

# Chapter 6

## Farmers' Suicide and the Moral Economy of Agriculture: Victimhood, Voice, and Agro-Environmental Responsibility in South India

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**Farmers\_Suicide\_and\_the\_Moral\_Economy\_of\_Agriculture\_Victimhood\_Voice\_and\_Agro\_Environment al\_Responsibility\_in\_South\_India**

One afternoon in August 2008, at the beginning of my first stage of field research into reports of farmers' suicide in Wayanad District, Kerala, I found myself in front of the huge desk of a senior agricultural researcher of the Ambalavayal Regional Agricultural Research Station<sup>2</sup> (RARS). I had come to this particular region because Wayanad had in 2006 been declared a "suicide-prone district" by the Government of India and was described in the English-language press as a suicide hotspot.<sup>3</sup> I expected a straightforward confirmation of an epidemic of farmers' suicides from the research officer. However, when I raised the issue, he exclaimed with confidence: "No real farmer has committed suicide in Wayanad."

"Ninety-five percent of them [i.e. the suicides]," he continued, "borrow money to spend on some other purpose. Seventy-five to eighty-five percent of agrarian loans are not used for agricultural purposes. They spend it as dowry or for their children's education. A debt relief in Wayanad would only benefit undeserving elements." After having denied the reality of farmers' suicides, however, the research officer went on to talk about the decline of agriculture in Wayanad. As a metropolitan government officer stationed in this remote hill district—

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1 The ethnographic fieldwork on which this chapter is based was funded by a travel grant from the Fritz Thyssen Foundation (Germany) and was affiliated in India with the Centre for Development Studies (CDS) in Tiruvananthapuram, Kerala. I am indebted to my research assistants Shinoj K. Anthony and Joby Clement for their friendship, hospitality, and dedication to this research. This chapter has benefitted from the input of the participants at the suicide and agency workshop and in particular from critical readings by Ludek Broz, Ursula Münster, Julia Poerting, and James Staples. The usual disclaimers apply.

2 The research station was established in 1946 as part of the Wayanad Colonization Scheme, which supported the settlement of Wayanad's uncultivated forests by ex-servicemen of the British Indian Army. The station has thus been an integral part of Wayanad's agrarian modernization.

3 Most prominent among the reports were those of The Hindu's rural affairs editor P. Sainath (2004a, 2004b, 2004c, 2004d, 2004e, 2005a, 2005b, 2005c).

a “punishment area for officials”<sup>4</sup>—he positioned himself as an outside observer of the plight and moral decline of the Keralan farmer, which he explained as follows:

Farmers overuse chemicals; ... we failed to educate the farmers, now it is up to the owners of fertilizer shops to explain the chemicals ... Chemicals in India are of bad quality; environmental degradation is at the heart of agrarian crisis. ... I tell you the real reason for suicides: perennial crops have made farmers lazy. Wayanad is a showcase for this. It has the highest per capita income in Kerala, yet look at all the liquor they drink! They also have more mobile phones per capita. ... Farmers have lost their sense for homestead farming. They continuously change their crop. Actually, rubber is not recommended for Wayanad, [but] still all farmers are destroying coffee plantations for rubber; ... they should diversify and not only pursue the latest high prize.

Even though the officer was highly skeptical about farmers’ suicides—an attitude that I came partly to share after a few months of field research<sup>5</sup> on the topic (Münster 2012)—the events in question nevertheless offered him an idiom with which he was able to raise certain issues about Wayanad’s agriculture in terms of ecological crisis, morality, and responsibility. His statement that “no real farmer” had committed suicide did not prevent him from speculating about possible reasons for suicide among farmers. The issues he raised were recurring themes in the moral talk about farmers’ suicides in the region, such as alcoholism, dysfunctional masculinities, gambling, the loss of the traditional farming ethos, the commercialization of agriculture, and the ecological decline of rice and homestead (*tōṭṭam*)<sup>6</sup> farming. The research officer’s position, I argue, illustrates widespread interpretations of suicide that articulate with what I call a “moral economy of agriculture,” that is, ideas of what is just, fair, and sustainable in farming. This moral economy of farming goes beyond questions of agency and resistance between subaltern producers and rent seeking elites by drawing attention to ethics of care for land, soil and other socionatures entangled in farming. The agency of the suicidal person is represented in terms of “responsibility” (see also Laidlaw 2010). Farmers are held responsible in these discourses for a general decline of agriculture and for violence to the landscape brought about by green revolution technologies and farmers’ “greedy” disposition toward mono-cropping of cash crops such as ginger (on the case of ginger growing see Münster 2015a).

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4 Most civil servants of Kerala State departments prefer to be stationed near the major cities of central and southern Kerala. It is a matter of discontent (and some amusement) among the people of Wayanad that many officials get transferred there for disciplinary reasons.

5 This chapter is based on nine months of (discontinuous) fieldwork in Wayanad between August 2008 and May 2011.

6 Malayalam transcription follows the ALA-LC romanization tables available at: <http://loc.gov/catdir/cpsr/roman.html>.

I suggest that responsibility best represents an ethnographic notion of agency in etiologies of farmers' suicides. Moral responsibility marks a middle ground between the two extremes of a structure-and-agency continuum that Münster and Broz discuss in the introduction to this volume, a continuum that is, in the case of representations of farmers' suicides, perhaps better described as a victimhood-and-resistance continuum.

