including the most dangerous American Bollworm. The Indian Government owned Central Institute for Cotton Research (CICR), India's apex body for cotton research located near Nagpur in the Vidarbha region found after extensive field tests that the pesticidal quality of Bt cotton seeds does not remain effective for the entire cultivation period and therefore other synthetic pesticides need to be sprayed to control pests. This invariably translates into increased cultivation cost. Monsanto, which had all along projected Bt cotton seeds as the panacea against all pests for all the time, now

advocates the use of additional chemical pesticides reasoning that higher yields resulting from cultivation of Bt seeds would cover the increased expenses in pesticide use. However higher yields have not happened and in a number of cases there is either total failure or an overall decrease in yields. In any case, farmers are sunk deeper into debt leaving no hope of salvaging themselves from debt trap. The fact that over 50% of suicides in Vidarbha are attributable to farms using Bt cotton seeds confirms the failure of Bt technology to deliver the much hyped results.

It is now observed globally that cultivation with GM Bt seeds results in large scale contamination causing morbidity to vegetation around. Though the world is assured by the business houses that Terminator seeds that grow weeds not amenable to control by any means and seeds that are sterile are not yet introduced despite their having been successfully developed for commercial marketing, farmers have experienced that cultivation of GM Bt seeds has the same damning impact on farming. GM Bt cotton seeds sown have contaminated making large areas of land around totally sterile. Contamination to farms located even nine km afar has been reported. GM seeds have shot out weeds that have killed standing vegetation around.

Members of the group noticed normally profusely fruiting mango (*Mangifera indica*) trees and perennial Pimpal (*Ficus religiosa*) trees totally defoliated with debarked main stem standing as if as a memorial to the bygone majesty of a mango and a pimpal. Hectares and hectares of mango orchards had to be cleared following mass mortality of once flourishing mango trees. Members of the group confirm that they have never come across in their long association with soil and vegetation, a mango and pimpal dying a death in the manner they have in Yavatmal, a district of Vidarbha. Pimpal like its other *Ficus* family members including Vad-bunyan (*Ficus benghalensis*) is a perennial spreading and living for centuries throwing out new roots. But no more in Vidarbha. Contamination was observed on a wide scale in farms located in the vicinity of farms where Monsanto Bt cotton seeds were sown.

It is clear that Monsanto is given a total license to spread Bt cotton and make money as it likes by the Central Government at the cost of agriculture itself. Monsanto GM Bt cotton seeds entered India surreptitiously without receiving official clearance, normally a prerequisite. Despite the fact that authorities claim to have in place an elaborate seed clearance procedure, Monsanto followed up with large scale plantation in a number of Indian states. Instead of taking penal action against Monsanto and its Indian subsidiary for cultivating GM seeds before clearance, the government issued a post facto clearance when it was confronted with large scale GM Bt cotton cultivation in a number of cotton growing states. The Central Government continues to issue and renew licenses for the use to GM Bt cotton seeds. Duplicate seeds that have come up because of high price for Monsanto Bt cotton seeds are sold in the open market on a large scale and such seeds have not shown any better performance.

4. Action by Andhra Government For Protecting Farmers

Andhra Pradesh remains the only state that has raised objection against the sowing of Bt cotton seeds before the Central Government regulatory body, Genetic Engineering Approval Committee (GEAC), to the Monsanto application for extension of clearance for use of Bt cotton seeds and has got proGM, GEAC, to ban the use of Bt cotton seeds within the Andhra State. The Andhra Government is again the only state that has hauled up Monsanto and its Indian subsidiary for charging exorbitant prices before the Monopoly and Restrictive Trade Practices Act and has succeeded in obtaining an interim order directing Monsanto to slash down the exorbitant Bt Cotton prices by about 50% applicable throughout the country. The Andhra Government is further the only state to file a legal suit seeking damages for the loss to its farmers resulting from the failure of the Bt cotton seeds.

