Farmer Suicides in India
Durkheim's Types

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This article makes an attempt to examine how far Durkheim's types explain farmer suicides in India and suggests that they correspond to two of his types – egoism and anomie. Agrarian changes having considerably lowered the level of economic achievements of farmers, the disproportion between achievement and aspiration is greatly felt by those who experienced egoism. This study argues that anomie is an effect of egoism. The latter, a structural characteristic of modern agrarian economy and society, is the prerequisite for emergence of the former.

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The recent spate of farmer suicides in Indian states has become the core of research and policy debates in the field of agrarian studies over the last one and a half decades. One sees a flood of publications indicating the causes of these suicides and policy prescriptions. Growing pressure of indebtedness, rising cost of cultivation, declining returns from agriculture, adverse impact of economic liberalisation, etc, are commonly identified as the main causes of this agrarian distress. However, why the loss of agricultural income and debt weigh so heavily on the minds of certain categories of farmers and push them to the extreme step of self-killing has seldom been analysed.

Stated precisely, a review of available literature on farmer suicides reveals that economic rationality has been the dominant line of inquiry because the studies on suicides were largely done by economists, who either ignored or tangentially touched upon the relevant sociological issues. Analysis of causes and types of suicide is central to the sociological tradition and there exists a rich discourse on conceptual, theoretical as well as methodological issues on suicide following Durkheim's classic work *Suicide* (1897/1952). However, studies on farmer suicides in India rarely relate themselves to this corpus of knowledge.

The present paper attempts to examine how far the types of suicides developed by Durkheim explain farmer suicides in India. While the following section outlines a broad theoretical framework based on Durkheim's ideas and the discourse that followed him, the next section enquires into the nature of suicidal currents operating in the Indian agrarian society. The subsequent section critically examines empirical evidences, as reported by various studies. The last section draws conclusions.

1 Durkheim's Types of Suicides

Though the sociological paradigm developed by Emile Durkheim (ibid) served as a model for understanding suicides, his typology of suicides generated scholarly debates. Durkheim identifies four broad types of suicides, viz, egoistic, altruistic, anomic and fatalistic. He explains these types and their causes based on two independent variables, social integration[1] and social regulation.[2] However, Durkheim did not lay equal stress on the four types of suicide. In *Suicide*, while two chapters are devoted to explain egoism, anomie and altruism take only one chapter each and fatalism is relegated to a footnote.

1.1 Fatalistic Suicide

Of the four types of suicides, Durkheim considers fatalistic as the least important type. According to him, fatalistic suicide is

caused by excessive social regulation. It is found among "persons with futures pitilessly blocked and passions violently choked by oppressive discipline. It is the suicide of very young husbands, of the married woman who is childless" (ibid: 276n). Durkheim states that "for completeness' sake, we should set up a fourth suicidal type. But it has so little contemporary importance and examples are so hard to find… that it seems useless to dwell upon it" (ibid). Many subsequent scholars also excluded fatalism from Durkheim's theory (Johnson 1965; Pope 1975).

1.2 Altruistic Suicide

Similarly, it is argued that altruistic suicide has not been legitimately studied by Durkheim and the examples cited by him are not explained in social terms (Johnson 1965: 881). According to Durkheim, altruistic suicide occurs when the "weight of society is brought to bear on the individuals themselves" (1897/1952: 219). The individual sacrifices himself to an internalised social imperative. To quote him,

> Either death had to be imposed by society as a duty, or some question of honour was involved, or at least some disagreeable occurrence had to lower the value of life in the victims' eyes. But it even happens that the individual kills himself purely for the joy of sacrifice, because, even with no particular reason, renunciation in itself is considered praiseworthy (ibid: 223).

However, it is argued that Durkheim's type of "altruistic" suicide is rarely found (Giddens 1966: 295). Though Durkheim says that altruistic suicide is also found in more recent civilisations, almost all his examples of altruism are what he calls "primitive" (Johnson 1965: 879). He also states that "altruism…may be regarded as a moral characteristic of primitive man" (1897/1952: 223). He argues, "In our contemporary societies, as individual personality becomes increasingly free from the collective personality, such suicides could not be widespread" (ibid: 228). Moreover, this type of suicide is not amenable to comparative tests (Breault and Barkey 1982).

1.3 Egoistic Suicide

To Durkheim, egoistic suicide occurs when the ties binding the individual to others are slackened and there is absence of adequate social integration. He states social man necessarily presupposes a society that he expresses and serves. The greater the social isolation, the lesser the individual participates as a social being. As a result, his life lacks purpose and meaning. He experiences a loss of direction, sense of apathy and finally absence of attachment to life itself.

Egoism refers to institutionalised structural conditions which "loosen" or "dilute" social ties binding the members of a group to one another. It produces structural pressures tending towards the isolation of individuals from closely defined ties with others. The conditions of egoism are found in the existence of social values promoting individualism, personal initiative and responsibility in various spheres of social activity (Giddens 1966: 278).

Durkheim further stresses that the degree of development of egoism is relative to the features of the domestic environment (family structure). The larger the family size, the greater is the degree of protection against suicide because it represents a higher degree of social cohesion due to greater sentiments and historical memories (Morrison 1995: 174). The duties and obligations, and the demands and expectations in the family generate attachment to life. The immunity to suicide is, therefore, less among unmarried persons and persons belonging to a small family, and particularly when they face widowhood, separation and childlessness (Durkheim 1897/1952: 180-216). In a nutshell, egoism results when a person becomes individualistic in his activities and ties with his family, kinship and community are weakened.

