

**Journalism for Life:
A look at Indian Media Representation of Farmer Suicides**



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Preface

Over the years CMS has brought out in specific terms how little rural India is reported in the news media, particularly by the 24-hour news channels. It should not be an exaggeration to say that national channels and most national newspapers continue to cover and cater to India at the neglect of Bharat. That farmers' suicides occur on account of various factors, new and old, was first brought to national attention by local newspapers. Yet, in spite of so many committees and study reports on farmer suicides, how has the scope of coverage evolved in terms of representing the basic issues involved?

This report of CMS Media Lab is based on an analysis of news coverage of farmers' suicides by prominent national dailies. While dailies like The Hindu have set a good example for objective, in-depth field reports and comprehensive editorials, news media, by and large, has missed yet another opportunity to report beyond mere symptoms.

Though news reporting should not increase the severity of social problems, this, is often the case today. However, there are some good examples for how news reports could go beyond the status quo to help address and even resolve the very root problems at hand. In today's world, such "*life saving*" or "*conflict-resolution*" journalism can make a positive, even necessary, difference. Hence, this study also features a guide (included as an appendix to this report) for reporting on farmers' suicides, in a manner promoting discussion.

As we are about to come out of this report, the "Social malaise that needs sensitive coverage" of the Readers Editor of The Hindu appeared on June 12, 2006. This is very pertinent and deserve to be discussed nationally together with guides like the one suggested in the report. To facilitate such an exercise, K. Narayanan's "Online and Off line" also is being reproduced at the end of this CMS monograph.

We thank Ms. Radha Vij, CMS Researcher, for this report and the guide, both of which are part of a larger ongoing study.

P.N. Vasanti

Director
Centre for Media Studies (CMS)

Journalism for Life: A look at Indian Media Representations of Farmer Suicide

From 1998 to 2003 reported incidents of suicides among farmers ranged from 16,015 to 17,471 or over one lakh in six years.¹ Yet, television medium has done little to bring understanding of this issue. This can be judged from the fact that there has been only one televised news report on farmer suicides during three month media monitoring from Jan 2006 to March 2006. Though the print media has slightly better analysis of the situation, the Indian television news media continues to ignore a reality that is only growing more severe. Past decades have seen a high but not precisely known numbers of farmers kill themselves due to India's looming agrarian crisis. This report is an attempt to understand a grave epidemic in rural India, and suggest ways for the media to address it from a comprehensive multidimensional perspective.

1. Background

In a country with an estimated 702 million people of working age (15-64), approximately 66 per cent of rural labourers are dependent on agrarian activity for income.² Meaning, over 350 million agrarian workers including toolmakers, day labourers, landless farmers, tillers, etc. draw their sustenance from farm-based work. Yet, Budget 2005-2006 announced agrarian sector GDP growth as only 2.3 per cent versus the manufacturing sector's 9.4 per cent. In fact, since the liberalization of the Indian economy, allocation to agriculture from the Centre's budget has dropped so drastically that the 2005 agriculture budget was actually 20 per cent less than that of 1991.³ It is not only the government that has lost its farm focus; similar apathy is seen in the media attention it receives. Only 0.3 per cent news on six Hindi television news channels

¹ The Hindu, Delhi, Monday June 12, 2006, pg 11, Readers' Editor column, 'Oline and Offline': *Social malaise that needs sensitive coverage.*

² Government of India: Ministry of Finance, Economic Division. [Economic Survey 2005-2006](#), Social Sectors 209 and 215.

³ Perna Thakurdesai, "The Cotton Graveyards," [India Today](#) 27 Feb. 2006: 80-81

was devoted to agriculture in the three-month study period when number of suicides were reported in the press; international, sports and entertainment news for the same period comprised eight per cent of news. At the most basic level, the more rural India continues to grow, the less monetary resources and overall attention it receives. Lack of attention from government, private sector and media amplifies the socio-political and economic disparities leading to a state of rural emergency.

India's agrarian workers, the single largest labour force, account for approximately 30 per cent of India's \$ 35 billion yearly exports. Yet, this number has become stagnant because Indian farmers are forced to downsize and/or sell off their farmlands due to economic hardship caused by low Minimum Support Prices (MSPs) set by the government, and insufficient agrarian infrastructure such as storage and transport facilities. At the same time, the area devoted to food production is progressively being replaced by commitment to cash crops, leading to dangerous food security issues, which, ironically, most severely affects those BPL (below poverty line) families living as agrarian labourers in remote rural areas. Consequently, 2006 was the first time in over six years that the Central Government had to import food grain to curb a potential reserve shortage⁴. Furthermore, rising costs of agriculture inputs like pesticides, fertilizers and seedlings (GM crops like Bt Cotton are mostly responsible for cost burdens) and a lack of adequate agricultural education prohibits farmers from diversifying their crops. Insufficient credit mechanisms, poor irrigation and lack of agricultural marketing systems needed to sell crops to targeted markets all add to the farmers' sense of despair.