At one end of the continuum, suicides might be conceived as devoid of agency, with farmers understood as victims of larger structural processes. This is the discourse of many activists, journalists, and NGOs. At the other end of the continuum, one may be tempted to view farmers' suicides as acts that mark a space of freedom, an extreme form of political communication (Andriolo 2006) in which the suicidé voices accusations, indictments and dissent. In contrast to these opposing conceptions of agency in farmers' suicides as "victimhood" and political "voice," the notion of "responsibility" acknowledges farmers' collective agency in historically contributing to the very structures of crisis, distress, and despair. Or, to invoke E.P. Thompson, it supposes that the class of "farmers in distress" was present in its own making. In this chapter, I use the term "responsibility" not in the perhaps more common dictionary sense of being "sensible, trustworthy, and able to make good moral and practical judgments; opposite of irresponsible." Rather, I use it in the second sense of "having done or been the cause of esp. something bad; guilty" (Longman Dictionary of Contemporary English). I am interested in tracing within local discourses about suicide a moral notion of farmers' responsibility for the agro-environment and what I call the moral economy of farming. All three notions of agency in farmers' suicides—victimhood, resistance, responsibility—could be discerned in local conversations around the issue as well as in media representations, which contributed to a widespread moral panic in relation to agriculture, the state, globalization, and farmers. Before I return to notions of agency, the moral dimension of the media hype around farmers' suicides deserves some attention.

### **Moral Panic**

From approximately 2004 to 2008, Wayanad was the scene of a "moral panic" (Cohen 2004; Englund 2009) surrounding the apparent suicide of a number of indebted local farmers. The term "moral panic" refers to "outbreaks of public concern or alarm" (Ungar 2001: 171), usually greatly exaggerated and boosted by the mass media, about nascent threats to the fabric of society, such as terrorism, youth criminality, diseases—or suicide epidemics. Stanley Cohen's definition (2004: 1) is arguably the most popular:

Societies appear to be subject, every now and then, to periods of moral panic. A condition, episode, person or group of persons emerges to become defined as a threat to societal values and interests; its nature is presented in a stylized and

stereotypical fashion by the mass media; the moral barricades are manned by editors, bishops, politicians and other right-thinking people; socially accredited experts pronounce their diagnoses and solutions; ways of coping are evolved or (more often) resorted to; the condition then disappears, submerges or deteriorates and becomes more visible. (Cohen 2004: 1)

Most moral panic research is concerned with the elements of disproportion, exaggeration, and alarm with respect to the perceived threat, deviant behavior, or social evil (Goode and Ben-Yehuda 2009). In this chapter, I am not interested in the disproportionality and scandalization inherent in media representations of farmers' suicide. Instead, I follow David Garland in stressing two further dimensions of moral panics: "(i) the *moral* dimension of the social reaction, particularly the introspective soul-searching that accompanies these episodes; and (ii) the idea that the deviant conduct in question is somehow *symptomatic*" (Garland 2008: 11). I contend that farmers' suicides, although experienced firsthand by very few people in agrarian Wayanad, but blown out of proportion by a scandalizing media and a nexus of political interests and the NGO sector (see also Münster 2015b), nevertheless served as an important topos through which farmers engaged in moral reflection on their agrarian practices and their farming ethos. Farmers' suicides were widely recognized as symptoms of an ecological, economic, a moral crisis of neoliberalizing agriculture.

In Wayanad, the moral panic about farmers' suicides was not limited to the public spheres of media and political populism but also articulated with local assumptions about farmers and agency in suicide. I identified three popular notions of "agency" attributed to self-inflicted death among farmers emerging, namely, victimhood, voice, and responsibility. These three notions of agency are particularly conspicuous in discourses about farmers and suicide perhaps because of the morally laden ties between death and production, suicide and work that are absent in other types of suicide. Victimhood, voice, and responsibility emerge in discourses that put suicide and transforming agrarian production in the same framework of moral considerations. An analytical focus on the nexus between the political ecology of agriculture and self-inflicted death is complementary to other approaches to "self" and "person" in the study of rural suicides and to the literature on the moral discourses about "suicide in Kerala" (Halliburton 1998), which focuses on mainstream Malayalee society and interrogates the critical issue of middle-class-consumerism-education-and-migration, that is so central to the anthropology of Kerala (Lukose 2005, 2009; Osella and Osella 2000, 1999; specifically on suicide see Chua 2009; Chua 2011). Here, however, I wish to concentrate on the agrarian dimensions of suicide in Kerala. I aim to bring the anthropological work on South Indian suicide together with the critical study of agricultural production in India: its ongoing neoliberal restructuring, the role of new technologies, the legacy of the green revolution, and the materiality of agrarian production.

