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Farmers' suicides and the state in India: Conceptual and ethnographic notes from Wayanad, Kerala

Daniel Münster

This article reflects on the challenge of making 'farmers' suicides' an object of ethnographic enquiry. This challenge is not just a matter of methods, ethics and access but also a matter of categorical choices involved in studying this over-determined and politicised category of self-killing. Drawing on fieldwork in the Wayanad district of Kerala, the article argues that 'farmers' suicides' are not self-evident types of rural death, but become reified and visible through the state's enumerative practices. This state-defined category, conveyed and scandalised by the media, rests on a connection between suicide and—an equally reified—'agrarian crisis'. The ethnographic endeavour of 'chasing' the elusive object of farmers' suicides may destabilise this seemingly self-evident link. Despite this, farmers' suicides have taken on a political life of their own. They have become a constructed yet real interface for the reworking of the relationship between state and rural citizens in liberalising India. The Indian state has launched unprecedented relief and rehabilitation measures in response to the suicide crisis. This article makes a strong case for grounding the study of farmers' suicides in ethnographies of agrarian practice and the local developmental state.

Keywords: Kerala, farmers' suicides, local state, ethnography, party politics, agrarian ecology, liberalisation

India, looked at from the West, appears as a predictable cascade of contrasting images of which it is impossible to make any sense: slums

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and skyscrapers, call centers and illiteracy, Bollywood and anti-Valentine's Day protests, McDonalds and farmers' suicides.

Menon and Nigam (2007: 1)

I

Introduction: Farmers' suicides and the Indian nation-state at the turn of the century

In recent years the issue of farmers' suicides has become a standard token in writing about India's neoliberal contradictions. As the epigraph above indicates, farmers' suicides have found their place among the stereotypical urban slums or the continuously high illiteracy rates as indicators of the shadow-side of 'shining India'.¹ Journalists, activists, politicians, civil servants and, increasingly, social scientists have jointly identified 'farmers' suicides in India' as both a graphic and drastic way of reflecting and commenting on post-reform India² (Shiva and Jafri 1998). Farmers' suicides are being linked to the combined effects of the World Trade Organisation's (WTO's) role in reducing import barriers for agrarian products, the workings of multinational agribusiness-corporations and specifically their genetically modified (GM) seeds (especially Bt Cotton), global warming, climate change and the ecological costs of the Green Revolution.³ In short, they are considered to be 'a tragic manifestation of the deteriorating condition of the farmers' (Suri 2006). Most commentators, however, link farmers' suicides to political failure at different levels and in general terms to the neglect of agriculture and the overall failure of the Indian state to protect its peasantry vis-à-vis globalisation. Although representations of 'farmers' suicides' deserve anthropological

¹ 'India shining' was the slogan of the Hindu nationalist National Democratic Alliance (NDA) government's media campaign for a rising and nuclear India during 2002.

² See P. Sainath, 'One farmer's suicide every 30 minutes', *The Hindu*, 15 November 2007.

³ 'Green Revolution' denotes the introduction of hybrid varieties of seeds as well as the mechanisation and chemicalisation of agriculture that was introduced in many 'developing countries' in the 1960s in order to achieve food self sufficiency. In India the Green Revolution is linked to the name of Prof. M.S. Swaminathan and his MSS Research Foundation. Critics like Vandana Shiva (1991) argue that the Green Revolution has actually made small holders lose their self-sufficiency, increased agrarian inequality and destroyed the eco-system.

attention as a media event with intricate political implications, they also point to quite real scenarios of distress and crisis in agrarian India as well as to an altered relationship of the state to its rural population.

Farmers' suicides are hence an important reminder of a neglected strand of the identity of India's postcolonial state—India as an agrarian country, as a nation with a majority of rural citizens. The masterminds behind both industrial modernisation and neoliberal reform had other sectors in mind when depicting India's future: industrial labourers were considered to be the prime bearers of India's industrial modernity. Urban business classes and flexible knowledge-workers of the IT and call centre sectors seem to be the bearers of India's neoliberal 'postmodernity', together with a re-launch of industrialisation in new Special Economic Zones (SEZs), this time without burdensome socialist ideas and trouble-making unions or labour regulations.⁴ In all of these visions there is little space for rural and agrarian India. Jawaharlal Nehru, India's first Prime Minister, although acknowledging that the country's economy depended on agriculture, departed significantly from Gandhi's vision of Independent India as an agrarian country of autonomous 'village republics'.⁵ Instead under his leadership India launched a 'development regime' (Ludden 2005) of planned industrialisation.⁶ With respect to agriculture, Nehruvian bureaucratic elites—again contra Gandhi—clearly favoured modernisation: land reforms, introduction of 'scientific methods', the mechanisation, chemicalisation and later 'hybridisation' of agrarian production. Thus

⁴ The establishment of SEZs was boosted recently with the passing of 'The Special Economic Zones Act, 2005'. It provides for: 'quality infrastructure complemented by an attractive fiscal package, both at the Centre and the State level, with the minimum possible regulations'. See Government of India. 2009. *Ministry of Commerce and Industry: Special Economic Zones in India*. Available at <http://sezindia.nic.in/about-introduction.asp> (accessed on 12 October 2009).

However, comparable to farmers' suicides, SEZs in India are popular images of the brutality of neoliberal reform in the form of forceful land acquisitions and have as in Singur, West Bengal, become arenas for the organisation of popular resistance (Banerjee 2006; Cross 2010).

⁵ For a further discussion of the role of 'village India' that the makers of the postcolonial nation had envisioned see Jodhka (2002) and Münster (2007).

⁶ Nehru also had noteworthy ideas about peasants' exit strategies out of agrarian crises: '[The] Indian peasant has an amazing capacity to bear famine, flood, disease, and continuous grinding poverty—and when he could endure it no longer; he would quietly and almost uncomplainingly lie down in his thousands or millions and die. That was his way of escape' (quoted from Jodhka 2002: 3349).

rural India, although considered to be of secondary importance to the creation of a postcolonial future, was still subject to a considerable amount of 'developmental' attention delivered through the practices of an array of local state institutions and officials.

