

Pain and Hopelessness among Indian Farmers: An Analysis of Deepa Bhatia's *Nero's Guests*

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Abstract

Nero's Guests (2009) is a documentary film directed by Deepa Bhatia on farmers' suicide in India. It documents the suicide of farmers harvesting cotton crops. Sainath P, journey across villages in India, to investigate the motive behind farmers' suicide. Sainath mentions the shortcomings of the Green Revolution — the use of HYV seeds, fertilizers, and pesticides results in higher costs of crop production and so the profit declines and debts escalate. This hopeless situation of the farmers prevail all over the country and force them to end their lives. The pain of farmers is incomprehensible due to debts, lack of water, rapid urbanization, and insurmountable pressure to run the family and farming despite losses. This paper focuses on David Klonsky and Alexis May's *Three- Step Theory* (2015). The theory identifies four important factors such as pain, hopelessness, connection, and capability for suicide. This study aims to bring out the overlooked state of the farmers and the agrarian economy of India in the light of pain and hopelessness in David Klonsky and Alexis May's *Three Step- Theory* (2015).

Keywords: farmers' suicide, agrarian economy, three- step theory, nero's guests, pain and hopelessness

1. Introduction

"Studies across the globe have identified farming as one of the most dangerous industries" (Behere & Bhise, 2009, 242). Sorrow and despair are commonly experienced by farmers in many parts of the world. India is one of the countries with a higher farmers' suicide rate. Around 1,60,000 people commit suicide in India. "Suicide rate increases in contemporary India due to depression, illness, family disputes and addiction" (Ravi, 2015). National Crime Record Bureau collects data and reports on "Death Caused by Accidents and Suicides" every year. The research highlights that, 5563 agricultural labourers committed suicide in the year 2021 (National Crime Record Bureau Ministry of Home Affairs, 2021, 204). Farmers in India contemplate suicide for reasons like

[B]elow average rainfall, heavy load shedding, lack of small irrigation projects, poverty, the pressure of private moneylenders and banks, ignorance of ancillary occupations for raising income, employment problem of the farmers' children, decreasing interest of the young generation in farming, rapid urbanization, apathy and lack of political willpower toward welfare and development of the region. (Behere & Behere, 2008, 125)

Though government supports them economically by introducing policies like Pradhan Mantri Fasal Bima Yojana (PMFBY 2016) to decrease the burden of debt, still farmers are facing difficulties that are to be addressed. Despite extensive research in the area, farmers' suicide is not yet controlled in India. The research attempts to find the root cause of farmers' suicide and to prevent it.

India is an agrarian country, 70% of its population depends on agriculture and the plight of the farmers question the future of the nation. From famines, droughts, debts to wastage of crops, they encounter endless challenges. Contemporary books, news, documentaries, and films stress the importance of farmer issues whereas Deepa Bhatia's *Nero's Guests* (2009) voices out the catastrophe of the farmers. Deepa Bhatia is a film director, editor, and producer based in Mumbai. Some of her notable works as an editor are *Tare Zameen Par* (2007), *My Name is Khan* (2010), and *Kedarnath* (2018). *Nero's*

Guests is a documentary on farmers' suicide especially farmers harvesting cotton crops. P. Sainath, Ramon Magsaysay Award (2007) winner, Amnesty International's Global Award for Human Rights Journalism (2000), founder editor of the People's Archive of Rural India, writer and journalism teacher undertakes an expedition to research on the suicide of farmers in Vidarbha, Maharashtra. The documentary also holds a video of P. Sainath's lecture to students on the predicament of Indian farmers. It portrays the pain and emotion of the families of farmers, who committed suicide. The focus of the study is to identify the pain and hopelessness in the life of the farmers that the documentary exhibits. Pain and hopelessness are two factors that result in suicide ideation or suicide according to David Klonsky and Alexis May's *The Three-Step Theory (3ST): A New Theory of Suicide Rooted in the "Ideation-to-Action" Framework* (2015). The paper aims to draw attention to prime factors responsible for suicidal desire, 'pain and hopelessness' and to create awareness on farmers' suicide in India.

2. Methodology

Documentaries are "about reality", 'real people', and events that happen in the 'real world'" (Smith & Rock, 2014, 59). Among documentaries related to farmers' suicide, *Nero's Guests* (2009) is an award-winning documentary that documents interviews of Palagummi Sainath, a famous journalist. This captures the hardships and emotions of families of farmers who took their own life. Various suicidal theories have evolved with time. Traditional theorists like Emilie Durkheim (1897), Shneidman (1985), Baumeister (1990), Beck (1967), and Abramson (2000) laid foundational theories on suicide. Later, Thomas Joiner's *Interpersonal Theory of Suicide* (2005), Rory O'Connor's *Integrated Motivational-Volitional Model* (2011), and Craig J. Bryan's et. al *Fluid Vulnerability theory of Suicide* (2020) contribute to creating a new generation of theories of suicide.