1.4 Anomic Suicide

On the other hand, anomic suicide results when social regulation is too weak or disrupted. The individual's needs and satisfaction are regulated by "common beliefs and practices" or what Durkheim calls "collective conscience". When this regulation is upset, the individual's horizon is broadened beyond what he can induce, or contracted unduly, and in this situation the proclivity for suicide tends towards a maximum. The individual is provided with ill-defined objectives or with goals that make the possibility of "failure" high (Giddens 1966: 301).

Durkheim believes that social wants such as the appetite for wealth, prestige and power are essentially unlimited, and that society sets limits on these wants through moral restraints by linking them to available means (Morrison 1995: 182). When the regulatory power of the society fails, social wants exceed the possible means for attaining them and the individual remains in perpetual danger of suffering from the disproportion between his aspirations and achievements. This situation generates disappointment and feelings of failure, which lead to the growth of the "suicidogenic impulse".

1.5 Individualisation and Integration

Durkheim's theory on suicide becomes more meaningful when it is interpreted in the context of his ideas on division of labour, as these contain the seeds of all of Durkheim's later work (Nisbet 1965). In Durkheim's view, the division of labour requires the individual to keep himself in constant relations with neighbouring functions and not lose sight of his collaborators, and that he acts upon them and reacts to them (1893/1933: 372). When the division of labour advances, organic solidarity breaks down as it leads to the corresponding rise of individualisation. Rapid development of the division of labour is held to produce excessive individuality. In *Suicide,* excessive individuality is regarded as one of the precipitating factors in egoistic suicide (Miley and Micklin 1972: 660). Durkheim notes that in more industrialised contexts suicide is a result of an absence of community as manifested in individualisation (Mohanty 2005: 246).

Social integration is strongest when the society is characterised by mechanical solidarity. As the ideal mechanical society is characterised by pure homogeneity, organic society

is characterised by heterogeneity, in which the process of individuation associated with modernity has reached its limit (Bearman 1991: 505). In the terminology of *Suicide*, weak social integration results from rapid advances (Miley and Micklin 1972: 660). Consequently, this weak social integration leads to weak regulation because weakened integration means that the individual is no longer so closely bound to the group, which cannot exercise restraint on his passions. As persons become more and more individuated, the normative demands and moral regulation placed upon them decrease proportionally. As a result, the highly individuated modern person is freed from social constraint and regulation. Ultimately, the expanding needs create a means-needs disequilibrium (Pope 1975: 423).

Durkheim notes that it is almost inevitable that the egoist have some tendency to non-regulation since he is detached from society, and that it has not sufficient hold upon him to regulate him (1897/1952: 287). Therefore, he spoke of "the hypercivilisation which breeds the anomic tendency and egoistic tendency" (ibid: 323). While explaining the composite types, Durkheim (ibid: 288) also observes the peculiar affinity between egoism and anomie. However, though Durkheim considers anomic suicides as the characteristic feature of modern or industrial society, he regards the instance of anomie as "temporary". It merely occurs "in intermittent spurts and acute crisis" (ibid: 254). He explains that the division of labour is anomic only "in exceptional and abnormal circumstances" (1893/1933: 372). In fact, Durkheim asserted that egoism is far more a cause of high suicide rates in modern societies than is anomie (Johnson 1965: 877). Egoism is termed as structural pathology and anomie as a normative one (Marks 1974: 332). Anomie may be said to be an effect of egoism.[3] The former emerges from the latter's existence.

2 Agrarian Change in India

The Indian agrarian economy and society has witnessed substantial changes since the days of the British Raj. Prior to the introduction of the British rule, agriculture was mostly specific to local needs and the area under cultivation was adjusted to increases and decreases in population. Crops were grown according to the suitability of climatic conditions and agricultural operations were carried on with commonly practised and simple technology. The social framework of agriculture was organised within caste, family and kinship relations. Due to similar socio-economic backgrounds, the farmers shared common values and their needs and aspirations were limited. By and large, agriculture was well integrated with the social structure.

British colonialism brought a series of changes through the introduction of new land tenure, commercialisation of agriculture and expansion of the politico-legal system. The provision of new land tenure enhanced the propensity to invest more in land, and the privileged and affluent sections started acquiring more land. The area under cultivation was increased and the emphasis was on the cultivation of cash crops like cotton, sugar cane, jute, etc, to feed Britain's industries. The cultivation of these crops was largely profitable because of rising demands in domestic as well as international markets.

2.1 Caste and Land Reform

The rich upper-caste people reaped the benefit of the expanded forces of production because of their large-scale landholding and vantage economic position. The small and poor farmers were hardly in a position to cultivate these commercial crops as they were constrained by their small landholding and poor resource base. Though loss of these commercial crops like cotton was a regular feature in many parts of India owing to adverse weather, it did not affect severely the large landholders as they mostly recovered the loss by lowering the wages of agricultural labourers and increasing the price of their surplus foodgrains (Guha 1985; Mohanty 2001a).

However, the agrarian changes introduced during the British period did not disturb the rigid caste structure considerably; rather, these took place within that broad framework. The traditional caste structure was used while allocating the official positions. The members of higher castes remained as intermediaries of the British administration with large amounts of land under their control, and some of them also engaged in moneylending activities. While the members of medium castes were the cultivators, the people of lower castes provided various types of labour services.