K.C. Suri distinguishes three phases of state-agriculture engagements. Immediately after Independence the major concern of the ruling elites was territorial sovereignty and self-sufficiency. The ensuing strategy of import substitution and planned industrialisation brought 'reform and consolidation' by way of several 'pro-peasant policies' to rural India (Suri 2006: 1524): land reforms, investment in rural infrastructure, abolition of intermediaries, and the reduction of land revenue. During the Green Revolution in the 1970s and 1980s 'agriculture became a cash-based individual enterprise requiring high investments in modern inputs and wage labour' (Suri 2006). Simultaneously, bonded labour was abolished and a number of land ceiling acts were implemented at union and state level. As a consequence in the villages traditional modes of power and forms of labour recruitment were weakened and agriculture increasingly depended on loan based labour and market prices. The third phase of 'liberalisation' started with a number of structural adjustment programs in 1991 and has meant in effect the diluting of import restrictions and the opening up of India's agrarian economy to world-market influence combined with a gradual removal of state support to agriculture. Agriculture is here seamlessly integrated in a widely shared framework that understands the 1991 'reforms' as a clear-cut threshold marking the beginning of 'globalisation' in India.

Farmers' suicides are talked about within this framework as if they were a composite social fact, invariably linked to and almost synonymous with the—equally composite—agrarian crisis in the aftermath of neo-liberal 'reform'. Most of the writing on the subject is based on the same set of data (statistical data of the National Crime Records Bureau) or on journalistic visits to suicide 'hotspots'. So far few ethnographic accounts, committed to qualitative research in suicide prone areas, have been published.⁷ The following pages are an ethnographic report from the

⁷ To this date I am aware of only two anthropological publications (in a narrow sense) that touch upon farmers' suicides—Assayag (2005) and Stone (2002). Both deal with farmers' suicides more in passing, their actual topic being biotechnology, especially genetically modified seeds in the Deccan plateau.

field⁸ in the South Indian district Wayanad, one of the officially designated suicide-prone districts. The primary aim of my research is to analyse the state's responses to farmer suicides: the bundle of relief packages, inquiry commissions, rural employment schemes and debt relief commissions that were set up in recent years partially as a response to reports on increasing numbers of farmers' suicides. Such investigation may eventually contribute to an understanding 'of precisely how neoliberal globalisation is transforming the re-distributive functions of the Indian state or affecting its legitimacy and identity as an agency of social welfare' (Gupta and Sharma 2006: 290). On the one hand, I intend to understand the local effects of classifying Wayanad as a suicide-prone district (especially for those targeted as victims of distress) and the political discourses revolving around farmers' suicides within the district. On the other hand, I propose to take the farmers' own explanations of the causes of mass suicide seriously and to make an effort of understanding the rampant agrarian crisis in Wayanad. My primary perspective is that of a political anthropologist, which entails a certain casualty, if not neglect, of other related perspectives on farmers' suicides, such as critical medical anthropology, economic anthropology and political ecology.

In this latter sense the intention of my research is to conceive farmers' suicides as an highly over-determined interface between 'state' and rural society; an interface in two senses: first as a drastic image, repeatedly invoked to speak about rural distress and the widespread agrarian crisis in neoliberal India and to address the failure of the nation state to protect its agrarian classes; second, as a set of actually existing practices—suicides—which force state agencies to show presence in social settings which they had allegedly neglected. I hence follow a recent trend in the anthropology of the state to empirically engage the dubious entity 'state' at the everyday level of state-poor interactions (Acre and Long 1992; Corbridge et al. 2005; Gupta 2001). For local actors, 'seeing the state' (Corbridge et al. 2005) involves preceding practices of being made visible for the state through social categories that are both produced and recognised by the state. Such 'legible' (Scott 1998: 2) categories include 'poor' (Below the Poverty Line), 'Adivasi' (Scheduled Tribe), 'cultivator',

⁸ For this particular article I conducted fieldwork in August–September 2008 and February–March 2009, partly funded by Martin Luther University Halle-Wittenberg.

or in the present case: the ‘dead-farmer-who-killed-himself-due-to-indebtedness’ (farmer suicide). In the case of suicides in Wayanad, I also argue for a close interrelation between state action in the form of relief and a special instance of biopolitical (Foucault 2008: 21) legibility of self-inflicted death by a distinct category of state subjects.

Farmers’ suicides may thus provide an insightful contribution to the emerging anthropology of the state in India (Fuller and Bénéti 2001; Shah 2010; Sharma 2008). One contribution may be to follow the arguments of Abrams (1988), Gupta (1995) and Mitchell (2006) and to ask for the imagination of the state among different actors and how the effect of an encompassing, supra-local entity beyond and above society is produced. Similar to the discourse of corruption, I contend that the discourse of farmers’ suicide may be understood as a ‘key arena through which the state, citizens, and other organisations and aggregations come to be imagined’ (Gupta 1995: 212). Farmers’ suicides provide rural citizens with a language to speak about politics, citizenship and development in the context of neoliberalising agriculture.

The state is implicated in farmers’ suicides in complicated ways. First of all, the state is the source of knowledge that made suicides appear. Suicide (or rather attempted suicide) is a crime in India and is punishable under Section 309⁹ of the Indian Penal Code (1860). It was the National Crime Records Bureau, the statistical apparatus of police and hence the Home Ministry that brought epidemic suicides to the forefront in an early phase of public attention to farmers’ suicides in the late-1990s. Secondly, farmers’ suicides have entered the state classificatory repertoire by marking spaces of exception within the Indian nation on the basis of suicide statistics. In July 2006 the Government of India (GoI) officially declared 31 districts in four states (Andhra Pradesh, Maharashtra, Karnataka and Kerala) as suicide-prone districts. Finally, and closely related to the previous point, the state has initiated at different institutional levels (centre, union state, district) a number of relief packages aimed at assisting farmers in distress. Hence it has unleashed its governmental and development apparatus in an unprecedented manner on agrarian livelihoods.

⁹ Section 309, IPC, 1860, ‘Attempt to commit suicide’: ‘Whoever attempts to commit suicide and does any act towards the commission of such offence, shall be punished with simple imprisonment for term which may extend to one year [or with fine, or with both]’. (1. Subs. by Act 8 of 1882, Sec. 7, for ‘and shall also be liable to fine’).