David Klonsky and Alexis May, one of the new generation theorists, framed an "Ideation to Action" theory, *The Three-Step Theory (3ST): A New Theory of Suicide Rooted in the "Ideation-to-Action" Framework* (2015) which states pain, hopelessness, connection, and capability are factors responsible for suicide ideation and suicide in a person's life. "Pain usually, but not necessarily, refers to psychological or emotional pain" (Klonsky & May, 2015, 116) is the first step for suicide ideation. Pain combined with hopelessness is required for moderate suicidal ideation. The second step toward suicidal behaviour involves connectedness. A person with high connectedness will continue to have moderate suicidal ideation whereas low connectedness will result in strong suicidal ideation. The third step in the theory mentions that the development from suicide ideation to attempts mandates "suicide capacity: dispositional, acquired and critical" (Klonsky & May, 2015, 119). This paper attempts to identify factors responsible for suicide ideation in Deepa Bhatia's *Nero's Guests*.

3. Farmers' Suicide: An Overview

Suicidology is a study of suicide and Edwin Shneidman is the father of suicidology. Two major branches of suicidology are the psychological and sociological study of suicide. Suicide is carried out for various reasons like family disputes, relationship breakups, financial crisis, disappointments, failures, depression, and mental illness. The increase in the number of suicides creates a need to examine suicide.

3.1 Background of Suicide Studies

Vijaykumar's "Indian Research on Suicide" (2010), mentions that the suicide rate in India is 10.3 and the numbers increase every year. This research talks about the importance of mental, social, and public health. It states that to prevent suicide by promoting a "framework in an integrated system of interventions across multiple levels within society including the individual, the family, the community, and the health care system" (Vijayakumar, 2010, 291) is essential.

"Suicides in India" is a book chapter in *Accidents & Suicides in India* (2021) by NCRB (National Crime Record Bureau), releases data on accidental deaths and suicides in India every year. It picturizes percentage share of suicides in state/UT-wise, cause-wise, profession-wise, social status-wise, and educational status-wise is mentioned in this chapter. It illustrates the statistical data from 2017 to 2021, the suicide rate was 9.9 and 12 respectively, which increase steadily.

Mueller et al.'s "The Social Roots of Suicide: Theorizing How the External Social World Matters to Suicide and Suicide Prevention" (2021), is a research paper that critically reviews Emile Durkheim's *Suicide*. It explains his theory in detail and points out its limitations. It incorporates sociological understandings of the way external components influence suicide and its prevention. It also helps to describe the dynamics of suicide and to determine efficient ways to intervene in it.

3.2 Farmers' Suicide

P. B. Behere, A. P. Behere's Farmers' "Suicide in Vidarbha Region of Maharashtra State: A Myth or Reality?" (2008), explored farmers' suicide in Vidarbha. 'Psychological autopsy method' was used in this study, examines the farmers' decision to make a life-altering choice in their lives. They suggested that persistent debt, an economic downturn that causes issues and family disagreements, grain loss, increased input costs for agriculture, and government compensation money motivate farmers to commit suicide.

Guillaume Gruèrea and Debdatta Sengupta's "Bt Cotton and Farmer Suicides in India: An Evidence-based Assessment" (2011), examined the connection between BT cotton and farmers' suicide. The researchers concluded that there is no evidence to prove BT cotton and farmers' suicide but, in some states, BT cotton was the reason for increases in debt and more debt was the reason for the farmers' suicide.

Jonathan Kennedy and Lawrence King's, "The Political Economy of Farmers' Suicides in India: Indebted Cash-Crop Farmers with Marginal Landholdings Explain State-level Variation in Suicide Rates" (2014) is an article on farmers' suicides in India. It tries to identify the variation of suicide rates in various states of India and the different reasons for their suicide. The research concludes that debts and, in some states, the introduction of genetically modified crops are the reasons for the failure.

3.3 Pain and Hopelessness

Talia Troister and Ronald R. Holden's "Comparing Psychache, Depression, And Hopelessness In Their Associations With Suicidality: A Test of Shneidman's Theory of Suicide" (2010) is a study to examine the contribution of pain, depression, and hopelessness, which are criteria related to suicide in 1475 undergraduates. They emphasize "For an individual to die by suicide, Shneidman asserts that the perception of pain must be unbearable for that person" and "Numerous studies have found hopelessness to be an indicator of current suicide intent" (Troister & Holden, 2010, 689). The findings of this study support Shneidman's theory that 'psychache hopelessness and depression' are predictors of suicide.

