

# *Farmers' Suicides as Public Death: Politics, Agency and Statistics in a Suicide-Prone District (South India)\**

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## Abstract

This paper argues that Indian farmers' suicides may fruitfully be described as public deaths. Based on ethnographic fieldwork in the South Indian district of Wayanad (Kerala), it shows that farmers' suicides become 'public deaths' only via the enumerative and statistical practices of the Indian state and their scandalization in the media. The political nature of suicide as public death thus depends entirely on suicide rates and their production by the state itself. But the power of representations complicates the ethnographic critique of statistical knowledge about suicide. In a context like Wayanad, which had been declared a suicide-prone district by the Indian state, public representations of suicides have taken on a life of their own; statistical categories and the media interpretations of these statistics have had a curious feedback—mediated by development encounters—onto the situated meanings of individual suicides. Local interpretations of individual suicides mostly commented on personal failures of the suicide and on the perils of speculative smallholder agriculture. Ethnography of farmers' suicide based on case studies alone, however, would soon encounter limitations equally grave as the limitations of statistical analysis. Not only is the meaning of suicide (intentions, causes, motives) at the actor level off limits for ethnography, but in addition to that the (public) meaning of suicide is co-determined by state practice including statistical accounting.

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## Introduction

In India, more than 100,000 farmers in distress have committed suicide in the past 10 years.<sup>1</sup> By way of substantial national and international media coverage, these suicides have attained wide public recognition and have arguably become instances of public death. As a result of this publicity, farmers' suicides have found their way into Bollywood productions as iconic representations of the shadowy side of India's putative neoliberal boom and have been included as an issue in a variety of activist and social movements opposing globalization, genetically modified seeds and economic liberalization. Contrary to other, more spectacular cases of individual political suicides in South Asia,<sup>2</sup> however, these suicides rarely attain publicity as individual acts. Rather, it is the ascription of membership to the state-produced category of 'farmers' suicide' that gives these suicides public visibility and renders possible the attribution of a common political message—an indictment of state, politics and capital—to these acts of self-destruction. This paper, based on ethnographic engagement with suicides in Wayanad (Kerala), a region of India that has been suicide-prone since 1999, addresses the complex and ambiguous set of situated meanings behind suicides in the region. It argues that the public discourse about and politicization of farmers' suicides feed back into the possibility of accounting for rural suicides ethnographically.

Because individual cases of self-destruction in Wayanad defy easy generalization, and ethnographic engagement with such cases complicates decontextualized narratives of peasant victimhood and resistance in the face of corporate globalization,<sup>3</sup> the local state's involvement in producing statistical knowledge about farmers' suicides and managing its fallout shapes the way people in Wayanad make sense of suicide cases. An anthropological approach to rural

<sup>1</sup> For a comprehensive discussion of official suicide statistics in India, see Nagaraj, K. (2008). *Farmers' Suicides in India: Magnitudes, Trends and Spatial Patterns*, Macroscan: <[http://www.macroscan.org/anl/mar08/anlog308Farmers\\_Suicides.htm](http://www.macroscan.org/anl/mar08/anlog308Farmers_Suicides.htm)> [Accessed 25 March 2014].

<sup>2</sup> In South Asia, spectacular protest suicides, often committed by eye-catching means including self-immolation, form an established part of the collective-action and protest repertoire. Amongst the most memorable cases are public self-immolations by students in protest against implementation of the recommendations of the Mandal commission in 1989 and 1990.

<sup>3</sup> Vandana, S., Jafri, A. H., Emani, A. and Pande, M. (1998). *Seeds of Suicide: The Ecological and Human Costs of Globalisation of Agriculture*, Research Foundation for Science, Technology and Ecology, New Delhi.

suicides thus cannot hope to position the epistemological superiority of ethnographic engagements with situated deaths as a counterpoint to the sociological ‘summation of series of events in an arithmetic and statistical form’.<sup>4</sup> Instead, this paper seeks to show that an anthropology of suicide is uniquely positioned to treat, in a parallel fashion, the social construction of statistical knowledge about suicide, its public life and politicization, the vernacular interpretations of self-destruction and, at the same time, the effects of enumeration, categorization and aggregation on populations in distress. This paper argues that one unintended effect of the public life of farmers’ suicides is the politicization of self-destructive action that is otherwise isolated and largely domestic.

When it comes to interpretation of the recent surge in rural suicides, there seem to be two recurring perspectives in both the scholarly and popular imagination. The first perspective interprets farmers’ suicides as a direct, unmediated result of economic crisis. The structural violence of globalization and neoliberal reform, and the resultant diverse manifestations of agrarian crisis, are taken as the sole and sufficient explanations for these suicides. A second, related temptation is to attribute to these acts a ‘message’ and a political intentionality beyond the will to end one’s life; hence, implicit in many recent commentaries on farmers’ suicides is the idea that they are ‘protest suicides’ and politically motivated. From both perspectives, the attribution of a singular universal cause—unmediated by cultural, regional or personal variation—and imputation of a ‘resistant’ or ‘protest’ motivation in these suicides is quite understandable and justified in the light of their magnitude in India. Indeed, the scope of farm-related suicides is staggering, and points to the undeniable failure of successive Indian governments to lift the increasing burden of debt and hopelessness from the rural population.<sup>5</sup> Farmers’ suicides are highly political and public deaths, yet their political qualities do not stem from a direct causal chain linking them to the larger scales of state and capital or from the manifest intention of the suicidal actors to make a political statement. Farmers’ suicides become ‘public deaths’ only via the enumerative and statistical practices of the Indian state and their scandalization in the media.

<sup>4</sup> Cohn, B. S. (1987). *An Anthropologist among the Historians and Other Essays*, Oxford University Press, New Delhi.

<sup>5</sup> Vasavi, A. R. (2012). *Shadow Space: Suicides and the Predicament of Rural India*, Three Essays Collective, Gurgaon.

The uncanny relationship between agrarian crisis and increasing suicide rates in India explains the Durkheimian framing of many recent social-scientific writings about farmers' suicides.<sup>6</sup> These writings are Durkheimian not in the strict sense that they subscribe to Durkheim's theory of individualization and anomie,<sup>7</sup> but rather in their fundamental methodological agreement that suicide *rates* are the privileged site for the social-scientific study of suicide and that these rates somehow correspond to changes in the macro-structure of society. However, suicide rates are far from self-evident data. The rates for farmers' suicides depend especially on the relatively recent (1995) inclusion of the census category 'self-employed (farming/agriculture)' in the National Crime Records Bureaus' yearly Accidental Deaths and Suicides (ADSI) report.<sup>8</sup>

Farmers' suicides are thus a 'scandal of the state'<sup>9</sup> in a dual sense. On the one hand, they are manifestations of a scandalous existential crisis amongst small capitalist farmers,<sup>10</sup> which amounts to 'the piecemeal dispossession of small-scale farmers, unable to survive when exposed to competition from agricultural systems

<sup>6</sup> Most social scientific articles on the issue of farmers' suicides have appeared in the journal *Economic and Political Weekly*. See Assadi, M. (2000). Seed Tribunal: Interrogating Farmers' Suicides. *Economic and Political Weekly*, 35(43–44): 3808–3810; Deshpande, R. S. (2002). Suicide by Farmers in Karnataka: Agrarian Distress and Possible Alleviatory Steps. *Economic and Political Weekly*, 37(26): 2601–2610; George, J. and Krishnaprasad, P. (2006). Agrarian Distress and Farmers' Suicides in the Tribal District of Wayanad. *Social Scientist*, 34(7–8): 75–80; Kulkarni, M. N. (2003). Saving Farmers' Lives. *Economic and Political Weekly*, 38(44): 4626–4716; Mishra, S. (2006). Farmers' Suicides in Maharashtra. *Economic and Political Weekly*, 41(16): 1538–1545; Mohanakumar, S. and Sharma, R. K. (2006). Analysis of Farmer Suicides in Kerala. *Economic and Political Weekly*, 41(16): 1553–1558; Revathi, E. (1998). Farmers' Suicide: Missing Issues. *Economic and Political Weekly*, 33(20): 1207; Sridhar, V. (2006). Why do Farmers Commit Suicide? The Case of Andhra Pradesh. *Economic and Political Weekly*, 41(16): 1559–1565.