II

Grounding farmers' suicides

During fieldwork it soon became evident that both farmers' suicides and the state in India have to be disaggregated in order to be amenable to ethnographic research. A self-evident first step is to ask for regional variation. In both academic and government literature on farmers' suicides the semi-dry Deccan heartland regions of India—Maharashtra's Vidarbha region being the most infamous suicide area—are treated as the prototypical suicide zone and the majority of academic publications exclusively deal with the Deccan states of Andhra Pradesh, Karnataka and Maharashtra.¹⁰ These regions have a specific agrarian environment that revolves around issues of drought and rampant poverty combined with a massive involvement of multinational agri-corporations aggressively promoting genetically modified (GM) seeds. The cotton farmers' suicides have a central place in the globally contentious politics about GM seeds. As Glenn Davis Stone puts it: 'India is a key battle line in the global war over GM crops, and both sides interpret the Warangal [a district in Andhra Pradesh] suicides as supporting their position' (Stone 2002: 1). An ideological battle is being fought between those who understand farmers' suicides as a symptom of 'corporate feudalism' and see a clear link to neoliberal globalisation and GM seeds¹¹ and those who condemn the rhetoric of the 'suicide-seed coalition' as a 'hoax' (Herring 2006: 468). In Wayanad neither cotton, nor GM seeds, nor global agri-corporations

¹⁰ The first academic articles on farmers' suicides such as Assadi (1998), Parthasarathy and Shameen (1998), Revathi (1998) and Visvanathan (1998) appeared in the journal *Economic and Political Weekly* (EPW). So far most articles in that journal have dealt with farmers' suicides in relation to cotton and Deccan agriculture: Deshpande (2002), Mishra (2006), Sridhar (2006); exceptions are Bose (2000) on the Punjab and Jeromi (2007) on Kerala. Outside of *EPW* there is a similar 'cotton bias': see Mohanty (2005), Shiva and Jafri (1998). See also Guillaume P. Gruère, Purvi Mehta-Bhatt and Debdata Sengupta. 2008. *BT Cotton and Farmer Suicides in India: Reviewing the Evidence*. IFPRI Discussion Paper 808. Washington, DC: International Food Policy Research Institute. Available at <http://www.ifpri.cgiar.org/sites/default/files/publications/ifpridp00808.pdf> (accessed on 17 January 2009).

¹¹ See Vandana Shiva, 2004. The suicide economy of corporate globalisation. *Counter Currents*. Available at <http://www.countercurrents.org/glo-shiva050404.htm> (accessed on 15 November 2008).

play a significant role. The most important disaggregating measure is thus to broaden the scope of analysis from this link between endemic suicides and the Deccan, and to introduce Wayanad as a region that has an entirely different political, agrarian and environmental history.

Hence the study of farmers' suicides is in dire need of regionally specific ethnographic research. However, such ethnography is an exceptional methodological challenge. First, there is no group or community in the conventional anthropological sense that might be studied. The fact is not only that—for obvious reasons—dead farmers cannot be interviewed but also any identification of a relevant group would require a prior assessment of what factors constitute this relevant/decisive category of people, which in turn presumes a judgement of causes and reasons for suicides. To explain these difficulties I will shortly describe how I entered the field.

Prior to coming to Wayanad I was already acquainted with the problem of farmers' suicides. Like most people in India, I had been informed about it through the Indian media. I came to Wayanad actively looking for farmers' suicides and thereby framing a problem that is far from evident to the visitor. Entering Wayanad there are no visible signs of epidemic suicides. Wayanad presents itself to the first time visitor as a perfect tourist destination: a prosperous, fertile and climatically pleasant hill district.

The first peculiarity that I noted was the absence of villages as can be found in other parts of India: densely populated spaces where different castes live in separate streets but share central places, where the village temple, some shops, possibly the village Panchayat are located and where people may meet in the afternoons. The settlement pattern of Wayanad is dispersed: certainly there are administrative units called village (the smallest unit of the revenue department's apparatus) but they have arbitrary boundaries that are devoid of any cultural meaning or potential for socialising (you do not meet at the village office; it is just a small government building on a field). Instead people live dispersed in the hills, surrounded by their fields and land, even if they own very little. The proper address in Wayanad is the house name, followed by the 'PO' (post office), which may be at a different location than the village or the Panchayat. Trails connect these single and isolated houses to small dirt roads eventually connecting them to larger roads. At the juncture of these roads

there are small commercial centres, with hill products merchants, tea-shops and small grocery shops, a bus stop and a few Mahindra jeeps waiting to be hired. These settlements bearing names like '5th mile' (because they may be five miles from a larger junction) are not really places where people come together or meet and hardly anyone lives in them.

In terms of access there were two decisive consequences for my own field research. First, there were no villages where an ethnographer could settle down and, with time and trust, learn about suicide cases in the neighbourhood. Second, if you want to meet people in Wayanad, you need to visit them in their houses. That in turn means you have to know them or learn about them beforehand. Then you are required to make an appointment and finally hire a jeep to take you near the trailhead leading to their house. Thus, whenever I did meet people we came in a bunch of up to five mostly male persons: me, my field assistant, the NGO employee who had established the contact, the NGO's field-worker who knew the location, the jeep-driver plus the occasional jeep-driver's friend. The clock was ticking and the situation often felt awkward and was in no way adequate to speak about sensitive issues.

But the difficulty of getting an ethnographic hold on farmers' suicides is not limited to getting territorial access; it is one of categorically deciding on the real issue. I had chosen a top-down approach and entered the field via Shreyas¹² a social service and research NGO financed by the Syro Malankara Catholic Diocese of Wayanad. The plan was to follow the issue—farmers' suicides—mapping the discourses, narratives, actors and institutions that were involved in it. When my friends at Shreyas asked me whom I wanted to meet in order to gather my data, my first reaction was to arrange meetings with families of suicide victims. But not all suicides in Wayanad were related to agrarian distress. For many decades Kerala has had high suicide rates (Halliburton 1998), many with multiple causes: family problems, alcoholism (extremely widespread in Wayanad), health issues, 'love failure', or debt. In other words, to ask about suicide per se leads off-track, towards a general ethnography of suicide (for example, Chua 2009; Macdonald 2007). The next step then was to narrow the topic down to farmers' suicides. The Shreyas staff

¹² I contacted Shreyas because their research department had just produced one of the first publications of farmers' suicides in Wayanad (Shreyas 2007).

would then inquire: who qualifies as a farmer, and which suicides qualify as farmers' suicides, since after all farmers may also have family problems. Hence at the very beginning, before I was even able to access ground reality, I had to make categorical predefinitions of the type of suicide I considered relevant and eventually rely on categories of people (or cases) established by state or NGO knowledge-gathering practices. I decided on working with those widows who had either been identified by NGO field-workers or had been beneficiaries of state compensation.