That farmers have turned to cash crops in order to stay afloat has subsequently led to the involvement of global farm subsidies and genetically engineered (GE)/ genetically modified (GM) seedlings into India's traditional farming system. The presence of GE technology, in addition to WTO trade norms and sanctions, has invited exogenous MNC interests into the precarious life-struggle of an endogenous

⁴ "Government to import wheat after 7 years," Economic Times [New Delhi] 3 Feb. 2006: 13.

national industry. Even Indian seed companies such as in Guntur and Nalgonda (Andhra Pradesh) have acted on the MNC model of assuring 65 per cent germination rates when customers are forced to pay for 100 per cent of the seeds at market-high prices. Post 1998, when MNC seed companies entered the market, all government controls and regulations were halted. As a result, high input prices and low quality of seeds continue to destroy annual crop yields.⁵

The resulting crisis is present in everything from food commodity shortages in consumer markets to the Indian agrarian workers' struggle for life. In the past 15 years, journalists and NGOs reporting agrarian crisis estimate that 10,000 cotton-farmers have taken their lives⁶ as a result of a failed national commitment to developing the agricultural sector and a ruthless agricultural subsidy disparity between developed and developing nations. Those farmers who have resisted suicide resort to desperate measures such as putting their entire village up for sale to pay up their debts⁷ or, worse, selling their kidneys at "*Farmers' Kidney Sale Centres*," like the one in Amravati.⁸

Continued neglect of this situation has intensified and diversified the epidemic of suicide in rural India. What began contained within the cash crop - particularly cotton - growing sector, has now spread to subsistence farmers and farmers growing food crops to feed the nation. This past year the first farmers' suicides were first made public in onion and poultry sectors (the latter, obviously, due to hysteria surrounding the potential bird flu pandemic). Furthermore, the suicides have spread from Andhra Pradesh in the 1990s to Karnataka, Kerala, Maharashtra and, presently, into Punjab. Vidarbha, the worst affected region, has seen over 200 suicides from July 2005 to Feb 2006, that is almost 2 suicides a day in eight months⁹. Unfortunately, Maharashtra Chief

⁵ P Sainath, "Seeds of Suicide-I," India Together, July 2004, 14 Apr. 2006
<<http://www.indiatogether.org/2004/jul/psa-seeds1.htm>>.

⁶ Devinder Sharma, "Bt Cotton: Stepping into a booby trap," InfochangeIndia, 5 May 2006
<<http://www.infochangeindia.org/features1DS.jsp>>.

⁷ "Farmers put up distress village for sale," Hindustan Times [New Delhi] 13 Feb. 2006: 7.

⁸ Perna Thakurdesai, "The Cotton Graveyards," India Today 27 Feb. 2006: 80-81.

⁹ Vivek Deshpande, "Cotton Kill: Toll rising again" The Indian Express [New Delhi] 31 Mar. 2006: 19.

Minister Vilasrao Deshmuk's monetary relief package for the families of suicide victims has done little to address the root problems leading to suicides in the first place.

Although the farmer exists at the centre of this report, it is of the utmost importance to note that toolmakers, day labourers, landless farmers, tillers, etc are all just as much affected by the agrarian crisis. Such suicides are neither detached anomalies of personal tragedy nor solely relegated to a single dysfunctional element of the economy. The reasons for these suicides exist within the larger political context of an agriculture system, which lacks credit, industry and health infrastructure and investment outlined above. Farmer suicides are a phenomenon demonstrative of failed national and state level political processes.

2. Media and Farmers' Suicides

In the present day context, media is the most ubiquitous way in which societies are informed about events. More significantly, media functions as the machinery through which prevailing definitions and opinions of both global and domestic events become socially formalized versions of reality. Thus, to understand farmers' suicides it is imperative to assess how the representational practices of media institutions are affecting the socio-economic and political dimensions of the crisis.

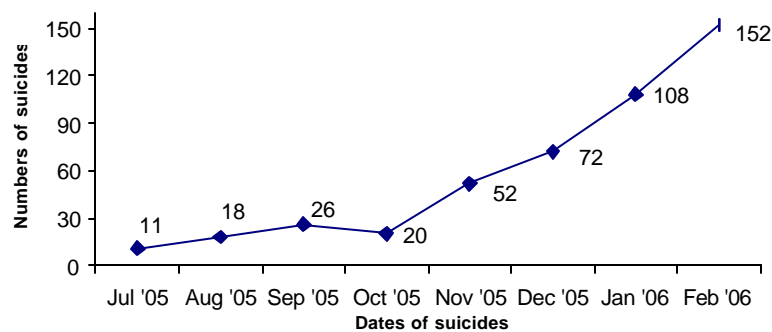
In an attempt to get at the problems of media coverage of farmer suicides, this study aims to ask three central questions. Are the media reporting on farmers' suicides at all? If so, are they viewing the tragic phenomenon as an individual or community event or as a failed national process? Finally, are the media reporting on this issue from within the malaise of the Indian agricultural scene by forging valuable connections to a multiplicity of causal factors?