5. Why Are Governments of India and Maharashtra Not Banning GM Bt Cotton Seeds?

Recognizing the suffering and hardship caused to farmers, the Andhra Pradesh Government has taken various measures to stop the use of GM Bt cotton seeds. While on the other hand the Government of India has opened up red carpet to Bt seeds and the Government of Maharashtra is doing everything to promote GM Bt cultivation in Maharashtra despite the fact that 50% of the 700 plus suicides till date in Maharashtra are directly the result of sowing of Bt cotton seeds. This group was informed in meetings with farmers that the majority of duplicate seeds marketed as Bt originate from the states of Maharashtra and Gujarat hence Maharashtra and Gujarat politicians are patronizing the Monsanto Bt cotton seeds to provide cover to duplicates produced in their respective states. In fact, the Union Minister for Agriculture Sharad Pawar, who as well originates from Maharashtra, does not lose a single opportunity to shower praise on GM organisms and Bt seeds and it is widely believed by farmers that he is using his position in the Government of India to extend support to Monsanto for promoting the Bt cult. His close association with Indian producers of duplicate Bt seeds is very well known.

It is pertinent to record that the Governments of India and Maharashtra have not directed Monsanto and its subsidiary to follow fair trade practices in marketing Bt cotton seeds. For them Monsanto prices that include royalty at disproportionately high rate, rates not charged by Monsanto anywhere else in the world, are a fair price and hence allow Monsanto to extract the maximum from poor farmer resulting in tremendous increase in his cultivation costs and indebtedness.

6. Politics of Minimum Support Price And Cotton Procurement Price And Its Impact On Farmers

The wholesale prices for India's major agricultural produce are governed by the Minimum Support Prices (MSP) for cereals fixed by the Government of India and the

Cotton Procurement Price (CPP) for cotton by the Government of Maharashtra under the Maharashtra Cotton Procurement Scheme. Wholesale Mandy prices for all agricultural produce hover around the MSP and CPP announced by the Government of India and the Government of Maharashtra respectively towards the end of the cultivating season. As both the MSP and CPP prices are not known at the time of sowing, farmers cannot rationally choose crops they should cultivate for assuring to them fair returns. Having gambled on cultivating crops without any idea as to what they would realize for their toil at the harvest time, farmers become a pawn to the floor prices that the authorities announce as late as possible practically when standing crops become ready for harvesting. They are left with no alternative but to dispose off their produce at or around government fixed MSP/CPP prices.

Experience shows that the central and state government fix floor prices for keeping their liability to the lowest in acquiring produce that farmers choose to hand over. Floor prices have no bearing whatsoever to cultivation costs, hard labour that farmers put in, worsening soil yields due to continued use of synthetic inputs, erratic frequency and declining quantum of rains due to vagaries of the climate as well as actual expense incurred in purchasing at ever increasing costs inputs like Bt and other seeds, synthetic fertilizers, hazardous pesticides, additives etc the use of which is relentlessly hyped by the authorities and giant business houses on farmers. The authorities also do not take note of the reality of having to buy afresh Bt cotton seeds every time the farmer sows GM seeds as seeds saved from the last year's GM crop are incapable of germinating. Government subsidies extended to farming for use of synthetic fertilizers are pocketed by the fertilizer industry to cover up losses resulting from its unviable working. Subsidies extended in the name of farmers become incentives for the fertilizer industry to continue to manufacture otherwise unviable hazardous products.

The authorities however do take cognizance of the ruling global prices artificially kept lower than economic costs through huge subsidies and incentives doled out by the rich countries led by the USA, European Community Countries, Canada, and Australia to their giant corporations and large farmers for dumping their extra production in poor countries. And these rich countries additionally use the WTO and other global agencies to support their giant business houses to have free access to the remotest parts of the poor countries. Rich countries use global forums to pursue their policy of extending subsidies on food items to their giant corporations up to a point that global meetings calling for multilateral approach break down and then the same rich countries enter into bilateral agreements with hapless poor countries to push their giant corporations into the remotest parts in the poor countries for free market access. The bilateral agreement, Indo-US Agriculture Cooperation Agreement, concluded during the visit of President Bush to India provides to these giant corporations free market access into India's remotest areas. It is no accident that executives from Walmart and Monsanto, giant US business houses are invariably present in meetings held under this Agreement to push their agenda of plundering the unorganized villagers and farmers.