Each caste remained as an occupational group and the agricultural services were mostly carried on through the *jajmani/balutedari* system. Thus, the caste-based occupation and division of labour provided a kind of organic linkage among the rural communities. Besides, the joint family and strong kinship ties were very common in rural areas. However, towards the beginning of the 20th century the cohesiveness of rural society showed signs of disintegration with the emergence of various kinds of protest movements by peasantry and the members of lower castes against the exploitative land, labour and credit relations[4] and rising economic inequality among the various castes.

The organic solidarity of the rural society started gradually crumbling down after independence, particularly in the post-planning period. Planned efforts were made to achieve agricultural growth and distributive justice. Keeping in view the large-scale unequal distribution of land, especially the landlessness of lower castes and tribes, land reform became a part of the planning for a package of measures like abolition of intermediaries, imposition of ceiling, distribution of ceiling surplus land, etc, which was introduced invariably in all states.

Though it is argued that land reform in India failed to achieve the desired goal, it did make some positive impact on members of the lower castes, particularly in states like West Bengal, Maharashtra, Tamil Nadu, Karnataka, Kerala and Andhra Pradesh (Rajasekaran 1998; Deshpande 1998; Mohanty 2001b; Reddy 2002). Besides, the positive impact of development planning and new urban sources of income

also enabled many of them to acquire land from the land market (Omvedt 1993).

2.2 The Green Revolution

The green revolution started in the 1960s, following the introduction of high yielding variety (HYV) technology based on water-seed-fertiliser strategy, and the associated land- and crop-based subsidised formal credit facilities generated a strong impression that agriculture is a relatively profitable source of income. The first phase of the green revolution was limited to a few food crops (wheat and rice) and water-rich regions; the 1980s witnessed the second phase of the green revolution, which diversified into non-food crops like cotton.

The traditional system of agriculture that prevailed till the early 1960s was mostly self-sufficient in terms of inputs. The agriculture was closely integrated with the inward-looking village economy and was marginally linked with the market outside the village (Revathi and Murthy 2005). Farmers were preparing seeds traditionally by selecting the best lot from their crops. The seeds were exchanged within the farming community, and were used and reused a number of times. Following the introduction of HYV technology, the production and distribution of new seed varieties were undertaken by the government with a set of supporting institutions set up for this purpose.

The agricultural modernising endeavours of the post-planning era broadened the economic and social horizon of all categories of farmers. More importantly, to the newly entrant lower-caste farmers, who had earlier witnessed the prosperity of the upper-caste landholders through agriculture as labourers, the new provisions such as availability of land, low-cost credit, HYV seeds that provide higher profit, etc, appeared as a means to fulfil their long-cherished desires. The strong social movements and mobilisation of the lower castes by Ambedkar and his followers, and many lower-caste political organisations like the Republican Party of India in Maharashtra and Bahujan Samaj Party in Uttar Pradesh also expanded their socio-economic aspirations.

On the other hand, the new social order challenged the historical dominance of members of the higher castes and they were restricted from increasing their landholding beyond the prescribed ceiling limit. As a result, they started looking beyond agriculture, to trade, finance and politics, and some of them emerged as new entrepreneurs (Rutten 1995; Upadhya 1997; Mohanty 1999). The initial and temporary rise in incomes of all classes of farmers set off the aspirations of cultivators and they started spending lavishly on social ceremonies,[5] and the urge to subscribe to consumer-defined lifestyles became more visible.

Though the agricultural revolution initiated in the planning period spelt prosperity for the farmers, it also created conditions that were likely to push the farmers to undesirable grave consequences. True, efforts were made to expand irrigation, but excepting a limited number of states, the area under irrigation did not increase substantially[6] and cultivation of high-value crops like cotton was left to the vagaries of monsoon. As the new HYV seeds require high doses of pesticides, fertilisers and other inputs, the cost of cultivation became higher.

The farmer was expected to be aware of the updated information on changing market situations and agricultural extension services regarding appropriate doses of agricultural inputs and timings of their applications, etc. A first generation of farmers entering modernised agriculture with some experience in its intricacies was not fully competent in the skills it needed. They were weak in dealing and coping with institutional channels of modernisation – markets, traders, input dealers and institutional finance – without effective access to crucial services like insurance, warehousing, post-harvest processing, and export (Rao 2009: 121).

2.3 Rural Credit and Price Policy

The risks and uncertainty associated with modern agriculture multiplied following the economic liberalisation initiated in the 1990s. After the nationalisation of banks in 1969, a package of policy initiatives ensured that the share of moneylenders in rural credit fell from an average of over 75% in 1951-61 to less than 25% in 1991. But in the post-reform period, there has been a sharp decline in the share of the formal sector in rural credit.[7] The share of public sector banks in rural credit has fallen continuously from the peak of 15.3% in 1987 to 8.4% in 2006, and the share of rural deposits has fallen steadily from its peak of 15.5% in 1990 to 10.8% in 2006 (Shah et al 2007: 1357). The "targeted priority lending" or "directed credit" to agriculture was put on the back burner at the recommendation of the Narasimham Committee (1992) on financial reforms. As a result, farmers are required to depend on moneylenders/private shopkeepers, who usually charge exorbitant rates of interest, for a timely agricultural input requirement.[8]