<sup>7</sup> See Durkheim, É. (1952 [1897]). *Suicide: A Study in Sociology*, Routledge and Kegan Paul, London; Mohanty, B. B. (2005). 'We are Like the Living Dead': Farmer Suicides in Maharashtra, Western India. *The Journal of Peasant Studies*, 32(2): 243–276. Mohanty is amongst the few authors who explicitly discuss Durkheim's theory of anomie in relation to farmers' suicides.

<sup>8</sup> For a discussion of the statistical procedures, see Nagaraj, Farmers' Suicides in India.

<sup>9</sup> Rajan, R. S. (2003). *The Scandal of the State: Women, Law, and Citizenship in Postcolonial India*, Duke University Press, Durham.

<sup>10</sup> Reddy, D. N. and Mishra, S. (2009). *Agrarian Crisis in India*, Oxford University Press, New Delhi.

backed by subsidies and preferential tariffs'.<sup>11</sup> It is the scandal of a 'political economy of uncaring'<sup>12</sup> and a neoliberal state policy that has curtailed programmes that once sustained rural India. On the other hand, farmers' suicides are a scandal of the state's own making—the very reality of which has been constructed by the postcolonial state's calculative techniques. Suicide rates, like other categories and indicators of the wellbeing of populations (mortality rates, infanticide rates, infection rates, etc.), are powerful social constructions produced for governance purposes. As studies influenced by the philosophy of Foucault<sup>13</sup> have shown in different contexts, the exercise of modern governmental power depends on numbers, quantification, calculation, numeracy and statistics.<sup>14</sup> Many calculative techniques have unexpected effects on populations.<sup>15</sup> As Ian Hacking argues, 'many of the modern categories by which we think about people and their activities were put in place by an attempt to collect numerical data'.<sup>16</sup>

As both a statistically constructed category and an everyday reality, farmers' suicides thus exhibit similarities with ontologies of caste and identity politics in South Asia, which have been co-produced by the colonial census and local kinship and power dynamics.<sup>17</sup> What Bernard Cohn writes about objectification of caste through the colonial census holds true, to some extent, for farmers' suicides as well: 'It was the act of questioning the need for explanation to

<sup>11</sup> Li, T. M. (2009). Exit from Agriculture: A Step Forward or a Step Backward for the Rural Poor? *The Journal of Peasant Studies*, 36(3): 72.

<sup>12</sup> Vasavi, *Shadow Space*, p. 2.

<sup>13</sup> Foucault, M. (2007). *Security, Territory, Population: Lectures at the Collège de France, 1977–78*, Palgrave Macmillan, New York.

<sup>14</sup> Gupta, A. 'Governing Populations: The Integrated Child Development Services Programme in India' in T. B. Hansen and F. Stepputat (2001). *States of Imagination: Ethnographic Explorations of the Postcolonial State*, Duke University Press, Durham, pp. 65–96; Rose, N. (1991). Governing by Numbers: Figuring Out Democracy. *Accounting, Organizations and Society*, 16(7): 673–692.

<sup>15</sup> Cohn, *An Anthropologist among the Historians*; Mitchell, T. 'Society, Economy, and the State Effect' in A. Gupta and A. Sharma (2006). *The Anthropology of the State: A Reader*, Blackwell, Malden, pp. 169–186.

<sup>16</sup> Hacking, I. 'How Should We Do the History of Statistics?' in G. Burchell, C. Gordon and Miller (1991) *The Foucault Effect: Studies in Governmentality*, University of Chicago Press, Chicago, pp. 181–195.

<sup>17</sup> Cohn, *An Anthropologist among the Historians*; Dirks, N. B. *Castes of Mind: Colonialism and the Making of Modern India*, Princeton University Press, Princeton; Guha, S. (2003). The Politics of Identity and Enumeration in India c. 1600–1990. *Comparative Studies in Society and History*, 45(1): 148–167; Sundar, N. 'The Indian Census, Identity and Inequality' in R. Guha and J. P. Parry (1999) *Institutions and Inequalities: Essays in Honour of André Beteille*, Oxford University Press, New Delhi, pp. 100–127.

themselves or to the British which lies at the heart of the process [of objectification].<sup>18</sup> However, according to Cohn, the process of objectification also necessitates critical questions about one's own society. Similar processes have been observed regarding the social life of suicide statistics and their problematic feedback loops into populations, such as Canadian Inuits<sup>19</sup> or young homosexual people,<sup>20</sup> who are statistically branded as suicide-prone. The factorization of agrarian crisis into widely publicized farmers' suicides has subtly shaped the way the state, activists and the media have addressed the current rural predicament as a social problem.<sup>21</sup>

### Public suicides in Wayanad

At the district level, suicide rates for such specific categories as 'farmers' depend, amongst other factors, on the willingness of local police to file the First Information Report (FIR) accordingly. This may lead to both over-reporting and under-reporting of farmers' suicides. Over-reporting arguably happened for some time in Wayanad when, at the height of moral panic about farmers' suicides, rumours of an imminent compensatory payment of 50,000 rupees from the government spread amongst the rural population, and families were eager to have cases of death filed under the category of 'farmers' suicide'. In the run-up to the Kerala state assembly election in 2006, both 'agrarian crisis' (*kāṛṣika pratisandhi*) and 'farmers' suicides' (*kaṛṣaka ātmahatya*) in their most dramatic manifestations were the major campaign issues of the contending Left Democratic Front under the leadership of P. Krishnaprasad, the Communist Party of India (Marxist) candidate for the Sultan Bathery constituency.<sup>22</sup>

<sup>18</sup> Cohn, *An Anthropologist among the Historians*, p. 230.

<sup>19</sup> Stevenson, L. 'The Suicidal Wound and Fieldwork Among the Canadian Inuit' in J. Borneman and A. Hammoudi (2009). *The Fieldwork Encounter and the Making of Truth*, University of California Press, Berkeley, pp. 55–76.

<sup>20</sup> Waidzunas, T. (2012). Young, Gay, and Suicidal: Dynamic Nominalism and the Process of Defining a Social Problem with Statistics. *Science, Technology & Human Values*, 37(2): 199–225.

<sup>21</sup> Münster, D. (2012). Farmers' Suicides and the State in India: Conceptual and Ethnographic Notes from Wayanad, Kerala. *Contributions to Indian Sociology*, 46(1–2): 181–208.

<sup>22</sup> The present-day Wayanad district was formed in 1980 and is made up of three Taluks (and three State Assembly constituencies): Vythiri, Mananthavadi and Sultan Bathery. My fieldwork was mainly carried out in Sultan Bathery Taluk.