Experts have shown that the government floor prices for all farm produce are low, too low for providing to farmers minimum returns for their toil, to cover the expenditure incurred on costly bought out inputs from giant synthetic fertiliser and pesticide industries as well as on expensive Bt seeds that need to be purchased year after year afresh from Monsanto at awfully expensive prices.

As observed earlier, floor prices for agricultural produce are arbitrarily fixed without any relevance to the expenditure incurred by farmers or to their actual living costs. To cite an example, the Government of India announced the MSP for wheat for the year 2006 at Rs. 600 per quintal (100 kg), an increase of Rs. 25 that is 4.25% over the MSP for the 2005 season without taking into account the steep rise in costs for inputs such as fuel, petro-based synthetic inputs and labour in addition to farmer family living costs. The Government of India rejected outright representations from farmer groups for raising the MSP to Rs. 650. Failing to receive any response, farmers of Punjab resorted to agitation by boycotting the mandies for selling their freshly harvested crops.

But farmers, already under heavy debt, had to start disposing off their crop to the first buyer. And there were ready cash rich buyers waiting for an opportunity to grab the maximum. Large Indian and multinational business houses took over large quantities of wheat at rate ranging around Rs 650 a quintal. By the time the Government of India raised under political pressure the MSP to Rs 650 and prepared to procure at the increased MSP of Rs 650, substantial quantities of produce had gone off from the market to the hoarders. Giant business houses that had cornered available wheat started releasing their stock at around Rs 1250 a quintal making a fat profit of Rs 600 per quintal. The damaging effect of free market access in the wheat trade on the grower and consumers can be perceived readily. Unorganized poor farmers under serious government and societal tension hardly realized a fair price while equally unorganized consumers are paying a very high price resulting from the unscrupulous business houses pocketing about 100% profit. Consumers are forced to shell out practically double the usual price for wheat.

7. Import of Wheat

The government procurement agencies could not procure enough stocks for distribution under Public Distribution Scheme due to the Government of India fixing a hopelessly low MSP and failing to accede to just demands of farmers as well as not acting swiftly to accommodate to the farmer needs for cash money to meet their obligations.

This situation resulting from the government policies of not providing support to agriculture and at the same time of opening up agriculture and cultivable land to large business houses and of providing free market access globally following the World Trade Organisation (WTO) conditionalities has provided to the authorities in the face of increasing inflation a ground for allowing free global trading in hitherto well protected Indian agriculture sector. We observe here the concept of globalisation operating at

zenith damaging the grower and consumer interests as well as affecting the Indian economy. Placing the blame on farmers for not delivering wheat at the MSP price, authorities decided to import 3.5 million tons of wheat declaring increasing inflation as a ground. The government resorting to importation of food stuff from outside in a country acknowledged as a predominantly agricultural country to avoid paying a fair price to its farmers had a demoralizing effect on farmers. The government realized subsequently that relatively higher landed cost for imported wheat would further raise overall wheat prices. So the decision to import has been followed by another announcement of withdrawing the import duty totally on imported wheat. While this decision would result in heavy blow to the public exchequer, it has straightaway affected the farmer self confidence. He now realizes that the government and the society do not look to the Indian farmer for feeding his countrymen and hence they would rather make consumers to pay over higher price than pay a fair price for his toil. Thus the injury inflicted through fixing totally unworkable floor prices is followed by insult through withdrawal of import duty on food items. It is disappointing to observe the rulers of India succumbing to the US pressure for free market access and at the same time dealing a death blow on farmer self confidence.