From January to March 2006, the CMS Media Lab monitored six Hindi television news channels for their daily news bulletins. Additionally, in February and March 2006, six English newspapers and two Telugu newspapers were also monitored daily. Collection of news was based

on whether or not the item contained 1) an agricultural focus and 2) a mention of farmers' suicides. This report intends to present a quantitative and qualitative analysis of farmer suicides to the extent that they have figured in the news. At the most basic level, it will show that the issue of farmers' suicides is still vastly under-represented and in need of urgent, consistent and multidimensional media attention.

Before we analyze any media reaction to farmers' suicides, it is necessary to see the progression of the crisis over the past seven months. The graph below¹⁰ shows the number of suicides in the Vidarbha region of Maharashtra only- the area most recently afflicted by the suicide epidemic. The areas with the worst recorded suicide numbers exist along the cotton belt in the villages of: Amravati, Akola, Wahim, Buldana, Wardha & Yavatmal. Since faulty records and poor/non-existent data-collection methods are employed to document suicide victims, the figures above are only the most conservative approximations. The Indian Express, for example, places the number of suicides in Vidarbha since June 2005 at 371,¹¹ while a summation of all suicides in the graph above shows 459 deaths since July of the same year. The government, estimation is over 17,000 a year from across the country.

Chart 1.1 Farmers' Suicides in Vidarbha



¹⁰ Graph Courtesy of Vidarbha Jan Bachao Andolan as in Sourav Mishra, "Long Yarn," Down to Earth March 31 2006, New Delhi.

¹¹ Vivek Deshpande, "Cotton Kill: Toll rising again" The Indian Express [New Delhi] 31 Mar. 2006: 19.

Vidarbha is by no means the only region where farmers' suicides are occurring. In the past five years, such deaths were recorded in Andhra Pradesh, Karnataka, Kerala, Punjab as well as in Maharashtra. However, Vidarbha farmers' suicides are most extensively covered by the English print media. In fact - in all of the newspapers with regionally focused frame-of-reference on farmers' suicides - over 50 per cent of news was from Vidharba.

3. CMS Media Lab Study of Hindi Television News

From January to March 2006, the CMS Media Lab monitored six television news stations for coverage of agriculture news in general and farmer suicide news in particular¹². These six channels were: Sahara Samay, NDTV India, DD News, Aaj Tak, Zee News and Star News. Results showed that only three channels presented agricultural news coverage: Sahara Samay, NDTV India and DD News, and only one reported farmers' suicides. The headline of DD News on a suicide in Punjab read, "*Farmer commits suicide due to financial problems.*" The failure to include analysis or links to larger systemic issues in the agrarian economy made the story read as if the farmer brought about his troubles due to his own money mismanagement. This six-minute rural news report was dated February 11th 2006.¹³

From January to March 2006 there were at least 44 farmer suicides in Vidarbha alone. The Indian Express reported seven farmer suicides on March 10th, five on March 19th, five more on March 23rd and another five on March 26th of 2006.¹⁴ However, there was no TV news report on these incidents.

The highest recorded areas of TV news focus were national politics, sports, legal news, international news, cinema/ entertainment and business & economy. Furthermore, agricultural news was seldom

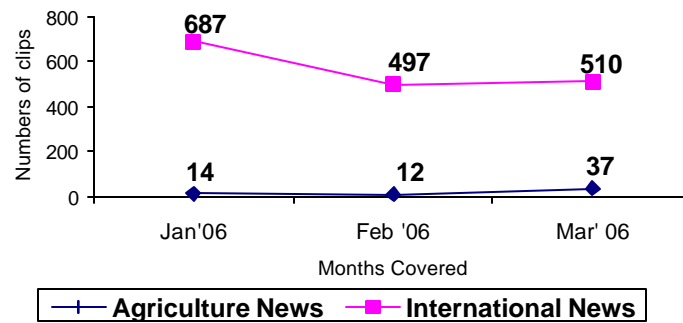
¹² Monitoring and analysis conducted by *CMS Media Lab [New Delhi]*, January-March 2006.

¹³ CMS Media Lab Log Sheet: DD News February 11th 2006, Rural news.

¹⁴ Vivek Deshpande, "Cotton Kill: Toll rising again" *The Indian Express [New Delhi]* 31 Mar. 2006: 19.

included as a news item within the spectrum of national politics, business/ economy, international news or legal news- although the crisis leading to farmers' suicides shares elements with all. The graph below gives a more representative portrayal of the priorities of the television news.