Given the context of repeated *hartals* (general strikes) and other demonstrations by agitated farmers, the political mood at the time was such that the local administration was deliberately generous in classifying almost all suicides as ‘farmers’ suicides’, an occurrence which local-level bureaucrats confirmed in interviews. The decisive administrative step for the ‘acknowledgement’ of a farmer’s suicide is inclusion on a list administered by the village officer—the local-level representative of the Revenue Department—that is informally called the ‘register of farmers’ suicides’ within administrative offices.<sup>23</sup> The most crucial criteria for inclusion on this list were the suicidal person’s ownership of agricultural land and the existence of institutional debt for agricultural purposes. All the families of the ‘farmers’ mentioned on this list had received the compensation of 50,000 rupees from the so-called Chief Minister’s Distress Relief Fund .

After the election, when the Left Democratic Front had won all three seats of the conservative (United Democratic Front) stronghold of Wayanad for the first time in history, the criteria for recognizing farmers’ suicide became stricter; as one officer in the Revenue Department said, this was because the government ‘did not want to encourage further suicides by continuing to give out compensatory payments as had been done briefly after the elections’. This strictness may also be a side effect of more stringent procedures, leading to the assertion that the ‘suicide problem’ has been ‘getting better’ or was even ‘over’, as heard increasingly in recent years. Farmers’ suicides may or may not have abated in Wayanad since 2006; there is no safe way to tell, given the state’s monopoly on data. However, there are reasons to believe in the beneficial impact of recent protective central government schemes, such as the National Rural Employment Guarantee Scheme and the debt waiver of agricultural loans in 2008. The fact remains that there is no agreement on the total number of suicides in Wayanad, particularly the politically charged number of farmers’ suicides. According to the Revenue Department, there were 435 farmers’ suicides in Wayanad between 1997 and 2008 (the year the crisis was officially declared over and the payment of compensation terminated),<sup>24</sup> whereas according to the Safe Farmers Campaign, a

<sup>23</sup> The official name of that register was ‘*kaṭakkeni mūlum ātmahatya ceytavaruṣe pērunkaḷ*’ (Mal.)—literally, ‘names of those who committed suicide due to debt’.

<sup>24</sup> The source is a document obtained from the District Revenue Department in Kalpetta. It lists all beneficiaries of the 50,000-rupee compensation from the Chief Minister’s Distress Relief Fund. A report by the Kerala Department of Economics

network of Catholic NGOs founded in response to the suicide crisis in Wayanad, there were 1,690 suicides from 2000 to 2008 alone.<sup>25</sup>

The point here is that the political nature of suicide as public death depends entirely upon suicide rates and their production by the state itself. Absent in the discussion so far has been an engagement with the 'meaning' of the suicides themselves—'meaning' in a Weberian sense, which aims to interpret intentions, motives, motivations and the 'Sinn' of suicidal action.<sup>26</sup> Aspects of agency and intention on the part of those who commit these suicides remain out of reach with regard to the 'sociologistic' treatment of farmers' suicides, since accurate data on suicide rates cannot be taken for granted. Agency ultimately lies with the state and its policies of either 'make live' or 'let die'.<sup>27</sup> Political decisions after liberalization in 1991 and the failure to protect agriculture from the macro-economic forces of globalization—conceived as adverse 'terms of trade' and export-led growth—are given sole agency as 'causes' of suicide. Yet the link between crisis, debt and distress on the one hand, and these acts of suicide on the other, has hardly received any attention in recent research on farmers' suicides. Capitalist smallholders do not simply react to generic forces of rural dispossession by committing suicide; rather, they have developed a series of situated agrarian responses and exit strategies for unviable agriculture, among which the public importance given to suicide reflects neither its quantitative occurrence nor its importance amongst farmers.

### Suicide and political agency

Conceiving farmers' suicides as public or political acts is impossible without the treatment of agency. An extreme position would be to

and Statistics reports a total number of 317 farmers' suicides for Wayanad (979 for Kerala in total) from 2003 to 2007 on the basis of police reports, Revenue Department reports and field surveys. See Government of Kerala. (2009). *Report of Survey on Farmers' Suicides in Kerala*, Department of Economics and Statistics, Thiruvananthapuram.

<sup>25</sup> The findings of the consortium are summarized in the Kerala Social Service Forum. *Wayanad Suicides: A Psycho-Social Autopsy*, KSSF Kottayam, Adichira. See also the earlier publication by Shreyas, a member of the Safe Farmers Campaign network of NGOs, Shreyas (2007). *Increasing Suicides in Wayanad: A Study Report*, Shreyas Publication, Sulthan Bathery.

<sup>26</sup> Weber, M. (1990 [1922]). *Wirtschaft und Gesellschaft: Grundriss der verstehenden Soziologie*, Mohr, Tübingen.

<sup>27</sup> Li, Exit from Agriculture, pp. 629–636.

deny farmers any agency whatsoever, viewing them purely as victims of their overwhelming debt and of the structures behind it. Suicide would thus be interpreted as a culturally accepted 'exit option'. Consider Jawaharlal Nehru's position on Indian farmers in distress:

[The] Indian peasant has an amazing capacity to bear famine, flood, disease, and continuous grinding poverty—and when he could endure it no longer; he would quietly and almost uncomplainingly lie down in his thousands or millions and die. That was his way of escape.<sup>28</sup>

If we transfer this quotation to the present context of farmers, yet again willing to die by the thousands, Nehru's observation begs the question: why would 'he' escape like this? Are these suicides really 'quiet' and 'uncomplaining'? Are they not, on the contrary, public, loud and accusatory acts? If this type of suicide is interpreted as a quasi-customary behaviour not unlike some interpretations of *sati* (widow burning/suicide),<sup>29</sup> it becomes an almost altruistic form of suicide by Durkheim's classification: one that is culturally accepted or even demanded.<sup>30</sup> This, of course, cannot be said about recent farmers' suicides and the moral panic that surrounds them.

Durkheimian studies of farmers' suicides, whether in sociology or economics, thus generally function under an implicit assumption similar to what E. P. Thompson has termed, with regard to so-called 'food-riots' in eighteenth-century England, the 'spasmodic view of popular history'.<sup>31</sup> This perspective explains riots and other forms of 'direct popular action' only as spasmodic reactions to distress and treats subaltern agency as responses to 'elementary economic stimuli'.<sup>32</sup> To Thompson, such perspectives are built on an 'abbreviated view of economic man' and hence are 'guilty of crass economic reductionism, obliterating complexities of motive,

<sup>28</sup> Quoted in Jodhka, S. S. (2002). Nation and Village: Images of Rural India in Gandhi, Nehru and Ambedkar. *Economic and Political Weekly*, 37(32): 3343–3353.

<sup>29</sup> There is a huge debate about the nature of *sati* (the burning or customary suicide of widows on their husband's funeral pyre in India), its uses in colonialist and orientalist writings and its reality. See Mani, L. (1998). *Contentious Traditions: The Debate on Sati in Colonial India*, Oxford University Press, Oxford; Sen, M. (2002). *Death by Fire: Sati, Dowry, Death, And Female Infanticide in Modern India*, Rutgers University Press, New Brunswick; Spivak, G. C. 'Can The Subaltern Speak?' in Williams, P. and Chrisman, L. (1994). *Colonial Discourse and Post-Colonial Theory: A Reader*, Columbia University Press, New York, pp. 66–111.

<sup>30</sup> Durkheim, *Suicide*, p. 200.

<sup>31</sup> Thompson, E. P. (1971). The Moral Economy of the English Crowd in the Eighteenth Century. *Past & Present*, 50(1): 76–136.