Farmers realize that their government and fellow beings, on one hand, have no faith in their own farmers to feed their own brethren and are now importing sugar, pulses, cooking oil, processed foods, they are on the other hand highly disappointed and extremely perplexed to observe the government giving a free hand to import GM soybean oil into India. The fact remains that soy oil is not a cooking medium in any part of the country and yet GM soy oil is freely allowed despite already widespread opposition in India to GM seeds and soy crops having disastrous impact on farmers and the soil. They realize that the talk of the country's food security is all hollow and that the government would rather import than pay to them a fair price that can sustain farmers and their families.

8. Cotton Crisis of Vidarbha

Actually Vidarbha has the right soil and climate for cotton cultivation. Despite this, the case of cotton, highly sensitive cash crop, as handled by the Maharashtra Government is no less depressing to farmers. More than half of Vidarbha farmer suicides are attributable to cotton cultivation failure and that too to the use of Monsanto Bt cotton seeds and duplicates thereof. Farmers are not provided the 'informed choice' to opt for cotton cultivation as the Cotton Procurement Prices are not announced well before the start of the Kharif season. This forces farmers to gamble on cultivating cotton with their traditional variety and/or with much hyped Bt cotton seeds in preference to the traditional seeds.

In fact the Government Cotton Procurement Prices are terribly low hardly covering cultivation costs leave aside additional cost of acquiring expensive Monsanto Bt cotton seeds and the fakes. It is pertinent that the State Government has not acted on the

recommendations of a high power government committee to raise the minimum price of cotton to Rs. 3000 per quintal even at the height of suicides and left the farmers to the working of a Cotton Procurement Scheme dipped in corruption, favouritism and non-accountability inbuilt in the procurement procedure adopted by the state and erratically implemented by the inefficient bureaucracy.

Maharashtra State is the only state that has persisted in continuing compulsory cotton procurement scheme despite suffering recurring heavy losses in continuing the Scheme in addition to causing hardship to cotton farmers. These losses incidentally are due to extremely high establishment expenditure incurred by the Maharashtra Government in running the Scheme. Maharashtra again has not raised a finger against Monsanto for anti-farmer and anti-land practices. Maharashtra has not moved to obtain for farmers a fair purchase price for procuring Bt cotton seeds. Maharashtra has again not taken any steps to obtain damages for crop failures for farmers who suffered losses in cultivating Monsanto GM Bt cotton seeds and were forced to commit suicide. The Central Agriculture Minister hailing from Maharashtra continues to insult the psyche of farmers by repeating that incidence of farmer suicides is not new to Maharashtra while spreading misinformation that cultivation with Monsanto Bt cotton seeds brings about higher yields. He simply refuses to take cognizance of the findings of the Central Institute for Cotton Research under the charge of his Ministry and to observations that GM seeds cause severe contamination resulting in large scale devastation of vegetation.

Added to this depressing situation is the reality that import of cotton is freely allowed into this country and that too at reduced import duty rate. This shows as to where government priorities lie. In a number of discussions with us, farmers expressed their displeasure on the step motherly treatment meted out to them by the government and indicated that raising the rate of import duty or at least withdrawing import duty concession on imported cotton would help them to realize a fair price for their cotton crop while withdrawal of Government Procurement Scheme would enable them to make a free choice between cultivating or not cultivating cotton at all in their farms.

The government has not carried out even a farm-to-farm survey for collecting minimum data on farms and farmers on the ownership, crop cultivated, extent of debt, likelihood of farmers paying back the debt and what support farmers need in meeting the liability caused and increased by government erratic policies. There has been no initiative by the government and the society as to how they can provide support to farmers in meeting their social obligations and financial liabilities.