Another no less problematic way was to follow the issue by asking for experts on the agrarian crisis.¹³ This had the advantage of greater distance from those who had come to exploit the sensational issue of farmers' suicides. Tabloid press, alert media,¹⁴ 'activist-journalist' P. Sainath of the South Indian newspaper *The Hindu*, the tours of central teams that came to investigate the issues but provoked the ire of many farmers because they brought their whole families, stayed in posh resorts and drove around in government SUVs. In short the study of agrarian crisis was much more acceptable to many people in Wayanad. The problem, however, is, again, that the focus broadens. Agrarian crisis is related to new crop diseases, (micro)climate change, price fluctuations of agrarian commodities on the world market, liberalisation policies, issues of land rights, *Adivasi* rights, raids by forest animals on fields, rights to forest produce, the Beijing Olympics and the rubber boom, an emerging environmental discourse, etc. Agrarian crisis was the much better known issue and more appropriate as an object of study. The suicides of some farmers were not necessarily centre stage in the discussions among farmers living in crisis. Therefore my strategy was to introduce myself as someone studying agrarian crisis but to steer the conversation towards suicides as best I could.

¹³ I conducted interviews with employees of the district administration at various levels from the collector to *tahsildar* and village officer, agricultural officer, NREGS officers, spice and coffee board members, to members of NGOs and other activists, to leaders of farmers' movements, to politicians, bankers, priests, environmentalists, journalists and marginal as well as wealthy farmers and of course victim families.

¹⁴ See K. Nagaraj, 'Farmers' suicides in India: Magnitudes, trends and spatial patterns. *Macroscan*. Available at http://www.macroscan.org/anl/mar08/pdf/Farmers_Suicides.pdf (accessed on 15 December 2008).

III

Wayanad: History and political ecology

Wayanad is a hilly tropical district in the South Indian state of Kerala covering an area of 2,131 square kilometres with a total population of 780,619 persons.¹⁵ The Western Ghats mountain range forms a natural boundary to lowland Kerala in the west and to Karnataka's Kodagu (Coorg) Region in the north; hence all major rivers of Wayanad drain towards the Deccan in the east and eventually reach the Bay of Bengal. In the east Wayanad borders on the Karnataka Deccan from which it is separated by large stretches of reserved forest and national park, and in the south-east it borders on the 'blue mountains' of Tamil Nadu's Nilgiri District. Both in terms of geographical distance and means of transportation, Wayanad is at an equal distance from Karnataka Deccan and coastal Kerala. In fact many people, especially the youth of Wayanad, orient themselves more towards Karnataka and Tamil Nadu than towards lowland Kerala. Wayanad consists of two ecological zones, the Wayanad Plateau and Wayanad Forested Hills.

Wayanad, although geographically remote from coastal Kerala, has a long history of exchange relations with the region. Wayanad's hill tribes participated in regional and even international economies as forager-traders (Morrison 2006) of forest products, especially pepper (which is native to the Malabar), but also cardamom, ginger, sandal-wood, ivory and wild honey. While Indo-Roman trade networks across the Indian Ocean date to the last centuries BC, coastal spice trade has, according to Kathleen Morrison, expanded and intensified in the immediate pre-colonial period and during the Portuguese Period (1498–1663) (Morrison 2006). Politically Wayanad was at the borderland of the kingdom of Malayalee Rajahs of Kottayam and Mysore state. Under Hyder Ali (1722–82) Wayanad became a tributary to Mysore, his son Tipu Sultan who had the Thamacheri Ghat Road built as a military road from Mysore to Calicut (today's National Highway 212), had to eventually (as per the Srirangapatnam truce) give up Wayanad to the British Raj. The British integrated Wayanad in the 1790s into the Madras Presidency, where it

¹⁵ Data taken from the 2001 Census of India; Wayanad has a population density of 369 per square km (the second lowest in Kerala) and a literacy rate of 85.52 per cent (male 90.28 female 80.8) (Government of Kerala 2003).

formed part of Malabar District (together with the coastal region around Calicut) (Innes 1997 [1908]). The British immediately developed Wayanad for incorporation into the imperial economy: tea and coffee plantations were built on a large scale, as well as roads to connect Wayanad both to coastal Malabar and to Coimbatore via Ooty in the Tamil parts of Madras Presidency. After independence, Wayanad became shortly part of Madras State and in 1956, when South India was restructured along linguistic lines, it became part of the new union state of Kerala. Wayanad was, however, broken up to form part of Kannur district in the north, and Calicut (later renamed Kozhikode) in the south. Only in 1980 did the current Wayanad district come into being, comprising of three *taluks*: Vythiri, Mananthavadi and Sultan Bathery.

Before the British established a plantation economy, Wayanad was sparsely populated, its hilly interior was covered by forest and inhabited by *Adivasi* groups who practiced swidden agriculture and collected forest produce for exchange. The river valley had settlements of high caste Chettis and Gaunders (Jains) who cultivated, with the help of *Adivasi* bonded labourers, wet-rice on the flat ground in the valleys and spices or coffee on the slopes of the hill. The British plantations also employed mainly *Adivasi* labourers from the region. After independence, however, large-scale migration to Wayanad by, mostly Syrian Christian, settlers from central Travancore occurred. The government of India actively encouraged the colonisation of forest regions for agriculture (Farmer 1974). Soldiers who had fought in the Second World War were given small plots of land in Wayanad. Independent of state action, the forests of Wayanad also attracted hundreds of thousands of impoverished settlers from Travancore. Many encroached on forest and revenue land but were tolerated by the state. Some settlers took over abandoned shifting cultivation plots of *Adivasis* in the forest. Soon these settlers came to constitute the demographic majority in Wayanad, which is today noteworthy for its high percentage of *Adivasis* (17.43 per cent), Christians (23.39 per cent) and Muslims (25.87 per cent).¹⁶

¹⁶ The 17.43 percent of Scheduled Tribes (*Adivasis*) stand in sharp contrast to only 1.14 per cent for Kerala. Census data on religion is available only for 1991 (Government of Kerala 2003). Most Christians in Wayanad belong to one of the Syrian Christian churches, the largest among them being the Catholic Syro Malabar, Syro Malankara rites as well as the Syrian Orthodox and Jacobite churches.