<sup>32</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 78.

behaviour, and function'.<sup>33</sup> The parallel to farmers' suicides in India is noticeable. For example, in their article on the phenomenon in Kerala, economists Mohanakumar and Sharma begin with the claim that 'the price fall of export-dependent crops has claimed the lives of many farmers in Kerala since 1997'.<sup>34</sup> However, as in much of the existing literature, they remain silent about the means and circumstances of individual suicide cases (Thompson's 'complexities of motive, behaviour, and function'). One reason for this economic reductionism may stem from an unspoken apprehension that analytical attention to such situated meanings of suicide may distract from blame placed on recent policy decisions, instead redirecting attention towards the messiness and relativism of cultural and social explanations. According to this theory,

The ongoing spate of farmers' suicides is caused basically due to [sic] economic distress rather than psychological and social reasons. Recently, there have been attempts to situate farmers' suicides in broad theoretical frameworks such as the family stress models and Durkheim propositions of individualisation (...), *with a purposeful objective of belittling the devastating impact of neoliberal policies on farming community* [sic].<sup>35</sup>

Such a rejection of social and psychological nuance in the study of politically charged suicides—also present in media representations and popular discourses in Kerala—is characterized by the assumption of a singular causality and, as one aspect, the identification of (singular) political responsibility: globalization and so-called anti-people policies, however vague, emerge as the main addressees of blame. These singular causality discourses are unconvincing for several reasons: not only are they economically reductionist, but they also align with what anthropologist Sherry Ortner, in her seminal critique of resistance studies, called a 'sanitised'<sup>36</sup> notion of homogenous subaltern peasants—a perspective that delegitimizes any nuanced view of the class position, subjectivities, psychology and life circumstances of suicide victims.

Finally, Mohanakumar and Sharma remain silent on the question of why some people commit suicide whilst others in comparable economic

<sup>33</sup> Ibid., p. 78.

<sup>34</sup> Mohanakumar and Sharma, *Analysis of Farmer Suicides in Kerala*, p. 1553.

<sup>35</sup> Ibid., p. 1553, emphasis added.

<sup>36</sup> Ortner, S. (1995). Resistance and the Problem of Ethnographic Refusal. *Comparative Studies in Society and History*, 37(1): 137–193.

situations do not. This brings us back to E. P. Thompson's well-known formulation:

Being hungry (or being sexy), what do people do? How is their behaviour modified by custom, culture, and reason? And (having granted that the primary stimulus of 'distress' is present) does their behaviour contribute towards any more complex, culturally-mediated function, which cannot be reduced—however long it is stewed over the fires of statistical analysis—back to stimulus once again?<sup>37</sup>

Hence, the challenge for an anthropology of such serial-distress suicides is to move towards embedding these acts in situated meanings in an attempt to make sense of their apparent meaninglessness. Riots, according to Thompson, are embedded in an outrage of the 'moral economy of the poor', which includes traditional rights and obligations of both rulers and ruled. Likewise, it is worth pursuing the question of moral economy and ideas of justice and justified outrage in the study of farmers' suicides. Distress, in the form of declining prices, depleted soil and overdue loans, certainly looms large over most small-scale and occasional farmers in Wayanad. Discourses about suicides in the region also frequently convey a sense of disappointed expectations and focus on the state's responsibility for its present bleak situation. As A. C. Varkey, leader of the Farmers Relief Forum, a farmers' movement specializing in direct action interventions,<sup>38</sup> put it at the height of the debt crisis in Wayanad, 'Government is always cheating; banks and the cooperative sector—all are cheating'.<sup>39</sup> According to Varkey, and many other farmers in the region, the state, its agronomists and agricultural advisers in particular, had failed farmers by exaggerating the prospects of vanilla crops and aggressively promoting its cultivation in the region, but also by failing to provide social security to 'agricultural people' and by putting up bureaucratic hurdles<sup>40</sup> in the allocation of debt relief.

<sup>37</sup> Thompson, *The Moral Economy*, p. 77f.

<sup>38</sup> Examples of the Farmers Relief Forum's direct-action interventions include the protection of farmers threatened with eviction notices from their land by shutting in bankers and village officers and preventing land auctions from taking place. The Forum also independently called a general strike (*hartal*) in 2008 and staged protests against the high-level (and in their view hypocritical) visits of state and central politicians at the height of the agrarian crisis.

<sup>39</sup> A. C. Varkey, Nadavayal, 28 August 2008.

<sup>40</sup> Here, the most important hurdle was the waiver of exclusively 'agricultural loans'. This was perceived as a great injustice, as a large amount of rural debt either lay with informal moneylenders or was categorized as 'consumer loans' or 'housing loans'. The

### Farmers' suicides as protest suicides

Are rural suicides in Wayanad, if viewed not as statistical anomalies but as individual, real-life cases, meaningfully interpreted as 'suicide against the state'? Do they constitute a form of 'direct popular action' akin to riots and other forms of protest? Many anthropological studies of suicide have pointed to the inherent accusation in most attempted and successful suicides, even those related to issues of 'domestic justice'.<sup>41</sup> The question, then, is who is accused (implicitly or otherwise) in the case of suicidal acts? Does the rage of suicidal violence speak to one's immediate circumstances of livelihood, does it reach to local moneylenders or is it an indictment that extends all the way up to the structural violence of politics and political economy? Anthropological theories of suicide, beginning with Malinowski<sup>42</sup> and Raymond Firth (1967),<sup>43</sup> seem to agree that most suicides entail elements of accusation, revenge or indictment against wrongdoers in kinship affairs and that suicides are therefore ultimately communicative acts that possess what Anthony Giddens calls a 'social aetiology'.<sup>44</sup>

Consequently, anthropologists who deal with explicitly political or protest suicides such as Allen Feldman<sup>45</sup> or Karin Andriolo<sup>46</sup> stress that these suicides have 'a message' and that it is their strategic objective, as Andriolo argues, to get that message across to the state or whoever is responsible for the 'wrong of moral, political, or economic dimension, a wrong that affects the lives of many'.<sup>47</sup> Andriolo understands protest suicides as 'embodied minding', the quite literal

availability of agricultural loans was very restricted. According to Varkey, 'We are an agricultural district. Everything we do is agriculture-related.' Another local scandal involved the strict application of cut-off dates for debt relief.

<sup>41</sup> Wu, F. (2010). *Suicide and Justice: A Chinese Perspective*, Routledge, London.

<sup>42</sup> Malinowski, B. (1978 [1926]). *Crime and Custom in Savage Society*, Routledge and Kegan Paul, London.

<sup>43</sup> Firth, R. (1967). 'Suicide and Risk-Taking' in *Tikopia Ritual and Belief*, Allen and Unwin, London, pp. 116–140.

<sup>44</sup> Giddens, A. (1964). Suicide, Attempted Suicide, and the Suicidal Threat. *Man*, 64(3): 115–116; Giddens, A. (1977). *Studies in Social and Political Theory*, Basic Books, New York.

<sup>45</sup> Feldman, A. (1991). *Formations of Violence: The Narrative of the Body and Political Terror in Northern Ireland*, University of Chicago Press, Chicago.

<sup>46</sup> Andriolo, K. (2002). Murder by Suicide: Episodes from Muslim History. *American Anthropologist*, 104(3): 736–742; Andriolo, K. (2006). The Twice-Killed: Imagining Protest Suicide. *American Anthropologist*, 108(1): 100–113.