In this context, I suggest that an anthropological study of suicide may move beyond existing models, developed primarily by medical anthropologists<sup>7</sup> by attending to the influence of work and labor on the formation of suicidal subjectivities. More specifically, I would like to draw attention to the work and labor of farming at a frontier of capitalist agriculture. My use of the term labor gestures toward Karl Marx's broader (anthropological) sense of labor as "human metabolism (*Stoffwechsel*) with nature." "Labour," writes Marx, is "a process between man [sic] and nature, a process by which man [sic], through his [sic] own actions, mediates, regulates and controls the metabolism between himself [sic] and nature" (ct. in Foster 2000: 141).<sup>8</sup> In my ethnographic research conversations about suicides became occasion to speak about the work of farming, conversations about farming became in turn occasion to discuss the "metabolic rift" (Foster 1999, Schneider and McMichael 2010) in human relations to agro-environments. The moral talk about suicide, I contend, may be treated as a vernacular diagnostic of a crisis in an "agrarian environment" (Agrawal and Sivaramakrishnan 2000). In Wayanad, arguably the most important contemporary moral debate concerns the (ecological) future of agriculture itself. The outrage over rural male suicide has become integrated into this larger debate. The understanding of suicidal agency as victimhood, voice, and responsibility was thus partly informed by the urgency of the agrarian question in the twenty-first century (Friedmann 2006). In the following sections I will briefly deal with understandings of suicidal agency in terms of victimhood and voice before turning to the question of responsibility. The subject of responsibility, I argue, best captures the common view of the suicide problematic in the context of Wayanad's agro-ecological crisis.

### **Farmers as Victims**

From a methodological point of view, discourses about suicide should be treated as a sphere of cultural production that is to a great extent disconnected from the realities of actual suicide cases. However, precisely because these discourses do not have to deal with the contradictory and idiosyncratic realities of individual acts, they can offer access to shared articulations of "what went wrong." The challenge of making sense of suicide is faced not only by the families of the deceased but

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7 Anthropological research on suicide has been undertaken by medical anthropologists, who have introduced a valuable conceptual focus on the politics of the body, social suffering, and medicalization.

8 In the first English edition of "Das Kapital" from 1887, the German notion of "Stoffwechsel" is translated not as metabolism but as "material re-actions": "Labour is, in the first place, a process in which both man [sic] and Nature participate, and in which man [sic] of his [sic] own accord starts, regulates, and controls the material re-actions between himself [sic] and Nature" (Marx 1887 [2010]: 124).

extends to the public at large. As argued by Münster and Broz in the introduction to this volume, suicide, as a “bad death” (Bloch and Parry 1982; Kearl 1989), in one way or the other sheds light on the society in which it happens. It is this moral and diagnostic element in suicide discourses that I am interested in here.

Attempts to ascertain the *real* reason for farmers’ suicides have always seemed presumptuous to me. In Wayanad, a host of survey teams were seeking the single economic explanations for farmers’ suicides, probing for correlations between debt and suicide, landholding and suicide, and so on (Jeromi 2007; Government of Kerala 2009; Nair and Menon 2009). Employees from a Christian charitable NGO were trained in psychological methods of “verbal autopsy” and a so-called befriending technology for getting access to the possible causes of suicide. My actual encounters with suicide cases—more than 50 visits to families and neighbors between 2008 and 2011—never produced any conclusive picture, not even “types” of suicide that would lend themselves to easy generalizations. It is well known that poverty, debt, hardly viable land holdings, and volatile crop prices produced widely shared existential anxieties that contributed in many cases to the suicide. Yet what appeared more worthy of attention than the structural etiology of suicide was the moral work that went into making sense of such acts.

Both the political debates and much of the social scientific literature<sup>9</sup> on the subject of farmers’ suicides in India rely heavily on suicide statistics and indicators of economic distress. These structural interpretations construct farmers’ suicides as a natural consequence of overwhelming debt and the forces of globalization behind this proliferation of rural indebtedness. When it comes to farmers confronting big structures such as global trade regimes their agency is obfuscated by black boxes such as “distress” or “crisis” that self-evidently trigger suicide. According to these victimizing narratives, crisis and debt “drive” farmers to suicide; their agency is ultimately effaced, and their actions reduced to victimhood.

My unease with these writings on farmers’ suicides runs somewhat parallel to E.P. Thompson’s seminal critique of structural approaches to social history. He introduced the concept of “moral economy” to the study of peasant food riots in eighteenth-century England in order to counter a “spasmodic view of popular history” (Thompson 1971) and introduce a perspective more sensitive to agency. According to Thompson, such riots and other forms of “direct public action” have been treated in the literature as nothing more than spasmodic reactions to distress. Subaltern agency thus disappears behind behavioral responses to “elementary economic stimuli.” For Thompson, such perspectives build on an “abbreviated view of economic man” and are “guilty of crass economic reductionism, obliterating complexities of motives, behavior, and function” (Thompson 1971: 77).

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9 Here I am mostly referring to publications in the journal *Economic and Political Weekly* since the late 1990s (e.g. Assadi 1998; Deshpande 2002; Jeromi 2007; Mishra 2006; Mohanakumar and Sharma 2006; Mohanty and Shroff 2004; Sridhar 2006; Vaidyanathan 2006). I have discussed this literature in more detail elsewhere (Münster 2015b).

Ethnographic understandings of farmers' suicides may be enriched, I argue, by an engagement with classical debates about moral economy and popular reactions to crises and the violence of economic transformation. James Scott has continued E.P. Thompson's study of the "affective and moral consciousness" (Thompson 2008 [1978]: 171) of the peasant, by asking "what makes them angry and what is likely, other things being equal, to generate an explosive situation?" (Scott 1976: 4). In Scott's early work the study of moral economy is a contribution to a "phenomenology of exploitation" (1976: 31, 160f.):

If the analytical goal of a theory of exploitation is to reveal something about the perceptions of the exploited—about their sense of exploitation, their notion of justice, their anger—it must begin not with an abstract normative standard but with the values of the real actors. (1976: 160)