Chart 2.1 TV News Coverage Jan - Mar 2006



Source : CMS Media Lab

4. CMS-Hyderabad Study of Telugu Print Media

CMS-Hyderabad contributed to this study by monitoring three prominent Telugu Newspapers in February and March 2006.¹⁵ Their findings revealed 39 news stories on farmers' suicides. This number is only slightly lower than that of the three most prominent English national dailies, which collected 57 stories in total. The chart below includes findings from three major Telugu language daily newspapers:

Chart 3.1 Telugu Newspapers on Farmers' Suicides Feb-Mar 2006

Newspaper Name	Number Farmer Suicide Stories- February 2006	Number Farmer Suicide Stories- March 2006	Number Farmer Suicide Stories- Total
Eenadu	9	8	17
Vartha	4	3	7
Andhra Jyothi	5	10	15
Overall Total	18	21	39

Source : CMS Media Lab

¹⁵ Monitoring and collection conducted by CMS Media Lab [Hyderabad], February-March 2006.

5. CMS Study of English Print Media:

In regard to the English print media, six newspapers were monitored during February and March of 2006. These were *The Times of India*, *The Hindustan Times*, *The Indian Express*, *The Hindu*, *The Economic Times* and *The Business Standard*. Together, these publications represent the majority of English newspaper readership in New Delhi. Further, their readership belongs to a class of decision-makers, power-elite and foreign industry actors who are a major part of the socio-political and economic processes defining the problems and conditions causing farmer suicides. The table below gives a breakdown of results collected from the six main English newspapers through daily monitoring of agricultural news and farmer suicides.

Chart 4.1 English Print News on Farmers' Suicides Feb – Mar 2006

Newspaper	Times of India	Hindustan Times	Indian Express	The Hindu	Economic Times	Business Standard	Total
Number of Agricultural Stories (including farmer suicide stories)	32	45	80	113	67	98	435
Number of Farmer Suicide Stories	2	12	22	23	2	4	65

Source : CMS Media Lab

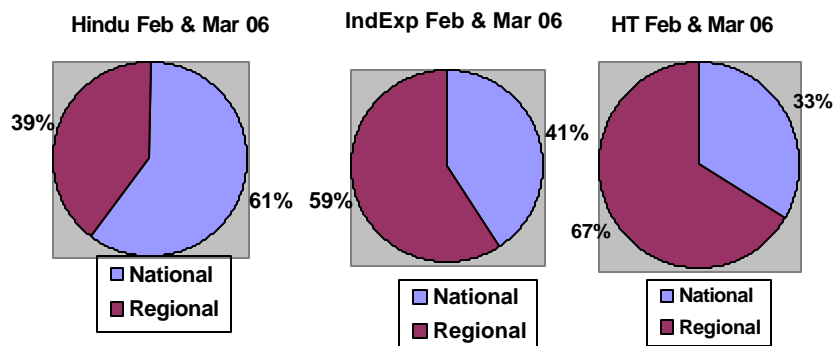
From numbers alone, we see that *The Hindu*, *The Indian Express* and *The Hindustan Times* are, respectively, the top three newspapers in Delhi that give coverage to farmers suicides. While the top three newspapers that give coverage to agriculture news are *The Hindu*, *The Indian Express* and *Business Standard*.

5.1 Frame of Reference Reporting

The English language news media was monitored closely for a variety of themes, one of which being how an article was framed. Categories were broken into Global, National and Regional areas. Within the regional categories, a breakdown of the states covered will be shown. Most articles in the regional category had some elements of individual or community focus, however, this focus almost always fits into a wider regional context. The majority of articles from all papers covered showed either national or regional focus. There were no global stories dealing with WTO, international trade norms or farm subsidies and farmer suicides. There were also no narratives from individual or community members affected by farmer suicides presented as stories.

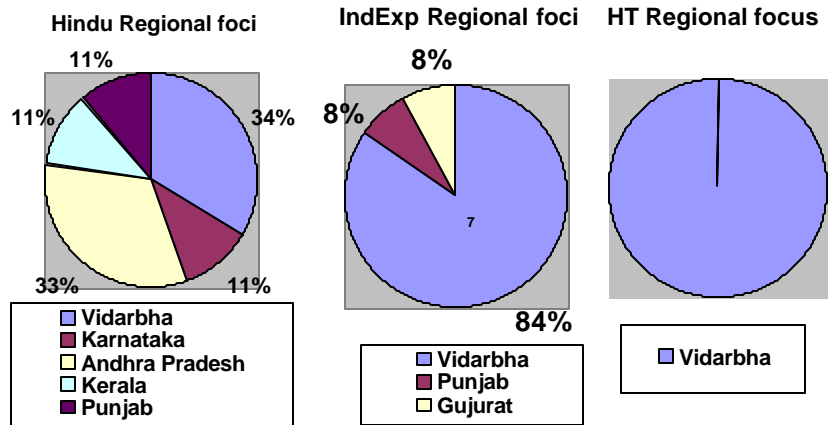
Analysis of news reports on farmers' suicides in the three English newspapers brings out that while *The Hindu* presented a national focus of the issue, by and large, *The Indian Express* and *The Hindustan Times* show regional foci in their coverage of the issue (See chart 4.2). Examples of nationally framed articles on farmers' suicides include Centre-Government decisions negatively impacting farm life., VIPs speaking on the farmer issues, provisions of Central Budget 2006-07 in dealing with farmer suicides. Examples of regionally-focused farmer suicide stories focus on one state or one district's problems and/or figures on farmer suicides.

