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Farmers' Distress in *The Long March* and *Shoes of the Dead*

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Abstract:

A substantial portion of Indian society is occupied in agriculture or allied occupations. Therefore, farmers are the foundational force of the Indian economy. However, they have continued to be perturbed while making ends meet. Disappointed and disillusioned, they surrender to death. The disillusioned attitude is the result of numerous causes. Their livelihood and financial resources are conditional not only on the open market but also on nature's varying moods, the government's laissez-faire attitude, import-export policies, unfair market dealings, globalisation, etc. The factors described above affect the lives of the farmers and make them vulnerable. The present research paper is centred on two novels set in the Vidarbha region of Maharashtra. A comparative study of the two novels, namely, *The Long March* by Namita Waiker and *Shoes of the Dead* by Kota Neelima, is undertaken in this paper. Both narratives elucidate the trauma and dilemma in the lives of farmers of the Vidarbha region. The select novels represent the wretched life of farmers in the region and vocalise the need for the fight and struggle against the injustice inflicted on farmers. They bring to attention the required justice for farmers. This justice, as the narratives indicate, would not be accorded to farmers by external agencies such as governments, political leaders, administrators, or media speakers; rather, it would have to be acquired by launching or setting out a strong campaign by farmers themselves. Both novels suggest several causes for the farmers' plight and offer some identical

solutions. The novels expatiate on the distress of Vidarbha's farmers and the predicament of farmers across India.

Keywords: Vidarbha, farmers, neoliberalism, distress, suicide.

Me aagla vegala, mahi nyarich jindagani;

Mahye maran bhi aahe, jase avakali paani.

I am unique; my life an uncommon odyssey;

My death will also be like untimely rain (Hardikar ix)

Shrikrishna Kalamb

A substantial portion of Indian society is occupied in agriculture or allied occupations. Therefore, farmers are the foundational force of the Indian economy. However, they have continued to be perturbed while making ends meet. They are the cultivators and producers of food for the country; paradoxically, due to inadequacies in the system and persistent agrarian hardship, a significant agri-based population could not secure substantial food security for their own families. A marked deficiency of fundamental necessities is discernible in the thatched houses of farmers. They are unable to fulfil the elemental and legitimate needs of their families, such as adequate nutritious food, fine clothing, and good educational opportunities. At the culmination of socio-economic distress and psychological suffering, they withdraw from life and commit suicide. Does the sense of hopelessness and alienation ensnare them due to their own incapacities and inefficacies as a farmer, or are other factors equally viable? Are farmers solely accountable for their predicament, or do other factors in society share the agony?

Aristotle mentioned in his *Politics*, “Man is by nature a political animal. And therefore, men, even if they do not require one another's help, desire to live together” (59). Being an integral constituent of society, his ‘essence’s accountability equally falls on society. Concerning farmers, this association is firmer as their livelihood is conditional on external factors such as the impact of global markets, nature's varying moods, unfair market dealings, the government’s laissez-faire attitude, import-export policies, globalisation, etc. Farmers’ socio-cultural lives are heavily influenced by the above and the like forces, and despite being the breadwinners, they become vulnerable.

This paper focuses on two novels. The first is *The Long March* by Namita Waikar, the managing editor of the People’s Archive of Rural India (PARI) - a digital platform for rural journalism founded by veteran journalist P. Sainath. The novel, published in 2018, portrays a debt-laden family from the Vidarbha region of Maharashtra. The head of the family is depicted as succumbing to death owing to a long-standing psychological despair of economic indebtedness. The twenty-year-old son of the deceased farmer and the protagonist of the novel, Vikram Sonare, supports the family from a job in the Agricultural Technological Centre after his father’s death. With the knowledge of technology and social media, Vikram forms a network among Indian farmers and initiates a silent revolt for the fair share of rural people in India’s prosperity. Mallika Joshi, an NGO worker from Mumbai, assisted him in his quiet defiance.

