

Thinking Clearly about Suicide in India

Desperate Housewives, Despairing Farmers

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The patterns of suicide in India are quite different to those observed in industrialised societies. Those differences must lead us to question many generalisations which almost approach sociological “law” such as the protection against suicide afforded by marriage. This paper contrasts media coverage of farmer suicides in India with the near total neglect of the suicides of housewives, though there are more than three housewife suicides for every one of a farmer.

Over the past decade the print media have returned again and again to the issue of suicides amongst India’s farmers. Depending on weather patterns and prices, the focus of these reports is sometimes on Andhra Pradesh, sometimes on the Vidarbha region of Maharashtra, at other times on Karnataka.

While not in any way wishing to dismiss the seriousness of rural distress in central India, in this paper I want to suggest that India’s press coverage of farmer suicides is highly stereotyped, is unintentionally highly selective in what is reported and what is ignored and generally fails to observe the ethical guidelines on reporting suicide deaths which are now the norm elsewhere. To illustrate the point, in this paper I will compare Indian media coverage over farmer suicides with a relatively more serious crisis among India’s housewives. I will begin by briefly reviewing what we know about how the media, everywhere, present the news in terms of genres and frames.

Framing the News

One of the fundamental tools of media analysis is the importance of “framing.” According to Robert Entman (1993: 52),

to frame is to select some aspects of a perceived reality and to make them more salient in a communicating text, in such a way as to promote a particular problem definition, causal interpretation, moral evaluation, and/or treatment recommendation.

Tannen’s work from a linguistic perspective is also relevant since it underscores the reciprocal role of frames in transmission and reception: frames are “structures of expectation, based on past experience...which help us process and comprehend stories [and] serve to filter and shape perception” (1993: 53).

Price, Tewksbury and Powers observe that there are two major journalistic influences which act to shape the selection of items for presentation in the news. The first, “agenda setting” is the selection of “issues, events, and people deemed newsworthy and thus deserving of media attention” (Price et al 1997: 482). The second is the way journalists present stories through particular frames. Citing William Gamson, they note that

These frames often reflect broader cultural themes and narratives, and they supply citizens with a basic tool kit of ideas they use in thinking about and talking about politics. How events and issues are packaged and presented by journalists can in this way fundamentally affect how readers and viewers understand those events and issues (Price et al 1997: 482).

The research presented in this paper was initially supported by a grant from the Australian Research Council. Portions of the paper were presented to the Seminar on Asia’s Emerging Middle Class, University of Wollongong, 10-11 August 2006 and at the Annual Meeting of the Association for Asian Studies, Chicago, 26-30 April 2009. The author acknowledges the comments provided by an anonymous referee of this journal.

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[Theorists of framing argue that] By activating some ideas, feelings and values rather than others...the news can encourage particular trains of thought about political phenomena and lead audience members to arrive at more or less predictable conclusions (p 283).

[Conflict, human interest and consequence] offer editors and reporters a repertoire of story slants or news hooks they can employ in presenting any particular issue or event to readers or viewers (p 485).

Gamson and Modigliani identify five framing devices used by the media to suggest to readers how to think about an issue: metaphors, exemplars, catchphrases, depictions and visual images (1989: 3).

Campbell argued that framing is involved at every stage of the news process:

Journalists approach an event and using their news sense, i.e., knowledge or instinct of what is newsworthy, evaluate a potential story. Operational rules are then used to gather the relevant facts and background information from sources like personal contacts and libraries. Reporters construct the news by interpreting the gathered information and targeting the issue for the appropriate readership or audience. Editorial rules refer to the knowledge of the organizational requirements. These rules are applied throughout the process in conjunction with the other rules categories (1997: 61).

In an examination of UK media coverage of disasters, Bennett and Daniel note that the media is often charged with using distorting stereotypes to frame stories.

The western media has been accused of covering Third World disasters in an excessively emotional fashion, focusing on their sensational aspects rather than the serious side of local relief efforts (2002: 35).

Framing Media Coverage of Suicide in India

In this paper I look briefly at the ways in which the media in India frame and report on two major categories of suicides, those of farmers and those of housewives, developing the argument that there are significant policy consequences which arise from the ways each is framed in the media. By way of introduction, let us consider the major genres of suicide which make their way into Indian newspapers.¹

'Ordinary' Suicides: We can distinguish a number of broad categories of suicides which are reported in the English language in India. First there are what may be termed "ordinary suicides." On any given day, over 300 Indians choose to end their lives. Of these only a small fraction receives even cursory mention in the daily press. Whether one reads newspapers from the 1960s or the 2000s, there is a depressing similarity to most of these brief vignettes lifted from the police records which tell of economic failure, family friction, despair over disease or reaction to humiliation.

Gururaj and Isaac note some recurrent features of how suicides in this category are framed in media coverage: (i) "a tendency to 'sensationalise' the act with catchy and attractive captions"; (ii) a focus on poverty related issues; (iii) disproportionate coverage of suicides of a number of individuals at one time; (iv) greater coverage of unusual events; and (v) greater coverage of mysterious deaths (2001: 45).

Celebrity Suicides: At the other end of the spectrum is media coverage of the suicide deaths of celebrities (see for example,

anon 2013; Sridhar 2014). Because of the prominence of the dead person, these reports are placed, not amongst the municipal and police items, but on or near the front of the paper or magazine. Some examples of the relatively more prominent coverage of celebrity suicides are: the death of contemporary dancer Ranjabati Chaki Sircar in Kolkata in 1999 (Kalidas 1999), the death by jumping from the fifth story of a five-star hotel in New Delhi of media personality and news reader Bhaskar Bhattacharya in 2000 (Kant 2000), the death of Bangalore model Rakhee Choudhari in Mumbai in 2002 (*Deccan Herald* 2002), the death of Tamil filmstar Revathisree in Chennai in 2003 (*Times of India* 2003), that of Mumbai model Archana Pandey in 2014 (IANS 2014) and recently the death of BA Pass actor Shikha Joshi (Express News Service 2015).