Taking inspiration from this theory of exploitation, I focus on the values of real farmers and their interpretations of what may have gone wrong in Wayanad's agrarian development. As I hope to show, their notions of justice and anger go beyond economic exploitation and include a sense of environmental injustice in neoliberalizing agriculture. This "moral economy of agriculture" articulates rural actors' views on the future of farming itself and the morality of human-nature relations. My expanded perspective on moral economy resonates with Dove and Kammen's notion of "moral ecology" about an "exchange of resources between people and the environment" (1997: 91). Also, Sarah Besky's notion of a "tripartite moral economy" among plantation workers in Darjeeling, which, according to Besky, involves "reciprocal relationships between labor, management, and the plantation landscape" (2014: 120) is similar to my concerns. Among the smallholders of Wayanad, their historical relationships to land and soil have become an issue of debate. Wayanad's moral discourses of crisis and suicide—the views of the agricultural officer discussed previously may serve as an example—rarely revolve around clear-cut issues of exploitation and victimization. For sure, there is a widespread sense of being neglected by the state (*sarkkār*) and being exploited by "cheating banks"<sup>10</sup> and of uncertainty in the face of unpredictable market prices. As the following discussion makes apparent, however, discursive representations of farmers as victims tend to be complicated by moral narratives of personal greed, consumerist aspirations, collective agro-ecological malpractice, and the risks of science and technology in agrarian production.

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10 Among those who raised the issue was A.C. Varkey, the leader of Farmers Relief Forum (FRF) a farmers' movement that specializes in direct action protests. At the time, FRF was particularly active in preventing the execution of so-called recovery operations, through which banks recover the properties of defaulting lenders. To this end, FRF members would surround the houses of defaulters in a protective crowd or block the offices of regional bank managers.

### Voicing Dissent: Suicide as Resistance

Just as farmers' suicides are not mere corollaries of external exploitation, they are also hardly manifestations of resistance. As I have argued elsewhere (Münster 2015b), it would be farfetched to interpret farmers' suicides as protests against banks, the state, or even globalization. Wayanad's farmer suicides are not "protest suicides" as defined by anthropologists Allen Feldman (1991) and Karin Andriolo (2006) as comprising a message, an audience, and a strategic objective. There is some evidence from other parts of India that farmers' suicides may entail explicit expressions of dissent. After all, suicide is a well-established part of South Asia's protest repertoire. Suicidal agency as "voice" would have to be inferred from suicide notes addressed to a higher official or politician or by committing suicide in public and/or "symbolic" locations (like a local agrarian office). However, no ethnographic evidence of individual suicides serving as "message" exists for Wayanad. Agency in these rural suicides seems to be less about political agency and the "voicing" of dissent, than about lived experiences of agrarian deadlocks and the conditions of agro-ecological crisis. Speaking of agency here means speaking of *responsibility*, of farmers' responsibility in taking too much financial risk for cash crops, and of the responsibility of settlers' agriculture for environmental destruction. The "phenomenology of agrarian crisis" involves farmers' sense of economic concerns such as indebtedness and volatile commodity prices as much as their notion of justice in regard to ecological issues such as the conversion of wet rice fields, chemicalization and soil depletion.

In Wayanad, violations of the rural moral economy seem to result not in collective "direct action" but in self-inflicted death. Both Thompson and Scott employ a Polanyian (Polanyi 2001) framework that understands rural production as "embedded" in moral rights and expectations of subsistence safety, manifest in traditional obligations (reciprocity, sharing) and entitlements (commons, harvest shares). This moral economy is disrupted by historical elite projects of introducing variants of "laissez-faire" capitalism. But how does the moral economy of rural producers look like in twenty-first-century South India? What are the expectations, aspirations, and notions of justice and fairness that prevail in a time and place where it no longer even makes sense to speak of non-capitalist subsistence farming (since most farmers produce non-food crops for the market) or, for that matter, of "peasants"? Mark Edelman (2005: 332) has recently argued that Scott's "right of subsistence" has "broadened to the 'right to continue being agriculturalists'":

This means, in essence, the right to continue living from the land as well as the protection of a patrimony both of public-sector institutions, which made being an agriculturalist possible and which are now targeted by neoliberal privatizers, and of plant germplasm and cheese cultures, which peasants' antagonists now sometimes euphemize and covet as 'intellectual property.' (2005: 332)

While there is no evidence from Wayanad that individual suicides were carried out as a form of protest suicide, suicides nevertheless featured prominently in various

farmers' agitations between 2004 and 2006. Suicides were here discursively incorporated into agitations concerned with demands of debt relief and other government interventions. I heard no one claim that suicides would entail a continuation of farmers' protests through other means. But how did the people of Wayanad actually speak of farmer suicides? How did they make sense of death and the agrarian situation? As I will show in the next section, many farmers, sharing their interpretation of the suicide epidemic, were quick to point out their personal and collective responsibility for the dire state of Wayanad's agrarian environment.