9. Failure of 'Credit To Farmers' Policy

It is observed that many of the government decisions on extending relief to farmers are ad-hoc taken on the spot without fully understanding the entire situation and without creating an infallible mechanism for delivering quick and timely relief being announced from time to time as policy measure to support the targeted sector. The Chief Minister,

Vilasrao Deshmukh, stated that the state government has decided to provide a 2% relief in the interest chargeable on bank credits to farmers and for this purpose it has conveyed to the NABARD that it will look after 2% out of the 6% NABARD Refinance rate. Keeping aside, for the time being, the issue whether the 2% relief in interest rate is adequate enough to save farmers from committing suicide, one is tempted to welcome this as an important measure in the right direction aimed at reducing stress on farmers. We were however dismayed to learn that this measure has not been given effect and farmers continue to pay high compounded interest rates following normal trade practices.

Our enquiries with the nationalized Bank of India in Kolhapur, the lead bank for Kolhapur District, confirmed that bank does not extend this relief to farmers for the simple reason that it does not avail the NABARD Refinance facilities. The bank officers clarified that the bank, having adequate liquidity of its own, does not go to NABARD for refinance hence the question of providing 2% relief to its farmer customers does not arise. In reply to our query, they clarified that working of scheduled including nationalized banks is governed by the Reserve Bank of India. Hence they do not take cognizance of state government declarations and do not extend the facility of reduced interest on loan advanced to farmers. Thus farmers are denied the state government relief and continue to pay compounded interest following the prevailing bank practice.

Participants received similar response from other nationalized banks. Banks further disclosed that even cooperative banks rarely extend such relief to customers even while availing the NABARD facilities as there is no monitoring. Obviously interest rates that cooperative banks charge and conditions they levy on farmers, approaching for credit, are out of bounds for an authority announcing relief for helping the poor.

The situation at ground level shows that banks have not become the main source for credit to farmers despite government announcement on extending bank credit to farmers made more than a year ago. This is an indication of no or poor performance in this area with majority of borrowings coming from money lenders or sahuikars over which the state does not and can not exercise any control. Farmers are exposed to bullying tactics year after year by Sahuikars who force borrowing farmers to mortgage their lands in their favour at the time of giving loan on difficult-to-observe terms. After a lapse of couple of years, sahuikars take over the possession of farmer land and get the 7/12 transferred to them. Instances of farmers having lost their land, the only means for their sustenance, galore however the government has taken no action against such dispossessions. In fact the offices of the Revenue Department enter lending sahuikars in the 7/12 documents to confirm the change of ownership to sahuikars.

Sahuikars have direct access to politicians hence use government machinery to harass farmers in distress including getting the transfer of land ownership to themselves secretly. Taking action and penalizing the informal money lenders also is not the way out. Bank credits need to be worked out at the village and more specifically at farmer level. Nationalized banks, private banks, cooperative banks as well as sahuikars are all

aligned against farmer interests. Thus farmers availing assistance from banks and sahuks end up in not receiving the loan when they badly want and in addition paying interest at exorbitant rate much higher than the rate an urbanite pays for buying a personal motor car or a petrol guzzling amphibian sport utility vehicle. The NABARD facilities are gulped by the intermediary banks.

Thus the government can boast in public of having extended to farmers credit facilities in farming operations but these facilities come in a packet that farmers cannot comply with. Public agencies including the government desirous of providing timely and proper support to farmers in their grief shall have to evolve other more sensitive arrangements for making facilities easily accessible to farmers.

Poor share of bank credits in overall indebtedness of farmers confirms that government policy of extending bank credit to farms is a non-starter and farmers are still under bullying tactics of unscrupulous money lenders. In any case, the government policy decision to extend easy, prompt bank credit to farmers has remained undelivered like many government policy announcements.

10. Promoting Organic Cotton Cultivation

It has been observed that resorting to sustainable agriculture practices including organic farming reduces costs and provides more jobs in addition to creating a remarkable degree of Self Reliance and Self Confidence in farmers. Vidarbha, incidentally, became in the year 1995, the country's region where organic cultivation of cotton, a cash crop, erroneously believed to be requiring the largest quantum of hazardous pesticides, was successfully carried out. Farmers associated with this campaign continue organic cultivation of cotton as well as other crops with great satisfaction.