The second novel discussed in this paper is *Shoes of the Dead* by Kota Neelima, published in 2013. It focuses on one more deceased farmer named Sudhakar Bhadra and his family from the Vidarbha region of Maharashtra. The novel primarily foregrounds the intricate ‘politics’ or bureaucratic and political manoeuvring played around the compensation issues of the deceased farmers in the area. There are long debates with little practical endeavour by the characters representing the political and administrative side for reducing the actual number of recorded

suicides in the constituencies. Both novels are contemporary narratives of farmers' agony. Both novels depict the resistance against societal discrimination and capitalist exploitation undertaken by the close acquaintances of the deceased farmers. In the novel *The Long March*, it is the son of the deceased who is portrayed as engaged in a fight against injustice, while in *Shoes of the Dead*, the fight is undertaken by the brother of the deceased. It suggests that justice for the farmers will not be provided by other sources, such as governments, political leaders, administrators, or media representatives. Instead, it must be achieved through their own active actions. Farmers' solidarity is essential for their rights. Both novels provide a list of reasons for the farmers' plight along with solution-oriented resolutions. Some of them are analysed in this study.

The government's policies are designed to aid farmers in enhancing their income levels and overall living standards; however, the narratives frequently reveal that the outcome is often contradictory to the intended objectives. The question regarding administrative and governmental awareness of agrarian issues faced by the farmers' community requires a critical examination here. The question here becomes essential as there is hardly any improvement in farmers' socio-economic conditions; instead, cementation of the distressed status quo is noticed through the study of select narratives. The various schemes are ineffectual in helping farmers overcome adverse circumstances; instead, they continue to be subject to those conditions. Farmers' issues have become a game of dice, which various political agencies engage in to enrich themselves. The agenda of the political agencies, as described in *The Shoes of the Dead*, manipulates the issues of farmers to serve their own purposes to secure votes in the subsequent elections. The underlying motivation behind various governments' approaches at the onset of elections echoes the colonisers' instrumentalisation of colonial subjects to secure political legitimacy and imperial control rather than to realise a sustainable welfare program. Most of the schemes proposed for the welfare of farmers are motivated by the hidden goal of gaining

their backing. Schemes to waive crop loans are implemented in the states before elections. The promised relief funds, compensations, and subsidies for crop failures are not substantial or sustainable. They only provide temporary relief, but the root causes of farmers' disparagement are not addressed through such provisional measures. Instead, there should be the implementation of viable remedies. If we provide farmers with feasible solutions to their problems, the number of suicides in the region will effectively come down.

Historically, farmers in the region cultivated a diverse range of native crops that were adaptable to the ecological and socio-cultural conditions. Traditionally, farmers were accustomed to storing some sorghum and other grain crops, while the rest was sold in the market to procure some economic gain essential for auxiliary needs. With the introduction of BT cotton in regional agricultural fields, farmers experienced significant changes in the crop system and further regulations in the market dealings. When the BT cotton and other hybrid seeds were introduced in the neo-liberal period of the 1990s, the traditional varieties of native crops were altered by the monocultural cultivation of the BT variety of cotton. BT cotton and other hybrid seeds are the products of capitalism. They were introduced to produce a good quantity of crops for gaining good monetary results. But the quality of these products is not taken into consideration. The farmers started sowing hybrid seeds instead of indigenous varieties of food grains and cotton. And it was not their own choice; rather, they were under obligation to plant that as it was asked and demanded in the market. Thus, farmers turned to hybrid seeds, resulting in a swift decrease in indigenous varieties of crops like *jowar*, which had less demand in the global market. It indicates that globalisation directly affects the local cropping systems. Due to the free market policies formulated during the neoliberal era, Indian farmers are compelled to compete with global market standards without the security of policies, subsidies, or protection from the government that is provided to farmers from other countries, such as the US, by their governments. Farmers were and are like the 'One-Dimensional Man' of Herbert Marcuse, not

directly forced, but indirectly left with no choice but to produce the crops that are in demand. Whether the BT seeds are proper for the soil they were sown in and whether they will improve farmers' lives were not the concerns while introducing these hybrid seeds in the country. The individuality of farmers and of the crops they produce is lost, and there is a production of monocrops that are in high demand in the global market.

In the age of late capitalism, farmers are the consumers. As consumers, they are cheated in the world of globalisation or by the cultural industry, as mentioned by Adorno and Horkheimer in their essay "The Culture Industry: Enlightenment as a Mass Deception." According to them, the critical and inquisitive faculties of the people are stunted. Only the things that are consumed at the larger or mass level are produced. Instead of individual differences, it depends on stereotyping products, and only certain kinds of products are cultivated on farms.

Indigenous food varieties are undervalued in the global market. In discourse about farmers in any sphere, they are not treated as individuals but rather as a 'number' in the game of statistics. Whenever farmers are represented by the government or any other private agencies, they are categorised according to their income groups and counted as numbers on various charts of long-term plans or short-term implementations of schemes. Due to such methodological techniques, the individuality of farmers is oppressed, and ultimately, they are dehumanised. In other words, farmers are the cogs in the bigger apparatuses of the global market and are shaped by an abstract system. There is no freedom or autonomy for them in deciding the cropping system. There is manipulation of the farmers and homogenization of crops.