### **The Moral Economy of Agriculture: Suicide and Agro-Ecological Responsibility**

In Wayanad the common moral discourse about farming and suicide varies according to class, generation, and community. Take the case of Mathew, a typical Christian settler in his early 70s. Mathew was a child when his parents migrated in the 1940s to Wayanad's Pulpally region, which since 2004 has become infamous as a suicide hotspot. From the agrarian capital that he accumulated in the 1980s, Mathew was able to construct a huge marble-floored villa for his family. Mathew is thus a member of the rural Christian elite: he owns two cars and three motorcycles in addition to 20 acres of land, does well economically, and is proud to be unaffected by crisis. Nonetheless, his livelihood has suffered as a result of the drought that has slowly spread to Kerala from the Karnataka Deccan over the past ten years due to dwindling forest cover and the change in the region's microclimate. I spent a great deal of time with Matthew while doing fieldwork on agrarian change in the region. Sharing sweet coffee and cookies with me in his large living room, Mathew would talk about the art and ethos of being a good farmer. He explained how almost anything used to grow in Wayanad, how the soil used to be fertile and rains abundant. He told me how the Christian pioneers experimented with numerous different crops such as lemongrass and how one Christian family in his neighborhood had brought samples of pepper vines from the Travancore region in 1968: "With the first pepper, everything changed. Everybody stopped lemongrass and shifted to pepper, coconut, and rubber." From 1977 to 1985 farmers in the Pulpally region had fantastic yields and the pepper sacks would fill every room in the house, even their sleeping quarters.

In 1988 a "quick wilt" epidemic hit the first pepper vines and then the supporting plants. On the whole, however, agriculture remained viable: "We had high yields and labor was very cheap," explained Mathew. "At present we have a quarter of the yield and four times the labor cost." Mathew attributed the decline in *adivasi* labor to the lure of education and urban employment, noting that "they [*adivasis*] like to be in townships." Indeed, for Mathew, and many of the other wealthy farmers, the only major problem facing agriculture was the short supply of labor: "In the beginning we didn't have money but [we had] plenty of labor; now we have money but no laborers." This perspective also shaped his moral interpretation of suicides:

I was never in a real crisis because I was always diversifying. I will never give up. Suicide is not the fault of others; it is the fault of the man himself. If he is playing out of control he is to blame. Agriculture is always profitable; we need to manage it well. If we mismanage, it will get out of control. If people speculate on the price of pepper and go into it as gambling, they may “over-play their hand” [*kayiliruppu*]. ... Here there are a few people who constructed a new house or married off a daughter on the expectation [*pratīkṣa*] of this and next year’s harvest. Recently the Panchayat [elected local administration] conducted a survey on debt. I was the only one without debt. I like hard work and I am satisfied. I don’t need to show anything to my neighbors by getting a loan.

It is farmers like Mathew—owners of land, hardworking, proud, and alive—who the agrarian officer was referring to when he spoke of the “real farmers” who didn’t commit suicide. Both men, the development trustee and the self-proclaimed modest and hard-working farmer, seem to agree that the suicides spoke primarily of the moral failure of individual cultivators, who were ultimately responsible for their own suicides. In this discourse of “blaming the victims,” which was widespread among better-off farmers and urban middle classes, among the recurring themes were the laziness of farmers, their bad management, conspicuous consumption, inflated dowry, alcoholism and an irrational obsession with increasing one’s status through the construction of new houses.

Other moral explanations of suicide locate responsibility more at the collective level. Wayanad’s agriculturalists today find themselves at a crossroads. For over 50 years, the district, along with other areas of the Malabar region, had been the promised land of Syrian Christian modernity in Kerala (Varghese 2006), a landscape that was transformed within one generation from a forested, malaria-infested hinterland of the colonial Madras Presidency into a hub for the production of cash crops, which involved the foundation of new Christian institutions and resulted in the formation of a modern rural middle class with a prosperity that far exceeded that of farmers in parts of lowland Kerala (Jacob 2006; Varghese 2006). Now, however, many migrant settlers are pessimistic about the future of agriculture and reports of suicides are seen as symptomatic of a general crisis in small-holder cash cropping. Landholdings may have been adequate at the time of the 1960s land reform by successive Left governments, which granted land rights of roughly 14 acres to many tenant farmers across Kerala, including many of Wayanad’s settlers (Mannathukkaren 2011; Radakrishnan 1989). Many of these small holdings now yield too little to be able to sub-divide them into viable plots among one’s children, which in turn prompts the younger generation to abandon agriculture in favor of urban employment or higher education in the neighboring states of Karnataka and Tamil Nadu. The history of internal migration to Wayanad, which was characterized by rapacious land grabs at the forest frontier, now returns with a vengeance: large forest mammals living in small, fragmented, and overpopulated wildlife sanctuaries increasingly raid the fields of pioneer farmers, often making agriculture impossible (Münster and Münster 2012b). More critically, fungal diseases and excessive chemical input have left many fields unfit for profitable farming.

Varghese, a prominent member of Pulpally's Syro Malabar Church, interpreted farmers' suicide with recourse to a moral narrative about the boom and crash of settler agriculture:

I will tell you the real story of farmers' suicides in Wayanad. In the years of the pepper boom, the use of chemicals was high in Pulpally, because we were in a frenzy about production. Farmers came to town with a jeep full of pepper and took one jeep full of chemicals back. They bought whatever was available in the market and applied it without thinking. ... After 1995 everybody was constructing new houses. A competition for higher, better houses was going on. But the majority could not finish their constructions. They lost all [their] pepper. The houses stand now like skeletons without door or floor in the properties. The rich or the middle class committed suicide. They did a lot of useless works, like spending three *lakh* [300,000 INR] on painting. They were continuing even though they could not afford it.