Organically cultivated cotton has been in demand from overseas countries so much so that a number of overseas cotton apparel manufacturers have entered into long term tie-ups with India's organic cotton growing farmers to ensure regular supply of organic cotton. The authorities can actively support organic cultivation of cotton in the country and particularly in Maharashtra, the epicentre of farmer suicides. Eliminating hazardous inputs like synthetic fertilizers, hazardous pesticides and unwarranted hormones and additives as well as heavy agricultural machinery from farming operations, an essential prerequisite for sustainable agriculture, would substantially reduce cultivation costs while regenerating the farmer self confidence in his capacity to grow while rekindling confidence in the soil to grow high quality food and fibre in optimum quantity. It would be appropriate for the authorities to promote farmer movement for sustainable farming and support the movement for sustainable agriculture through innovative incentives and facilities to stave off suicides.

11. Ignorance and non-delivery of government facilities and relief to targeted sectors

It is clear that facilities that policy makers declare are not delivered to the targeted people and this has happened more glaringly in case of farmers as they hardly have the daring to make a demand for extending relief already announced. There is no effort to provide relief to ones in dire need as senior public officers expected to take the relief to the needy do not take minimum care for ensuring that relief is provided expeditiously. We have already pointed out that the Chief Minister's announcement of granting remission in rate of interest remains a hollow declaration fit for public consumption without any benefit to the society.

This can be observed from large number of schemes and programmes that the government claims to have formulated for farmers for instance promotion of organic farming or providing market openings for their produce. It would be worthwhile studying as to how farmers are informed on such measures, whether they avail them and if so, to what extent and if not, why they are not availed. Development of foolproof communication channels for instant dissemination of information amongst targeted sectors is essential for avoiding catastrophe.

12. Citizen Involvement

The authorities would do well to involve citizens and NGOs as equal partners in their efforts to reach out to far flung farmers in their distress. A live partnership between the government and NGOs in attending to the problems of the neglected sectors of the society is bound to create a feeling of affinity bringing citizens closer to farming issues. This is naturally the high priority area where the frequently talked of concept of Public-Private partnership has to be brought into being for making things happen in the manner required.

13. Reaching Out To Farmers

There is no gainsaying that relief and facilities that the policy makers declare are not delivered to the targeted people and this has happened more glaringly in case of farmers. Disorganised and alienated farmers have hardly the dare to ask for or demand relief that is announced. There is no effort to provide relief to ones in dire need as senior public officers expected to deliver the relief to the needy do not initiate and ensure that relief is provided expeditiously to the needy.

It is time to discard the 'Nine to Five' approach assiduously followed by public servants in the Collector's office, Agriculture and Forest Departments, Law and Order enforcing agencies, local self government instruments at village, town and city levels in respective districts of Vidarbha that has denied to farmers an easy access to numerous government measures designed to reduce their hardship. It is yet important that farmers are supported

in availing and utilizing government relief and facilities as that could stop or at least reduce substantially farmer suicides.

Farmer suicide is not an issue restricted to handling by the government alone. The society has a moral duty and definite responsibility as farmers sustain one and all in the society. The government can look to sensitive citizens and non government organizations (NGOs) for support in the formidable task before the society of providing care and support to farmers. This country has developed a long and dependable tradition of concerned citizens devoting their time and energy to supporting and being on the side of the shunned and the shunted. The authorities could usefully work in the direction of involving citizens and NGOs as equal partners in their efforts to reach out to far flung farmers in their distress. The society as such is as much concerned as the government is in extending services to the needy. A live partnership between the government and NGOs in attending to the problems of the neglected sectors of the society is bound to create a feeling of affinity and bring citizens closer to farmers in distress.

PART II : Action Plan for Stopping Farmer Suicides

1. Recommendations for transforming the agriculture scenario

While these recommendations form a total packet of measures to ensure prompt delivery of relief in general to the farming community that form 70% of the country's population, they need to be implemented on highest priority to Vidarbha and neighbouring regions where suicides are continuing.

