

9 funerals and a wedding in Vidarbha village

People visit this village to attend funerals, or in the aftermath. There have been plenty in the last seven years. I was going to attend a wedding instead-- a wedding in Both Bodhan after nine funerals.

My car swirls right from the highway to the gray serpent of the weather beaten potholed track leading to the hamlet fifteen-odd km from Yavatmal in Maharashtra's drought-prone Vidarbha region.

It is early April. Two months of dry searing heat would drain most of the ponds, and wells; and even the deepest crevasses of all the moisture; and then the pre-monsoon showers would descend in the first week of June. If at all they would after two successive years of deficient rainfall. The rich black soil on the either side of the road, though, is ready -- ploughed and decked up--almost pleading with the rain gods. Or else would return, the concomitant misfortunes and miseries of a failed crop; the perpetual shadow of death that lurks around swallowing residents of Both Bodhan, year after year.



This is India's ground zero of agrarian distress. In this village of fifteen hundred, nine residents have taken their own lives in the last seven years. "Taking ones own life" is the preferred euphemism for a suicide in government lexicon; it doesn't put the onus of death on anyone, absolving anyone and everyone of any act of omission, or commission. The first man in Both Bodhan to "take his own life" was Vinod Balu Rathore. That was on 25th January 2003. His daughter Sonali is getting married today.

"It's here, at the village square a team of bank officials on a debt collection drive had reached when Vinod gulped a bottle of pesticide"; a villager reminisces escorting me to the ceremony.

Children, bare feet and semi-naked, lustily suck at multi-hued ice candies right opposite the inverted U-shaped welcome gate. It's a somber occasion, weighing heavy on the gathering; the hanging inertia inside the yellow and brown marquee amidst undulating humming and buzzing of pedestal fans. A billboard put up by an enterprising insurance agent hangs loosely by a pylon- the only greetings coming my way this hot afternoon.

Vinod Balu Rathore however was not insured, but his family got the assured ex gratia help of Rs one lac. But not before the suicide was conclusively proved to be one borne out of burgeoning agrarian debt.

In the next twenty-four months, five others in Both Bodhan village killed “their own selves”. By 2008, this figure had reached nine. Only three out of which have been found eligible for compensation.

Gajanand Amdavadar fought a protracted battle to get compensation for 28 such families in the adjoining Washim district. “The benchmarks are such, procedures are complicated. It has to be proved beyond doubt before a district level committee that suicide committed is due to agrarian distress”; he laments.

Perhaps Vidarbha would be the only place on the planet where the dead regularly undertake the eligibility test.

The aftermath and the relief packages

“Vinod’s daughter was just a child then”; recalls Ganesh Rao, whose house is across the village square on the western side of the hutment. His wife, the village sarpanch offers me nimbu sherbet in their three room semi-pukka house- brick and mortar structure with half- concrete, half- thatched roof.

So, what has been the impact of all these relief packages for Vidarbha? There have been plenty in the last five years- CM’s package, PM’s package for the drought- hit regions in 2006 and then the 2008 loan waiver.

“Even I am a beneficiary of the loan waiver scheme. But since then, for two years in running rains have been erratic”; he says intermittently slurping at his sherbet.

Ganesh Rao cultivates ten acres of un-irrigated land, grows one crop every year, which is generally cotton. By government standard, he is a medium farmer whose annual income should be relatively higher than any small and marginal farmer with a landholding of five acres or less. Ganesh over the last two years has once again accumulated a debt of seventy thousand rupees.

If debt is considered the real reason behind farmer distress culminating into his suicide, then these are ominous signs. Especially for a village like Both Bodhan that has been the focus of many relief schemes; and has not reported a suicide case in the last two years.

As in Ganesh Rao’s case- debt is again mounting and its effect percolating to the ledger books of Yavatmal District Central Cooperative Bank or DCCB. Along with nationalized banks, DBCC offers short term Kharif and Rabi credit to farmers. Under the waiver scheme it wrote off loans to the tune of Rs. 227 crores rupees in 2008. More than 1.25 lakh farmers holding less than or equal to five acres (small and marginal farmers) got a complete waiver while another 68 thousand farmers with larger landholdings got partial relief. Total cost to the state exchequer- Rs 227 crores.

After wiping the slate clean, DCCB account books are again in the red; the un-paid loan by far exceeds the amount waived-off in February, 2008.

These are the figures provided by the office of District Deputy Registrar of Cooperative Society. For the financial year 2008-09, and 2009-10 put together, the bank has disbursed a loan amount of Rs.691 cr. As against this disbursement, the recovery (final figures for year 2009-10 are awaited) has been less than fifty percent (it could be as less as 33%).

Loan recovery by other banks- Rural, DCCB and Nationalised Banks including- is no better. Total credit disbursed by all the banks (DCCB, RDB and Nationalised Banks) in 2008-09 was Rs.518 cr. Of this sum, only Rs.136 cr could be repaid.