As the supply of varieties of hybrid seeds could not be adequately met by the public sector, the private sector gradually emerged in the 1980s in response to the growing demand for HYV seeds and dominated the seed market by the 1990s (Revathi and Murthy 2005; Shiva and Jafri 1999). Since 1991, 100% foreign equity was allowed in the seed industry (Reddy and Mishra 2009: 20). During the Tenth Plan period, private seed supply had overtaken the seed sourcing from public sources. The share of the private sector in seed production in 2006 was 58% as against the public sector share of 42%.[9]

Besides, though agricultural policy was earlier meant to mitigate the impact of any undue rise in prices on the vulnerable sections of the population, the price policy in the 1990s altered the situation drastically (Dev and Rao 2010: 180). The earlier policy of low-input and low-output prices shifted to high-input and high-output prices, while public investment in irrigation, extension and other related infrastructure went down considerably. The share of private sector investment in agriculture, which was 54% in 1980-81, gradually increased to 80% in 2003-04. While public sector investment showed negative growth in the 1980s and 1990s, the growth rate of private investment increased from 2.5% in the 1980s to 4.1% in the 1990s.[10] Though minimum support prices increased, it did not benefit the farming community as these prices are

meant to compensate for the rising cost of production in the absence of yield-increasing public investments (Dev and Rao 2010: 180).

Hikes in power and other tariffs, as well as irrigation rate, and withdrawal of fertiliser subsidy contributed to rise in the overall cost of cultivation many times (Shiva and Jafri 1998; Mohanty 2005; Revathi and Murthy 2005; Reddy and Mishra 2009). As a result of this policy shift, growth rates in yields went down.[11] As a consequence, the share of agriculture in real gross domestic product (GDP) fell. The growth of agricultural GDP decelerated from over 3.5% per year for 1981-82 and 1996-97, to only 2% for 1997-98 and 2004-05.[12]

The consequence of economic liberalisation lowered the prices of many Indian agricultural products like cotton due to the pressure at the international market.[13] In the post-liberalisation period, it is rightly argued that the farmers face not only yield risk but also price risk (Mitra and Shroff 2007). Gupta (2005: 752) aptly observed

> Indian agriculture has always lurched from crisis to crisis. If the monsoons are good then there are floods, if they are bad there are droughts, if the production of mangoes is excellent then there is a glut and prices fall, if the onion crops fail then that too brings tears. The artisanal nature of agriculture has always kept farmers on tenterhooks, not knowing quite how to manage their economy, except to play it by (y)ear.

He argues that in the present context, agriculture is an economic residue that accommodates non-achievers resigned to a life of sad satisfaction and the villager is bloodless as the rural economy is lifeless (ibid: 757).

2.4 A New Social Order

The social structure of the rural society also witnessed profound changes. The joint family, the rural caste hierarchy, and the harmony of village life have lost their tenacity (ibid: 752). The traditional joint family was the predominant feature of agrarian economy and it was a link between continuity and change with a major potential to provide stability and support at the time of crisis (Sonawat 2001). In the recent years the joint family and kinship ties have gradually weakened due to the spread of urban values, education and the impact of development planning, etc. Many families today are different from the standard families of the 1950s and 1960s. Large-sized families with more than 10 members have virtually disappeared (Gulati 1996). Going by statistics provided by the National Sample Survey (NSS) rounds, it has been found that the average size of the rural household gradually declined from 5.2 members in 1977-78 to 4.8 members in 2004-05.[14]

Many large landholders partitioned their families into small units in order to protect their land from the ceiling laws (Rajasekhar 1988; Mohanty 2000). Besides, the idea of the household as a unit for allocating the benefits of many development schemes also encouraged the division of traditional joint families into nuclear families. The National Health Policy of 1983, which emphasised the need for securing the small family norm through voluntary efforts and moving towards the goal of population stabilisation, encouraged a shift towards the nuclear family. In addition, women heading households and taking over the responsibility of cultivation because of single male migration to urban centres became an emerging reality (Lingam 1994: 699).

As a result, in most cases a single person bears the burden of having to eke out a satisfactory livelihood. The conditions of modern agriculture, which involve regular buying of agricultural inputs, arrangement of credit, sale of produce and some kind of accounting, encouraged the members of a peasant family to assign these responsibilities to one member who is considered as capable of managing these responsibilities (Mohanty 2001a: 170). Individualised decisions made in the context of the splitting of joint families into nuclear families place an unduly large burden on individuals, which compounds the sense of loneliness and individualisation (Vasavi 2010). Withdrawn into their individualised households and families, agriculturalists are often unable to gauge the risk involved in engaging with an unpredictable market, varying and unreliable climatic conditions, unreliable quality of agricultural inputs and untested forms of agricultural practices.

2.5 New Agriculture

As the new methods of farming made traditional skill and knowledge almost obsolete, the experienced elderly cultivators, who were often consulted for agricultural operations, lost their traditional authority and remained isolated from the larger community. This apart, the rising assertiveness of the members of the lower caste, in view of their wider mobilisation and organised activities, created a kind of hostility between the members of lower and higher castes. True, the disintegration of the customary forms of support has liberated the working, lower-ranked caste groups and enabled them to escape from caste-prescribed subservience and provisioning of labour. But, it has not been adequately replaced by the state mechanism of provisioning (Sarma 2004; Vasavi 2005). The atomisation from the traditional rural economy and structures of patronage and loyalty, and the continuous prejudice of the upper castes against the former untouchables, increases the isolation of the low-ranking new agriculturalists (Vasavi 2010: 78).