It seems probable that reports of farmers' suicides, although doubted by many, appealed to the imagination of cultivators in Wayanad because their "right to continue being agriculturalists" (Edelman 2005) was at stake. Behind Varghese's laconic summation that "they lost all [their] pepper" are biographies of shattered aspirations and sudden economic decline. I cannot recall how many times I heard sentences like "I don't see any future here" or "agriculture is over in Wayanad." It took me a while to learn to observe the signs of agrarian doom. After all, Wayanad is one of the most popular destinations for tourists from Karnataka, Tamil Nadu, and Kerala (Münster and Münster 2012a). What visitors don't see, however, is that the trees in the fields were planted to support pepper vines that have since disappeared, that coffee plantations are neglected, that farmers apply the weedicide Roundup for lack of laborers, and that the conversion of wet rice paddies into fields for fast growing cash crops (e.g. banana) is irreversible and hence destined to destroy the fertility of the land.

*Vayal vāla*, the cultivation of banana (*vāla*) in wet-rice fields (*vayal*) neatly exemplifies the association between suicide and ecological doom (see Figure 6.1). Surendran Chetti, a *Wayanad Chetti* (or *Chetty*, one of the old cultivating castes in the region), told me his views on farmers' suicides. He personally knew of only one suicide that had happened in his neighborhood, but in this particular case, according to Surendran, the suicide had stemmed from an argument between the deceased and his wife. Nevertheless, he had a theory of farmers' suicides that invoked the difference between Chettis and Nayars—"the real farmers of Wayanad" and the Christian migrants who were after "easy income." His thesis proceeded as follows:

These farmers are in crisis because they spent all their money in periods of decline; then they were hit by price falls and ended up with debts. To regain their lost money, they changed their cultivation and shifted from paddy to banana. But



**Figure 6.1** Agrarian landscape in Wayanad, showing banana plantation in wet-rice field. Photograph by D. Münster, 2013

bananas need a dry soil, so they drained the *vayal*. But the *vayal* conserves the water; it holds it for at least ninety days. For two or three years they were making money and a real race set in. Then the yield went down. So they started using chemicals excessively; they call it “medicine” [*marunnu*]. The use of pesticide exploded since the late 1980s. Now they suffer from drought, winds destroy the plantations, the fields are useless and fallow now.

In reference to the ongoing overuse of agro-chemicals, it was repeatedly pointed out to me that it was no coincidence that the primary means of committing suicide in Wayanad was by consuming Feuredan, one of the most toxic systemic insecticides available in India, which was found in most agrarian households in Wayanad due to its use in banana cultivation. Another Chetti farmer added that “the worst [cultivators] are those who lease the land.” The practice of leasing out paddies has become popular with the declining profits from rice cultivation, due to which many paddies were left fallow. The problems with banana conversion [*vayal vāla*] were compounded when cultivators without prior experience in agriculture began cultivation for quick profit on leased land; in such cases, the shortsighted over-use of chemicals knew literally no limit. Once the fields were chemically destroyed after one or two seasons, cultivators would simply

move on to another field. In local discourse this widespread practice is linked to suicide in two ways: first, the initial conversion of vayal is said to be driven by economic distress and the need for quick cash; and second, banana is a very capital-intensive and high-risk crop that may completely fail and thereby ruin the cultivator. During my interview with local farmers, the poisoned landscape of post-agrarian cash-crop farming was more than once discursively linked to the poisoned bodies of the suicides.

As Surendran Chetti's argument suggests, the moral economy of agriculture in Wayanad is sometimes cast in a communal (in the South Asian sense of caste and religious groups) light—as a critique of the large-scale immigration of Syrian Catholics into the region. A thorough treatment of the role of Syrian Christianity in the agro-environmental history of Wayanad is beyond the scope of this chapter. Suffice it to say for the moment that doubts about the blessings of Christian modernity and progress (Varghese 2006) are voiced not only by the original Hindu inhabitants of Wayanad but also by Christians themselves. As one Christian teacher put it, “the bible is great book if you want to take other peoples' land.” In Pulpally, the Christian frontier region of Wayanad, Suresh, another Wayanad Chetti, offered the following take on the Christian's agriculture:

The government is promoting chemical fertilizers for cultivation. Christians are making use of every opportunity as soon as possible. They are exploiting [*cūṣaṇam*] the land and are heavily using chemicals [*rāsa*]. We [Chettis] have learned this type of exploitation from the Christians. In the olden days we used cow dung only. But they introduced chemicals and are now compelled to use it continuously. I don't want to speak badly about other communities. The government is the root of all evil. No people can live here. We lost pepper and prices are low. How can we survive if wild animals come?

On this and other occasions, my attempts to speak about suicide brought to the surface morally charged stories about agrarian production, changes in the landscape, and histories of dispossession.

The problem of Christianity re-emerged in inquiries into farmers' suicide in Wayanad conducted by Catholic NGOs, which together with media reports on the subject, contributed to the moral panic about suicide that reached its peak during the 2006 State Assembly elections.

### **The Shifting Realities of Farmers' Suicides in Wayanad**

The agrarian officer's doubts about the scale of farmers' suicides were also widespread in Wayanad. Clear-cut cases of suicide were much less easy to identify than one would expect for a certified “suicide-prone district.” It is probably fair to say that the great majority of people in Wayanad had no firsthand experience of suicide among their neighbors or friends. However, they were made aware of the

issue by the extensive and often scandalizing media coverage of this India-wide phenomenon since the late 1990s (Mohanty 2005).

