



Exploring Barriers to Assess the Livelihood Sources of Widow Farmers

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Abstract: The drought-prone Nanded district of Marathwada happens to be one of the least developed regions of Maharashtra where farmers' suicide has been a continued phenomenon for a considerable period of time. By using qualitative research methods in an explorative framework, the present paper tries to find out the various barriers to accessing different livelihood sources by the widows of those farmers who had committed suicide in the recent past. Significantly, these widows of the farmers have not only taken up farming, the vocation of their late husbands who themselves could not survive in situations of agrarian crisis but also are negotiating with the wider patriarchal social systems, state, and market forces.

Keywords: agrarian society, farmer's suicide, barriers, livelihood sources, and widow farmers.

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Introduction

Since the last two and a half decades, farmer suicides have been a common occurrence in various parts of India in general, and specific pockets of the country in particular. Despite numerous initiatives to address and mitigate the problem, farmers are committing suicide even in some of the country's more prosperous states, such as Maharashtra. In the year 2018, about 10,349 farmers/ cultivators/ agricultural labourers committed suicide which comes to 7.7 percent of the total suicides in the country of which Maharashtra reported highest the proportion (34.7 percent) of farm-related suicides. Data from Divisional Commissionerate records (Talule 2020) shows that around 83.74 percent of the state's total farmer suicides were committed in the Vidarbha and Marathwada regions. These two regions are extremely vulnerable to the vagaries of constantly occurring natural calamities such as droughts, hailstorms, and floods, which place an

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additional burden on rural communities that rely directly and indirectly on agriculture and natural resources for survival. It is estimated that more than half of the people in this region still rely on agriculture and local resources. Most of these are small farmers having less than two hectares of marginal land holdings (Prakriti Resource Centre for Women and Development 2017). Many desperate farmers, faced with the combined effects of drought, crop failure, indebtedness, and many other critical circumstances such as total bankruptcy resulting in the inability to repay loans, had no choice but to commit suicide. While the farmers take their own lives, their widows are left to “deal with the state, moneylenders, in-laws, and a society that stigmatises them and denies them their equal rights” (Prakriti 2017). There is an urgent need to focus on a thorough understanding of the ground-level realities from a gender perspective. Only a few studies have been conducted on the challenges that widows of suicide victims encounter. These studies have largely disregarded gender-related issues thus far.

Therefore, this paper attempts to explore how, despite the psychological trauma of losing the family’s main breadwinner, coupled with the stigma associated with suicide, these widows have dealt with the financial stress and hardship of raising a family and repaying loans by focusing on the widows’ socioeconomic backgrounds, household livelihood sources, and individual characteristics; their internal and external barriers. Two case studies are included to reveal personal narratives in greater depth and to discover differences across caste, class, tribe, and gender in the social-cultural and social-economic contexts of this region.

Review of Literatures

Existing studies on farmer suicide appear to focus primarily on the material and economic aspects of agrarian society in general, with little attention paid to socio-cultural and gender issues. Since the 1990s, critical perspectives have examined the effects of neoliberal policies on Indian agriculture in general, and farmer suicide in particular, as farmer suicides became more common from that time onwards. Many studies have attempted to identify the factors and causes of farmer suicides in various parts of India like crop losses, indebtedness, market imperfections, and economic hardship (Mohanty and Shroff 2004; Mitra and Shroff 2007); illiteracy, a lack of basic support facilities related to health and education (Deshpande and Arora 2010); limited rural non-farm employment opportunities, and a decline in the size of holdings, falling investment and agricultural credits taken from formal sources, the uncertainty