Abramson et al.'s "The Hopelessness Theory of Suicidality supports Abramson's The Hopelessness Theory" (1989) with evidence of case study. It explores the "developmental origins of cognitive vulnerability to suicidality" (Abramson et al., 17). It suggests that the hopelessness theory of suicidality will help in understanding the vulnerability to suicide.

Thomas E. Joiner, Jr., Jeremy W. Pettit, Rheeda L. Walker, Zachary R. Voelz, And Jacqueline Cruz's "Perceived Burdensomeness and Suicidality: Two Studies on The Suicide Notes of Those Attempting and Those Completing Suicide" (2002) examined two sample sets of suicide notes- One set consists of suicide notes of 'attempters' and another of 'completers'. The first study determined that perceived burdensomeness was more in completers than the attempters. The second study derived that "from an evolutionary-psychological model the prediction that a sense of burdensomeness toward kin would particularly characterize those who complete suicide and would be associated with lethal means of completed suicide" (Joiner et al., 2002, 544).

The review of literature comprehends various research articles on suicide studies, farmers' suicide, pain, and hopelessness. Studies on farmer suicide in India and cotton farmers highlights that debts and modified crops are the reason for the farmers' suicide. The research gap identified is to analyse the farmers' suicide from a psychological, 'ideation to action' framework theory. This research aims to analyse the suicide of farmers with one such theory, 3ST.

4. Nero's Guests: An Overview

P Sainath delivers a talk to college students and introduces Tacitus' *Nero and the Burning of Rome*. Nero, a Roman King, holds the greatest party ever seen in the ancient world. Nero burns the captives and common people alive for light because it is pitch-dark night for his guests. Tacitus blames Nero's guests, who watch the fire in silence and proceeds to enjoy the celebration, rather than Nero himself. Sainath compares farmers who committed suicide to the charred victims reported in *Tacitus' Nero and the Burning of Rome*. He begins his quest to answer the question "Who are Nero's Guests?" (Deepa Bhatia, 2009,1:28) in the farmers' lives. He continues by saying that he has the answers after researching farmers' suicide for five and a half years. Sainath blames the media for being "imprisoned by profit" (Deepa Bhatia, 2009,11:43). India comprises various media correspondents covering entertainment, fashion, politics, and economy whereas no correspondent is established to focus on farming or poverty in India. He discusses the agrarian crisis in India and the displacement being a result of it. He questions the government for exporting 20 million tons of food grain when people in India starved in 2002 and 2003. He also blames the bank for being generous about loans to rich people whereas biased toward the poor. Sainath concludes by quoting Mahatma Gandhi, "Recall the face of the poorest and weakest person you've met and ask yourself how the action you contemplate will place him or her in greater control of his life" (Deepa Bhatia, 2009,53:38).

Simultaneously the documentary has clippings of Sainath visiting the family members of farmers who committed suicide and investigates the mystery behind their death. Sainath approaches the families of Shekhurao Datta Tembore, Kasi Vishwera Rao, Shri Krishna Kalamb, Sudamani, Rukmani, and other farmers. The families state that failure in farming and rural distress as the causes of suicide. Sainath urges the government to take measures to prevent farmers' suicide.

5. Pain and Hopelessness

Developed nations also have higher farmer suicide rates, "Farmers and ranchers are nearly two times more likely to die by suicide in the U.S., compared to other occupations" (Kendall Crawford, 2022). According to studies conducted, in the USA, Canada, Australia, South Africa, India, and Sri Lanka, the farming sector has an increased incidence of suicide

compared to the universal population. Farming is an essential line of work practiced differently across the world. They vary in terms of the seeds they use, the crops they harvest, farming methods, yield returns, water usage and availability, machinery, manpower, and profit. In India, "Agriculture is the backbone of the Indian economy," said Mahatma Gandhi (*Farmers Portal*). Since independence, agriculture continues to play a vital role in the Indian economy. It contributed 59% to the country's GDP in 1950-1951 (Role of Agriculture in the Indian Economy). US's GDP fell by 8.9%, European countries by more than 12.4%, Canada's GDP by 12.4%, and Mexico's by 19% in 2020 because of the pandemic ("US Economy and the Global Pandemic," 2022, 100). Developed countries GDP fell higher whereas India's GDP fell by 6.6% in 2020. India's GDP increased by 15.54% from 2020 ("India GDP growth rate 1961-2022") and agriculture played 18.8% in it ("Page 262 - economic_survey_2021-2022"). It is disheartening that 6.6% of people working in the farming sector end their lives and it is important to support the farmers who play an important role in the country's development.