Agriculture no longer draws on established principles of local knowledge and caste- and kin-based ties. It has become primarily an independent, household or family enterprise with more links between each cultivator and the market than among cultivators themselves (Vasavi 1999). The new agricultural practices have restricted the interaction among the farmers, who were earlier cultivating land mostly through exchange of labour services and consulting one another regarding farm-related decisions (Mohanty 2001a). Commercialisation, which introduced the use of external inputs and practices that were not locally derived or evolved, not only meant the distancing of such local practices, but also the distancing of agriculturalists from each other (Vasavi 2005).

Agriculturalists now compete with each other to enhance productivity or grow new crops that fetch the best market prices. In many places farmers have started integrating their agricultural activities with floriculture, horticulture, viticulture and food processing, in tune with economic change, but

without realising the associated risks (Jadhav 2006; Mohanty 2009). It is argued that modern agriculture has led to disintegration of "community" and the kinship support system, and rise of individualistic orientation (Jodhka 2005). With the spread of school education and widespread exposure to modern communications media, such as the cinema, television and advertising, there is a strong and widespread desire among younger members, both male and female, of peasant families to not live the life of a peasant in the village (Chatterjee 2008: 57). Many wealthy landed people either live in cities, or hope to recreate an affluent urban ambience in their rural setting (Gupta 2005: 757).

Thus, the cumulative effects of agrarian change in India broke down the traditional family, kinship, caste and community ties of the farmers and enhanced their social and economic aspirations, which ultimately led to the emergence of anomic suicidal currents in the context of growing egoism in rural society. The analysis of empirical evidence reported by studies undertaken in states with high incidence of suicide will substantiate it further.

3 Empirical Evidence: Egoism and Anomie

According to an estimate, 2,70,940 Indian farmers committed suicide in the last one and a half decades (from 1995 to 2011), and among the states, Maharashtra, Andhra Pradesh, Karnataka and Punjab have the undesirable distinction of being in the forefront.[15] The findings of the studies undertaken in these states provide an impression that indebtedness and crop failure, one way or the other, pushed the farmers towards economic distress and suicide. However, a critical analysis of the data presented by these studies hints that the disappointment and despair of the suicide victims, associated with loss of agricultural income and indebtedness, had its origin in growing social isolation and individualism.

3.1 Maharashtra

The incidence of farmer suicides in Maharashtra appeared in media reports from the beginning of 1998. Following this, Dash (1998) undertook a survey of 45 suicide cases among the cotton growers in Amravati and Yavatmal districts. Though he attributes suicides to unanticipated loss of agricultural income of farmers owing to crop failure and indebtedness, the case histories included in the study point to social isolation of deceased farmers caused by a variety of factors like illness, old-age, family disorganisation, etc.

Three years later, Mohanty (2001a), based on a study in the same districts covering 66 suicides, reported that the small farmers who were mostly from lower and medium castes found their life not worth living when they failed to realise their aspirations for a better socio-economic position through agriculture, due to unexpected crop loss. It also noted that these farmers witnessed caste-based social isolation, detachment from family and individualism in agriculture. On the other hand, the study attributes the suicide of large and medium farmers, who mainly belong to higher castes, to abrupt loss in business, trade and politics. Like small farmers, they also experienced strained social relations within their family and community due to old-age, illness, family disputes, loss of social prestige and honour, etc.

Subsequently, Mohanty and Shroff (2004) analysed farmer suicides based on 30 sample suicide cases drawn from Amravati, Yavatmal and Wardha districts, with an equal number of control cases from each of these districts. The findings of the study indicated that loss of agricultural income owing to rise in cost of cultivation and market imperfections was common to both deceased and control farmers. However, a comparison of the social characteristics of deceased farmers with those of control farmers reveals that, unlike control farmers, the suicide victims belonged to small families with negative social experiences like divorce and separation. Many of them were unmarried and they were independently looking after agricultural operations and expenses thereof. Moreover, a significant number of them belonged to lower castes.

In a more complex analysis, Mohanty (2005), based on micro- and macro-level analysis, argued that the suicides occur due to the disproportion between the achievement and aspirations of farmers, as an effect of individualisation, and due to a process of socio-economic "estrangement" from agrarian communities experienced by farmers in the context of rapid economic growth. Even though the study done by the Tata Institute of Social Sciences (2005) points to crop failure and indebtedness as the main causes of suicides, it also reports that all the suicide victims were the heads of their households and over 61% belonged to lower castes and tribes. Many of the case studies appended clearly indicate social isolation and loneliness of the deceased farmers.

A more recent study by Mishra (2006), based on 111 suicide and 106 control cases, reaffirms the findings of earlier studies. It shows that the sudden deterioration of economic status of farmers due to loss of agricultural income, combined with their alienation from the family, neighbourhood and community resulted in suicides.

3.2 Andhra Pradesh

The findings of studies conducted in the state of Andhra Pradesh are in no way different. The economic analysis of cotton cultivation made by Parthasarathy and Shameem (1998), with special reference to Warangal district, indicated the rising indebtedness as well as the price and yield instability of cotton crop as the main reason for the strain on cotton farmers, but concluded that farmers did not commit suicide only for these reasons. It hinted at social disintegration and a deepening alienation of farmers from society, as they belonged to nuclear families and backward castes.