of water availability, improper input and use of technology, increasing costs and fluctuating prices (Reddy and Mishra 2009). By focusing on the theoretical aspects of the phenomenon of farmer suicides, Mohanty (2005, 2013) observed that, of the four broad types of suicides identified by Durkheim, namely egoistic, altruistic, anomic, and fatalistic, farmer suicides in India exhibit characteristics of egoistic and anomic forms of suicide. The suicide cases, he believes, “offer strong evidence on how egoistic conditions lead to anomic situations” (ibid). Jodhka, (2018) had argued that Indian agriculture being diverse in nature, one cannot develop any single perspective to analyse the agrarian issues of the entire country. However, these studies have largely disregarded gender-related issues thus far. As a result, there is an urgent need to focus on a thorough understanding of the ground-level realities from a gender perspective. There have been a few studies on the challenges that widows of suicide victims encounter. Kumari (2009) addressed the problems faced by widows surviving farmer suicides in an age of globalisation, while Padhi (2009) made similar observations regarding the life of Punjab’s farmer’s widows. Assadi (2008) identified gaps and drawbacks in the implementation of farmer relief packages and called for the state and its agents to intervene more assertively. Studies of Chari-Wagh (2016) dealt with the coping strategies of widow farmers in Maharashtra’s Wardha district, Ghunnar and Hakhu (2018) discussed the challenges faced by widowed women farmers in rural Maharashtra, whereas Kota (2018) too explored the varied stories and experiences of widow farmers in the Vidharbha region of Maharashtra. Their studies reveal the economic, social and emotional burden faced by the widows after the death of their husbands as they were overburdened with the responsibility of repaying the outside debts, managing the money for the dowry of their daughters; meeting the education expenses of their children and acting as primary caregivers to the older people in the family. All these problems actually spring from the patriarchal notion that pervades the mindset of the wider society. Patriarchy is a set of social relations with a material base that enables men to dominate women. It is institutionalised discrimination towards the female sex. However, its influence varies in accordance with diverse determinants such as the size of landholding, caste, and religion in the Indian context (Goli & Pou 2014).

Methodology

On the basis of insights and qualitative material from fieldwork done in October and November 2018 and again in October 2019, this article is the outcome of an ongoing research project on widow farmers in Marathwada’s Nanded

district, one of Maharashtra's least developed rural regions. In Nanded district, 1107 farmers had committed suicide between January 1, 2003, and December 31, 2017, while in the year 2020 alone, 77 such cases of farmer's suicide were recorded (<https://nanded.gov.in/past-notice/farmers-suicide-list>). The fieldwork was carried out in five blocks of the Nanded district, namely Kinwat, Mahur, Hadgaon, Bhokar, and Himayatnagar.

The blocks, field villages, sites, and the widows of farmers were chosen by using purposive sampling. Focus group discussions, in-depth interviews, and case studies had been the three important tools for data collection. The focus group discussion was used to explore the common issues of the widow women farmers, while in-depth interviews were conducted to explore their personal and individual lived experiences as women. Other stakeholders, such as gatekeepers, key informants, NGO workers, and community leaders, were also interviewed to gather supportive information, and also to develop an easy rapport with these informants and research participants. As the trends of farmer suicides varied across the different blocks of this district, the present study selected ten women each from the five blocks by using the purposive sampling method. Thus, a total of fifty widow farmers formed the sample for this research paper to explore their personal and common issues, challenges, and barriers in accessing livelihood sources after the death of their husbands. The terms 'widow' and 'widow farmer' have been used to describe the widows of farmers who have committed suicide. Since the suicide of their farmer husbands, all of them are continuing cultivation as the main source of livelihood.

Before presenting the major findings, a brief background related to the modes of livelihood among the families is presented.

Livelihood Sources of the Households in the Area

It was observed that major patterns of livelihoods of the local people of the study area happened to be agriculture, forest resources, physical labour, and migration. All the selected fifty households had land, but the size of landholding was not equal. The nature of the land was also not the same. In general, it was seen that the nature of the land was dry but sufficient irrigation facilities had not been provided to all farmers.