<sup>47</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 102

inscription of a political message onto the body of the protester. For Andriolo, protest suicides are all about a message: 'Protest suicide is dying with a message, for a message, and of a message. The body becomes the site on which self-destructive mimesis denounces the wrongs that humans have wrought'.<sup>48</sup> According to Andriolo, protest suicide, then, has two strategic objectives: visibility and the undistorted transmission of its message. Protest suicides are based on an exchange model in which the human 'sacrifice' yields a (political) 'boon'. It is clear from her examples—hunger strikers in Northern Ireland, self-immolations and the suicide of the South Korean farmer Lee Kyung Hae at the World Trade Organisation summit in Cancún, Mexico in 2003—that these suicides have a clear-cut message which aims to reach the largest possible audience: national or even world populations. Such protest suicides, for Andriolo, stand in contrast to 'regular' suicides with their histories of personal and psychological 'suicidality'.

Rural suicides in Wayanad are not 'regular suicides', yet at the same time they hardly conform to Andriolo's criteria for protest suicides: political messages have not been formulated, those who have committed suicide have not sought audiences for their self-destruction beyond domestic contexts, and expectations of exchange (with the state) did not appear to have played a significant role in the suicide cases I was able to record in detail. During fieldwork in Wayanad, I was able to engage with more than 50 households in which suicides had occurred. The majority of them had received official recognition as 'farmers' suicides'; hence, families had not only received compensation of 50,000 rupees but also had to endure a series of 'development encounters' with NGOs, politicians, village officers, Pentecostal ministers and the media. Some of their widows—these farmers are predominantly males—had been additionally targeted as government beneficiaries of the so-called Vidarbha package<sup>49</sup> and

<sup>48</sup> Ibid.

<sup>49</sup> The 'Vidarbha package' is a central government scheme exclusively for suicide-prone districts. Officially, it is called 'Prime Minister's Package for Rehabilitation' or 'Rehabilitation Package for Suicide-Prone Districts' and was implemented by the union government in 2006/2007 in 31 districts. It permitted writing off overdue loans for the families of the dead farmers as well as an income-generating programme (livestock) for the widows, but its funds were otherwise spent through the agricultural offices. Its shorthand, 'Vidarbha Package', is derived from Vidarbha, the region in eastern Maharashtra that is most notorious in the country for farmers' suicides, which Prime Minister Manmohan Singh visited in June 2006. In Kerala, the districts of Wayanad, Palakkad and Kasaragod were included in the scheme.

other small 'income-generating' schemes delivered by NGOs. Yet during our conversations, none of them interpreted their husbands' suicides as protest suicides in Lee and Kleinman's understanding of the term, that is, as 'wilful moral acts'.<sup>50</sup> Farmers' suicides in Wayanad are not political suicides in the narrow sense: they are not singular acts of protest and resistance built on a notion of agency that attributes the intention or will to communicate a political message in the public sphere to the individual committing the suicide.

The disclaimer 'in Wayanad' is very important here, as there are reports from other parts of India where viewing an element of protest in suicides seems more clearly justified. P. Sainath, a journalist at the South Indian daily *The Hindu*, reported several cases in Maharashtra in which farmers directly addressed Maharashtra Chief Minister Vilasrao Deshmukh or Prime Minister Manmohan Singh in suicide notes.<sup>51</sup> In other cases, farmers chose public sites for their suicides—political meetings,<sup>52</sup> the Agricultural Produce Marketing Committee or the premises of the Agricultural Officers—explicitly pointing to concrete issues in the agrarian situation ('delay in procurement and crashing prices') as causes of their suicides.<sup>53</sup> There have also been reports elsewhere in India of farmers choosing the politically charged method of self-immolation as a means to end their lives.<sup>54</sup> Instances of self-immolation and public sites for suicide, in addition to political

<sup>50</sup> Lee, S. and Kleinman, A. 'Suicide as Resistance in Chinese Society' in Perry, E. J. and Selden, M. (2003) *Chinese Society: Change, Conflict and Resistance*, Routledge, New York, pp. 289–311.

<sup>51</sup> Sainath, P. (2007). Farmers' Suicides: Striking a Note of Dissent. *The Hindu*, 27 January 2007.

<sup>52</sup> Visvanathan, S. (1998). The Sadness of Cotton. *Economic and Political Weekly*, 33(7): 323–324.

<sup>53</sup> Sainath, Farmers' Suicides.

<sup>54</sup> At the time of writing this paper, the self-immolation of farmer Jabardaan Gadhvi in Rapar, Kutch (Gujarat) on 21 February 2011 had become a matter of heated debate between the government and its opposition in the Gujarat Assembly. According to Mishra, 4.5 per cent of all suicides by farmers in Virdarbha were committed by self-immolation, see Mishra, S. (2006). Suicide Mortality Rates across States of India: 1975–2001: A Statistical Note. *Economic and Political Weekly*, 41(16): 1566–1569. Self-immolations in India are more frequent amongst female suicides and are often associated with instances of dowry harassment and other cases of domestic violence, see Oldenburg, V. T. (2002). *Dowry Murder: The Imperial Origins of a Cultural Crime*, Oxford University Press, Oxford; and Sen, *Death by Fire*. Most commentators agree that in such instances, the moment of accusation and protest outweighs possible elements of psychopathology, see Singh, S. P., Santosh, P. J., Avasthi, A. and Kulhara, P. (1998). A Psychosocial Study of 'Self-Immolation' in India. *Acta Psychiatrica Scandinavica*, 97(1): 71–75.

suicide notes, point towards the possibility of understanding farmers' suicides as politically motivated and as manifestations of protest. Lee Kyung Hae, the South Korean farmer in Cancún, seems to have set a leitmotif for interpretations that attribute strong political agency to farmers' suicides, as he was wearing a sandwich board that read 'WTO! Kills. FARMERS' when he killed himself.<sup>55</sup>

However, as earlier indicated, hardly any explicitly political or public suicides occurred in Wayanad; I heard of a single such case, in which a farmer had hanged himself at night on the premises of the agricultural officer. Other than that, most suicides had taken place in farmers' fields or houses. Suicide notes were also extremely rare in Wayanad; I learned of their content only through second-hand accounts from social workers sent out by NGOs to investigate these cases. The notes, if they existed at all, addressed family members: they contained apologies, regrets or confessions of personal failures. In fact, in a 2004 interview with P. Sainath, A. C. Varkey angrily dismissed the suicides in Wayanad on these grounds: 'I say that if we must [commit suicide], let us do it en masse at the government headquarters. Make it an act of political struggle, not one of individual despair.'<sup>56</sup> Yet there were no explicit accusations, no larger political perspectives on individual misery—neither in the performance of suicidal acts nor in their families' interpretations. Returning to the issue of suicide and agency, an overstretched notion of political agency may be just as mistaken as the denial of agency from the 'distress trigger' perspective.

Active capitalist smallholders in Wayanad often commented on farmers' suicides in terms of an ideology of rural entrepreneurship, according to which suicides must be interpreted as instances of individual failure rather than as victims of external forces. One reason for such an emphasis on farmers' decision-making may be found in the political ecology of Wayanad's smallholder agriculture. During my ethnography, I encountered many narratives of suicides as speculations gone wrong, of the failure of a type of agriculture that was both entrepreneurial and speculative—almost a kind of gambling, of 'playing out of control'. These narratives portrayed the suicidal person as someone who 'overplayed their hand' (*kaiyillirippā*), as one farmer put it—someone who may have taken out too large a loan

<sup>55</sup> Brooke, J. (2003). Farming is Korean's Life and He Ends it in Despair. *The New York Times*, 16 September 2003.