IV

The pepper boom of the 1990s and the rise and fall of an agrarian consumer class

Most of the older settlers remember their own migration as young men and women. During the early phase after 1945 migrants began their new life by cultivating paddy, tapioca and some coffee. Production was basically for subsistence. After 1964 a second wave of migrants came from Kottayam (the Syrian Christian heartland of Travancore) and entered the more remote areas at the border of the reserved forest. After 1970 most settlers started to shift their cultivation to cash crops, beginning with coffee. By 1975 many coffee plantations were levelled, paddy was neglected and farmers shifted to pepper and vanilla. In retrospect many farmers believe that they had no real long-term perspective in undertaking their actions. They only followed the latest market trend and the recommendations of agricultural officers. In the beginning everything went well, the soil was extremely fertile, yield was excellent and so was the price for spices. The 1980s and 1990s brought unprecedented wealth to Wayanad. In the late-1980s up until the late-1990s, many farmers of Wayanad especially pepper growers in the 'Pepper Panchayats' of Pulpalli, Mullankolli and Poothadi, became wealthy. Wayanad became an important earner of foreign currency in Kerala. Farmers, even relatively small farmers who owned around two acres could afford constructing large houses. Many farmers told me stories about the 'filthy rich' pepper growers of Pulpalli, who would come on the weekend to Sultan Bathery town 'to make jolly' and spend thousands of rupees on alcohol and food.¹⁷ In those boom years—which lasted even across the alleged liberalisation threshold of 1991—everyone, even those without land, started to cultivate pepper, often on the basis of loans with horrendous interest rates from cooperative banks, private banks and moneylenders (locally called 'blades' after the infamous instruments of their debt collectors).

¹⁷ Jokes (or legends) circulate in Wayanad, about the sales managers of the Mahindra jeep factory in Pune, who—so the story goes—got so many orders for their jeeps at a time when hardly anyone in India could afford private cars and that too from an unknown place called Pulpalli. The managers subsequently received a delegation from Pulpally to the factory while turning down a request for a visit from the powerful Delhi police.

The end of the 1990s hit Wayanad's agrarian economy in a series of crises. First, the world market prices for cash-crops dropped dramatically. Local rates for pepper (ungarbled) dropped from 270 INR/Kg in 1997 to 54 INR/Kg in 2001, coffee dropped from 60 INR/Kg in 1997 to 16 INR/Kg in 2002 and vanilla, most dramatically dropped from 4300 INR/Kg in 2003 to 25 INR/Kg in 2006. Prices had fluctuated before, most cultivators remembered price crashes in the late-1970s, but this time they were accompanied by a second crisis: a dramatic drop in productivity. Since the late-1990s Wayanad has been facing a serious ecological crisis. During the boom years cash-croppers heavily overused chemical fertilisers and pesticides in order to keep productivity high and profitable. The soil is now depleted beyond redemption and some Panchayats of Wayanad suffer from increased incidences of cancer.¹⁸ Furthermore new diseases started to affect plantations. 'Quick wilt', 'slow wilt' and 'foot rot' are their names, and all share the ability to destroy whole plantations quickly. In response to these diseases many farmers resorted to the use of more chemicals, even banned products like DDT, Phorate or Carbofuran applied in thousands of tons.¹⁹

Both the price crash and the productivity crash hit Wayanad simultaneously. Just before the crisis, banks would aggressively advertise consumer credits and gave out agrarian loans beyond their legal limits.²⁰ Many marginal landholders also took up intensive cultivation of single crops, partially on leased land and that on the basis of loans. Even many non-agriculturalists, 'hobby farmers' as one farmer put it, were attracted by the green gold rush and started cultivating. Input prices, for example the vine necessary to start a vanilla plantation, rose astronomically and labour became expensive and scarce. Add in the time it takes for perennial crops to actually yield fruit and it is obvious that there was a high amount of

¹⁸ According to medical doctors and social workers, those Panchayats with tea and cardamom estates as well as those where banana and bitter gourd are cultivated are most affected by pesticide-related diseases (see also Jayakumar 2002).

¹⁹ In response to the ecological aspects of the agrarian crisis, the last Left Democratic Front (LDF) government launched the Kerala State Organic Farming Policy, Strategy and Action Plan on 17 May 2010. It provides for the creation of organic zones and the phasing out of inorganic pesticides.

²⁰ Banks were supposed to give no more than a 25,000 INR loan per acre of farm land but, according to the president of Infam farmers' movement, actually gave up to 100,000 INR credit per acre in 1997.

risk involved. When prices crashed and plantations died, many farmers and neo-farmers were left with heavy debts. When, eventually the recovery notices of the banks arrived, hundreds of farmers, especially marginal landholders with up to two acres of land, drank pesticides²¹ and killed themselves.

Another economic practice emerged since the late-1990s and has a strong correlation with suicide cases. Many suicide victims had invested in the cultivation of ginger in neighbouring Kodagu (formerly Coorg) district. Since in Wayanad land is scarce and the soil worn out, many agrarian entrepreneurs went to Kodagu in order to plant annual cash crops—mostly ginger but also banana, sunflower and sugarcane. Kodagu is a plantation area with large landholdings in private hands. These landlords rented parts of land on an annual lease to small entrepreneurs from Kerala. The latter would bring their own labour force, mostly *Adivasis*, who stay in temporal shelters near the fields, cultivate and watch the crop for the season.²² For the entrepreneurs the possibility for profit was considerable. In the most common case of ginger, the input was about 150,000 INR per acre, including labour, fertiliser, pesticides and seedlings and the return was 500,000 to 600,000 INR. But the return could also be nil. 'Ginger is a gamble!', one ruined cultivator of ginger said. There is an almost 50 per cent chance that the ginger plant is going to be affected by a fungus that would spread quickly across the fields and destroy the plantation within days. Many suicide victims had given ginger 'one last shot', being already indebted they took another private loan to invest in ginger. When ginger failed, the result was fatal.

One question that I kept asking, when people started talking about the agrarian crisis as the prime explanation for farmers' suicides was why farmers committed suicide only in certain regions of India and not in others, with similarly precarious agrarian existence? Why did they not choose other exit options, such as labour migration or even joining

²¹ The most common way to commit suicide in Wayanad is to drink 'Furadan' (2, 3-dihydro-2, 2-dimethyl-7-benzofuran-5-yl methyl carbamate) a pesticide manufactured by Rallis India Ltd. It is available in almost every rural household as a widely and constantly used pesticide for bananas. 10 grams mixed with alcohol is considered a lethal dose.

²² The 'ginger frontier' has moved on from Kodagu. In search for new land for the cultivation of ginger, Wayanadian cultivators have reached as far as Goa and Maharashtra for their operations.

the Naxal movement? I was told in response that they were Malayalee settlers, and that settlers had a peculiar settler culture. Settlers came out of poverty; they left everything behind and took great risks in the hope of finding a better living in a far away and hostile environment. In their self-representations many settlers stress the forward looking and pioneering spirit of the Travancore migrants (see Varghese 2006). They were basically in need of land (*bhoomi*) and in the hills they found land. They began a new life in hostile malaria-infested country and struggled hard against the forest, wild animals and previous holders of land rights. Even though hundreds of families died in Wayanad and despite the large-scale dispossession of *Adivasis* (Kjosavik and Shanmugaratnam 2007), the Christian colonisation is regarded by migrants as a success in ‘developing’ a ‘backward’ region. In the beginning life was good, they had full crops on fertile soil, and were able to feed their families—some even became rich. Repeatedly I was told that ‘settlers’ had a special attachment to land, nature and their soil and that deserting the land for another migration to urban centres was unacceptable.