Student Suicides: Another significant category, especially prominent between March and June when examinations are in progress, is of stories of students taking their own lives (for example, Das 2001; Rao R 2014; Srivastava 2014; Gowhar 2015). These "student suicide" stories often give only the bare details of a child unable to bear the stress of educational competition. Occasionally an article, such as the one by Leela Menon (2002), surveys student suicides in a state, in this case Kerala.

Indian student suicides occasionally feature in the international press as happened in 2002 when the Saudi press picked up a story, then reprinted in the United States, of the suicide of a student who had actually passed the second-year exam but who took his life before it was found that his name was inadvertently left off the university list (*Washington Report on Middle East Affairs* 2002).

There are two other major categories on which I wish to focus for the remainder of this paper: "economic—especially farmer—suicides" and "female suicides."

Economic—Especially Farmer—Suicides: Without question the largest, and in many respects the most complex category is that which reports on the suicides attributed to economic distress, particularly among weavers and farmers. What distinguishes the articles in this category is the way in which stories are framed in terms of broad economic issues which in most cases are linked to policy changes which have taken place in the post-1991 era of economic reforms. In almost all the articles, individual suicides are treated, not as the principal subject of the article, but as exemplars, that is, a routine journalistic device, at times almost a cliché, used to highlight the hardships experienced by a broader class of workers. In this genre, vignettes of worker suicides—frequently framed with a photo of surviving relatives—are an almost obligatory feature, used in much the same way that pictures of severely malnourished children are in articles on famine in Africa (for general discussions of the selective attention of the media to development issues, see Bennett and Daniel 2002; Sainath 2002).

Weaver Suicides: In 2001 and 2002, a number of articles appeared which highlighted the plight of power loom weavers

in Andhra Pradesh (see for example, Our Staff Reporter 2001; Farooq 2001; Dayashankar 2001a, 2001b; Reddy 2002). For more recent media coverage of weaver suicides (see, for example, Acharya 2012; Krishnan 2011; Naidu 2013; Salvadore 2013).

The most extensive and in-depth examination of the condition of weavers in Andhra that we have seen is the series of articles written by Asha Krishnakumar in 2001 (2001h, 2001g, 2001b, 2001f, 2001e, 2001a, 2001c, 2001d). Krishnakumar outlined a series of policy changes since 1985 as well as changes in the national and international market which have led to an economic crisis for both handloom and powerloom weavers in the state (see especially Krishnakumar 2001e, 2001d). These changes include the emergence of competing powerloom centres in Maharashtra which have lower costs of production and higher productivity and which more recently have introduced jet looms,² liberalisation policies which promoted the export of cotton and yarn, increased electricity charges and excise on yarn, and the removal of import restrictions which has led to dumping of cloth by Thailand and China. More recent articles make it clear that little has changed in the intervening decade (Galab and Revathi 2009; Kumar 2013; Naidu 2013; Salvadore 2013; Nemana and Rao 2014).

At the end of several of Krishnakumar's articles are poignant case studies of weaver suicides which trace a common, distressing history of loss of income, lack of alternative work, mounting debt and family distress and finally a decision to end life (Krishnakumar 2001h, 2001b, 2001f). One further feature set Krishnakumar's articles on weaver suicides apart from almost all other discussions of suicides arising from economic causes in the Indian media: a relatively informed discussion about the causal factors which lead a tiny minority of affected individuals to choose death (Krishnakumar 2001g).

Farmer Suicides: The largest body of reports on suicides with economic causes are those which cover farmer suicides. As with weavers, coverage of farmer suicides tends to attribute the cause of suicide to the economic distress of the individual. Some accounts are brief and relatively factual, much like the coverage of "ordinary" suicides (for example, *Hindu* 1998; Our Principal Correspondent 1998; Siddiq 2000; Sharma 2002; PTI 2015). The greatest number of stories, however, use farmer suicides as a stock journalistic device for highlighting agricultural distress in a district or region (for example, David 1998; Nautiyal 2002; Deshpande 2003). In these reports the vulnerable rain-fed agricultural regions of the Deccan feature prominently.

A number of articles locate the causes for farmer distress in the intersection of adverse weather, government policy failures and inappropriate crop choices. In 2004 Vivek Deshpande reported on the distress experienced by cotton farmers in Maharashtra's Vidarbha region arising in part from failures in official procurement mechanisms. Samar Harlankar surveyed the situation in Karnataka, Andhra Pradesh and Maharashtra, concluding that the agricultural crisis could be traced to a headlong rush by farmers to embrace cash crops (Harlankar 1998; a similar assessment was made by Iyer 1998).

The media also occasionally covers the politics of farmer suicides, for example, speculation on the impact of farmer suicides on impending elections (Reddy 1998; Datta 2003) or reports of official investigations into the causes of farmer suicides (*Hindu* 2001). A spectacular example was the death by hanging of a farmer who attended a rally of the Aam Aadmi Party in New Delhi in 2015 (Sriram and Anand 2015).

Stories about agrarian distress and farmer suicides in India are occasionally picked up by the international media who report matters in much the same terms as appear in the Indian press, (for example, anon 1998; Waldman 2004).

As with weaver suicides, a few journalists have probed the issues in greater depth or with greater persistence. In a companion piece to Krishnakumar's articles on weaver suicides, Parvathi Menon wrote an in-depth study of suicides by groundnut (peanut) farmers in Andhra Pradesh's Anantapur District. Menon found that drought, as well as market changes brought about by economic liberalisation—higher costs for electricity, fertilisers, seeds and low prices because of cheap imported edible oil—had all pushed families into debt (2001a, 2001b).