Local seeds required less water, and they were pest-resistant. The BT cotton variety introduced as a commercial cash crop was claimed to be a genetically modified variety capable of resisting bollworm and other infestations. However, genetically engineered seeds required more water than local varieties, and drought-prone areas like Vidarbha are unfit for this new

variety of cotton. Farmers sowed it in the hope of getting a good crop. Instead, that gave rise to indebtedness, which is the biggest cause of farmers' suicides in the region. Gopalkrishna Gandhi mentions in his foreword to *Everyone Loves a Good Drought*, a book by P. Sainath, that "new strains of synthetic crops and commercial cropping are converting agriculture into a gamble with death" (xix). Huge numbers of farmers are committing suicide in Vidarbha due to many reasons, like low yields, constant crop failure, etc. "Suicide is on the minds of many farmers in Vidarbha," Meena Menon and Uzamma mentioned in their book *A Frayed History* (81). They have also mentioned the petition made by 102 farmers from the Wardha district of the Vidarbha region to the government for permission to commit suicide in 2016. If one pays attention to the numbers, then P. Sainath mentions in one of his lectures on Indian farmers that "one every 30 minutes" takes his life (Kaushal 46). As this number is disturbing, so is their plight, which makes the study more relevant and urgent.

The cost of genetically modified seeds is three times higher than that of non-BT seeds. There is an additional cost of fertilisers and pesticides, as the claim of seeds being pest-resistant turns out to be false. Therefore, chemical manures and insecticides were introduced into agricultural markets, and they were also claimed to be beneficial for the farmers. Interpolated by advertisements, farmers started purchasing chemical products to improve the quality and quantity of their crops. However, are these chemical fertilisers and pesticides manufactured for the benefit of farmers or, as Adorno and Horkheimer say, created with the ulterior motive of profit and deluded farmers? The consequences associated with using such chemical fertilisers make the above question relevant. Even a large number of suicides, including the suicide of the most strong-willed protagonist, Gangiri, by consuming the same chemicals in the novel *Shoes of the Dead*, validate the above question. If these fertilisers are gradually taking the lives of those who eat the food grains produced by spreading them, they are also causing many deaths among farmers.

Therefore, growing cotton is costing farmers arms and legs in the region. It also resulted in them having to spend money to buy food for themselves that they had previously obtained from their farm. Neither farmers nor common people are benefiting from the overdoses of fertilisers. Most of the benefits of fertilisers go to a handful of manufacturers. They are accumulating material gain at the cost of hampering the healthy lives of the people. A capitalistic agenda is behind the introduction of pesticides and fertilisers into farming. Vandana Shiva once stated in a speech that these chemicals came from Hitler's lab after the Second World War. She says that "chemicals made to kill people in concentration camps are the same chemicals that are being used now." She proposes organic farming in her speech. Organic farming could be one answer to the problem of unhealthy food people consume every day, but is it an effective and feasible solution to farmers' issues, and is the adaptation simpler? There is a need for adequate research on its adaptability and wider applicability.

Various measures have also been proposed by governmental bodies and other private agencies to alleviate farmers' distress. However, those proposals have largely been based on external analysis and lack the holistic contextual analysis of the distress. "Solutions for any sector would have been a real success only if they included inputs from people who belonged to that sector; in this case, the farmers themselves" (*Shoes of the Dead* 14). Farmers' involvement is necessary if the issues related to them are to be addressed. Both novels proposed the same thing. It has also been noticed that most of the agencies, either governmental or private, that claim to be giving solutions to farmers' problems, have studied 'numbers of farmers' suicides. This has reduced farmers' lives to statistics. Suicides are not the result of sudden distress caused by debt. The causes of farmers' suicides are not limited to isolated incidents that happened at one point in their lives. Their plight is shaped by the constant and cyclical interplay of failures throughout their entire lives. Their lives, from the cradle to the grave, are sunk into distress. Therefore, when reflecting on their troubles, one ought to reflect

on their life as a whole, not as parts. The character Gangiri leaves his job as a teacher when his brother commits suicide, and when the district committee rejects his claim to be an eligible farmer to get compensation from the government. Later, he was appointed as a member of the district suicide committee and fought for the endorsement of the committee to acknowledge most of the farmers' deaths as debt-distress suicides. His efforts are opposed by many members, and by their attitudes, we noticed how farmers' suicides are of less concern for most people in society. They are either negligent toward farmers' issues or believe that farmers are destined for such an awful end.