In addition to this settler complex, many local explanations of suicide related to consumer culture and the sentiments of a rising middle class. ‘We may not eat, but we pretend that we are all right,’ one Christian farmer told me. ‘Even if we are high in debt, we take another loan to paint our houses—but only from the outside.’ And a Syrian Christian priest added: ‘In Kerala, I want what my neighbour has. Kerala may be looking better off at first sight, but actually on the inside it doesn’t look so good.’ In the years of the pepper boom, Wayanad developed a quasi-urban consumer culture with shopping malls and retail outlets of fashion and electronics stores even in remote towns like Sultan Bathery or Kalpetta. A local police sub-inspector told me: ‘After 2000 a total change happened in Wayanad. They had a computer in every home. Everybody needs a two-wheeler, cell-phones and luxury foods. Globalisation has affected the youth; they put pressure on the parents to buy, buy, buy—that is the main reason [for farmers’ suicides].’

In this context, other cultural explanations were solicited: sub-optimal communication within families. Husbands very often did not even talk about their debt burden to wives and children: they just changed their character, became abusive and started to drink more heavily. Many widows shared later that they had no idea of their husbands’ debts, and

were not involved in agricultural matters at all. This made it all the more difficult for them to deal subsequently with the stigma, poverty and political instrumentalisation they were to experience.

V

The politics of farmers' suicides

'WTO Kills Farmers' (Lee Kyung Hae)

On 10 September 2003, Lee Kyung Hae, leader of the South Korean 'Federation of Advanced Farmers Association', stabbed himself to death with his Swiss pocket-knife at the opening day of the World Trade Organisation's Fifth Ministerial conference in Cancún, Mexico. He was wearing a sandwich board that read 'WTO Kills Farmers'.²³ With this act of protest suicide²⁴ Lee Kyung Hae arguably established on an international stage both the global link of farmers' distress and agrarian crises and the inherently political nature of all subsequent suicides by farmers worldwide. In fact his slogan 'WTO Kills farmers' has become the leitmotiv for social activists and journalists alike.

The political nature of farmers' suicides (in Wayanad and elsewhere) can be investigated in more than one way. Suicides can be understood as political acts in themselves, or one might ask for the political consequences of mass suicides for local and national bureaucrats and politicians. Finally it may be useful to investigate the micro-politics of targeting, compensation and populism that played out in the aftermath of increasingly politicised suicide cases.

The first approach is the most difficult. In some reports on farmers' suicides the events have become politically enlarged and understood as subaltern anti-WTO protests and so have been treated in a direct sense as political: farmers' suicides as political protest (Andriolo 2006). One of my original research questions was also to consider farmers' suicides as suicides against the state. This link, however, was difficult to establish in Wayanad. For other parts of India, P. Sainath has collected preliminary

²³ See James Brooke, 'Farming is Korean's life and he ends it in despair', *The New York Times*, 16 September 2003. See also Jonathan Watts, 'What drove a Korean farmer to kill himself in Cancun?' *The Guardian*, 16 September 2003.

²⁴ For a discussion of Lee Kyung Hae's suicide as protest see Andriolo (2006: 102).

evidence that keeps this line of questioning open for future research. He reports, for example, of farmers, who drank pesticides and then walked into the offices of agricultural officers, just to collapse dead at their desk, or of suicide notes that specifically addressed a Chief Minister or 'the government'.²⁵ No such incidents were reported from Wayanad, nor did I hear of any written suicide notes in the district. Still, I would maintain that farmers' suicides are communicative acts that intend to do more than just end a life: they convey a message of despair and protest and, therefore, a political message. In the absence of direct access to dead actors' intentions in killing themselves, the political nature of suicides in India can be induced only from the wider discursive field in which farmers move. Approximately since 2002, farmers' suicides have been very much at the centre-stage of political debate and have featured prominently in vernacular as well as English media in India. Farmers who killed themselves knew that they were part of a district-wide if not all-India epidemic, that their suicide would attract considerable attention from the media, NGOs as well as state agencies and also—controversially—that the state might eventually take care of their families, write off their debt and pay compensation of 50,000 INR.

If the immediate political nature of farmers' suicide may be open to debate they certainly had a significant politicising effect on Wayanad farmers. They became part of the activists' repertoire of depicting India's bestiary of the underside of globalisation (together with child labour, female infanticide and kidney sales of the poor); repeatedly invoked for castigating political failure. They also became an idiom through which farmers could reflect on the existential anxieties of being in debt and articulate the effect of large-scale processes on their livelihoods. Many farmers were quite specific in pointing to creditors, failing state support and globalisation as the main causes of (di)stress. Recently, as farmers' suicides have 'moved to the inner pages of the newspaper', as a local journalist put it, there are increasingly voices to be heard that, alternatively, stress the environmental aspect of the crisis, hence advocating organic farming rather than protesting against neoliberal policies.

Kerala, being the first state to democratically elect a communist government in 1954, has always had a comparatively politicised (and well educated) population (Franke 2006; Lukose 2009). The increasing

²⁵ See footnote 2.

numbers of farmer suicides additionally politicised farmers in Wayanad and inspired several new NGOs, farmers' movements and leaders. The most important of them are the Farmer Relief Forum (FRF) and the Indian Farmers' Movement (Infam). FRF specialises in direct action protests like the locking in of bankers or village officers who signed recovery notices or forcefully preventing police from evicting families off their properties or agitating at banks, village offices or at auction sales of indebted farmers' property. Infam even took the protest to Delhi, demonstrating for a general debt waiver, against neoliberalism and the WTO. Most farmers I spoke to, whether activists or not, were quite knowledgeable about the removal of quantitative restrictions on imports and the dismantling of import duties for agrarian products under the GATT regime as the main reasons for the fall in prices of agrarian cash-crops. They would speak of cheap coffee and pepper coming from Vietnam and Sri Lanka that keeps flooding the market and later to be resold as premium Wayanad pepper. Second, they articulated the retreat of the state, the cut of input subsidies and low investments in irrigation and infrastructure. Here they would speak of the government that always cheated, gave no security to the farmers, had no procurement policy and provided no minimum price. Those, however, who committed suicide, were rarely organised in social movements: neither FRF nor Infam claimed any suicide victims among their members.