In 2009-10 almost 75% to Rs.911 cr. Final figures are awaited, but preliminary indications are that recovery could be as bad last year’s.

So what should the government do now? Redux 2008. If anything, these figures make a strong case for another loan waiver. But will it make any difference; or serve any purpose?

Back to square one?

What exactly has gone wrong with the mother of all relief schemes? Have the farmers stopped paying up on the crop loan in anticipation of another waiver? Or is there more to it?

It’s not that people haven’t tried to find answers to these vexing questions. From politicians in serpentine cavalcades with media at their toes; to babas and gurus pontificating on the virtues of Yoga in curing hypertension and stress; to animal husbandry department officials advocating remuneration through allied activities- they have all been to these villages. Seeking answers in a conundrum manifesting itself in the most tragic way of human existence.

“Finding solutions through piecemeal approach will not work”; rues Vijay Javandhia, agriculturist from Wardha.

Suicide records are diligently maintained in all six worst affected districts of Vidarbha- Amravati, Washim, Akola, Buldhana, Yavatmal and Wardha. 985 suicides have been recorded in these alone in the year 2009.

The data collected by Vasant Rao Naik Sheti Swavlamban Mission- the nodal Maharashtra government agency overseeing the implementation of the relief packages puts the corresponding figure to 969 for the ten months of 2008 after the 28th February loan waiver announcement. Add another 200 to this- the preliminary report on farmer suicides for the first three months of 2010- and we arrive at a figure of 2150.

Nearly 2150 farmers in these six districts have committed suicides from February 2008 till March 2010. This on an average comes to more than a thousand farmer suicides every year. More than a thousand suicides every year after centre and the state together pumped in thousands of crores in what is billed as focused and monitored relief work in just six districts!

Yavatmal district is already reporting seventy-two farmer suicides in the first three months of this calendar year. But government agencies are analyzing the data in an entirely different way. In January this year Vasant Rao Naik Mission released figures of farmer suicide attributing a comparative decline from the 2007 figures to the successful implementation of various packages.

“It’s building up again. For sure, farmer suicides are not getting reflected in mainstream media anymore”; laments Chandrakant Wankhede, former editor of the Marathi daily Sakaal. As an after thought he adds- “May be the issue lacks the necessary sex appeal to be picked up by our news channels”.

Farmers with a payback capacity in anticipation of another waiver may defer repayment but would not be committing suicides- 2,150 to be precise since March, 2008.

“In my district they want to pay back, but their current economic condition doesn’t allow that. 30% to 40% deficient rainfall in the last two years has severely curtailed their capacity to reduce debt”; confirms Yavatmal Collector Sanjay Deshmukh.

It alludes to something which has gone drastically wrong somewhere, a systemic deficiency or failure in understanding and evaluation plight of small and marginal farmer in Maharashtra in particular and India in general. “Maharashtra has been able to survive many serial blasts orchestrated by terror modules. Come June and if rains are not satisfactory this year, there will be “serial suicides” in Vidarbha”; apprehends Prakash Pohre, Editor of Akola based Marathi daily Deshunnati running a consistent campaign on farmer suicide for the last ten years.

Land holdings

“You must get out of the Bollywood mindset to understand the crisis of the Indian farmer,” Chandrakant Wankhede told me in Nagpur, right at the onset of my Vidarbha journey.

What he meant was that the quintessential “rural” ambience of the Hindi cinema caught in a time warp is far- far removed from the reality, as it exists today. The exploiter and the exploited theme- the landless and the landholder screenplay, the raja and the praja dimension of engagement in the hinterland have undergone a tectonic shift. The primary reason being the shrinking or diminishing size of landholdings.

The land ceiling statute in Maharashtra enacted and implemented in 1960s had put a cap of 18 acres on irrigated land and 54 acres on un-irrigated land. That was almost fifty years back.

The Economic Survey of the Maharashtra Government for the year 2010 compares the landholdings in 1970 with the figures in the last census.

In 1970 there were 4,951,000 landholdings in the state with an average size of 4.28 Hectare. By 2001, these landholdings more than doubled to 12,138,000 while the size reduced to only 1.65 Hectare. 77% of total landholdings are less than 5 Hectare and 38% less than 2 Hectares.

In the last ten years, the average landholding size has reduced further. The decennial census currently underway will clearly demonstrate that.

With government admitting 84 percent of the landholdings are less than or equal to five acres, there exist now a sort of level playing field.

Land ownership per se is increasingly getting de- linked from person’s economic status; especially amongst the traditional farming communities in the upper and intermediate castes. Thus, ones affiliation to a particular caste or group is no guarantee to economic emancipation.

Profit and loss

Mahadev Rao Ingle had two sons, a wife, 2.5 acres of land and a debt of little over Rs 50,000 when he decided to “take his own life”. Ingle swallowed poison right at the gate of the vegetable wholesale market at Akola in 2005.