Among those who have reported for many years on all aspects of Indian rural life, including farmer suicides, perhaps none is more distinguished than the former Rural Affairs Editor of the *Hindu* P Sainath. His investigations of rural poverty in the 1990s were summarised in Sainath (1999). For other reports on farmer suicides, see, for example, Sainath (2001b, 2001a, 2005c, 2005d, 2005b, 2005a, 2005e, 2009).³ In many of Sainath's articles a farmer suicide (often accentuated by a poignant photograph taken by the journalist) was used to frame an acute investigation of the broader issues facing farmers. An article on the situation in Maharashtra's Vidarbha region in 2005, for example, found that drought, lack of access to credit, failures of cotton cooperatives to pay farmers, rising input costs and falling prices have plunged farmers into mounting debt. In short: "[T]he state has turned its back on the farmer" (Sainath 2005c).

Politics of Farmer Suicides: Economic commentators have also used farmer suicides to highlight policy changes which they feel are necessary. In 1998, Jairam Ramesh noted that differing explanations had been offered for the suicides of cotton farmers in Andhra Pradesh in that year: media exaggeration, imitation and the risks of farming in arid and semi-arid regions. He went on to argue that cotton farmers had been hurt less by economic reforms than by policy failures. In addition to the collapse of state-supported credit and the provision of agricultural extension, the failure to give cotton farmers consistent access to world markets had also hurt them (Ramesh 1998).

More commonly, though, suicide deaths among weavers and farmers have also been utilised by activists as a means of dramatising their opposition to economic liberalisation, globalism and intellectual property regimes promoted by the international bodies such as the World Trade Organization. In her 2000 Reith Lecture for the BBC, the prominent

environmentalist Vandana Shiva introduced her argument that “industrialisation and genetic engineering of food and globalisation of trade in agriculture are recipes for creating hunger, not for feeding the poor” by a reference to farmer suicides:

Recently, I was visiting Bhatinda in Punjab because of an epidemic of farmers suicides. Punjab used to be the most prosperous agricultural region in India. Today every farmer is in debt and despair. Vast stretches of land have become water-logged desert. And as an old farmer pointed out, even the trees have stopped bearing fruit because heavy use of pesticides have killed the pollinators—the bees and butterflies (2000).

It is essential to note here that a rigorous academic study of farmer suicides investigated the situation in the Punjab (Bhalla et al 1998). It concluded that, on the whole, Punjab has a very low rate of suicides, and “that politicians and the mainstream media misrepresented the scale and causes of what they claimed were debt-driven suicides by farmers in the Punjab.” Rather, “[dowry] and expenditure on narcotics and alcohol” were the major causes of debt (Swami 1998). Despite this strong evidence, Vandana Shiva has continued to highlight farmer suicides in other parts of India to validate her arguments about the harm being done to small farmers by trade liberalisation and the entry into India of giant international seed corporations (see for example, Shiva 2004a, 2004b; Shiva and Jafri nd).

Another prominent environmental activist who has highlighted farmer suicides to criticise harmful aspects of globalisation is the journalist Devinder Sharma. Commenting on the agricultural situation after the defeat of the Chandrababu Naidu government in Andhra Pradesh in 2004, Sharma observed that the core cause was industrial farming (2004).

The most sweeping linkage of Indian farmer suicides with economic liberalisation has been the report issued by Christian Aid “The Damage Done: Aid, Death and Dogma.” The report argued that the real origins of the agrarian crisis in Andhra Pradesh lie in international pressures for liberalisation in India (2005: 14). (An Indian NGO introduced the report with the headline “Britain Blamed for Indian Suicides.”)

The Christian Aid report concluded:

The number of farmers taking their own lives in Andhra Pradesh is shocking and indicates that something has gone terribly wrong with the agricultural sector. These are not deaths from just one area or from just one type of farming. This is suicide on a scale that is surely unique in modern times.

The immediate cause of these deaths is debt. This debt was brought on by a number of factors, all of which, except for the weather, can be ascribed to liberalisation. These liberalising factors at both national and state level were the results of policies made by India’s central government, the Andhra Pradesh state government of Chandrababu Naidu, the IMF, the World Bank and [UK development agency] DFID....[H]ow many more years will it take for the world to wake up to the fact that wholesale liberalisation of agriculture and the privatisation of the support mechanisms that sustain it are killing farmers? (2005: 29–30).

One response to the intense media interest in farmer suicides has been the publication of a number of academic studies. In addition to the study of Punjab farmer suicides by Bhalla cited earlier, the Tata Institute of Social Sciences has produced a study of the situation in Maharashtra (Dandekar

et al 2005), and the National Institute of Rural Development has produced a study of farmer suicides in Andhra Pradesh and Karnataka (Vidyasagar and Suman Chandra 2003). Others who have studied different aspects of farmer suicides include Gill and Singh (2006); Mishra (2006a, 2006b); Mohanakumar and Sharma (2006); Sridhar (2006); Vaidyanathan (2006); Jeromi (2007); Mitra and Shroff (2007); Behere and Behere (2008); Gruère et al (2008); Mishra (2008); Nagaraj (2008); Choudhary (2009); Padhi (2009); Sheridan (2009); Deshpande and Arora (2010); Das (2011); Gruère and Sengupta (2011); Dongre and Deshmukh (2012); Münster (2012); Kennedy and King (2014); Nagaraj et al (2014).

Housewife Suicides and Suicides by Women: In contrast to the frequent appearance of stories in the media about farmer suicides, the references to them by social activists and the detailed research work on agrarian conditions by academic institutions, there is little distinctive media coverage of the suicides of married women—or of women generally.⁴

The suicides of housewives are most commonly treated with brevity, as “ordinary” suicides. On the relatively rare occasions when the Indian media do cover the suicides of married women it is almost always framed in terms of mistreatment by in-laws and harassment for dowry. An article by Prabhjot Singh, for example, reported that “harassment by in-laws for various reasons, including insufficient dowry, accounts for 80% of suicides by women in Punjab, where the incidence of ending one’s own life has been alarmingly on the rise in recent years” (2000). An earlier example by Navneet Sethi and K Anand (1988) which looked at the impact of the compulsion for women to be married and the consequences of demands for dowry is presented in terms of the examples of the deaths of two sisters. A second but less common framing device arises when the very rare cases of *sati* occur. Though extremely infrequent these are relatively more common in articles about India which appear overseas. A BBC article, for example, reported on a *sati* in Madhya Pradesh in 2002, without obvious framing (anon 2002).