The widows belonging to the tribal and nomadic tribal communities like the Banjara, Dhangar, Golewar, Mali, and Bhil adopted three sources of seasonal livelihoods: (i) cultivation in the rainy seasons, (ii) collection of forest resources in winter, and (iii) migration to other places in the summer. Thus, they had adopted their own patterns of livelihoods to cope up with the

coming crisis and distress. Cultivators like the Marathas, Gonds, and Andhs also kept bullocks, cows, and buffaloes while the Kolam were artisans who made different basketry items out of bamboo for marketing. Some of these communities have been traditionally harvesting forest resources like Mahu, Charoli, Tendu Patta, Gum, Biba fuel wood, grass, fodder, and other minor forest products to supplement their livelihoods besides many other purposes, such as consumption, medicinal uses, and sale in the market. They also grazed their cattle in the forest and community land.

But at the time of this study, local people were not getting sufficient forest resources to meet their daily needs for consumption and marketing. As a consequence, local communities were migrating to other places in search of alternative employment and work. The families who migrated, seasonally, had fewer rates of farmer's suicides. Conversely, the families or social groups that depended upon cultivation as their sole means of livelihood were more prone to economic crises. The crop failures, frequently occurring natural disasters, floods and droughts posed threats to agricultural production. On the other hand, agricultural policies and the increased expenditures on agricultural inputs are also major concerns that had worsened the condition.

The rate of farmer suicides is increasing among the cultivators belonging to Marathas, Malis and Golewar, and Banjaras communities of this region. In the early days, the Banjaras used to migrate, but at present, they are practicing settled agriculture, and consequently, they could not sustain the onslaught of the emerging agrarian crisis. It is also observed that due to the absence of industrialisation process no agro-based factories have emerged which could have provided alternative employment opportunities to the local people. However, National Rural Employment Guarantee Scheme, (NREGA)¹ and forest departments occasionally provided some work to the local marginal and small farmers. But these schemes could not stop the seasonal migration of the local people out of the area in search of livelihood. As a result of their father's suicides, their children were disturbed, and hesitant to take up cultivation as an occupation. Their widowed mothers, too, have lost faith and hope, that agriculture would liberate them from the bonds and cycle of loan and crisis, for which their farmer husbands lost their lives. Consequently, they desired to send their children to school, believing that only education could provide them with alternative means of survival.

The Findings

The widows who had been left behind by their deceased husbands in the male-dominated rural society, fend for themselves where their private lives are being

controlled by the patriarchal rules, rituals, cultural values, caste-based norms, and ethics. Thus, in such a patriarchal social set-up, entry for a male researcher to interact with women is a very tough task. In general, to converse with men outside of the society, more particularly when women were from rich and /or higher castes is almost unthinkable and may lead to social ostracism. However, it was comparatively easier to interact with women belonging to marginal groups and representatives of the poor classes. Thus, it was found that caste-based norms control the activities and mobility of women in this region. In the field, the researchers had to negotiate with the different stakeholders who were directly and indirectly associated with the rural communities like the community leaders, social workers, agents of civil society, and heads of the households.

Socio-Economic Background of the Widow Farmers

Out of these fifty households around forty households had less than five acres of land while only ten households had more than ten acres of land. It was seen in that region that farming was still the major basis of livelihood with forest resources and animal husbandry as supplementary and supportive sources. The sample of widowed farmers included three women from Scheduled Tribes, with the remainder belonging to caste groups such as Maratha, Mali, and Banjara. Out of these fifty households, thirty-eight households fell under the category of nuclear families while the rest twelve households were joint families. Of the twelve joint families, eight households were from the Maratha caste, two from the Mali caste, and the rest two were from the Banjara caste. As compared to other castes and tribes, Maratha, Banjara, and Mali had comparatively more landholdings in this region. However, the Maratha caste is the dominant caste group in this region. Women belonging to the Banjara and other tribal communities had more freedom and choice in their respective families and communities than the women belonging to Maratha and Mali castes.