<sup>56</sup> Sainath, P. (2004). So Near to God, So Far From Heaven. *The Hindu*, 14 December 2004.

in the 'hope' (*pratīkṣa*) of securing this year's or even next year's harvest, which then turned foul and drove the farmer to ruin. I take inspiration from these narratives as a call to turn to regionally specific practices of capitalist farming. This is not to blame the victims or to deny the dispossessive effects of neoliberal capitalism for Wayanad's smallholders; on the contrary, probing into agrarian practices may deepen our understanding of neoliberalism as both a global process of restructuring development policy and strategies of accumulation and as the cultural effects of these processes on the economic subjectivities of local actors.<sup>57</sup> Agrarian subjectivities are rooted in the recent history of agrarian migration, the neoliberalization of agriculture and the closure of the forest frontier for conservation in Wayanad.<sup>58</sup>

### Agrarian crisis in Wayanad

Wayanad, formerly part of British Malabar, underwent rapid economic and ecological transformations after independence. Beginning in the 1940s, this hilly, forested area was colonized by waves of agricultural settlers from Travancore, attracted by the prospect of cheap and abundant land. These migrants—many of whom were Syrian Christians—largely displaced the local Adivasi population, encroached upon or purchased forest land from landlords or temple trust, and transformed Wayanad into one of the most prosperous agrarian regions of India. Wayanad's tropical evergreen ecology and its fertile soils of recently converted forestland has made the planting of a great variety of crops possible. Hence, its agriculture allows agriculturalists to make a variety of choices, especially with short-term crops<sup>59</sup>; these choices have previously created considerable opportunities for capital accumulation amongst some entrepreneurial farmers in the region. There have been times when Wayanad has been known as the 'mini-Gulf' because of the visible wealth in the region.

<sup>57</sup> Münster, D. and Strümpell, C. (2014). The Anthropology of Neoliberal India: An Introduction. *Contributions to Indian Sociology*, 48(1): 1–16.

<sup>58</sup> Münster, D. and Münster, U. (2012). Consuming the Forest in an Environment of Crisis: Nature Tourism, Forest Conservation and Neoliberal Agriculture in South India. *Development and Change*, 43(1): 205–227.

<sup>59</sup> On the issue of choices in small-scale capitalist farming, see Tharakan, P. K. *Coffee, Tea or Pepper: Factors Affecting Choice of Crops by Agro-Entrepreneurs in Nineteenth Century South-West India*, Working Paper, Centre for Development Studies, Thiruvananthapuram.

High-value cash crops with highly volatile market prices, in particular, thrive in Wayanad. This so-called hill produce includes spices such as pepper, vanilla and cardamom, in addition to natural rubber, areca nuts, ginger, bananas and plantation crops of tea and coffee. Some of these crops may bring handsome returns, even to holders of relatively small plots of one to five acres, if the yield is good and the world market price is right.

Since liberalization in the 1990s, the incidence of dramatic price drops has increased. At the same time, due to mono-cropping and heavy use of chemical fertilizers, many of Wayanad's cash crops have been affected by new fungal diseases such as 'quick wilt' or 'foot rot', which share the ability to destroy whole plantations quickly. In response, many farmers have resorted to increased use of systemic pesticides and fungicides, amongst them numerous 'red-label' pesticides such as Furadan (perhaps the most toxic carbamate pesticide widely used in Wayanad). The point here is that in Wayanad's capitalist smallholder agriculture, there exist both the possibility of becoming rich in a very short time and the possibility of total failure. Other factors, including the advice given by agrochemical dealers and agronomical extension workers, contribute to the success or failure depending upon the choices made by individual agriculturalists: did they bet on the right crop? What prices can they expect for the coming years? Wayanad's capitalist smallholder agriculture is thus susceptible to hype and speculative bubbles as well as busts. In 2003 and 2004, the great agrarian bust was accompanied by a severe drought throughout the district. As many farmers were unable to repay their loans, many were forced to cut down trees on their fields and sell them as timber. This distress measure further aggravated the ecological degradation of the soil.

In settler pockets of Sultan Bathery Taluk, many of the Christian *chettans* (lit. elder brothers) became rich in the 1980s solely on the basis of their cash crops, initiating a 'run' for pepper throughout the whole district. In the 1980s, the price of pepper was high and yields were profitable, but since pepper vines require some three to five years before they begin to bear fruit, only those farmers who had shifted to growing pepper earlier were able to reap the benefits. During the heyday of the pepper boom, some farmers—lured by advice from state agronomists and aggressive credit sales from banks—bet their entire existences on pepper. This was done at the cost of a diversified cropping pattern, especially at the expense of long-term crops with lower profit margins, such as coffee. Even salaried 'town people' leased land in

Pulpally, often on credit, in order to cultivate pepper; I heard stories of old buildings being levelled to make space for its cultivation. Fertilizers were used increasingly to obtain greater yield.

Yet suddenly, everything came to an end. By the end of the 1990s, prices for pepper had crashed, diseases continuously ravaged plantations and the fertile soil was exhausted. Additionally, deforestation and the conversion of ecologically precious wetlands (paddy) into fields for bananas, ginger and areca nuts had caused a change in Pulpally's microclimate, bringing more frequent drought and rising temperatures. As the decade drew to a close, the production of pepper was basically 'over'. Similar booms and crashes happened with other crops—vanilla, ginger, rubber—yet speculative farming continued. In the meantime, a new investment opportunity emerged in the form of ginger plantations on new land in neighbouring Karnataka. Investors, often groups who pooled their money, hired a group of Adivasi labourers and brought them to Karnataka for one planting season. Again, these agrarian enterprises had the possibility to bring a tenfold return or total ruin, if the crop was damaged or the prices fell, as seemed imminent in the planting season of 2011. Vanilla was the 'crop of hope', as one farmer put it, in 2002. However, the market price for raw beans fell dramatically from 4,300 rupees per kilogram in 2003 to just 25 rupees for the same amount in 2006, ruining once again those farmers who had invested too much at the wrong time.

The point here is that agriculture in many parts of Wayanad bears little similarity to the romantic peasant situation that seems to be the subtext of so many alarmist reports about farmers' suicides; instead, it is in many cases a capital-intensive, chemicalized cash-crop enterprise.<sup>60</sup> Agrarian entrepreneurs celebrated success in these enterprises through conspicuous consumption and the display of cars, villas, food, alcohol, mobile telephones and wedding celebrations. Failure, on the other hand, is highly stigmatized, individualized and internalized. Sudden ruin, as manifested in debts of greater than 100,000 rupees, was an economic condition shared by almost all suicide cases that could be considered agrarian in a strict sense. Family members rarely interpreted the ruin of the deceased within a critical

<sup>60</sup> This type of capitalist entrepreneurial farming is one amongst many types of agriculture. A more comprehensive picture would have to include the corporate plantation sector in addition to the considerable organic movement in Wayanad and a large number of medium-sized 'traditional farmers' whose long-term strategies and diversified cropping patterns have made them relatively immune to distress.

framework that included a view of the banks' role in aggressively marketing consumer loans, class differences amongst settlers, the relationship between the WTO Agreement on Agriculture and falling spice prices, or the ecological costs of intensive cash-crop farming. Most *suicides* had not even shared worries about their debt burdens with their wives or families; many widows reported being taken aback at the sum of debt that had accumulated when they finally were able to see the complete picture. Widows frequently related that their husbands would build up 'tension' (*pēṭi*), 'anxiety' (*utkaṇṭa*) and 'sadness' (*viṣamam*), but if they articulated their 'fear' (*bhayam*) within their families at all, most would speak of the impossibility of marrying off their daughters or the shame associated with pledging their wives' gold. Frequently, the immediate trigger for a suicide was a recovery note from the bank or a humiliating visit from an irate moneylender.

