



**LIVES OF THOSE LEFT BEHIND: An Ethno-graphic Study on the Vulnerabilities of Women in the Aftermath of Farmer Suicides in Yavatmal, Maharashtra, India**

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This document represents part of the author's study programme while at the Institute of Social Studies. The views stated therein are those of the author and not necessarily those of the Institute.

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## **List of Acronyms**

GMOs - Genetically Modified Organisms

NGOs - Non Government Organizations

SIDA - The Swedish International Development Cooperation Agency

DFID - The Department for International Development

SLA - The Sustainable Livelihoods Approach

RLA - Rural Livelihoods Approach

NSWPs - Non State Welfare Providers

MGNREGA - The Mahatma Gandhi National Rural Employment Guarantee  
Act

PDS - Public Distribution System

BPL - Below Poverty Line

## **Abstract**

Agriculture is the primary sector in India. A large percentage of the population still relies on agriculture for its employment in one form or another, thereby making it the largest employer in the country. Despite its obvious relevance in terms of generating employment and creating agricultural self sufficiency in India, the government has continued to ignore its importance by gradually decreasing its investment in agriculture. Adding to this, liberalization of the Indian market in 1991 proved to be a turning point for the agricultural sector, which was bombarded with new investors, commercialization of crops and increased competitiveness.

As a result of this, Indian farmers were left vulnerable and unprotected, forced to bear the brunt of inadequate policies and safeguard mechanisms. Farmers, under the pressure to increase productivity and perform well, started committing suicide. Certain states, because of their geographical location and its connection to certain crops, became more susceptible to crop failure, in this era of climate change. The state of Maharashtra which is primarily suitable for growing cotton, is one of them. Statistics began showing that every thirty one minutes, a farmer committed suicide in India. This issue started gathering a lot of attention in the mid 2000s. Various forms of media started visiting these suicide prone sites in an effort to understand the phenomenon. Since then, a lot of research has been done on the reasons for farmer suicides. However, very little has been written on the repercussions of these suicides on the members of the household who survived, especially the women. These women are forced to deal with the harsh reality of not just a loved one dying but also the additional burden put on their shoulders at the loss of an earning member of the family. In an effort to understand the lives of these women, this paper will aim to highlight their stories and their vulnerabilities, thereby providing a medium to hear their voices and set a starting point for further research on how their lives can be made more secure.

## **Relevance to Development Studies**

Effective policies form the backbone of any society. With inequality on the rise in India, as in most of the world, it is imperative that we research issues that plague those who live through and are the most negatively impacted by this increased inequality, including historically marginalized groups such as women. The communities associated with the agricultural sector are some of the worst hit in India. It is ironic to consider that the persons who help put food in our mouths do not have enough food for themselves. While long term solutions to reduce farmer suicides are necessary to combat this plague, to make it easier for the widows from these suicides to survive, it is important to come up with short term policies that recognize and address the difficulties being faced by the widows and provide effective mechanisms to reduce these vulnerabilities. Especially if effective policies can help not just the widows live "better lives" but furthermore integrate them into society by providing better employment opportunities, thus creating a mutually beneficial relationship. After all, how can we inclusively develop a country if we ignore a large section of the population?



## **Keywords**

Farmer suicides, livelihoods, vulnerabilities, government, women, gender, welfare

# Chapter 1

## Establishing a Blueprint

### 1.1 Introduction and background

A lot of research has been done over the years on the reasons for farmer suicides in India, with results ranging from government apathy, lack of policies, indebtedness as a result of multinational corporations like Monsanto etc. However, it is imperative to acknowledge the emotional as well as financial burden that the surviving household has to deal with after the farmer commits suicide. It is important to hear the voices of the families who have gone through this traumatic experience and give them a platform to tell their stories. It is moreover vital to learn about the lived realities of individuals in these households so as to make policies that successfully address any limitations or gaps, thereby helping households reduce their vulnerabilities. Keeping that in mind, this research paper aims to document the vulnerabilities faced by the women of the households in the aftermath of farmer suicides, using an ethnographic orientation and suggest policy recommendations for reducing those vulnerabilities.