The year 2006 was the year of State Assembly elections in Kerala. The agrarian crisis or '*kharshika prathisandhi*' was the prime issue in the Wayanad constituency. In the long run-up to the elections P. Sainath, agrarian affairs editor of *The Hindu*, visited the region and started publishing a series of articles on farmers' suicides in Wayanad.²⁶ Several central teams came touring the district, national celebrity activists joined in, as did a host of camera teams and journalists. A.C. Varkey, leader of Farmers Relief Forum, contested the elections for the Sultan Bathery seat, as did Thangamma Augustin in Kalpetta, who contested for the 'Widows and Destitute Movement', founded in 2002 as 'representative of women widowed and orphaned by the suicide of farmers'.²⁷ As a result

²⁶ See P. Sainath, 'Hope dies slowly in Wayanad', *The Hindu*, 18 December 2004; P. Sainath, 'Fewer jobs, more buses in Wayanad', *The Hindu*, 27 December 2004; P. Sainath, 'Wayanad: Arrack as distress trade', *The Hindu*, 9 January 2005.

²⁷ See R. Madhavan Nair, 'Spectacular sweep for LDF in Wayanad: The front bags all the three seats in the UDF bastion', *The Hindu*, 12 May 2006.

of the elections the Left Democratic Front (LDF) not only came to power in the state but, for the first time, a Communist Party of India (Marxist) (CPI(M)) candidate became MLA in a traditional United Democratic Front²⁸ (UDF) stronghold. Krishnaprasad, the CPI(M) candidate, had also published various articles on farmers' suicides and neoliberalism (George and Krishnaprasad 2006).²⁹ Prior to the elections a coalition of NGOs, left parties, activists and farmers' movements had formed a 'joint action committee' (JAT) to press the state and union governments to save Wayanad farmers from their acute crisis. Among the demands addressed to the state was the granting of a 50,000 INR compensation to all families of those farmers who had committed suicide.

VI

The politics of facts and figures: The performance of 'relief' in state-farmer interactions

'No real farmer has committed suicide'
(Agricultural Officer, Wayanad)

'One farmer's suicide every 30 minutes'³⁰

The official all-India suicide-rate³¹ has for the last 10 years constantly been around 10.5 and hence not extraordinarily inflated.³² Kerala's official

²⁸ United Democratic Front (UDF) is locally called the 'right wing'. UDF's main constituencies are factions of the Congress Party and the Muslim League. Historically, LDF and UDF governments have alternated in the government of Kerala state.

²⁹ See also, P. Krishnaprasad 2004. 'Mounting suicides: Urgent need to save Wayanad farmers', *People's Democracy* 28 (29). Available at <http://cpim.org/pdf> (accessed on 13 September 2008).

³⁰ See footnote 2.

³¹ The suicide rate is the incidence of suicide mortality per 100,000 inhabitants. In India it is assembled by the National Crime Records Bureau (NCRB) and published annually in the 'Accidental Deaths and Suicides' report. The all-India suicide rates from 2002 to 2006 are as follows: 2002: 10.5, 2003: 10.4, 2004: 10.5, 2005: 10.3, 2006: 10.5 (National Crime Records Bureau 2007).

³² Some comparative suicide rates: Sri Lanka: 30.7, China: 13.9, Brazil: 4.35, Russian Federation: 33.95, Lithuania 40.5, see World Health Organization. 2003. Suicide rates (per 100,000), by country, year, and gender. Available at http://www.who.int/mental_health/prevention/suicide/suiciderates/en (accessed on 15 December 2008).

suicide-rate was 26.8 which is more than twice the national average and the third highest in India (after Pondicherry and Andaman & Nicobar Islands) and had been so for the last years.³³ Within Kerala there are two districts that have been given the recent status of 'suicide-prone districts': Idukki and Wayanad. Even though suicides are statistically well captured, there is a considerable fluctuation in the number of reported farmers' suicides.³⁴ In May 2006 union minister for agriculture Sharad Pawar informed the Parliament that between 1993 and 2003, 112,000 farmers had killed themselves. There are many grounds on which to contest these numbers as either too high or too low. The problem is the availability of good statistics. As said before, the 'Accidental Deaths and Suicides (ADSI)' annual report (National Crime Records Bureau 2007) is the only official source of information. It lists the distribution of suicidal death by state, gender, marital status, causes of suicide, means adopted and profession. According to K. Nagaraj, the professional category farmer (although still unspecific) is a relatively recent category in the ADSI reports: 'The category self-employed (farming/agriculture)—which can be taken as representing the farmers—was added for the first time in 1995 (...)' (Nagaraj 2008: 2).³⁵ This change in the statistical procedure therefore brought visibility to a previously invisible phenomenon, and thus actually produced awareness of farmers' suicides.

For all-India the official number in the ADSI reports is 190,753 farmers' suicides from 1995 to 2006. That makes an average of 16,000 suicides per year, which is still an underestimation since some major states have not reported on farmers' suicides.³⁶ The suicide rate for farmers can be calculated only for the year 2001, this being the first year that statistical data on farmers were recorded in the Census of India.³⁷ On an all-India

³³ The suicide rates for Kerala from 2003 to 2006 are: 2003: 29.6 (Kerala State Mental Health Authority', available at <http://www.ksmha.org/suicide.htm> (accessed on 15 March 2010), 2004: 27.8, 2005: 27.7, 2006: 26.8) (National Crime Records Bureau 2007: Table 2D).

³⁴ Suri, for example, gives a very low number of 8,900 suicides by farmers between 2001 and 2006 in the four states of Andhra Pradesh, Karnataka, Kerala and Maharashtra (Suri 2006: 1523).

³⁵ See footnote 14.

³⁶ See footnote 14.

³⁷ The decennial Census of India, however, other than the ADSI, lists 'cultivators' under two headings, namely 'main workers' and 'marginal workers' (for example, Government of Kerala 2003).

basis this does not make for highly inflated suicide rates among farmers: 15.8 among the main cultivators as compared to 10.6 of the general population. An entirely different perspective emerges, however, if one takes into account the fact that numbers of farmers' suicides vary significantly across India. For Kerala, a suicide rate among main cultivators of 176.5 emerges, and the figure is still 142.9 if all cultivators are considered. Those numbers are alarming indeed.