From around 2004 onward, suicides in rural Kerala were integrated into this national narrative and interpreted as a direct consequence of globalization and liberalization. Reports of farmers' suicides in Wayanad fell on fertile ground, with the rural economy mired in crisis following the crash in global cash crop prices in 1999 and the appearance of new diseases that devastated production of pepper and vanilla, two essential commodities. The recession in this agrarian district manifested itself at the individual level in a proliferation of household debt to both institutional and private lenders. Against a backdrop of unprecedented agitations by farmers' groups, who were enraged by debts, precarious livelihoods and the seizure of properties by banks, against the state and central governments the campaigning for the State Assembly election in 2006 unfolded. "Agrarian crisis" (*kārṣika pratisandhi*) and "farmers' suicide" (*karṣaka ātmahatya*) became centerpieces in the Left Democratic Front's (LDF) historic victory in all three constituencies of Wayanad, until then a stronghold of the right-wing Congress-led coalition (UDF). In 2006 Wayanad was also included in the central government's list of "suicide-prone districts" (see Münster 2012). Among the tangible consequences of this inclusion was Wayanad's selection as a pilot district for the National Rural Employment Guarantee Scheme, an ambitious multi-billion rupee program that guarantees every worker in India 100 days of employment at the minimum wage, with equal pay for men and women. In addition to this, Wayanad enjoyed allocations of central funds under the so-called Vidharbha package, relief interventions named after a notorious suicide region in Maharashtra.

It was not only the left-wing political parties and farmers' movements that were quick to draw connections between Wayanad's suicides and the nationwide epidemic; local NGOs also seized upon this issue. Many of these organizations have their origin in charity and social programs developed by the Syrian Christian churches. A case in point is Shreyas, the social service NGO of the Malankara Catholic Diocese of Bathery, which published the first report on "increasing suicides in Wayanad" (Shreyas 2007). Based on a survey of 316 families directly affected by suicide, the study identified a clear link (mentioned by 38.6 percent of respondents) between agrarian crisis and suicide.<sup>11</sup> This study drew nationwide attention and was arguably the spur for Caritas India and Caritas Australia to launch in 2007 the Safe Farmers Campaign (SFC), a much larger research-cum-relief project run by a consortium of seven NGOs (including Shreyas) with a budget of millions of dollars.

It was among the lower-level field staff of these NGOs (see Figure 6.2), who were being sent out to collect data on suicides, that I first heard serious doubts being raised about the survey category of farmers' suicide. These doubts were expressed only in private conversations, as everyone was aware of the funding that

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11 The respondents of this survey could choose only one answer and, significantly, the majority answered "not known" (39 percent).



**Figure 6.2** NGO workers on their way to visit suicide families in Wayanad. Photograph by D. Münster, 2008

would be lost if the suicide epidemic turned out to have no link to agrarian crisis, or worse still, to not be an epidemic at all. It was clear to the lower-level NGO staff that Caritas was interested in Indian farmers' suicides and that local NGOs had an interest in Wayanad being part of the nationwide crisis, in which, according to K. Nagaraj (2008), more than one hundred thousand farmers had committed suicide. One local observer of the NGO scene offered the following take on the politics of farmers' suicides:

The first report [(Shreyas 2007)] was really the key thing for fundraising. Approximately four *crore* [40 million] rupees came from Caritas India and Caritas Australia. They wanted more incidences [of farmers' suicides]. They think, "Suicide is our baby, how can anyone claim that they are not agriculture related?" They wanted to make it as agrarian crisis just to get funding for the next year. In 2009 Caritas Australia came, looking for farmers' suicides and agrarian crisis. If the report is another way, the funding will not come. ... It's a caucus, a network of NGOs; they play together.

In 2009 the final report by Wayanad's NGOs (Kerala Social Service Forum 2009) came up with the astonishing figure of 1,690 suicides for approximately the same

period in which the first report spoke of 316 suicides. This report wrestles with the problem of the causation and hence categorization of these rural suicides as “farmers’ suicides.” On the one hand, the report writes of “media hype” and the uncritical adoption of the term “farmers’ suicide” (Kerala Social Service Forum 2009). On the other hand, the ambivalence of the report’s findings is reflected in the careful wording used to uphold the notion of farmers’ suicides despite evidence that only 16 percent of the suicides according to their own study were committed by “farmers” in a narrow sense:

Wayanad being a zero industrial area and the brutal majority of its inhabitants being agricultural farmers/laborers, anything and everything that pertained to suicides were linked to ‘farmer suicide.’ Somehow it was an accepted norm of media reporting to present every case of suicide as that of a farmer. However, on a closer analysis of the data generated from the study herein, it was found that only 264 out of 1690 reported cases of suicides belonged to the farmers’ category. It means only 16% of the totally reported cases of suicides (1690) come under the classification of ‘agriculturists.’ ... However, in the backdrop of Wayanad, even the employed persons were also farmers in restricted sense. Therefore, though it was not fully correct to present suicides as strictly that of farmers, it was justifiable if those cases were termed as ‘farmers’ suicides.’ (Kerala Social Service Forum 2009: 10)

What the authors of the report argue here is that although “farmers’ suicide” has been a focus of media hype and only 16 percent of the suicides were actually committed by farmers, Wayanad is so essentially agrarian (i.e. “zero industrial”) that everything in the district is somehow connected to agriculture and all suicides are thus ultimately “farmers’ suicides.”