Realities of Indian Suicide Rates: At the risk of labouring the point, I hope that the contrast in extent and focus of media coverage has made clear the very different ways in which the media in India report the suicides of farmers and housewives. By way of introducing the next section of the paper let me summarise a few of the key points which emerge from that contrast:

- First, farmer suicides receive far more coverage than those of housewives. One could be quite forgiven for assuming that suicides of the former are correspondingly more frequent than the latter.
- Second, on the basis of the location of media reports, we would logically infer that the highest rate of farmer suicides occur in central India, that is, in Andhra Pradesh, Maharashtra, Karnataka and Madhya Pradesh.
- Third, despite everything we learned from Esther Boserup, on the basis of media coverage, we would conclude that all

farmers are male, or at least that all farmers who take their own lives are male.

- Fourth, media coverage would lead us to conclude that the aetiology of most farmer suicides is economic distress.

In what follows I want to suggest that each of these very reasonable inferences is wrong.

A methodological preface is in order. The only way in which we can compare the incidence of suicides is by comparing rates, conventionally the rate per 1,00,000 (that is, per lakh). In almost all media reports of farmer suicides, rates are almost never cited. Instead raw numbers are used. Because India is still a largely rural society in which agriculture is the occupation of the majority, the raw numbers are large and alarming. But as I will indicate in a moment, large raw numbers in a large population do not necessarily translate into high rates.

The suicide rates reported in this paper rely upon the official data compiled by the National Crime Records Bureau (NCRB) and it is reasonable to ask how accurate they are, given that in other countries and at other times there have been major inadequacies in reporting suicides. It is quite common in the Indian literature to assert that the NCRB figures greatly understate the actual number of suicides in India. Paripurana and Varma in his pioneering study of Indian suicide, for example, estimated that perhaps only one-third of suicides are captured in official figures (1976: 127). The one systematic study of the overall accuracy of Indian suicide data is that of Patel and colleagues (2012) who have recently published data based on psychological autopsies of deaths between 2001 and 2003. The data used in the Patel study were drawn from a sample collected by the Registrar General—conducted up to three years after the fact which were subsequently evaluated by independent assessors. They estimate the all-Indian suicide rate, when applied to the age-adjusted 2010 population, at 22 per lakh, well above the 11.4 per lakh recorded officially by the NCRB (which are not adjusted for age) (Patel et al 2012: 2345).⁵ This discrepancy is significant and should be the subject of independent investigation. A number of factors which may explain the differences are (i) NCRB data are collected on the spot by the police while the Registrar General's sample relies upon recall several years after the fact. (ii) Until Section 309 is finally deleted, attempted suicide remains a crime under the Indian Penal Code. It seems probable that the police, in assessing the intention of a deceased person, have applied the criminal law test of "beyond reasonable doubt," while Patel's team may have made their assessments on something approaching the civil law test of "on the balance of probabilities." Since the intention of the deceased is critical in determining whether a death is a suicide, these differences may explain the divergent results.

My colleagues and I have conducted an extended discussion of the accuracy of the official suicide data (Mayer et al 2011). To summarise broadly: we did not find any evidence of systematic distortion in the data caused, for example, by classifying drowning suicides as accidents. One straightforward test is to compare the national rates reported for India with the reported rates for Indians in the diaspora; these are virtually identical.

Farmer suicide data are subject to similar scepticism. In a recent study of farmer suicides, K Nagaraj and colleagues, who also utilise NCRB figures, argue that the official designation of occupation may undercount farmers because of the "rather strict and stringent definition[s]" of who is a farmer used by the police, at least in Andhra Pradesh (Nagaraj et al 2014: 55). In a recent newspaper report which notes the puzzling reduction of farmer suicides reported for 2014, the authors dismiss the at-least-theoretical-possibility of an actual decline by stating that "No one really believes NCRB data as credible when it comes to farmer suicides, not even the NCRB" (IndiaSpend and Saha 2015).

The possibility that official statistics may *over-represent* the correct numbers of farmer suicides is much less frequently considered. Kumar Nilotpal's important anthropological study of farmer suicides in Andhra Pradesh's Anantapur District explores the impact government compensation schemes, such as Andhra Pradesh's "interim special package for relief, economic support and rehabilitation, 2004," have on the identification of the causes of suicide deaths in farming communities (2011). Nilotpal provides granular detail of the process by which suicides, which clearly had nothing to do with adverse agricultural conditions, were, nevertheless, converted by community collusion with agents of the state from personal tragedies