Chart 4.2 Percentage of Farmer Suicide News by Frame of Reference



To further see how these regional areas were being covered, it is important to look at the charts below. The following charts show the regional tendencies of media coverage

Chart 4.3 Percentage of Farmer Suicide News by Region



Monitoring reveals that *The Hindu* is doing the most comprehensive job of representing farmer suicides as a national problem affecting many regions in the country. The coverage of the issue in *The Hindustan Times*, however, shows a bias for Vidarbha. This kind of reporting is on the one hand important in depicting coverage of a volatile area but, on the other hand reductive in that it presents a biased view of where suicides are occurring. Readers of *The Hindustan Times* are more likely to presume that farmer suicides are only happening in Vidarbha, as opposed to readers of the Indian Express and *The Hindu* who will have a slightly better understanding of the breadth of the problem, and thus more willingness to view suicides in terms of a national epidemic

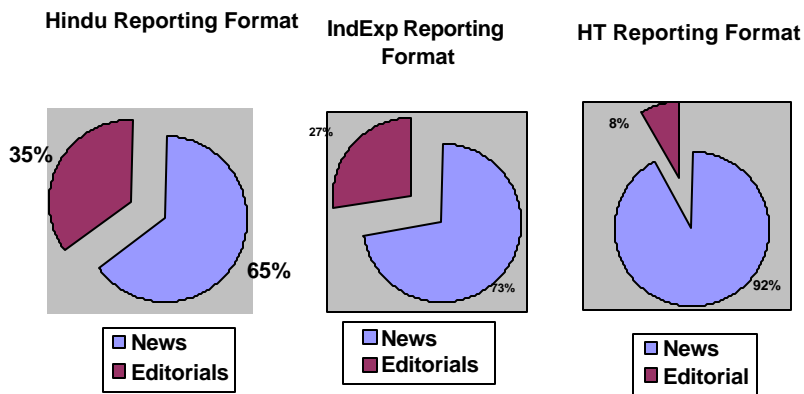
5.2 Type of Reporting Format

Another way in which farmers' suicides were analyzed was in the form of a feature article, a news story or as an editorial. News items were generally categorized by their sense of urgency in reporting on issues of the moment. Editorials were taken to be someone's written opinion

while features were taken to be special news or editorial items that do not regularly appear in the layout routine of the newspaper.

In these newspapers there was not a single feature on farmers' suicides, although the Indian Express did run a 5-part featured news series entitled "Killing Cotton Fields" in the month of February. This series, because of the type of its reporting, was categorized with the other news articles.

Chart 4.4 Farmer Suicide News by Reporting Format



It is interesting to see that the majority of items fell under the news category. *The Hindu*, however, had the highest editorial percentage. Out of 23 farmer suicide items in *The Hindu*, eight were editorials. *The Indian Express* had six editorials out of 22 farmer suicide stories while *The Hindustan Times* had only one editorial out of 12 farmer suicide stories.

Both a higher number and percentage of editorials (including letters written to the editor) signify a greater dialogue about farmer suicides is taking place between the readers of the publication and the corresponding institution of media. A greater dialogue, facilitated by a mix of reporting formats, presents increased opportunities for the reader to gain familiarity and comprehension of the issues.

5.3 Front Page News and Reporting Consistencies

In terms of prevalence of front-page news, however, *The Hindu* is lacking, with only two articles of its 23 appearing on the front page. The Indian Express does a better job with its front-page coverage of the issue. This is mostly attributed to front page/ page two combination news series, “*The Killing Cotton Fields*,” which is responsible for all five front-page articles in the Indian Express. *The Hindustan Times*, while accounting for the smallest number of both agricultural and farmer suicide stories of the three aforementioned newspapers, shows the highest ratio in terms of front-page news. Out of 12 farmer suicide stories, three appeared on the front page (two in February and one in March)

It is interesting to note that after Indian Express series (February), not a single front-page article on farmer suicides appeared in the month of March. Actually, the overall number of farmer suicide articles decreased in the Indian Express from 16 in February to only six in March. This fact shows inconsistency on the part of *The Indian Express*. In fact, all three papers reveal poor consistency in number of articles reported on farmer suicides. While The Hindustan Times’s numbers went from eight stories in February to only four in March, The Hindu’s climbed from eight stories in February to 15 in March. For issue-based reporting to have an effect, there should be a consistent flow of information at all times.

Three newspapers *The Times Of India*, *The Economic Times* and *Business Standard* were not included in the chart series because of the limited coverage given to farmers’ suicides. The only two farmer suicide stories in the Times of India (TOI) were ambiguous and reductive in terms of factual detail. While one article speculated the Vidarbha-based incident was spawned by debt, the other- based on a greater New Delhi incident- omitted reason all together. In both cases there were no links to external factors such as credit structure, national and state level budget allocation, infrastructure and/or public health.