Wife and sons Nikhil and Swapnil have since tilled his un-irrigated land. The family this year has earned Rs 25,000 by taking a crop each of soya beans and arhar. Boy’s mother has recently been employed in the local aanganwadi Kendra. This brings in another twenty seven thousand rupees per annum to the household.

“This year when we were getting a good deal on my arhar crop; everyone raised a great hue and cry. The result was government intervention and as a consequence prices tumbled”; one of the sons complains.

Now, let’s take a look at the expenditure. The family is shelling out Rs. 30,000 annually on the education of two brothers. That leaves the household with less than two thousand rupees a month for everything else that includes health, food, transport; and also for the investment on next year’s crop.

Another division in landholding will leave Nikhil and Swapnil with a little over an acre of land.

Soon both or at-least one will have to look for an alternative source of income for sustenance. Even if irrigation facilities are provided provide for, farming alone on one acre will not be able sustain their respective families in the future.

The Ingle family falls in the category of 84 percent landholders with less than or equal to 5 acres of land. The National Commission for Enterprises in Un-organized Sector records monthly income of marginal farmer to be Rs 1,657 and per hectare.

These are un sustainable remuneration for running a household.

In the next decade, the landholdings will continue to reduce in size and increase in number, rendering many without any means of livelihood.

In a country where 57% of the total employment and 73% of the rural employment is dependent on agriculture, it's a scary scenario.

A farmer in Naya Vathoda village in Morshi taluka of Amravati district has an interesting take on the issue.

"In a high paying economy of a cosmopolitan, the consumer is spending just 5% of his monthly income on kitchen. More than 50% of his expenditure is on real estate and vehicle. In this scenario, do you expect farmers to get a competitive price for their produce"; he told me. A point, worth pondering over.

Epilogue

Twenty-five years ago, on the 23rd of March 1986 Sahibrao Karpe, a farmer from Yavatmal took his entire family to Wardha- where Gandhi had built the village of his dream- sevagram. Reeling under a huge loss after electricity department discontinued power supply to his semi-arid fields subsisting on tube well irrigation; Karpe and his family committed suicide.

To this date, the crisis persists for people like Karpe and their families.

The question today isn't whether India will be able to feed its burgeoning population. By all means- Bt or the beast- the nation will continue to produce enough food grain through landholdings of every shape and size.

The size of these landholdings will obviously decrease with each generation. Those being unable to make ends meet with smaller holdings will have to sell their lands and opt out, as agriculture increasingly becomes a loss making and un- sustainable venture for small, marginal landholdings.

The litmus test for this economy thus will not be how many of its entrepreneurs make it to the annual list of billionaires.

The real challenge would lie in absorbing those being rendered jobless- the semi- skilled and non- skilled farmers - in a milieu, which has so far has been non- conducive to their entry into the job market.

What has made matters worse is the complete de-attachment of the entire political process from real issues. The political mobilization is increasingly happening on emotive issues; or is being guided by the monetary health of the political leadership. That leaves fewer safety valves or the redressal mechanisms in a political democracy like ours to seek justice or inflict political punishment by the aggrieved masses.

Something needs to be done; and done fast or else the growing chasm could manifest itself in other social and economic strains and tensions, multiple in dimension and unmanageable in proportion.

Postscript:

The crowd atop the Mukundraj hill on the outskirts of the temple town of Ambejogai is slowly dispersing. The hill is named after one of the earliest Marathi poet Mukundraj who lived here in the later half of the 12th century AD. His Samadhi is down the hill, a flight of one hundred steps from where I am standing.

Further down flows the river Banaganga sandwiched between two steep rugged slopes.

Amar Habib often comes here in the evening to evade the routine load shedding during summer months. He is a reputed Marathi writer and journalist who toured and extensively reported on the worst affected regions of agrarian distress in Maharashtra in 2007.

These days, he is on a different mission.

Habib- whose native place is Ambejogai- is now working towards establishing a repository of Marathi manuscripts- literary or otherwise- of the last one thousand years since Mukundraj penned his famous work Viveksindhu.

The Maharashtra leg of my fieldwork has ended. I will be taking a train back to Delhi tomorrow.

Habib is excited about his the project, I about mine. He has written to numerous literary personalities seeking support for the proposed "vaachnalay" or a library close to the Samadhi. I seek his views on the plight of farmers in Maharashtra- especially in Vidarbha and Marathwada.

There is a brief pause.

In his succinct reply to the query, a glum looking Habib redefines the entire concept of the "exploiter" and "the exploited" in contemporary terms.

“It needs to be revisited. In the existing environment, the innovator or the creator is “the exploited”. He can be a farmer, a poet, a writer- just anyone who is the progenitor of thought, food or anything. The one who markets his innovation or product is the “exploiter””; he tells me glumly.

We watch an amber sun settle behind the barren red undulating expanse of the Balaghat hills.

(CNN-IBN's Sumit Pande is doing a series of reports on small/marginal farmers and denotified tribes. The series is funded by Inclusive Media for Change, or im4change, of the Centre for the Study of Developing Societies)