There exists a negative perception that farmers commit suicide to enable their families to receive compensation money given by the government to a deceased farmer. If one temporarily accepts the negative perception, it raises fundamental questions about the effectiveness of governmental agencies and society at large. For a small amount, the bread-makers lost their lives. It indicates the systematic failure that left one important part of society helpless to take their lives for a little compensation provided by the government. Jawaharlal Nehru once said, "Indian peasants have an amazing capacity to bear famine, flood, disease, and continuous grinding poverty when he could endure it no longer; he would quietly and almost uncomplainingly lie down in his thousands and millions and die." He further states that, "that was his way to escape" (Kaushal 46). But is it an escape, and if it is, then why does the next generation suffer the same agony? It may be an escape for the farmer as an individual, not for the farmer as a collective or in general. As earlier said, suicides are the result of the continuous distress farmers endure throughout their lives. Provisions like compensation for families provide limited financial support and are insufficient to address the agricultural crisis.

There is another question: do these suicides of the farmers show only their helplessness or something else, like the failure of postcolonial governments in their own country? Are these

suicides a rebellion against the way farmers are perceived in their own society? Since independence, the farmers of this nation have dreamed of improving their circumstances. Like every other free human being, they too desire to prosper in a free world. It is not merely about the financial prosperity; it is a matter of life—a good, healthy, educated, reputable, and happy life, which is or should be the right of everyone. Others are fulfilling their dreams successfully, but the farmers are still waiting to build their own concrete houses, educate their children, and get rid of a way back to poverty. Is it not distressing that even after so many decades, our bread-makers continue to live as they did generations ago in the same thatched house, uneducated and dilapidated?

They do not even get enough nutritious food for themselves and have less than their bodies need, and thus go starving. There can be nothing paradoxical and tragic that the providers of substance – the farmers – suffer from malnutrition. They drink water many times to fill their belly when the hunger is unbearable (*Long March*). Ironically, farmers are providers and beggars, as they own prestigious land and still suffer from poverty. They produce most of the food but are offered the same by the government under the free ration (food grains) schemes. Free food grain is provided to families belonging to those below the poverty line, and most of those people belong to the agricultural field.

Farmers take loans from the government or private banks, moneylenders, and relatives to manage their households and continue farming. But later, ‘the interest of taken loans grows faster than the crop’ (*Long March* 116), and they become indebted. Eventually, with the indebtedness, they lose their land as they sell some of it to pay the debt. They also lose their self-respect and courage to live and choose ‘death’. “Death is an eager bride when you are a farmer in debt” (*Long March* 117).

An alone farmer is like a blade of grass, so light and vulnerable, but “when many small things come together, they become big and heavy” (*Long March* 23). The same is true when the farmers come together; they will be tenacious. Farmers must find new ways to “shake up the authorities (media) and convince them to pay attention to their plight” (*Long March* 76). There is a need to create a network among farmers in the country, as created by Vikram in the novel *The Long March*, that will help to initiate new cooperative movements for their well-being. Technology can be the best aid in their pursuit. Because all the farmers in the country share almost the same problems. They work hard but gain nothing. In some parts of the country, farmers are fighting against governments and powerful industrialists. They are putting their lives in jeopardy to keep themselves and their families from being prey to these bigwigs. These kinds of efforts should get support from other parts of the country as well. Farmers from other regions should actively lend their helping hands for their betterment. In short, there should be cooperation among farmers from all the regions of the country.

The issues of the farmers should be given focus on the larger platform. Journalists and media reporters should focus on their lives and narrate their stories. However, we noticed that the mainstream media neglects the farmers’ issues. They hardly talked about the farming field. The mainstream media is busy covering only the lives of TV celebrities or news happening in a few metropolitan cities. “The media don’t cover rural India,” P. Sainath says in his introduction to his book (4). He also provides the numbers. “Between 2012-16, front-page space given to stories from India’s 6,40,000 villages was 0.26 per cent” (4). This scenario must change, and the media should bring farmers’ issues into the limelight. By doing so, a sense of connectedness would be felt by the farmers. They would think that they were not alone in their suffering. The society they live in concerns their agony, and it will provide them with some relief and courage to stand in the adverse situation.

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