The farmers in *Nero's Guests* took their own lives because of debts and their inability to run the family. It reveals the pain and hopelessness in their lives. P Sainath interviews Shekhurao Datta Tembare's elder son Vishnu and identifies the 'mortgage on the land' and the debt for '50000 rupees' as the reason for Tembare's suicide. The family did not receive compensation from the government and Tembare's two sons stop their education mid-way after his death. Kasi Vishwera Rao, Progressive Farmer of the Year Award winner of 2004 always states that "farming is in our blood" (Deepa Bhatia, 2009, 6:56) was against committing suicide and calls it "nonsense" (Deepa Bhatia, 2009, 6:55) chose death by suicide. Rao who strongly believed that hard work would make everything better lost his life in misery and despair. Suthamani's mother, a farmer, committed suicide. When Sainath enquires about Suthamani's "enduring memory" of her mother? She replies "I wish I had a memory of my mother of when she was not working. When I slept, she was working. When I woke up, she was working" (Deepa Bhatia, 2009, 7:33-7:47). The hardworking widowed mother's suicide is treated as a suicide of farmer's wife by the government. Rukmabai too committed suicide for the same reasons as Suthamani's mother: the reasons being harassment by moneylenders, debts, lack of water in the well, and the high cost of farming. Shri Krishna Kalamb, a farmer poet, left no indication that he would take his own life, and his daughter Usha Kalamb states that the family is in disbelief that Kalamb killed himself. She adds that farming is the sole income for the family and when farming turns unprofitable it takes a toll on their family. She reads one of her father's poems,

I'm different, and my life is unusual,
 You'll be shocked by my demise, too, like an unexpected rain.
 Poetry lover I am, just like the cotton plantation,
 Its root is delicious, similar to the sugarcane stem.

They'll comment on how my death hangs over doorframes like an ornament. (Deepa Bhatia, 2009,10:00-10:42)

"The 3ST suggests that if one experiences life as painful, miserable, or aversive, they will experience a powerful instinct to find a way out" (Klonsky et al., 2021, 1-2). In search of a 'way out' to their problems, farmers committed suicide. The government provides compensation money to the deceased farmer's family. Some farmers chose suicide for compensation to pay off their debts. The "former Hon. Prime Minister Manmohan Singh visited Vidarbha and promised a package of Rs.11,000 crores to be spent by the government in Vidarbha. The families of farmers who had committed suicide were also offered an ex-gratia grant to the tune of Rs. 1 lakh by the government" (Behere & Behere, 2008, 125). The compensation amount alters depending upon the pressure on the government by the families, media, and opposition party.

Sainath claims that after probing farmers' families for years, he could sense the intention of committing suicide among women in the family. This shows that the misery and anguish pervaded in their families. Sainath's exploration shows a clear picture of the pain and hopelessness in a farmers' life. "The motivations receiving the strongest endorsement were overwhelming pain and hopelessness" (Klonsky et al., 2021, 3). The documentary illustrates that pain and hopelessness as two primary factors which motivate farmers to choose suicide.

6. Conclusion

Pain and hopelessness in the lives of the farmers are the reasons for their suicide, supported by Alexis May and David Klonsky's *3ST* (2015). The pain and hopelessness are caused by debts, peer pressure, family commitments, and failure in farming. The main cause for this pain and hopelessness mentioned in the documentary is the Green Revolution and BT crops. "The Green Revolution in India was initiated in the 1960s by introducing high-yielding varieties of rice and wheat to increase food production to alleviate hunger and poverty" (Eliazer Nelson et al., 2019,1). Hybrid seeds, fertilizers and pesticides were initiated by the government as a part of the revolution, to increase the productivity of yields. "The HYVs had 20% more grain than its earlier cultivars and were more responsive to the nitrogen fertilizers. The yield potential doubled due to the incorporation of several traits and specific genes for short stature in HYVs" (quoted in Eliazer Nelson et al., 2019,2). The negative effect of the Green Revolution is faced by the farmers of cash crops. One of the farmers

expressed in an interview that they invested 2 lakhs and in return, they earn 25,000 rupees only resulting in loss and debts (Deepa Bhatia, 2009, 13:02). Though the government introduces schemes like Pradhan Mantri Krishi Sinchai Yojana (2015), PM Kisan Samman Nidhi (2018) and PM Kisan Maan Dhan Yojana (2019) according to NCRB (2021) data, 10,881 people commit suicide in farming/agriculture sector in India. Farmer asked a question to Sainath, “Is it a sin to be a farmer?” (Deepa Bhatia, 2009, 17:33) which rings a bell in people’s mind. Farmers’ suffering and hopelessness must be addressed to prevent suicide. The Government should take initiatives in creating awareness of the importance of mental health among farmers, educating farmers on modern farming, supplying free water and electricity, and providing free counselling sessions to ease the suffering and despondency that farmers experience. Hope is an important factor and a positive influence in a person’s life. Hope gives the courage to overcome pain and to avoid suicidal intentions to a larger extent. Farmers are in excessive need of hope to overcome their suicidal thoughts.

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