The agriculture focus in *The Economic Times* and *Business Standard* was extensive in terms of commodity review and investor knowledge. Though there were moments in which farmer suicides were mentioned—especially in relation to Budget 2006 - the issue, overall, went untouched. Though there is little room for social sensibilities in such publications, there is a definitive space in which articles and editorials can relay the economic incentives of alleviating the crisis of farmer suicides. Such incentives include a healthier climate for investment; increased opportunities for sales and distribution, a stimulated agrarian economy, and thus a higher national GDP. In the aforementioned papers, however, such space was not nearly co-opted to its optimum degree

6. Conclusions and Recommendations:

It is very plausible for a certain type of skeptic to have predicted the results of this study, given the historical negligence of corporate media's preoccupation with social issues. Unfortunately, trying to address the lack of progressive representational practice within mainstream media in most advanced capitalist countries has become a David and Goliath situation. However, because of the historically recent and uneven liberalization of the Indian economy, there are many more negotiable spaces available within the phase of capitalism defining institutional formation. From Government institutions to private Indian corporations, the present is a time of transformation in which to re-define priorities in line with a changing phase of Indian economy. Subsequently, there exists greater hope and more incentive for editors, media managers and PR agents to present a more progressive external image —of the publication itself and also of India's human rights record – for key domestic and increasingly international readers. It is in the interest of businessmen and humanitarians alike that farmers' suicides are addressed as an effect of inadequacies in farm policies.

There are certain precautions journalists can take when covering farmer suicides. Foremost, any reporting on the issue can trigger more of such incidents. Bad reporting on farmers' suicides entails sensational and graphic descriptions of methods used in suicide, providing too many

personal details about the victim and his/her family and portraying the suicide as a way to resolve personal crisis.¹⁶

Further, the Indira Gandhi Institute of Development Research (IGIDR) has suggested that there should be better coordination between the media and the government officials (particularly the ministry of information and broadcasting) for the dissemination of responsible and accurate information. Also, the government should refrain from offering “no comment” statements, since most official statistics and statements used by journalists, in this regard, comprise government information.¹⁷ In fact, all journalists reporting on farmer suicides should refer to the IGIDR’s Executive Summary on *Suicide of Farmers in Maharashtra* (January 2006) for a multidimensional understanding of the ways the government, private sector and press should address farmer suicides.

For news reporting to save lives, it must present a holistic portrayal of events. Farmers commit suicide because of debt spawned by lack of insurance, credit and industry infrastructure, but also because of the socio-cultural conventions surrounding marriage i.e. dowry, the lack of rural healthcare that covers medicines and procedures needed as farmers become sick and elderly, and the rigid gender conventions restricting social and legal legitimacy of female farmers.¹⁸

Progressive reporting must also address a cross-section of officials in commanding positions of power as well as citizens with the grassroots power to organize and expose farmer suicides as a national political crisis within the malaise of failed agrarian policies affecting rural India. It

¹⁶ Here, it would be wise for journalists to refer to a number of recommendations for the media on suicide reporting. Such examples include: Centre for Disease Control and Prevention, Annenberg Public Policy Centre, American Association of Suicidology, etc, “Reporting on Suicide: Recommendations for the Media;” the WHO’s “Preventing Suicide: A resource for Media Professionals;” or The PressWise Trust’s “The Media and Suicide: Guidance for journalists from journalists.” Although, it should be duly noted that these reports require adaptation to the local Indian context and that all of their suggestions do not necessarily reflect the best interests of the Indian farmer.

¹⁷ Srijit Mishra, Indira Gandhi Institute for Development Research. *Suicide of Farmers in Maharashtra* (IGIDR: Mumbai, 26 January 2006) 11.

¹⁸ Model reporting done by Sonu Jain (Indian Express) and P Sainath (Hindu) should be referred to for specific examples.

must also present creative solutions by focusing on positive work being done by NGOs, SHGs and individual farmers who have found innovative ways of coping with systemic agrarian despair. For example, how innovative NGO programmes are helping families of victims to cope with everything from added financial burden to emotional loss? What stories do the wives and children left behind tell of their struggle? What obstacles to economic prosperity are most mentioned by farmers themselves? Emphasis should be placed on the inclusion of farmer and the affected-family members' narratives (either in the form of anchors, features or editorials) so that those surviving and struggling through the crisis possess some means of portraying their own realities.

Addressing farmers' suicides from the vantage point of enacting a national campaign is also another avenue the press should consider. In the past 20 years, there has been much talk of a second Green Revolution in Agriculture: One that would revitalize the industry and make India a global agricultural presence, but so far little has happened. This second Green Revolution should address India's agriculture industry with a comprehensive, holistic and multilateral campaign of national action. It should make the farmer's interest its centre and take into account such facets as increasing public investment and GDP funds in agriculture, including the small farmer in credit infrastructure and public health programmes, encouraging crop diversification and increasing rural extension in agrarian technology.