Nirmala (2003), based on an analysis of 30 suicide cases and comparing them with an equal number of control cases, argued that farmer suicides in Andhra Pradesh may not be attributed only to loss of income caused by crop loss, market imperfections, etc, but also to growing social detachment and individualistic orientation of the farmers. The 60 case sheets on suicide victims as given in Murty et al (2005) reveal that the suicide victims were mostly young and innovative

backward-caste farmers belonging to nuclear families. The loss of integration of the farmers with the village community and institutions in Andhra Pradesh as a result of the introduction of market-driven new agricultural practices has also been reported by others (Vidyasagar and Chandra 2005; Kumar 2005).

Based on a recent sample survey of the socio-economic characteristics of suicide victims in the four districts, Revathi (2007) also reports similar results. Her study clearly shows the nuclear family as a characteristic feature of the deceased farmers. While 71% of the suicide victims in Mahabubnagar belonged to nuclear families, in Anantapur and Guntur districts it was more than 75%, and in Warangal district it was 94%. The study also shows that across the four districts the suicide victims were from the lower castes and tribes. In both Warangal and Mahabubnagar districts, the lower castes and tribes together constituted nearly 90% of the deceased farmers. However, their number is relatively less in the other two districts (51% and 73% in Anantapur and Guntur, respectively).

3.3 Karnataka

A good number of studies were undertaken in Karnataka, and an analysis of their findings also exhibits the same pattern. The first study on farmer suicides was undertaken by Vasavi (1999) in Bidar district. Though it views suicides as having resulted from a combination of ecological, economic and social crisis, it points to the modern agricultural practice, which has become an independent, household or family enterprise, without requiring any link and interaction among the cultivators themselves. To quote Vasavi,

> …it is not just the loss of crops that has created tensions. Rather, it is the experience of crop loss in a context of significantly altered form of agriculture and community relations that accounts for distress among people (ibid: 2267).

Another study, covering 99 suicide cases and an almost equal number of control cases, by Deshpande (2002a) provides the impression that imperfect market conditions and crash in prices of agricultural produce are major reasons for farmers' suicides in Karnataka, as they lowered the farm income beyond expectation. However, he also argued that lack of social support due to the break up of the traditional family and village community is responsible for the farmer's distress. His analysis reveals that a majority of victims lived in nuclear families, and family tension and discords with spouses were the important reasons for suicide. Moreover, the victims were largely young, belonging to the age group of 28 to 47 years, and a significant number of them were also below 25 years of age.

In a subsequent analysis, Deshpande (2002b) concludes that as the agricultural situation was more or less similar among the suicide as well control cases, multiple causes like family disputes, illness, and marriage issues get credence. Deshpande and Shah (2010) also observe that suicides are mainly attributable to social reasons such as family problems, old-age and illness, drinking, and gambling habits. They argue that the social relationships of the victims, their family commitments and support institutions assume greater importance in their getting secluded and becoming introverts.

More recently, Shah (2012) argues that the framework of economic rationality is insufficient to explain suicides of farmers. To her, one needs to understand the way in which suicides and the wider feelings of rural alienation relate to the fear of pauperisation based on the imagination of the self and the other.

3.4 Punjab

The same could be said about Punjab too. The Institute for Development and Communication (Kumar and Sharma 1998) studied 53 suicide cases covering Gurudaspur, Sangrur, Mansa and Ludhiana districts. It noted that about 60% of the total cases of suicides fall in the age group of 15-29 and over 70% of them belong to the small and marginal farmers category. It reported that a vast majority of suicide victims were loners, who did not share their feelings with anyone within or outside the family. More than 77% of the victims failed to maintain satisfying interpersonal relationships with their family members. The selected cases provide firm evidence that the deceased farmers had experienced chronic domestic discord, social isolation, injured self-esteem, etc.

The study also hints at the decline of the traditional social order and support system:

> The decay of the village support systems has been accompanied by a dilution of kinship ties and community based social existence…the traditional concept of the village community taking care of the needs of its members has been replaced by individual oriented living (ibid: 43).

Iyer and Manick (2000) studied 80 suicide cases, covering 11 villages from Sangrur district. The study attributes suicides mainly to the mounting indebtedness of the farmers. However, the data reveals that nearly 90% of the suicide victims belonged to the age group of below 40 years. The study notes youth as a major category of suicide victims and indicates their rising alienation from agriculture in view of the emergence of a consumerist culture, urban lifestyle and overall decline of joint families.

Similarly, Sidhu and Jaijee (2011) indicate that the incidence of suicides was higher among the younger age group. Over 78% of the suicide victims between 1998 and 2008 were below 40 years of age. They observe that "in rural Punjab young people are more likely to take their own lives than older people. This is alarming and indicative of something drastically wrong with the social situation in which Punjab's rural youth is placed" (ibid: 207).

Another macro-level study argued that the highly commercialised form of agriculture accompanied by the spirit of individualism and decline of the traditional social support mechanism, has pushed the farmers towards suicide (Gill 2005). The disintegration of community feeling and social relations in the areas of Punjab having highly commercialised and competitive agriculture is observed by other scholars as well (Chahal 2005; Jodhka 2005; Sidhu and Gill 2006; Gill and Singh 2006; Padhi 2009).