### Case studies of rural suicides

The Wayanad suicides mentioned in both the media and government reports were related to people engaged in a great variety of agrarian and non-agrarian activities, as well as those from divergent class backgrounds. In the rural setting of Wayanad, class is predominately determined by the size of landholdings; in the majority of cases, class differentials amongst farmers go back to the initial capital that migrants brought with them at the time they arrived in Wayanad.<sup>61</sup> Despite the land reforms of its Communist governments in the 1970s, there is considerable inequality in terms of landholding in Kerala, and the situation in Wayanad is no exception. In economic terms, the majority of suicides were cases of marginal farmers and persons who, paradoxically, were marginal to farming.

The story of Kurien<sup>62</sup> from Pulpally, who poisoned himself in 2002, is typical in this respect. It was recorded in an interview with Alyamman, his wife: Kurien's parents moved to Wayanad in 1959 from Kottayam (Travancore), where they were poor peasants who could not make ends meet. They sold their only assets, a water buffalo and a very small piece

<sup>61</sup> This is a very simplified picture of the class question. A more detailed treatment would have to take Adivasis, traders (many of them Muslims) and salaried classes into account. This statement refers to those who would identify their occupation as 'agriculture' (*kṛṣi*).

<sup>62</sup> Pseudonym.

of land, for 15 rupees. In Wayanad, his parents could not afford more than one acre, on which they planted tapioca and some lemongrass as cash crops. Kurien grew up working as an agricultural labourer (*kūli*). After his marriage, Kurien moved with his wife to Pulpally and bought one acre of land. In addition to working on a daily-wage basis, he began cultivating pepper with a loan from the bank. But pepper was a complete failure for him. Although he replanted frequently, he never got any yield due to drought and diseases. Kurien borrowed more money from all available sources: banks, neighbours, moneylenders (*paḷiśakkāran*). Finally, he made another attempt at a new beginning: he pledged all his land to the bank and started a small furniture shop. That business, too, was a complete failure—mainly, his wife believed, because he gave away furniture on credit and his customers did not pay up. In 2002, the peak year of suicides in Wayanad, he drank Furadan, the aforementioned 'red-label' pesticide, at his shop and came home to confess to his wife, 'It is not for me to stay in this world. If I stay I will make only more debts. It is better if I leave.' He died on the way to the hospital.

Kurien's suicide was reported in both the local media and the government lists of farmers' suicides. His widow, Alyamman, received compensation of 50,000 rupees, was targeted by NGOs for the Income Generating Programmes and was included in the central government's 'Vidarbha Package' relief programme, which provided her with a hybrid cow that she struggled to maintain.

Kurien's story illustrates the idiosyncrasy and complexity of circumstances leading to suicide amongst most of the cases I recorded. In most instances, suicides were embedded in everyday family issues and what Wu Fei, in his work on suicide in China, considers to be issues of 'domestic justice'.<sup>63</sup> Stories of a frustrating struggle for survival in volatile cash-crop agriculture were complicated by frequent descriptions of the *suicidée* as an alcoholic, depressed, violent and/or abusive; health problems and disabilities were also commonly mentioned in these life histories. In short, these cases were all psychologically complex and made attempting to generalize singular causes for suicides difficult at best; it was almost impossible even to describe a 'typical' farm suicide. Atypical circumstances within the actual cases included disabilities, illegal encroachment on Adivasi land which made institutional loans unavailable, a labourer who had

<sup>63</sup> Wu, *Suicide and Justice*, p. 31f.

borrowed money for his daughter's medical treatment, a stone-quarry worker and alcoholic whose qualification as a farmer would be far-fetched, a Nayar farmer who threw himself in his farm's well and whose lifelong obsession had been with his maternal kin cheating him of his inheritance, and one case of outright fraud by a salaried middle-class family that had managed to get compensation for the suicide of their 70-year-old grandfather (a cancer patient) as a farmers' suicide. The complexities and variations of economic and ecological crisis were thus entangled with idiosyncratic livelihood circumstances and a cultural notion of expectation and tension, consumption and shame, gambling for success and humiliation at loss.

### **Ethnography, case studies and the social life of suicide statistics**

Is ethnography—grounded, contextualized qualitative research—thus the panacea for the deductive impasse in the literature on farmers' suicides? Is it possible to gain deeper insight into the 'meaning' of suicide by following up individual cases, contextualizing domestic situations and tracing the economic biography of each suicide? Or does suicide, on the contrary, point to the limits of ethnography? For obvious reasons, there can be no unmediated apprehension of suicidal intentions and causes and hence of their meanings. All that is available to the ethnographer are representations—second-hand rationalizations of an act that ultimately remains a black box for the researcher. In the case of the suicides of 'farmers', the matter becomes even more complicated: even the case-study method is tainted by state practice, and data retrieved in ethnographic encounters are likely to be over-determined by statistical procedures. In family members' post-suicidal experiences, the enumerative state unleashed its full force in combination with governmental state agencies.

When I started visiting the widows of suicide cases, I was certainly not the first person to do so. Depending on the year of the suicide, these widows could have lived through encounters with police, journalists, camera crews, NGOs, the village officer, the *Tashildar* (the officer at the intermediary *Taluk* level), the district collector, politicians ranging from local to union level, fact-finding commissions, farmers' movement leaders, Pentecostal ministers and social scientists. NGO workers occasionally advised me quite frankly who amongst the families of the 'victims' would still receive visitors and who, on the

other hand, would become angry or refuse to open their doors. I was also interested in how 'relief' or 'compensation' was delivered: some widows were required to attend public functions to receive their compensation cheques from a high-ranking politician or bureaucrat in front of an audience. The 'targeting'<sup>64</sup> of women by NGOs for possible inclusion amongst their 'beneficiaries' (*gunabhōkthāvā*) was even more rigorous: widows had to undergo long, intimate interviews with social workers, including regular follow-up visits. To most 'victim families', as they are called by NGO workers, the political nature of the suicide in their household was quite literally brought home to them in a proliferation of what Aradhana Sharma and others have called 'development encounters'.<sup>65</sup>

Together with my research assistants, I tracked down and spent time with more than 50 widows or families who had recently experienced a suicide. In these short case studies, I was interested in individual life histories, the family's economic history and their economic circumstances at the time of the suicide, as well as their histories of migration to Wayanad. As far as they were comfortable talking to us, I was also very much interested in the suicide itself. How did it happen—by what means, when and where? Was the family surprised by the victim's action—was he depressed, abusive, alcoholic? What were their kinship ties in Wayanad; what were their aspirations as a family? Did they talk about other suicides? In these very often awkward and sad interview situations,<sup>66</sup> my aim was to get as close as possible to a qualitative understanding of the livelihood, hopes and fears of these people. Such extremely valuable intimate encounters certainly contributed to a more complex understanding of what was occurring than what the category 'farmers' suicide', even in combination with sound economic data, could possibly convey.

At the same time, however, the whole interview situation was possible only because of the existence of the very category I was ready to destabilize. This also had effects on the communication between ethnographer and informants: there were certain questions that these

<sup>64</sup> On the process of targeting, see Corbridge, S., Williams, G., Srivastava, M. and Véron, R. (2005). *Seeing the State: Governance and Governmentality in India*, Cambridge, Cambridge University Press.

<sup>65</sup> Sharma, A. (2008). *Logics of Empowerment: Development, Gender, and Governance in Neoliberal India*, University of Minnesota Press, Minneapolis.

