

KARNATAKA

Green fields of misery

In Karnataka, 2,500 farmers took their lives last year. But the BJP government is turning a blind eye to their plight, reports **IMRAN KHAN**



THE BJP, which stormed to power in Karnataka in 2008 by promising to change the farmers' lives for the better, has been claiming that it has arrested the spate of farmer suicides. But the state Crime Records Bureau (CRB) data shows that more than 6,000 farmers have taken their lives in the past three years and the numbers are rising steadily.

According to the data obtained under the Right to Information Act by TEHELKA, more than 2,500 farmers committed suicide in 2010 — an average of seven farmers took their lives every day. In the previous two years, the numbers were 2,282 and 1,737 respectively.

However, the state agriculture department rubbishes these stats. If its data is to be believed, only 900 farmer suicides have been reported since 2008, out of which it found only 385 suicides to be genuine cases. In reality, compensation has been given to families of only 111 victims.

"We take note of the deaths of those af-

ected by the farming sector. But we don't record the deaths of farmers who commit suicide due to reasons like love affairs," argues agriculture department Director KV Sarvesh.

The agriculture department looks at different parameters before deciding on a suicide's genuineness. They include: 1. Land should be in the name of the deceased, 2. Loan should have been taken from institutions like co-operatives and nationalised banks, and 3. It should be established that the suicide was due to debt and not other reasons. A district-level committee chaired by the assistant commissioner of the revenue department takes the final decision on the compensation.

"A compensation of ₹1 lakh is paid to the family of the deceased. We give compensation only to farmers who have taken institutional credit. We don't give relief to those who have taken loans from money-lenders because such transactions are not documented," says a department official

on condition of anonymity.

But food policy analyst Devinder Sharma doesn't buy that argument. "It is unfortunate that the department maintains such a criterion," he says. He cites an all-India survey that shows that more than 60 percent of farmers don't bank on institutional loans. "If a farmer is committing suicide because he is unable to get his daughter married, agriculture is responsible for that. If agriculture is indeed remunerative, then why would he commit suicide?" asks Sharma. "The agriculture department has a job to perform. Even if there is a high incidence of deaths, the department has to project a rosy picture. So, there is definitely a conflict of interest."

In Karnataka, nearly 56 percent of the workforce (76 lakh farmer families of which Dalits constitute 13 lakh) is engaged in agriculture and allied activities. Out of the state's GDP of ₹2.15 lakh crore in 2009-10, ₹41,306 crore came from the agriculture sector. However, the state economic survey



shows that this sector has seen a negative growth of 0.6 percent in the past five years.

“It happened due to the spike in the input cost of manure, pesticide, labour and due to the crash in crop prices. Import of sugar, groundnut and cheap Chinese silk also contributed to it,” says political analyst Shivasundar.

The state has witnessed three cycles of farmer suicides. The first cycle occurred in 1996-99 in the northern part of Karnataka, which is a dry land belt. Most of the farmers who took her lives then were small landholders, referred to as Lavanis. Since most of them didn't have documents of ownership, their deaths were not recorded and no compensation was paid.

Then came the second cycle in 2003-04 in the southern part of the state, where small-scale farmers grew cash crop. The immediate reason was the crash in crop prices, which led to a debt crisis. Import relaxations, duty cuts and inadequate support price also added to the woes of the

‘We don't record the deaths of farmers who commit suicides due to love affairs,’ says a department official

farmers. And the third cycle was witnessed during 2007-08 in which farmers of Bidar, Mandya and Gulbarga committed suicide because of a drop in sugarcane prices.

The highest number of suicides reported in the past three years has been in six districts – Belgaum, Chitradurga, Shimoga, Hassan, Chickmagalur and Kodagu. A sum of ₹2,689 crore has been earmarked for the state under the prime minister's relief package, which was constituted after the farmer suicides in Maharashtra. However, only ₹210 crore has been earmarked for interest waiver.

“They usually have 10-12 criterion for

☛ **Bitter harvest**
Boregowda's son and daughter-in-law committed suicide due to a debt crisis

a suicide to be declared related to farming. It's sad that general suicides have no criteria, whereas for farmer suicides there are many reasons to deny compensation,” says Shiv-sundar.

In January, global tenders for importing 2,500 tonnes of silk were finalised by the Central government. Following the Union Budget announcement that the import duty on raw silk would be cut from 30 percent to a mere 5 percent, cocoon prices plummeted from ₹380 a kg to ₹120.

Sericulture farmers were devastated. Swami, 35, from Valagere Doddi village in Mandya district, was one of the hundreds of farmers affected by the fall in prices. Unable to stomach the blow, he and his wife Vasantha committed suicide on 5 March, leaving behind three children: Sharath, 3, Keertana, 5 and Chandrika, 6.

Swami's father Boregowda, 65, himself a sericulture farmer, says his son owed ₹1.2 lakh to debtors. Last year, two of his six crops failed and the land lease was overdue. “Now how will a man of my age fend for three grandchildren?” he asks.

SINCE 2004, the Centre has written off ₹22 lakh crore in tax exemption, which appears in our budget as revenue forgone. It amounts to a subsidy provided to the corporate sector. If even ₹2 lakh crore had been given to farmers, they could have joined the middle class, says Sharma.

“The CRB numbers are less. This is the data collected by the police. In reality, the numbers are very high,” says Shantha Kumar, chief of the Karnataka Sugarcane Growers Association. “I blame government policies for the suicides. The government has imported fertiliser this year due to which prices have shot up. This will directly affect the input cost. Earlier, farmers used to get around ₹17,000 per quintal of turmeric. But due to imports, they are getting only ₹4,000 per quintal.

“When food prices shoot up, the government rushes to address it,” says Kumar. “When prices come down, nobody is bothered. Everybody is interested in talking about real estate scams, mining crisis, etc. But we hardly find any mention of the farm crisis plaguing this country.”

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