

Marathwada region beats Vidarbha in farmer deaths

Of the 860 suicides in 2011 — highest in four years — region saw 435 cases

Sandeep Pai & Sudhir Suryawanshi | Mumbai

KILLER FIELDS

In 2010, Vidarbha had 244 farmers' suicides, Marathwada 82 and western Maharashtra six.

Reason: High yield of BT cotton and its record-high global demand. Excessive rainfall and flooding in China, Pak and US created a demand for Indian cotton. The rates went to an all-time high of Rs7,000 per quintal. They fell to Rs3,500 in 2011.

In 2011, the highest number of farmers' suicides in Maharashtra was not in Vidarbha, but unexpectedly, in Marathwada. This region and Khandesh, where farmers suffered crop failure and massive debt, have emerged as the new epicentres for suicides in the state.

The numbers: Marathwada had 435 farmers' suicides, Vidarbha 276 and Khandesh 133. Overall, 860 farmers killed themselves in 2011, the highest figure in the last four years, according to Maharashtra's law and order department. (In 2008, there were 771 farmers' suicides, in 2009 535 and just 363 in 2010). Within Marathwada, Beed district (represented by a BJP stalwart) had the highest number of farmer suicide deaths.

The reason for this desperation was the failure of the BT cotton crop due to lack of irrigation, scanty rainfall, and massive debt. (These will be detailed in subsequent stories in this series.) "These are the reasons for the suicides but the government remains ignorant," says Dr RP Kurulkar, retired economics professor and chairman of the Marathwada Statuary Development Board (MSDB) in Aurangabad.

Marathwada comprises Aurangabad, Nanded, Latur, Jalna, Beed, Parbhani, Osmanabad and Hingoli. Khandesh comprises Jalgaon, Dhule, and Nandurbar. DNA visited several districts in both Marathwada and Khandesh and heard several poignant stories.

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Just 30 days ago, Shivaji Munde, 45, of Hivrabel in Kalamnuri tehsil of Hingoli district hanged himself because his BT cotton crop failed. His son Pravin, 21, said the crop failed as they had no irrigation and there were no rains. "Out of debt my father killed himself," he cries. Pravin, a standard XII student, now has to give up his dream of higher education.

Debt drove Dadarao Mhende of Phuldhaba in Hingoli to kill himself last November. "This year we had a lot of hope from BT cotton," his brother Bapurao says. "Seed sellers said the yield would increase and that we could repay loans from previous years, but the crop failed completely."

Even 65-year-old Ratan Patil of Dahivad in Amalner, Jalgaon, recently killed himself by drinking the very pesticide he was supposed to spray on his BT cotton crop. He had no crop due to no water, and recurring debt drove him over the edge.

"My uncle could not bear the ever-increasing debt, so he chose to end his life in old age," says nephew Ashok. When asked if he used irrigation facilities, he said: "We have never seen any irrigation facility in this region."

"If the government does not take the right steps immediately, then like Vidharbha, Marathwada and Khandesh, we will see more farmer suicides yearly," warns Rajan Ksirsagar, a political activist from Marathwada.

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