The second Green Revolution must be a national campaign which creates professional marketing and price support programmes, increasing available markets for produce, developing further agricultural infrastructure such as irrigation facilities, manufacturing outlets and food processing facilities. However, a multidimensional debate on the second Green Revolution has been relegated, primarily, to a recent media discussion on genetically and biogenetically engineered technology within the Indo-US Knowledge Initiative on Agriculture. This is a myopic surface debate of an extensive domestic crisis. More editorials must appear not just on the second Green Revolution, but also on the need and means to improve farmers' life within the next wave of agricultural renewal.

Addressing farmers' suicides in the press does not solely entail spotlight tragedies of wailing widows. It entails making the general reader - unfamiliar with the agrarian crisis in which the farmer exists - cognizant and impassioned regarding the change. It entails depicting farmers' suicides in a gender-forward manner, drawing attention to the story of the female farmer as well as to those women coping with the suicides of their husbands.

It is undeniably true that a longer study of print and television media could have unearthed a more lasting impression of the contemporary media reaction to farmer suicides. However – as has been pointed out by journalists like P Sainath, Devinder Sharma and farmer leader Vijay Jawandhia – the Indian media has a history of taking a backseat when it comes to farmers' suicides.¹⁹ From the days when farmers' suicides rose to epidemic proportions during Naidu's Government in Andhra Pradesh²⁰ to the UPA Government of today, there is a serious need for proactive reporting and self-regulation within the Indian news media.

As more foreign direct investment is sanctioned to enter the private sector, it is more important than ever for the Indian news media to define a strong sense of self. This is yet another crossroads for India: Let us hope the media emphasizes farmer enabling reforms that also provides greater push to our agro-economy. Such reporting could save lives.

¹⁹ P Sainath, "Chandrababu: Image and Reality,"

²⁰ Syed Amin Jafri, "Inquiry commission blames TDP for farmers' suicides in AP," The Rediff Special [Hyderabad], July 2004, 23 Feb 2006 <<http://www.rediff.com>>.

Annex 1

Indian Media Guide for Reporting on Farmer Suicides

Take Note

Irresponsible reporting on any type of suicide can lead to the increase of copycat incidents in other social sectors. The following are suggestions for journalists, editors & other media-workers on how to report responsibly on farmer suicides throughout India. Ideas & inspiration were directly borrowed and/or adapted from various outside sources on media sensitization such as: The WHO's "*Preventing Suicide: A resource for Media Professionals (Geneva 2000)*;" The Center for Disease Control & Prevention, Annenberg Public Policy Center & American Association of Suicidology et al.'s, "*Reporting on Suicide: Recommendations for the Media*;" and The Press Wise Trust's "*The Media & Suicide: Guidance for journalists from journalists (Bristol, UK 2001)*."

Avoid the following

- Use of sensational headlines, graphic images & dramatizing language, which may glorify events &/or turn the victim into a hero.
- Publishing details of suicide methodology, as this can lead to copycat incidents.
- Censoring, presenting misinformation & speculating so as to avoid stereotyping.
- Propagating myths surrounding suicide victims such as the use of phrases like, "*Person x brought this fate upon him/herself because of his/her caste.*"
- Qualifiers like "*successful*" or "*unsuccessful*" to explain a suicide. Instead, use "*suicide deaths*" or "*non-fatal attempts.*"
- Saying the person "*committed suicide,*" as this linguistic description has the tendency to present the person's activities as criminal in nature. Instead, use "*having died by suicide.*"

Consider the following

- Female farmers & agrarian workers such as toolmakers & day laborers are also dying of suicide.

- The context within which the suicide was enacted.
- Framing the suicide as a multidimensional issue deserving investigation, since suicides are always the result of complex issues.
- Offering readers information on positive work done by NGOs & SHGs as well as contact information on Government Schemes & farmer suicide prevention organizations to let people know where to get help or how to help others.
- Interviewing those directly involved in the problems leading to suicide as well
- as those directly affected by the death get at the source of events.
- Presenting as many quotes/narratives from farm communities as possible.
- Supporting other journalists in their endeavors to report responsibly will increase the overall quality of journalism on farmer suicides.
- Treating farmer suicides as pressing news included in an array of newspaper subsections (City, State, Finance, Politics, Culture & Lifestyles).
- Committing to enacting a regular cycle of farmer suicide news, including front-page stories.

Suggested Stories to Cover

- Statistics/Trends in farmer suicide rates by: geographic location, age, sex, caste, crop-type & land-size.
- Profiles on people/ organizations/ agencies doing positive work to address farmer suicides & how people can get involved to help agrarian workers.
- Personal interviews with both economically struggling female & male agrarian workers & those agrarian workers who have found creative ways to cope with despair.
- Outlining the myths surrounding suicide (such as: it is due to alcoholism, bad blood, lack of electricity).