Educational Profile of the Widow Farmers

All the respondents were between thirty to forty years of age except four widows who had not attained thirty years of age. So far as educational attainment is concerned, it was revealed that out of fifty respondents, only two (2) were educated up to higher secondary level; nine (9) were educated up to high school level; while another six (6) respondents had studied up to middle primary level, with five other widows educated up to primary level and the

rest 28 widows were illiterate. Thus 56% of the respondents were illiterate. It was observed that educated widows were comparatively vocal and aware of their rights and power. This shows how education can play a very important role in making women aware of their rights, duties, and responsibilities. Besides education, other individual characteristics such as age, motherhood statuses also played an important role. The study noted that the younger women particularly those who did not have children, had to face more barriers to get their share of the family property. Out of the four informants below the age of thirty years, three widows who had no children were not given equal share in the property by the head of the household by exercising patriarchic notions of power. Thus, the individual characteristics such as age, educational background, and motherhood status of the woman played very crucial roles. The study also recorded that the educated women generally went to visit administrative offices for claiming their rights over the property. They were also adept at using legal language. Such educated women were also trying to get benefits from the governmental schemes.

Internal Barriers

Study pointed out two types of barriers, internal and external, which were posing challenges to the widow farmers. The first type of barrier, mentioned here as internal, is related to their households, inheritance, sharing, ownership, and entitlements. In most of the cases households' property, particularly land was not divided. All property of the household was controlled by the patriarch of the senior-most male member of the family. In the case of landholding and entitlements of the household property, the study found that the ownerships were controlled by the notions of patriarchy and male dominance. They upheld the customary social practice of transferring property to the male, not to women members of the household. As a result, women, particularly widow farmers, faced numerous challenges in getting the *patta* or land deed in their name and obtaining legal rights to the property. Despite the fact that tribal widows were given more freedom and choice in their tribes, property ownership was always in the hands of the male. In the case of a joint family, the issues were more complicated as the land was in the names of the grandfathers and eldest sons of the families. The study discovered that in twenty of these fifty cases, widow farmers had struggled to get land legally transferred in their names or to incorporate their names in the *patta* following the death of their husbands. Widows who had only daughters and no sons faced more problems to regularise and claim equal shares in the property of the joint family. In

fourteen of the fifty cases, the widows did not have a son, so they were not easily given an equal share of the property. Some of them also took it to court to assert their legal right which is a time-consuming process. The study brought to light the fact that the heads of families and community leaders prioritised issuing *patta* of land in the name of sons over widows and daughters. Seven of the fifty widow informants also shared their harrowing experiences with domestic violence, subjection, and harassment by close relatives. In addition, three widows shared their stories of exclusion and oppression, including being forced to leave their home after their husband died while another three informants shared their stories of being sexually harassed by men of their own caste. Therefore, ten widows out of fifty were then living with their parents in their natal home which was also not so easy and safe. Thus, there are numerous internal forces that pose challenges to widow farmers.

External Barriers

It has been observed that the widows have not only struggled to obtain their rights and power over property and entitlements, but they have also encountered numerous obstacles in the public domain like administrative work, banking, and marketing are unknown worlds for the majority of these women. Twenty widow farmers had been able to open bank accounts, and fifteen others lacked Adhar² and Ration cards³. Thirty of the fifty respondents were still attempting to formalise *patta* in their names as well as their rights to household property. They also had a difficult time obtaining the ten lakh rupees in immediate relief provided by the state government. The widowed farmer's new role as a farmer, head of the household, and breadwinner for the family was not well received by her community or the larger society. In public domains also they were being controlled by the same notions of patriarchy, male-dominant ideologies. The study finds that patriarchal values are deeply ingrained within the state and its machinery. These widows said that they had to establish that she was the farmer's legally married wife at each stage by providing documents and proof. In public domains also they were being controlled by the same notions of patriarchy, male-dominant ideologies. The study finds that patriarchal values were deeply ingrained within the state and its functionaries.