Objective of the Agricultural Policy

It is important that the government and the society evolve a farmer centric and agriculture supportive policy and approach accepting the reality that it is the farmers who have all along tilled the land for the sustenance of living beings and hence it is essential that the society and government make every effort to rekindle in farmers the infallible conviction that Self Reliance (Swavalamban) that is reliance on himself and not on outside inputs or meddling under the guise of science and technology and Self Confidence (Swavishwas) that is the conviction that his toil on soil only can enable the soil to gift optimum returns that can bring back his Self Pride (Swabhiman) of feeding the world. After all, farmer has been respected throughout history as the father of the world as he has sustained life on the earth. The society and the government have a duty to support the farmer in regaining and maintaining his self pride of being an essential part of the society. Recommendations herein are measures that should rehabilitate him as an active actor in the society.

1. Citizen Involvement and Participation

Suicides continuing unabated make it clear that the government operating through existing bureaucratic system alone cannot reach out and provide to farmers the support needed by them. The government shall take positive steps for securing close cooperation and active participation of concerned citizens, NGOs, social organizations, educational institutions, public servants in different sectors, mahila mandals, youth groups, professionals etc for informing farmers and delivering relief promptly. The authorities shall identify NGOs and groups of people at village, taluka and district levels and constitute local Working Groups to be chaired by senior citizens and administered by local public servants involving NGO representatives as equal partners in carrying out activities at pada, village, taluka and district levels as well as in simplifying and systemizing procedures with inbuilt transparency and accountability for extending relief to the targeted community. Representatives of public agencies, banks and financial institutions operating in talukas and districts would need to be associated from bottom up for providing relief at levels close to farmers.

The government shall set up appropriate machinery for continually informing Working Groups on facilities and relief available from the state and other agencies and guide them

on procedures for delivering them to farmers on urgent basis. The government shall extend financial and managerial support to Working Groups to render effective assistance to farmers.

2. Farm to Farm Survey and Creation of Database

The government shall organize on high priority with close cooperation of Working Groups a comprehensive survey covering the name of the farmer and number of family members, land ownership, size of land, crops being cultivated, number of labour and cultivation cost, seeds sown, whether from his savings, bought out-hybrid or GM quantity and cost, money invested whether own source, bank loan sahuakar borrowing, rate of interest, simple or compound interest as well as social obligations of farmers on 'farm to farm' basis at village, taluka and district levels. The survey shall become the base for further working with farmers and be made accessible to all.

3. Take Over Of Existing Farmer Repayment Liability

The Central and State Governments shall jointly declare their decision for take over of farmer debt repayment liability and lay down fool proof mechanism for taking over the liability of all farmers including of those who have committed suicide. They shall ask all agencies including scheduled banks, cooperative banks, sahuakars etc to file complete information on loans and/or any other assistance extended by them and the terms on which loans are extended to farmers with the taluka agriculture offices within a fortnight and direct them forthwith to refrain from taking any action against farmers for repayment of loans. Lenders failing to register their lending within the notified time shall lose the right to demand repayment directly or through any other process.

4. Farm to Farm Liability Verification

The government shall cause the Working Groups to verify in their respective work areas the extent of debt of each farmer by visiting and discussing them individually and to report back to respective District Collectors on the actual position on preset time schedule.

5. Protecting Land For Farmers

The government shall introduce comprehensive policy measures to protect land and its produce for farmers and for that purpose withdraw operations of free market access to all lands and agriculture as well as ban contract farming and other practice that affect the farmers' exclusive ownership over their land. The government shall stop any change in the 7/12 or any other land ownership document and abrogate changes in the 7/12 carried out during last five years thereby assuring return of land ownership to original farmers.