The problem in recent years has been the considerable political interest in keeping the number of farmers' suicides low. Local policemen, who ultimately decide what to write in their report under the rubric of profession and cause, may be rather strict in their definition of farmer and debt. The status of farmer (cultivator) is based on the criterion of title to land. This leaves out women, tenant farmers, agricultural labourers, but also regular farmers if the land title was in the father's or son's name. A stringent criterion for agriculture-related suicide would be the absence of any other cause neighbours might mention (such as alcoholism or family problems).

The local practice of identifying farmers' suicide became additionally complicated after 2004 by the decision of the new LDF government to actually pay a compensation of 50,000 INR to all families with cases of farmers' suicides out of the Chief Minister's Distress Relief Fund (CMDRF). Understandably all families affected by suicide cases tried to get them acknowledged as farmers' suicides. In the beginning, as a populist measure, the criteria were handled rather loosely and compensation was paid rather freely. The first compensation cheques were handed over during public functions under great media attention. Later, both to be able to present the success of the other relief measures of the new state and union governments and to curb costs, the practice became more stringent. The debt still had to be the cause of suicide, but now it had to be an institutional credit (excluding debt with moneylenders) and the loan had to have been taken for agricultural purposes (excluding consumer loans).

In Wayanad, since suicide statistics are directly linked to the payment of compensation through the Revenue Department, the number of farmers' suicides stagnated during the years 2006 to 2008. 'Safe Farmers Campaign' (SFC), a consortium of eight, mostly Catholic, NGOs (including Shreyas), in 2007 began a large-scale investigation into farmers' suicides that ran parallel to the state's efforts of enumeration and

classification. Taking police reports of suicides as a starting point and following up all cases from 2000 to March 2008 they have come up with a total number of 1,690 farmers' suicides (Kerala Social Service Forum 2009). That is nearly four times the figure of 435 officially recognised farmers' suicides. The latter number is also the number of beneficiaries of the Chief Minister's (CM) relief fund. In order to receive the CM fund compensation, an additional layer of inquiry has been introduced. The village officers (VO) are now required to investigate and certify that the prime livelihood was agriculture. They need to report to the *tahsildar*³⁸ who requires a certificate from the bank, the post mortem and the police first information report (FIR). The *tahsildar* then completes a questionnaire to the collector, in which he makes a recommendation concerning whether compensation should be paid. To my question as to why they compensate only 'farmers' suicides' a village officer answered: 'Because it's a political issue. There is the issue that the government is not doing anything for the farmers.' However, another officer of Sultan Bathery *taluk* administration explained that there was an oral order to stop the payment of compensation immediately. The reason, he says, lies in the allegation that these payments might actually encourage further suicides: 'Anyhow, the government has decided to reduce these cases. So they will ask for many more clarifications before releasing any money.'

So when I started visiting widows of suicide cases I was certainly not their first visitor. Depending on the year of the suicide, these widows had experienced calls from police officers, journalists, camera-teams, NGO social workers and researchers (Kerala Social Service Forum 2009; Shreyas 2007), the village officer, the *tahsildar*, the collector, politicians of local, state and union level, field investigators of the Kerala Department of Economics and Statistics (Government of Kerala 2009), farmers' movement leaders, Pentecostals and social scientists (for example, Mohanakumar and Sharma 2006; Nair and Menon 2009; Sunil 2007). NGO workers told me quite frankly who among the beneficiaries would still receive visitors and who would get angry, or not open their doors.

The CM fund is the most specific programme that targets only cases of farmers' suicide. A complete mapping of the 'post-suicide' developmental state would have to include many more programmes and packages,

³⁸ The *tahsildar* is the head of *taluk* administration, the revenue department's administrative level below the district.

including the so-called ‘Vidarbha Package’ (officially: ‘Prime Minister’s Package for Rehabilitation’ or ‘Rehabilitation Package for Suicide Prone Districts’) that was released by the union government in 2005–06 for 31 suicide-prone districts and which provides a writing-off of loans for the families of farmers’ suicides as well as a cow, for income generation, to their widows.³⁹ Among the more general programmes that are neither limited to suicide cases, nor to suicide prone areas but are considered to be progressive agriculture-friendly schemes responding to agrarian crisis, are the National Rural Employment Guarantee Scheme (NREGS) and the general debt waiver (Agricultural Debt Waiver and Debt Relief Scheme, 2008) of all overdue agricultural loans for small and marginal farmers with up to five acres of land. The ‘Kerala Farmers Debt Relief Commission’ also began its work in April 2007 prior to the introduction of the national scheme, but was discontinued with the implementation of the 720 billion INR debt relief scheme.

VII *Conclusion*

Farmers’ suicides constitute a complex phenomenon, not easy to come to terms with as an object of study. Suicides in the agrarian district of Wayanad relate, on the one hand, to very specific practices of cash crop farming and to regional histories of political-ecological crisis. They demand further ethnographic attention in their own right. Suicides relate on the other hand to intimate biographies of migration, personal aspirations, choking debts, bad family relations and, possibly, diseases and alcoholism. The study of suicide in relation to questions of personhood and subjectivity will also fruitfully inform further research. However, such research will have to work its way around the ethical and epistemological challenges of doing case-studies under conditions where ethnographic encounters are highly over-determined by years of ‘development encounters’ by families facing tragic loss. The experience of migration and agrarian boom and bust, the life at the precarious forest frontier as

³⁹ For a complete list of the 31 ‘distress-affected districts’ and the scope of the Prime Minister’s Package see Government of India (2007).

well as the economic effects of trade liberalisation produced expectations of consumer citizenship but also structured feelings of sadness, despair and anxiety widely shared by the living and the dead.

The ethnography of farmers' suicides thus lacks a self-evident object of study. Ethnographically following up any of these two directions, the study of agrarian crisis or the study of individual suicide situations, research may lose sight of farmers' suicides as a meaningful category. The political ecology of agrarian crisis is a much larger story to which suicides are one among many aspects. Life histories of suicide victims are equally far too complex to be exclusively reduced to agrarian economics. Farmers' suicides appear as a unitary object only as a contentious representation: as a political scandal in the critical media, among activists and politicians. Most scholar-activist representations of farmers' suicides use them to tell important stories about the profound crisis of Indian agriculture in economic and ecological terms. Scepticism about the immediate link between neoliberal restructurings or GM seeds and farmers suicides must not invalidate their critique.

Most importantly, however, farmers' suicides have become a category of state intervention, indeed a category of regions and people that attains visibility only through the state's enumerative and classificatory apparatus. This category in turn is the prerequisite for a segment of the population to approach the state at the local level for relief and compensation. Thus suicidal farmers earn entitlement to state care through their death—attaining a sort of posthumous citizenship.

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