Those widows left behind after the loss of their spouses had to deal with the agrarian hardships while also having to fulfill many duties and responsibilities such as raising their children, caring for their elderly in-laws, and participating in the farming process as the head of the family. To delve deeper into these

concerns, a look at two real-world case studies is offered from the Maratha and Banjara castes. Incidentally, the majority of farmer suicides were reported from these two caste groups.

Case I: Prathibha Kailash Tivade (36 years)

Pratibha a 36-year-old widow moved to her maternal village called Kharbi in the Hadgaon taluka, after the death of her husband Kailash. Later, a patta of four acres was transferred to her name by her deceased husband's family who owned ten acres of land. Pratibha's brother-in-law retained ownership of the remaining six acres, thus, demonstrating the unequal distribution of landed property. She was also denied shares related to movable properties such as agricultural tools, equipment, cattle, and other supplementary sources of cultivation. Their eldest daughter was married when Kailash was alive. Kailash had borrowed money from various sources to pay for the wedding and the dowry, which cost him five lakh rupees. He was constantly under mental duress because he was unable to repay the entire loan amount plus interest on time. This was because agricultural land was in joint ownership in their family, which was the sole source of income. He eventually committed suicide in order to avoid the social stigma of not being able to repay a loan. Pratibha was now concerned about their other two children's future. Komal, her daughter who was twenty year's old daughter, had completed her HSC, and Manoj, her son, was studying for the HSC. While Pratibha was concerned about marrying off her daughter, Komal wished to continue her education but was unable to do so due to financial constraints. Pratibha was also forced to sell two acres of land in order to cover her daughter's dowry and other wedding expenses.

Case II: Kalpanabai Laxman Jadhav (28 years)

Kalpanabai's husband, Laxman, died when she was only 20 years old in 2010. She was 16 years old at the time of her marriage to Laxman. Her only child died when it was only three months old, owing to a lack of hospital facilities in the village and poor transportation facilities. As they did not have the financial means to admit their child to a private hospital, Laxman borrowed twenty thousand rupees from village money lenders. In the end, they were unable to save their child, and they could not pay back their debts on time either. Later, he was able to secure a forty thousand rupees crop loan. For three years, interest rates rose since he could not pay back both sorts of loans. As a result, his debt climbed from forty thousand rupees to one lakh, thirty-five thousand rupees. Due to the stress caused by the debt payback, he took his own life. As per the Banjara community's customary practice of remarriage of widows, Kalpana married Ravindra, her deceased husband's elder brother, with the community's blessing. Ravindra already had a wife who was then living apart from him. Kalpana had one son named Srinivas,

from her second husband. As an inheritance, a two-and-a-half-acre plot of land was given to her. She received one lakh rupees in compensation after her first husband died while the bank also waived the loan that Laxman took earlier. Kalpana now had to repay the loan from the village money lenders. Her access to domestic resources was not a problem for her now. However, after her second marriage, she was no longer considered eligible for accessing welfare schemes, benefits, and other initiatives provided by the government. Her applications for gas connections, cylinders, ration cards, Gharkul Yojana⁴, and other services had been denied by the administration.

These case studies show that the socio-economic, socio-cultural, class, and caste backgrounds of women are important determinants of the status, roles, and responsibilities of women farmers. It was observed that the women who were from the lower strata of the society had problems and issues that were quite different from those belonging to a higher status group. It was also highlighted that excessive spending on dowry and weddings has emerged as concerns where parents try to fulfill the demands of the groom's family by borrowing from the money lenders fueling an increase in farmer suicides.

There is evidence to suggest that youths in the region were uninterested in pursuing careers in agriculture because many of them have first-hand knowledge of their parents' and grandparents' circumstances as farmers. The suicides of their fathers have left them even more traumatised, and they are wary of taking up farming as a career. Their widowed mothers, meanwhile, had lost confidence and hope that agriculture would free them from the shackles and cycle of debt and crises that had claimed the lives of their farmer husbands. As a result, they wanted to send their kids to school since they believed that only education might give them a better chance of surviving.