Table 1: World Suicide Rates (per 1,00,000), c 2001

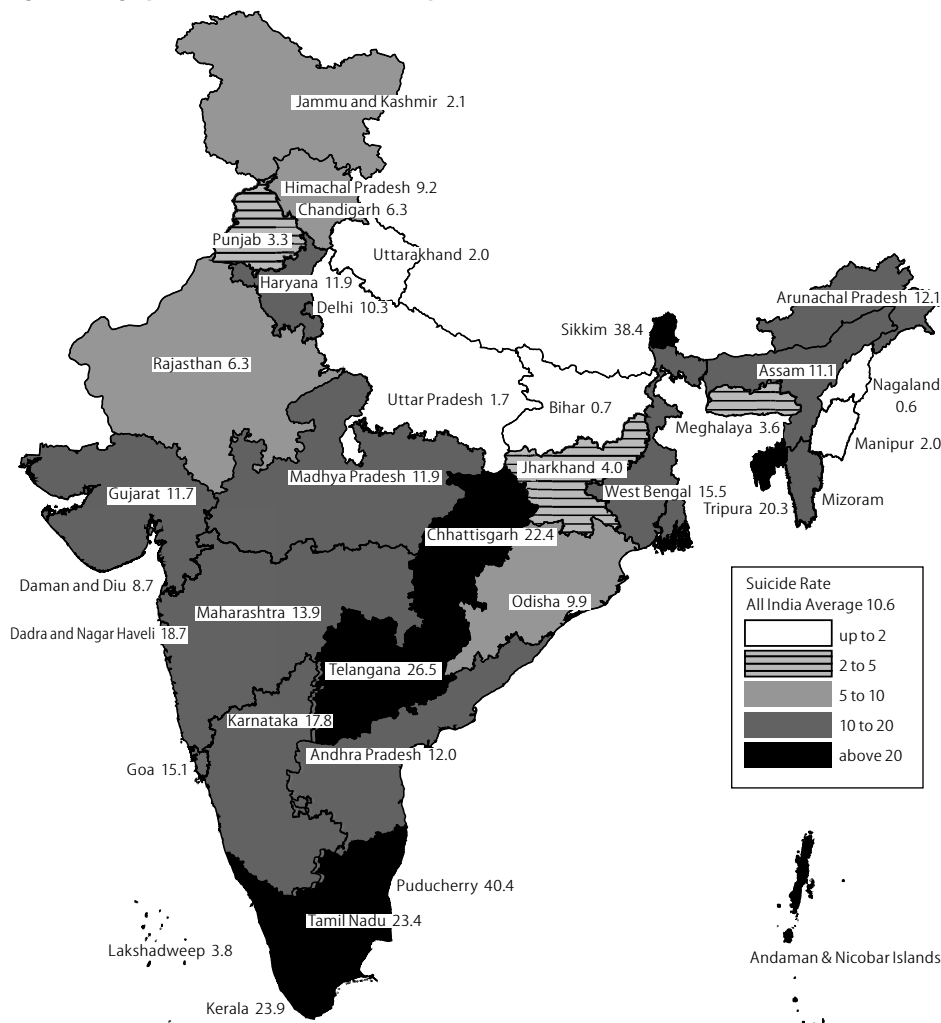
Country	Year	Total	Country	Year	Total
Lithuania	1999	38.4	Norway	1997	10.9
Russian Federation	1998	32.1	Romania	1999	10.8
Estonia	1999	28.1	Germany	1998	10.6
Kazakhstan	1999	27.9	Iceland	1996	10.4
Hungary	1999	26.9	United States	1998	10.4
Ukraine	1999	25.2	Uruguay	1990	9.6
Slovenia	1999	24.6	El Salvador	1993	8.5
Sri Lanka	1995	21.5	Netherlands	1997	8.3
Finland	1998	21.1	Puerto Rico	1992	8.1
Croatia	1999	18.5	Zimbabwe	1990	7.9
Belgium	1995	17.9	United Kingdom	1998	6.8
Cuba	1996	17.1	Costa Rica	1995	6.6
Switzerland	1996	16.7	Argentina	1996	6.5
Austria	1999	15.5	Israel	1997	6.5
Yugoslavia	1990	15.3	Spain	1997	6.5
New Zealand	1998	15	Italy	1997	6.2
France	1997	14.8	Chile	1994	6.1
Japan	1997	14.5	Venezuela	1994	6.1
Kyrgyzstan	1999	14	Ecuador	1995	5.5
China (selected areas)	1998	13.7	Albania	1998	5.3
Denmark	1996	13.6	Brazil	1995	4.7
Poland	1996	13.4	Thailand	1994	4.1
Australia	1997	13.3	Portugal	1998	4
Czech Republic	1999	13	Georgia	1992	3.9
Republic of Korea	1997	12.8	Mexico	1995	3.9
Ireland	1996	12.5	Colombia	1994	3.4
Bulgaria	1999	12.3	Greece	1998	3.1
Sweden	1996	11.8	Kuwait	1999	1.5
Slovakia	1999	11.5	Philippines	1993	1.5
Bosnia/Herzegovina	1991	11.3	Peru	1989	0.6
Canada	1997	11.3	Iran	1991	0.2
India	1999	11.2	Syrian Arab Republic	1985	0.1

Source: Adapted from Krug et al (2002).

into “farmer suicides” entitled to monetary compensation from government (2011: 224). Community collusion involved such things as creating false credit notes as “evidence: of indebtedness (Nilotpal 2011: 251). Of 29 cases officially recognised as farmer suicides which Nilotpal investigated in depth, 45% were understood by fellow villagers to be “fake farming suicides” (2011: 231). Münster in a study of farmer suicides in Kerala’s Wynad District has also noted that the existence of state payments creates strong incentives: “Understandably all families affected by suicide cases tried to get them acknowledged as farmers’ suicides” (2012: 202). Officials in Wynad became concerned that state payments might “actually encourage further suicides” (Münster 2012: 203).

Let us begin by considering the overall pattern of suicides in India. As can be seen from the map (Figure 1), there is a distinct regional pattern to suicide incidence: suicide rates are highest in the south and, broadly speaking, lowest in the Hindi heartland in the north.

Figure 1: Geographic Distribution of Suicide Rates per lakh (1,00,000) in India, 2014



Suicide rate means number of suicides per one lakh population. Source: Adapted from *Accidental Deaths and Suicides in India, 2014*, p 197.

Indian Suicide in the Global Context

Let us begin by placing the overall level of suicides in India, as officially recorded, into the global context.⁶ In Table 1 (p 48) it is evident that the Indian national suicide rate around 2001 was neither one of the world’s highest nor lowest. Rates in India are far lower than in the former Soviet bloc. Equally they are considerably higher than in some other developing economies and countries with Muslim majority populations.

A Brief Comment on Occupation

We have suicide information for only a few occupations which allow us to relate them to corresponding categories reported by the Census of India.⁷ Data do allow us to investigate suicide rates for farmers and housewives. Here data available from the 1991, 2001 and 2011 Census of India have been adjusted to let us calculate rates for subsequent years.