6. Future Credit To Farmers and Rate Of Interest on Credits

Realising that all costs on cultivation ultimately are to be borne by the society, the government shall direct that rate of interest on future borrowings shall not exceed the normal rate that scheduled banks pay on deposits lying in the Savings Bank Accounts to be charged on simple interest basis. Lenders shall involve related Working Groups in lendings to farmers and farming.

7. Banning Import, Production, Marketing And Use of GM Seeds

The government shall forthwith ban production, importation, marketing and use of GM seeds to make India GM free. Observation and experience of widespread contamination from GM seeds and adverse impact of GM organisms and seeds on vegetation and living beings are enough reasons to ban GM organisms to ensure healthy and sustainable farming. The society should realize the gravity of a situation that Monsanto, world's largest seed producer promoting GM cult everywhere and having extensive presence in India is also the owner of the only Terminator seeds manufacturing facility developed in the world. Entry of Terminator seeds capable of producing sterile seeds and contaminating lands widely in India can mean total destruction of soil and vegetation.

8. Supporting Establishment Of Farmer Seed Banks

The government shall support farmer groups in setting up of seed banks for traditional and improved seeds for making them readily available to farmers to support the tradition of sowing seeds saved from the preceding crop in the current season. Sowing of seeds from earlier crop is an effective practice for reducing costs in addition to inculcating in farmers a high sense of self reliance and self confidence as producers of the basic need of living beings.

9. Rehabilitating Victim Farmer Families

The government and the society shall provide and monitor comprehensive rehabilitation of victim families and take over their social liabilities and duties through community programmes.

10. Fixing MSP For Food Items

The Government of India shall, in consultation with farmers, fix for all edible food items the Minimum Support Prices (MSP) that cover the actual cost of cultivation and provide a fair return to farmers. The Government of India shall forthwith raise the existing MSP by minimum 25 percents over the existing MSPs.

11. Withdrawal of Cotton Procurement Scheme and Paying Reasonable Price Under The Scheme

The Maharashtra Government shall withdraw the Cotton Procurement Scheme at the earliest and raise, till the time the Scheme remains in force, cotton procurement price to Rs 3,000 per quintal.

12. Developing Concept of Food Security and Implementing Measures for Self-Sufficiency

The government shall promote the concept of food security for the country by achieving self sufficiency in food and agricultural produce through cultivation of local traditional crops. To achieve this objective, the government shall levy heavy import duty on imports of all agricultural produce to a level where imports become financially unviable.

13. Establishing Farming and Technical Training Schools

The government shall set up farming and technical training schools and other special training facilities to empower growing generations to take up challenges facing them. Rise in the knowledge base at the lowest level is bound to improve the overall quality of life for all citizens while improving job possibility in their existing setting.

14. Promoting Sustainable and Organic Farming Practices

The Central and State Governments shall promote sustainable and organic farming practices by providing incentives, orientation and technical support to farmers to change over to sustainable agriculture as well as promote sustainable practices like rain water harvesting, waste water recycling, solid waste reutilization, biomass generation, watershed development, afforestation etc to ensure finite natural resource conservation and environment protection.

15. Tree Plantation And Afforestation in Maharashtra

The government shall direct all local bodies of Maharashtra to set up Tree Authority as provided in the Maharashtra Urban Areas Protection and Preservation of Trees Act, 1975 for undertaking massive tree plantation and for protecting existing tree stock.

16. Promoting Value Addition To Primary Produce At Farmer Level

The government shall promote programmes for value addition to primary crops at farmer levels through farmer and consumer cooperatives as well as encourage marketing and consumption of agriculture produce at local and regional levels.

Regenerating And Reviving Swavalamban, Swavishwas, Swabhiman Amongst Farmers

The entire plan is to revive Self Reliance (Swavalamban) in the farmer that he can achieve the optimum without resorting to outside inputs or intervention, Self Confidence

(Swavishwas) in his capacity to grow everything that his soil is capable of as result of his toil and Swabhiman (Self Pride) that it is his working on the land that sustains the entire earth.

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