It was observed that there are no alternative sources and ways of incomes like industries and factories in this region. Agriculture is the major source of livelihood supplemented by allied occupations such as fishery, collecting forest produce, and animal husbandry. However, the nature of the land being quite infertile and without sufficient irrigation facilities, there was no other option for many people but to migrate seasonally from this region to other places in search of work and additional income to meet the needs of the people.

Self-help groups of poor women formulated in this region under the various micro-credit policies, such as Maharashtra Rural Livelihood Mission (MSRLM) have failed to stop migration and reduce the increasing burdens of the farmers. Micro-credit also failed to generate income activities and self-employment due to many lacunas and loopholes at the implementation level. Thus, the study finds that all these schemes have failed to fulfill the objectives

of checking migration, alleviating poverty, and providing employment to the local people.

The study reveals that kinship and social networks do not always play a favourable role in providing assistance and support to widowed women farmers. Women, on the other hand, were subjected to conflict with close relatives and kin over property distribution and the allocation of an equal portion of household assets. After their spouses died, most women were denied their fair portion of the property.

In joint families, these widows were not allowed to express their experiences and their voices were silenced. During data collection, it was clear that they wanted to share their experiences, but in many cases, they were not permitted to do so, and it was the father-in-law, a brother-in-law, or another male relative of their deceased husband who spoke on their behalf.

Discussion and Conclusion

The relationship between patriarchy and landownership is not new a theme in social thought and there are a plethora of theories shedding light on it. Men had been controlling vital economic resources like land since the dawn of civilization which had impacted negatively on the socio-economic advancement of women throughout human history. This control over land resources by the menfolk gradually led to increasing dominance in other spheres of human life (Engels 1884; Goli & Pou 2014). According to eco-feminism, male ownership of land had led to the emergence of patriarchy. Families' property systems, including ownership and rights, as well as political and social institutions, such as owning and transferring land, are seen as not just retaining but also strengthening patriarchal qualities (Goli and Pou 2014). The present study reveals that India's socioeconomic structure and gender stereotypes are undeniably rooted in patriarchy. There are religious sanctions and cultural standards that dictate female and male roles. Hindu sacred writings explain that women cannot cultivate the earth because they are the earth (Desai and Krishna Raj 2004). As a result of patrilineal (male-lineage) property inheritance and patrilocal residence pattern (the tradition of a woman moving to her husband's residence), male supremacy in society is deeply ingrained. Equality in land rights is a critical component of women's autonomy (Agarwal 1994). Land rights confer direct economic benefits such as a source of income, social status, nutrition, and collateral for credit. This study reveals that although the widows of farmers who committed suicide have come forward to don the role of earners in the family by engaging themselves in agricultural activities, they

are denied their rights of ownership and control of their land. Arokiasamy & Goli (2012) had tried to explain these gender-bias or patriarchal norms by referring to the landholding-patriarchy hypothesis according to which size and pattern of “household landholding directs patriarchal traits and thus influence women’s autonomy” and status in society at large (ibid). The present findings of internal and external barriers faced by widow farmers lend empirical support to the relevance of the landholding-patriarchy hypothesis in the Indian context.

Notes

1. National Rural Employment Guarantee Act, 2005 (NREGA) is a mandate by the Indian Government to provide at least 100 days of guaranteed wage employment in a financial year to every rural household whose adult members volunteer to do unskilled manual labour.
2. Aadhaar is a 12 digit individual identification number issued by the Unique Identification Authority of India on behalf of the Government of India. The number serves as a proof of identity and address, anywhere in India.
3. Ration cards are official documents issued by state governments in India to households that are eligible to purchase subsidised food grains from the Public Distribution Systems under the National Food Security Act (NFSA).
4. Gharkul Yojana is the Prime minister housing scheme in India. It is a centrally sponsored scheme and the purpose of this scheme is to provide financial assistance for homeless people living under poverty line in rural areas.

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