Farmer Suicide Rates Compared to Other Occupational Groups: Next let us place farmer suicides in the broader context of the relative handful of occupational groups for which we can compute suicide rates.⁸ As we can see from Table 2, in 1997

the unemployed had relatively high suicide rates: 27.2 per 1,00,000; those rates have declined since then, falling to 22.7 in 2001 and 9.0 in 2011. In 1991 both civil servants and the retired had higher rates than did farmers; by 2011 the rates of both occupations had fallen below those of farmers. Students have a rate lower than those of other occupations, though it must be of concern that the rate is rising when others appear to be declining. Those employed in agriculture had suicide rates below the national average of 11.2 in 2011.⁹

Table 2: Suicide Rates by Occupation (1997, 2001, 2011, per 1,00,000)

Occupation	Suicide Rate		
	1991	2001	2011
Unemployed	27.2	22.7	9.0
Civil servant	22.3	21.2	12.7
Retired	14.0	14.5	12.2
Self-employed (farming/agriculture)	12.98	15.7	14.5
Student	2.1	2.5	5.8

Let us now examine farmer suicides, by gender. As can be seen in Table 3, male farmer suicide rates in 1997 were only

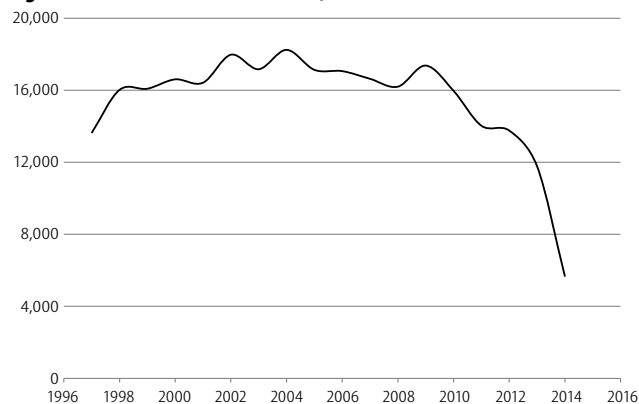
Table 3: Self-employed (Agriculture) Suicides (1997, 2011, 2014 by Gender, per 1,00,000)

	1997		2011		2014	
	M	F	M	F	M	F
Suicide rate	13.2	11.2	14.6	5.4	6.3	1.4

slightly higher than those for the relatively smaller group of women farmers, something one never finds in any media reporting of farmer suicide. By 2011, the rates had significantly diverged; male rates had risen to 14.6 while rates for female agriculturalists had fallen to 5.4. Three years later, male farmer suicide rates had fallen to 6.3 per lakh, women farmers to 1.4.

The 2014 volume of Accidental Deaths and Suicides in India devoted for the first time a separate chapter to farmer suicides which presented disaggregate figures for different classes of workers in agriculture (NCRB 2015). The chapter makes explicit that for statistical purposes “Farmers include those who own and work on field[s] (namely, cultivators) as well as those who employ/hire workers for field work/farming activities. It excludes agricultural labourers” (NCRB 2015: 266). As Figure 2 illustrates, the raw numbers of farmer suicides have fallen dramatically since 2009. Between 2013 and 2014, numbers fell precipitously but puzzlingly from 11,772 to 5,650.

Figure 2: Number of Farmer Suicides, 1997–2014



The detailed breakdown of figures provided in the 2014 Report is to be welcomed; it allows us to examine the rates for different categories of participants in agriculture.¹⁰ In Table 4 we can see that the rate for all cultivators and agricultural labourers is 4.3 per lakh. For all farmers, the rate is 4.9 per lakh; for tenants the overall rate is 3.1 per lakh and for agricultural labour 4.0 per lakh. The suicide rates for males are virtually the same across categories: 6.4 per lakh for owners, 6.0 per lakh for tenants and 6.0 per lakh for labourers. Female suicide rates are also quite comparable for all categories of agriculturalist.

The 2014 Report allows us to see, for the first time, the hitherto invisible suicides of agricultural labourers. Not only are the rates for agricultural labourers, male and female, comparable to those of farm owners, but the absolute number of labourer suicides (6,710) is noticeably higher than that for farm owners (4,949) (NCRB 2015: 237). It hardly needs emphasising that any approach to rural suicides must include equal emphasis on agricultural labour.

Desperate Housewives

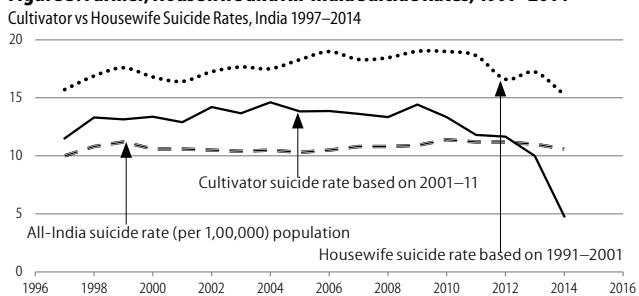
Now let us extend the comparison to include housewives. In 2014, 5,650 farmer suicides were recorded in India; in the same year, 20,148 housewives took their own lives, over 250% more in raw numbers. If we were to form our assessment from media coverage it might be 1/10th or less.

As can be seen in Table 5, suicide rates for housewives in 2014 were slightly more than twice those for farmers. If we consider the long-term trend (Figure 3) we can see that while housewife suicide rates have fallen somewhat from their peak in 2011, farmer suicide rates have fallen precipitously from a peak in 2009. The reasons for the decline, especially the sharp drop between 2013 and 2014 are not clear.

Table 5: Suicide Rates, Farmers v Housewives (2014, per 1,00,000)

	Suicide Rate
Self-employed (agriculture)	
Male	6.3
Female	1.4
Total	5.3
Housewives	13.3

Figure 3: Farmer, Housewife and All-India Suicide Rates, 1997–2014



When we look at the pattern in individual states and territories there are striking differences (Table 6).¹¹ In 1997, in the small union territory of Pondicherry/Puducherry, the male farmer suicide rate was 239 per 1,00,000. The rate for female farmers in Pondy in that year was an astronomical 480 per 1,00,000. In 2011, by contrast, there were no recorded farmer suicides in Puducherry.