Based on a census survey in the two most affected districts of Sangrur and Bhatinda between 2000 and 2008,

Sidhu et al (2011) reported that of 1,757 suicide cases, while 73% of the farmers committed suicide due to indebtedness, the remaining 27% did so due to reasons like marital discord, drug addiction, illness, etc. However, looking into the data on family size of the victims, it is found that the average family size of the suicide victims across the districts was small and limited to only four members. Interestingly, the family size of all the debt victims was smaller than that of the non-debt victims.

3.5 Egoism to Anomie: Case Studies

To summarise, the growing individualism and sense of isolation (egoism) encouraged the farmers to set a high level of aspirations, which could not be materialised within the available opportunity structure, leading to disappointment and despair (anomie). The suicide cases, as reported in several studies across states, provide firm evidence on how egoistic conditions generate anomic situations. A select six cases[16] are quoted below:

(1) K was a small farmer. He was originally a Mahar and became a Nav-Buddhist. His father and elder brother opposed his conversion. His brother began to stay separately. Since then his wife and children faced criticisms. Many people started addressing K as Lord Buddha. The Brahmin landlord who had leased out 9 acres of land to K transferred it to his elder brother. K's father died suddenly following chest pain. K's elder brother and others in the village criticised K for adopting Buddhism and thereby taking the life of his father. Next year his younger son also died. K's financial condition gradually deteriorated. Then his wife also fell sick. Finally, when he faced crop losses for two years consecutively in 1996 and 1997, he committed suicide. Source: Mohanty (2005: 263-64).

(2) This is a high caste group where the son of the household head committed suicide. He was a young man, separated from his family and was cultivating four acres of land given as his share from the total landholding. He had incurred a crop loan of Rs 14,000/- that his father repaid. He also had some private loan (amount unspecified). He was a heavy drinker and the habit continued even after his marriage. He committed suicide on 25.09.04. Source: Tata Institute of Social Sciences (2005: 11).

(3) Shankar was ambitious, and wanted to live a good live. When we were in joint family the main occupation was toddy tapping and cultivation. We got separated; we also purchased a share of the toddy trees (5-6 trees) for Rs 3,000. The income was sufficient for sustenance… Shankar took two acres of land on lease for 2-3 years. In the first year, he planted cotton in one acre and then extended it to two acres. He also planted chilli in two acres in one year… Later he purchased half acre of land and then another quarter acre for which he borrowed Rs 30,000 from private sources. After purchase of land he went for bore well which yielded hardly any water. He also went for an open well around the bore well to a depth of 30 feet, which cost Rs 17,000. He purchased a motor for Rs 3,000. All this happened within a span of one year… All this led a cumulative debt of Rs 1.1 lakh, which became burdensome… Unable to bear the pressure he consumed pesticide in the house. Source: Rao (2009: 115-16).

(4) Ramchand Singh and his two sons were farming 4 acres of their own land and 8 acres taken on lease. So long as the father and sons remained together, they were making ends meet without much difficulty. They have even bought a tractor, for which they had taken a loan and a diesel pump for their tube well…But after the sons married they decided to separate leaving the sons with 2 acres each… One of the sons, Pragat (24 years), started working in a ghee factory on a wage of Rs 1,900 per month. Even then, the income did not match expenses, so they sold an acre (of land). Pragat was becoming increasingly depressed. One evening in September 2000, he told his wife that he was going out to look at the field. Instead he headed for the railway track and threw himself under a train. Source: Sidhu and Jaijee (2011: 247-48).

(5) In 2007, 31-year-old Satnam Singh of Ferozput district consumed poison. Although the couple has been married for more than 10 years and was also greatly troubled by their childlessness, the situation was triggered by his sister's wedding, which obliged him to arrange for the dowry money. That was only four months before the suicide. Source: Padhi (2009: 54).

(6) Angrez Kaur aged 30 years belonged to a Jat Sikh family at village Rehal Kalan located in Lehragaga block. She was compelled to commit suicide in October 1998...The reason for her committing suicide is primarily social…Her husband Sardar Balsher Singh was aged 35 years.… The couple did not have any issue even after 3 years of their marriage. This was an important reason for frustration between the husband and wife. Her husband gradually got entangled with another lady in the same village…he wanted to buy a tractor…In order to by the tractor it was necessary for him to mortgage his 3 acres of land with the commercial bank…This resulted in a scuffle between husband and wife. Source: (Iyer and Manick 2000: 77-78).

All these cases invariably show that the suicide victims experienced a kind of egoism due to loss of social ties caused by reasons like caste-based isolation (Case 1), separation from family members (Cases 2 and 4), disintegration of the joint family (Case 3), and childlessness and marital disputes (Cases 5 and 6), which pushed them to anomic situations. The breakdown of social ties led to individualist feelings, and in the absence of any check and control over them the suicide victims freely undertook ambitious and speculative economic activities without realising the associated risks and uncertainties.

4 Conclusions

Two broad types of causes of farmer suicides are found: the first one is the disappointment and despair that resulted from the disproportion between achievements and aspirations conditioned by rapid economic growth and spread of neoliberalism; the second is the isolation that emanated from weak ties with the family, neighbourhood and community following individualisation of agriculture and decline of the traditional social order. While the former results from loss of social regulation (anomie), the latter indicates loss of integration (egoism).