<sup>66</sup> See also Shah, E. (2012). 'A Life Wasted Making Dust': Affective Histories of Dearth, Death, Debt and Farmers' Suicides in India. *The Journal of Peasant Studies*, 39(5): 1169.

widows expected from me, and often they would begin to answer them before I had even asked. Because many of the widows' previous visitors had screened these suicide cases for a possible inclusion in some kind of 'beneficiary' category, some widows were understandably reluctant to move beyond what seemed to me to be well-rehearsed narratives of farmers in crisis and debt. Representations of 'farmers' suicides' in the public sphere, in combination with the full force of development encounters, fed back into memories of the dead as well as the subjectivities of those who remained behind. These widows were hailed to see their position not only as a 'victim's family' but also to see their domestic tragedies within a larger political field.<sup>67</sup>

The power of representation complicates the critique of statistical knowledge about suicide. Jack Douglas is arguably the most prominent critic of the post-Durkheimian sociologies of suicide and their 'casuistic-deductive methods'. He summarizes one of his many arguments with these approaches as follows:

[T]he generally implicit assumption that the individual or immediate causes of specific suicides are so complex that they cannot be included in any systematic theory of suicide and the conclusions from this assumption that (1) sociologists should not be very concerned with the individual cases of suicide and (2) only the macro-structure of society or culture is an adequate level of theoretical argument for explaining suicide rates.<sup>68</sup>

Instead, Douglas proposes a hermeneutic approach that would move in a *Zirkel des Verstehens* ('circle of understanding') between the particular (case) and the general (context and situation). Thus he distinguishes between the often incoherent situated meanings of suicide and their abstract meaning—what they mean to those not immediately involved. According to Douglas, there is a gap in knowledge between actors directly involved in suicide and the general context in which suicides are happening:

[T]his general context is not something that is necessarily part of the meanings available to the social actors themselves: they may be, and almost certainly are most of the time, quite unaware of such general dimensions as we shall be considering.<sup>69</sup>

<sup>67</sup> See also Münster, *Farmers' Suicides and the State in India*.

<sup>68</sup> Douglas, J. D. (1967). *The Social Meanings of Suicide*, Princeton University Press, Princeton, p. 153.

<sup>69</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 242.

There is here a point of divergence from suicides in Wayanad, which already had a public dimension at the time of this research. If Douglas' 'general dimensions' may be taken to refer to the 'agrarian crisis' and 'farmers' suicides' as scandalized by media and political parties, then knowledge about this dimension was certainly available to the social actors. The awareness of the 'general meaning' of these cases was brought home to the rural population through their categorization as farmers' suicides and the subsequent politicization of suicide cases as ambiguous as Kurien's case cited above. These circumstances, in turn, facilitated or even imposed the interpretation of further suicidal situations along the same lines. In such a context, where public representations of suicides had taken on lives of their own, statistical categories and media interpretations of these statistics had curious effects on the situated meanings of individual acts. The ethnography of farmers' suicides, based on case studies alone, would soon encounter limitations equally grave as the limitations of statistical analysis. Not only is the meaning of suicide (intentions, causes and motives) at the actor's level, *per se*, off limits for ethnography, but it is also determined by state practice, including statistical accounting. Thus the *location* of farmers' suicides does not lie with these suicide cases alone; instead farmers' suicides have been enlarged through the media and other organs into an issue—a *Gegenstand* in the hermeneutical sense—of the public sphere, a relocation worthy of ethnographic attention in its own right.

The role of the media in farmers' suicides—not to mention the film industry—has to be dealt with in a separate paper. Suffice it to say that media coverage was far from homogeneous at any given time. In newspapers such as *Malayalam Manorama*, readers first became aware of the issue in an obituary section that featured very short biographical notes. Reports of suicides shifted to the Wayanad section and, finally, to the front pages by 2004. By 2008 the local media had come under criticism for their sensationalized reporting; due to the fear that it could contribute to a copycat effect, newspaper coverage of suicides once again retreated back to the obituary section. Prominent journalist P. Sainath's two-month visit to Wayanad in late 2004 was arguably the catalyst that elevated the district to a national suicide hotspot. Having previously reported from Vidarbha and Andhra Pradesh, his series of sharp and well-investigated reports from Wayanad compared events in the district with suicides in better-known regions of distress and presented Wayanad to a national audience.

### Conclusion: Farmers' suicides as public deaths

Rural suicides in Wayanad in the post-millennial years—whether or not they were suicides of ‘farmers’ in the strict sense—were public suicides at an aggregate level, not as individual cases. There emerges a paradoxical constellation in which the state’s own bio-political enumeration produces a category that in turn poses a challenge to the legitimacy of the state. As Jocelyn Chua observes in her ethnography of suicide in Kerala’s capital city, Thiruvananthapuram, ‘In accounting for contemporary suicide as the bitter harvest of historical trajectories, city residents spoke back to political, economic, and social developments in the region’.<sup>70</sup> Farmers’ suicides became public events as aggregate phenomena, whose visibility was first produced by the state’s classificatory practices and then retained as a ‘hot issue’ by an unlikely coalition of activists, farmers’ movements, NGOs, political parties, government officials, journalists and academics. The motives of these groups for keeping farmers’ suicides on the agenda are diverse and, in many cases, noble. Cynics may argue that a substantial amount of money has been made with the issue, that elections have been won, and that careers have been furthered. Indeed, the Safe Farmers Campaign, the consortium of NGOs, has been able to acquire a large grant for their projects on farmers’ suicides. The Left Democratic Front could triumph in a United Progressive Alliance stronghold. Wayanad was included in the Vidarbha Package, which allocated millions of rupees to the district through the agricultural department, horticulture department and veterinary offices. Additionally, Wayanad became a pilot district for the National Rural Employment Guarantee Scheme, one of the flagships of the rural poverty-alleviation programmes of the United Progressive Alliance government at the Centre. In all of these developments, the public deaths of farmers had an influence.

From an ethnographic perspective, however, it makes no sense to dismiss ‘farmers’ suicides’ as dubious and fabricated. The social life of suicide statistics and the public life of this contentious category makes for a valuable field of ethnographic inquiry in itself. Critical attention to the production of truths about farmers’ suicides, likewise, does not have to undermine the justified critique of the crisis of agriculture under neoliberalism. The politics of rural suicides do not derive

<sup>70</sup> Chua, J. L. (2014). *In Pursuit of the Good Life: Aspiration and Suicide in Globalizing South India*. University of California Press, Berkeley, p. 53.

their force from any element of resistance innate to individual acts. Ultimately, it is the sheer number of farmers' suicides that has given them a political charge and made them a highly visible issue in the public sphere: the message does not lie in individual acts, but in their volume. Thus, to think of farmers' suicides as public deaths requires one to turn away from the intentions of individual actors and instead focus attention on the aggregate effects of these suicides. The seriality and statistical anomaly of these suicides politicizes them, establishing them firmly in the public sphere. This is not a denial of political agency; on the contrary, it is an acknowledgment of the political potential of seemingly apolitical acts. Farmers' deaths have opened up a space to speak publicly about the violence and disappointments of the neoliberal dispensation. The rejection of a simple causality between globalization/liberalization and distress suicides may give way to a more serious engagement with the cultural effects of neoliberal capitalism on rural lifestyles. We may then begin to understand that neoliberalizing agriculture has a more profound cultural impact on the subjectivities and practices of farmers than simply being responsible for their dependence on volatile world-market prices.