The report is also full of moral evaluations of suicide, most of which efface subaltern agency in favor of victimhood. Among these are explanations invoking crisis, despair, stress, and the generally critical state of agriculture. In certain places, however, the report shifts its moral discourse toward responsibility. Tellingly, this shift happens when the Catholic authors of the report talk about their own people, or more specifically, about the “principal reasons for suicide among the elite societies, i.e. the *Ezhavas/Thiyyas*, Roman Catholics and the *Nairs*”:

Unhealthy and reckless competitions among people, consumeristic hubris, greed and avarice, indiscreet alcoholic addiction, outrageous and wasteful expenditure on marriages and life-style etc. have galvanized the communities ... leading to accumulated debts, resulting in increased number of suicides. (Kerala Social Service Forum 2009: 7)

Here, the authors reproduce a moral discourse that is very widespread among Syrian Catholics in Wayanad. The report thus illustrates how the moral discourse regarding healthy and unhealthy lifestyles as well as healthy and unhealthy

agrarian practices is largely independent of any evidential link between suicide and farming. Just as the study found that farmers accounted for a meager 16 percent of suicides in the district, most of the general public had had little direct experience of suicide cases. Yet farmers' suicides served time and again to make strong moral points.

My intention is not to expose farmers' suicides as some kind of "hoax," as Ronald Herring (2006) seems to do in his recent attack on the anti-GMO movement in India. To me, it makes sense to take "farmers' suicides" in Wayanad seriously for several reasons. First of all, suicide statistics have constructed suicides as a reality in the region. Farmers' suicides have become a known "fact," something "out there" prior to qualitative and grounded engagements with individual and regional circumstances. These statistics took on a life of their own in the media and election campaigns and forced everyone to react to the possibility of an epidemic of self-inflicted death occurring in their neighborhood (Münster 2012, 2015b). Second, and here I tend to agree with the KSSF report, everything is related to agriculture in Wayanad; the district's economy depends overwhelmingly on smallholder agriculture, which is now in crisis. I would not follow KSSF, however, in locating the etiology of suicides unambiguously in agrarian crisis by simply widening the category of farmer to include everyone in Wayanad. Such a single "cause" of rural suicides is methodologically impossible to establish. Rather, these "farmers' suicides" (whatever their personal and economic complexities) were suicides *of* all farmers of Wayanad: The latter were called upon by the media and the state to discursively react to these suicides and to make sense of them predominantly in relation to agrarian practices. Wayanad's suicides were thus farmers' suicides in the sense that one of their major effects was to initiate among all farmers in the district a critical moment of self-reflection about the past, present, and future of agriculture.

### **Conclusion: Agency and Responsibility**

As should by now be apparent, the testimony of farmers, neighbors of suicides, officials, priests, NGO workers, and other agrarian stakeholders shed light less on self-inflicted death than on agrarian production. With most of my interlocutors, I wanted to talk about suicide but ended up speaking about the moral economy of agriculture. Whether suicides were exaggerated, falsely associated with the nationwide phenomenon of farmers' suicides, or committed by persons with only a tenuous dependence on agriculture is not really relevant in this context. Farmers' suicides—real or imagined, contested or defended, denied or enumerated—meaningfully illustrate a crisis in the moral economy of agriculture that is manifest in the disrupted metabolic relationship between humans and the environment. In light of the well-argued critique of the notion of "peasantry" (Kearney 1996) and particularly of peasants as a "class" (Wolf 2001: 252), I have sought to speak of the moral economy of agriculture instead of the "moral

economy of the peasant.” This entails a shift in focus from class to production. The local discourses of the existential crisis afflicting agrarian production, of which suicides are indicators, go beyond a sectorial decline of rural production and include, I contend, a history of deteriorating human-environmental relations. The seriousness and sadness of suicide has been shown to be an important catalyst for many people to speak of the moral crisis of farmers who were attributed by many of my interlocutors with responsibility for the ecological costs of chemicalized mono-cropping and for turning agriculture into a business. I have not discussed any particular cases of suicide in this chapter, but rather have traced the emergence of a public debate about suicide, agency, and farming. What caused farmers’ suicide was very much a public question in Wayanad, debated by specialists (within the government as well as the NGO sector) as well as by almost everyone else. Whomever I asked, they were glad to contribute their opinions. These local interpretations are fruitful objects of ethnographic inquiry in themselves and may complement the pursuit of “structural causes” either through case studies or statistical analyses of correlations between suicide rates and economic factors. The existential urgency that is attributed to most instances of self-inflicted death makes conversations about rural suicides ideal ethnographic entry points for an investigation of agrarian matters of concern.

I have discussed three ways of conceptualizing agency in both popular and academic treatments of farmers’ suicides. Victimhood is the agency attributed to suicides in the largely mainstream social scientific and activist literature. A variant of this is the interpretation of suicide in terms of voice, message, or resistance. In Wayanad, I have argued, the predominant way of speaking about agency in suicide is in terms of responsibility. The shared responsibility of all settler farmers for the state of agriculture makes these debates more than cheap maneuvers toward blaming the victims. When the Christian settlers of Wayanad reflect on their agrarian legacy they have to account for both poisoned landscapes and poisoned selves. Suicide has become in this context a vehicle for cultural critique. In other words, farmers think about suicide in the same way that they think about themselves. Or rather, they talk about suicide in the same way they think about themselves.

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# Suicide and Agency

Anthropological Perspectives on Self-Destruction,  
Personhood, and Power

*Edited by*

LUDEK BROZ  
*and*  
DANIEL MÜNSTER

ASHGATE

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