It may be inferred that though the agrarian changes lowered the levels of achievement of farmers in general, the disproportion between achievement and aspiration is greatly felt by those who had experienced egoistic conditions. In other words, the individuated and isolated farmers set a high level of aspirations as the normative demands and moral regulation placed upon them by virtue of their integration with family, neighbourhood and community decreased.

Hence, egoistic conditions generated anomic feelings. The sequential effects of these two types of suicidal currents on farmers are observed from the selected suicide cases. Therefore, it may be said that egoism has emerged as a structural characteristic of the modern agrarian economy and society, and anomie has emerged as its consequence. Thus, anomie is an effect of egoism, and the latter is a prerequisite for the emergence of the former.

NOTES

1 Though the concept of social integration is nowhere clearly defined in Durkheim's theory, it implies that a society or group is said to be integrated to the degree that its members possess a "collective conscience", which refers to the beliefs and sentiments common to the average members. Generally, it is seen as relating to a desirable state of society, well-ordered with positive and reinforcing ties between individuals (Cresswell 1972: 139). Stated precisely, it indicates the strength of ties of individuals to the group to which they belong.

2 Social regulation refers to the restraints imposed by society on individual needs and aspirations. See Morrison (1995: 167).

3 Many scholars have found the properties of egoism in anomie (Henry and Short 1954; De Grazia 1963; Martindale 1960).

4 Lower-caste movements led by E V Ramaswamy Periyar in Tamil Nadu, Narayan Guru in Kerala, and Jyotiba Phule in Maharashtra started towards the later part of the British rule in India, besides the peasant resistance movements like the Deccan Riot in Maharashtra, the Moplah Rebellion in Kerala, the Halipratha movement in Gujarat, the agrarian unrest in Punjab and Uttar Pradesh, etc.

5 In places like the rural Malwa region of Punjab, dowry in marriages began to include a car, among other things. Sometimes, even a tractor loan from institutional sources is used to buy a car to be given as dowry. See Gill and Singh (2006: 2765).

6 Though the area under irrigation increased over the years, as reported by the Ministry of Agriculture in its *Agricultural Statistics at a Glance 2011* (Government of India: 2011), more than 55% of the net sown area in 2008-09 was un-irrigated. In states like Maharashtra, only about one-sixth of the net cropped area was under irrigation. Moreover, the pace of creation of additional irrigation potential came down sharply from an average of about 3% per annum between 1950-51 and 1989-90 to 1.2%, 1.7% and 1.8% per annum during the Eighth, Ninth and Tenth Five-Year Plan periods, respectively. See Government of India (2008a).

7 The share of credit to agriculture of the scheduled commercial banks declined from 18% in December 1987 to 11% by March 2004. The number of agricultural loan accounts in scheduled commercial banks declined from 27.7 million in March 1992 to 20.3 million by March 2004. For more details see Shetty (2006) and Shah (2007).

8 The reports of the all-India rural credit and debt and investment surveys indicated the rising share of institutional sources in the indebtedness of the cultivator households from 31.7% in 1971 to 66% in 1991. However, in the post-reform period, there has been an increase in the share of informal sources in the indebtedness of rural and agricultural households. Going by the *Situation Assessment Survey of Farmers*, National Sample Survey Organisation (Government of India 2005), 48.6% of farmer households were indebted. The All India Debt and Investment Survey (Government of India 2006a) shows a decline in the share of institutional debt outstanding of cultivator households from 66.3% in 1991 to 57.7% in 2003, with a corresponding increase in the dependence of cultivators on moneylenders from 17.5% to 25.7%. About 73% of the rural non-institutional debt carried interest rates of more than 20%. About 40% of rural borrowers were paying interest rates of more than 30% on their non-institutional borrowings, while prime lending rates of banks were in the range of 11-12%. For details, see Shetty (2009: 69-75).

9 See Government of India (2008b: 17).

10 For details on private and public investment in agriculture from 1980-81 to 2003-04 in 1999-2000 constant prices, see Dev (2012: 2).

11 An analysis made by Bhalla and Singh (2009) shows that compared to the pre-reform period (1980-83 to 1990-93), the post-reform period (1990-93 to 2003-06) is characterised by a serious retrogression, both in the matter of levels and growth rates of yield and output in most states and regions.

12 For details, see Government of India (2008b: 4).

13 The subsidies offered by the US government to its cotton growers slashed the price of Indian cotton in the international market. The US cotton crop in 2007 was worth around $3.9 billion. But the nation's handouts to its growers in the same year totalled $4.7 billion. It is reported that imported cotton now sells at Rs 17,000 a bale compared to Rs 19,000 a bale for Indian cotton. In 2001-02, the US raw cotton exports to India more than tripled to over one million bales. And the US' share of total Indian imports rose from 20% to 60%. See Sainath (2006).

14 Average size of rural households in different NSS rounds is given below:

NSS Rounds (Survey Periods)	Average Size of Rural Households
32nd (July 1977-June 1978)	5.2
38th (January -December 1983)	5.1
43rd (July 1987-June 1988)	5.1
50th (July 1993-June 1994)	4.9
55th (July 1999-June 2000)	5.0
61st (July 2004-June 2005)	4.8

Source: Government of India (2006b).

15 For details, see Sainath (2007), and also see a more recent report by Sainath (2012).

16 Though a number of studies across the states included case histories of suicide victims, in most of the cases the social profile of the victims were not properly documented. From among them, a few cases were drawn where the social background of the victims and their families have been briefly touched upon.

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