Table 6: Farmer v Housewife Suicide Rates, by State, 1997, 2011

	Self-employed (Agriculture) 1997		Housewives 1997	Self-employed (Agriculture) 2011		Housewives 2011
	Males	Females		Males	Females	
Pondicherry	238.8	480.4	54.1	0.0	0.0	63.6
Kerala	132.3	52.6	22.1	85.3	21.1	21.7
Karnataka	34.1	26.3	27.0	51.6	10.5	28.2
Maharashtra	26.9	8.4	31.0	45.7	3.6	46.9
West Bengal	24.8	63.7	16.6	14.7	23.5	26.1
Goa	20.8	0.0	21.0	6.7	0.0	26.8
Madhya Pradesh	19.2	19.1	20.4	17.2	6.0	33.3
Tamil Nadu	18.4	13.9	17.6	10.0	3.0	34.5
Andhra Pradesh	17.6	6.7	24.5	22.4	4.3	27.8
Gujarat	11.8	16.4	18.5	13.0	3.3	23.2
Rajasthan	9.5	4.9	10.7	3.0	0.7	14.1
Assam	7.7	2.0	6.5	9.7	1.2	14.5
Punjab	6.1	0	2.2	5.4	2.2	3.8
Odisha	5.7	6.2	12.2	4.1	0.8	16.8
Haryana	2.9	0	9.5	19.6	4.9	16.6
Himachal Pradesh	2.9	1.0	7.2	2.5	0.5	16.1
Uttar Pradesh	2.4	4.9	2.9	3.6	2.6	5.2
Bihar	0.9	1.0	1.4	1.1	1.4	1.1
Jharkhand	–	–	–	3.9	0.3	6.6
Chhattisgarh	–	–	–	0.0	0.0	49.5

Similar comments apply to Kerala, where the male rate in 1997 was 132 and that for female farmers was 53. In 2011 the respective figures were 85 and 21.

Another state which once had a high but largely invisible farmer suicide rate especially among female farmers is West Bengal. In 1997 male farmer suicides were at virtually the same rate as in Maharashtra (25 vs 27), but female suicides were at the high rate of 64 (the overall rate for women in Maharashtra was 8). In 2011, the respective rates had fallen to 15 and 24.

The other summary conclusion to emerge from Table 6 is that in many states farmer suicide rates were far lower in 2011 than they were in 1997. Chhattisgarh is a noticeable exception.

If we now consider housewives, we may note that in general, their suicide rates were higher in 2011 than in 1997 (Pondicherry, Kerala and Karnataka are exceptions). In 2011 in Pondicherry, Maharashtra, Tamil Nadu, Madhya Pradesh, Kerala Karnataka, Andhra, Goa, West Bengal and Gujarat housewife suicide rates were at or above 20 per 1,00,000. Indeed, in only Punjab, UP and Bihar was the rate less than 10 per lakh.

The states in bold under the Housewives column are those where their suicide rates were higher than those for farmers, male or female. It can be seen that this was the case in all but seven states in 1997 and in five states/territories in 2011. In Pondicherry in 1997 and in West Bengal in 2011 the suicide rates of female farmers were higher than those for males. *Of the major Indian states, in 2011 it was only in Kerala, Karnataka, Haryana and Punjab that male farmer suicide rates were higher than those for women—either farmers or housewives.*

Suicide and Social Change

Why are the suicide rates of housewives in some Indian states so high? It is, after all, one of the commonplaces of suicide research in Western societies that marriage confers protection from suicide to married women.¹² The very brief answer which I propose is that it reflects the conflicted roles in which women find themselves as Indian society undergoes social change. This is a theme which I examine in greater detail in another paper. For the moment, let me simply state my argument that as Indian marriages change from those arranged by parents and based on more formalised relationships between husband and wife, to those which are increasingly like what students of marriage in 18th century Europe have termed “companionate marriage,” a small fraction of married women find themselves unable to cope with the stresses which arise.¹³

Conclusions

I began this paper by surveying commonplace understandings of the media studies literature which highlight the ways in which the media rely on a relatively narrow repertoire of frames to select and present news items. What I have tried to show in this paper is that media framing of suicide in India gives highly disproportionate emphasis to the suicides of male farmers. At the same time, housewife suicides, which are both greater in number, and often occur at a higher rate than those of male farmers pass largely without either emphasis or comment.

How may we explain the great difference in coverage? In my opinion the answer is to be found in a higher level frame which is common in both the Indian media and in much scholarly writing: a ideological preference for the agricultural policies of subsidies and price-supports which were in force before the 1990s. I believe that the way in which farmer suicides are framed validates this interpretation. Almost without exception, the aetiology of farmer suicides is attributed to economic distress arising from one or another aspect of economic liberalisation, whether it is the use of BT cotton, higher input prices or competition from cheaper imports (for example, Patel et al 2012: 81). Cases in which depression, mental illness or drug addiction were proximate causes of suicide—causes which emerged, for example, from Bhalla’s close scholarly study of farmer suicides in the Punjab and in the 2014 edition of *Accidental Deaths and Suicides*¹⁴—are almost never highlighted by the Indian media. They are excluded, I believe, because they do not fit into the anti-globalisation frame which dominates much of India’s media.

Irrespective of one’s personal perspective on the evils or otherwise of greater global economic interdependence, I believe we can recognise the destructive consequences of this framing of Indian suicides. When the aetiology of suicide is cast in terms of resistance to globalisation, the clearly implied remedy is to undo globalisation. What is utterly absent is recognition of the evidence indicating, for example, the significant role of psychiatric factors in many suicides (see for example, Brent 1989; Clark and Horton-Deustch 1992; Gautami et al 2001; Bhalla et al 1998; Vijayakumar and Rajkumar 1999; Raguram et al 1996; Venkoba Rao et al 1989; Chynoweth et al 1980). As Patel et al (2012: 2350) observe:

Most Indians do not have community or support services for the prevention of suicide and have restricted access to care for mental illnesses associated with suicide, especially access to treatment for depression, which has been shown to reduce suicidal behaviours.