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Annex 2

From The Hindu, June 12, 2006

ONLINE AND OFF LINE

Social malaise that needs sensitive coverage

K. Narayanan

It was a reader who alerted me to a significant news report buried in one of the inside pages ("Agrarian crisis, wheat import discussed", May 19, 2006): over one lakh farmers committed suicide in the six years from 1998. The second paragraph of the story said that of the over one lakh suicides reported, 15 to 16 per cent were by farmers. The reader's doubt was — is it gross total of one lakh suicides over six years, or by farmers alone?

Enquiries with the Special Correspondent in Delhi, Sandeep Dikshit, who filed the report, made the picture clear. According to figures read out by Union Agriculture, Consumer Affairs and Food and Public Distribution Minister Sharad Pawar in the Rajya Sabha, suicides reported from 1998 to 2003 (the year which figures are available) ranged from 1.04 lakh to 1.10 lakh every year; farmers' suicides in these years numbered 16,015 to 17,471 a year, totalling over one lakh in six years.

For the national population of one billion the proportion of suicides may appear minuscule, but in absolute terms one lakh is no small number. And behind each one of these tragedies is a complex web of factors.

A day or two after this report appeared came the news of a student's death by suicide following the publication of examination results. Another such incident came two days later. Last week there were more, when some examination results were announced.

For journalists, covering suicides raises many questions. In the first place, should an individual suicide be reported at all? If it is done in private, how does it affect others outside the family and how is it newsworthy or in public interest? If it is a phenomenon, as among farmers, weavers, or goldsmiths, it becomes an issue to be discussed (as is being done by P. Sainath incisively in *The Hindu*, or was done by *Frontline* some time ago). So also in the case of celebrities.

Even when writing about a large number of suicides in one group, where does one draw the line? Will repeated coverage promote "suicide contagion" or the "Werther effect" as psychologists call it? (Goethe's story of a young dreamer, Werther, who killed himself for lost love led to a spate of suicides by youth.)

The Hindu used to have a policy of not reporting suicides by students after examination results were announced; it was feared that such reporting could be a trigger for more. Such non-reporting is no longer feasible. But the paper's coverage of the tragedies has always been sober and subdued, factual, even when celebrities like TV stars are the victims. In contrast to television coverage of the same events, it does not intrude into the family's privacy.

Total blackout is not desirable, says Dr. Lakshmi Vijayakumar, founder Trustee of Sneha, the suicide helpline in Chennai. Responsible reporting of this "multidimensional malaise with social, religious and cultural reasons" is needed, she says. Her advice is: don't sensationalise, don't describe the method of suicide (such as the chemical used) and don't glorify it.

Behind every suicide is a complex interaction of many factors — mental, physical, family circumstances, substance abuse, other stresses. There is no simple explanation of the causes, Dr. Lakshmi Vijayakumar notes. In reporting students' suicides, underplay the examination failure aspect, and never feature it — "don't make it a seed in vulnerable people," she stresses.

Journalism education has no regular courses on covering suicide. The codes of the Press Complaints Commission (PCC-U.K.) and the Press Council of India are silent on this. A few newspapers mention it in their in-house guidelines. *The Guardian*, for instance, asks its journalists to exercise restraint on reporting suicide or issues involving suicide, bearing in mind the risk of encouraging others.

Differing attitudes to this issue were evident some time ago when three London newspapers published pictures of a woman leaping to her death from a building. The others, including *The Guardian*, did not. A public debate raged over the ethics of such publication and it was taken to the Press Complaints Commission, which did not find substance in the protest. The PCC's decision was widely criticised.

The World Health Organisation (WHO), through its Suicide Project (SUPRE), and the U.K.-based media ethics charity, Presswise Trust, have comprehensive guidelines for journalists on this subject. The American Society of Suicidology and the U.S. Department of Health's Center for Disease Control have also jointly evolved a set of rules.

Some basic conclusions and suggestions emerge:

There are three ways of covering suicide: in graphic detail (as many newspapers in the U.S. still do); not reporting at all; reporting only cases that are genuinely newsworthy (which requires editorial discernment).

Reporting in "an appropriate, accurate and potentially helpful manner by enlightened media can prevent tragic loss of lives by suicides" (Presswise Trust, 2001). It is not coverage per se, but certain types of news coverage that increase suicidal behaviour, WHO points out.

The suggestions include: avoid sensationalism and a description of the method of suicide; do not offer simplistic, knee-jerk explanations such as attempt to cope with personal problems; point out that the cause may be not just a recent event, but complex factors; take account of the impact on the

families and show sympathy, understanding, and discretion; describe the consequences of non-fatal attempts as a deterrent; and provide links to a helpline. (When examination results were about to be announced, *The Hindu* ran two features on the work in Chennai of Sneha which has been active for two decades offering support to the suicide-prone.)

There is no sustained or adequate media attention to what causes suicide — mental illness (depression is one main reason and can be treated through medication), physical illness, substance abuse, poverty, unemployment, and relationship failure; the risk factors and warning signals, and so on. These need analysis and explanation from time to time, to highlight the nature and magnitude of the social problem. What is needed from journalists is sensitive, appropriate writing that can promote "mental health literacy."

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