If psychiatric problems such as depression are crucial in forming suicidal actions, then an essential aspect of the public policy response must be on the provision of better mental health services, especially in rural areas.

In addition to disproportionate coverage to farmer suicides, much of the India media appear to be unaware of journalistic best-practice in the reporting of suicide which has emerged in the rest of the world. A recent WHO report characterisation aptly applies to much of what appears in the Indian press:

Inappropriate media reporting practices can sensationalize and glamorise suicide and increase the risk of ‘copycat’ suicides (imitation of suicides) among vulnerable people. Media practices are inappropriate when they gratuitously cover celebrity suicides, report unusual methods of suicide or suicide clusters, show pictures or information about the method used, or normalize suicide as an acceptable response to crisis or adversity (World Health Organization 2014a: 32).

What should be done? Again, it is difficult to improve on the pithy observations in the WHO’s Preventing Suicide report:

Responsible reporting of suicide in the media has been shown to decrease suicide rates. Important aspects of responsible reporting include: avoiding detailed descriptions of suicidal acts, avoiding sensationalism

and glamorization, using responsible language, minimizing the prominence of suicide reports, avoiding oversimplifications, educating the public about suicide and available treatments, and providing information on where to seek help (World Health Organization 2014a: 35).

The international suicide-prevention NGO, The Samaritans—with which several Indian NGOs are affiliated—offers similarly pointed advice on how suicide deaths should be reported. Almost none of these rules is observed in Indian newspapers (The Samaritans 2014; see also Gururaj and Isaac 2003; Media-Wise 2014). Some of the Samaritan injunctions are:

- Leave out technical details about the method of suicide.
- Language matters. Avoid dramatic headlines and terms such as “suicide epidemic” or “hot spot.”
- Avoid dramatic or sensationalist pictures or video.
- Try not to give a story undue prominence, for example, with a front cover splash.
- Don’t brush over the complex realities of suicide and its impact on those left behind.
- Speculation about the “trigger” for a suicide—even if from close family members—should be avoided.

The most glaring neglect of all in Indian news coverage is the requirement to:

- Include references to support groups and places where suicidal people can find help—it really does make a difference.

Indian news reports virtually never make reference to Indian suicide-prevention NGOs, nor do they print telephone helpline numbers or provide links to online support available for those with suicidal thoughts. Nor am I aware of editorial support for increased availability of counselling services, or funding for investigations into effective prevention strategies.

Media shortcomings are reflected in Indian public policy. Despite long-standing calls by Indian psychiatrists and NGOs working in the area of suicide prevention (see for example, Vijaykumar 2007), India still does not have a national suicide prevention strategy (World Health Organization 2014b).

In this paper I have contrasted media coverage of farmer and housewife suicides in India. In many parts of Southern India, suicide rates for females, married and unmarried, are twice, even three times higher than the young male rates which evoked a crisis response in industrialised countries two decades ago. Let me conclude this paper by reiterating that what is urgently needed is for India’s journalists to learn to reframe the issues so that more appropriate responses are given to the suicide crisis among India’s despairing farmers and desperate housewives.

NOTES

- 1 Earlier examples of media coverage of suicides can be found in (Varma 1976; Gururaj and Isaac 2001, 2003).
- 2 Each power loom leaves a dozen handloom weavers unemployed while each jetloom does the work of 40 power looms, rendering hundreds out of work.
- 3 Sainath has won many awards for his journalism, including the European Commission’s Lorenzo Natali Prize and in 2007 the Ramon Magsaysay Award.
- 4 I will consider these in greater detail in the second paper in this series.
- 5 Their estimates appear to have been accepted by the World Health Organization in a recent report (2014a).
- 6 The selection of countries is idiosyncratic. Countries at the extremes of the distribution, those with which India might normally be compared and those from industrialised economies have been included.
- 7 The first year for which we have consistent information about occupations is 1997. For that reason it appears at several points in this paper as a nominal “base year.”
- 8 Because of the unavailability of relevant data from 2011, I have estimated rates for occupations other than Agriculture and Unemployed from the 2001 Census. For an extended discussion of the suicide rates of different occupational groups in India, see Mayer et al (2011).
- 9 Patel et al note that when cultivators and agricultural labourers are treated as a single occupational category, as they are here, “suicide deaths in unemployed individuals and individuals in professions other than agricultural work were, collectively, about three times greater than they were in agricultural workers” (Patel et al 2012: 2346).
- 10 I have used census figures for Main Cultivators to compute rates for farmers who own their own land and Marginal Cultivators for those who cultivate on lease.
- 11 Patel and colleagues have also presented a computation of state-level suicide rates for all farmers in 2011 (Patel et al 2012, Table 6,

pp 66–67). Although my own calculations agree with theirs for a number of states, they diverge for others. The differences are most pronounced for Chhattisgarh and Puducherry where they calculate the respective rates for all cultivators at 39.1 and 479.4 respectively; on my calculations the rate was 0.0 in both.

- 12 The elision of housewives with married women is based on an uncontroversial assumption. According to the 1991 Census, 94.9% of all women over the age of 14 were married and 97.8% of those engaged in Household Duties were women.
- 13 The suicide rates of unmarried and married women and men are discussed in Mayer and Ziaian (2002) and Mayer et al (2011, Chapter 12).
- 14 In 2014 virtually identical percentages of farmer deaths were attributed to personal issues and relationships (41.8%) as to economic or farming-related issues (41.8%) (NCRB 2015: 266).

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EPW would like to acknowledge the help of the staff of the library of the Indira Gandhi Institute of Development Research, Mumbai, in preparing the index under a project supported by the RD Tata Trust.