Farmer suicides have been an increasing phenomenon over the past two decades. Since 1995, more than 2,70,000 farmers have committed suicide in India (Kutner 2014). According to the National Crime Records Bureau of India, in 2012, 15,441 people engaged in farming and agricultural activities committed suicide (NCRB 2012). The state of Maharashtra, which is located in the western part of India, has recorded the highest suicide rates across all states in the past decade (Sainath 2013). The suicide rate in Maharashtra is approximately 29.1 suicides per 1,00,000 farmers (Sainath 2013). According to 2006 statistics, 86% of farmers who committed suicide were men (Nagaraj 2008: 6).

Over the years, there have been many studies regarding the reasons for this phenomenon. Dongre and Deshmukh (2012: 3) in their research on farmer suicides in the Vidharba region of Maharashtra, state that the primary reason was found to be debt, followed by alcohol addiction and environmental problems. Supporting this, Vandana Shiva, in her extensive research on farmer suicides, talks about the role of multinational companies like Monsanto in exacerbating this crisis of precariousness in the agricultural sector (Shiva and Jalees 1998: 1). She argues that rising globalization and neo liberalism lead to the use of genetically modified monocultures in agriculture (initially, in the form of BT Cotton in India), which promised farmers a higher crop yield if they invested in seeds produced by them (Shiva and Jalees 1998: 15). With this promise of higher returns, farmers took on large loans for purchasing these seeds but eventually during harvest, these seeds and the chemicals used in it resulted in extensive crop failure and overall losses of Rs.1 billion to Indian farmers in 2002, leaving farmers and their families in abject poverty and huge debts, resulting in farmers committing suicide (Shiva and Jalees 1998: 1). Debts are incurred not only as a result of such practices but also because of other reasons, for example, because of loans taken to provide for the daughter(s) marriage(s) (Dongre and Deshmukh 2012: 4). There are articles that disagree with Vandana Shiva's viewpoint, stating that the introduction of GMOs has not played an important role in increasing the number of farmer suicides (Johnson 2014). She has been accused of "romanticizing" the issue of farmer suicides

not out of empathy for the farming community but to fight the cause against GMOs (Johnson 2014). Other causes like a "lack of crop insurance, lack of social safety nets, and lack of affordable credit" are said to play a bigger role in exacerbating the crisis (Johnson 2014).

Research furthermore showed that the WTO and its policies added to this problem. Their policies on free trade, over the years allowed governments in the "Global North" to artificially lower the worldwide prices of agricultural produce by providing subsidies, which farmers in the "Global South" could not compete with (Shiva and Jalees 1998: 46). The removal of import restrictions only added to this problem for farmers from India who were left unable to compete with the lower prices in the global market (Shiva and Jalees 1998: 39). Shiva additionally speaks about the 'incentivization of suicides' (1998: 6) as a method for getting access to government compensation and paying off one's debt.

Studying the "epidemic" of farmer suicides in India is not just about addressing the economic factors but additionally looking at the social implications of the suicides. This has been addressed by Daniel Münster who talks about the notion of 'Posthumous Citizenship' which is the irony of farmers acquiring a kind of recognition only after they commit suicide (Munster 2012: 205). He talks about the sad reality of the invisibility of farmers in India and the total apathy of the government towards them (Munster 2012). According to him, "suicides relate ..... to intimate biographies of migration, personal aspirations, choking debts, bad family relations and, possibly, diseases and alcoholism" (Munster 2012: 204). The study of suicide as put forth by Munster (2012) is a study of individual identities and subjectivities.

Another portion of the literature suggests that while debt is a major reason why farmers commit suicide, one needs to look at the issues of masculinities and its effect on farmers. Kumar Nilotpal (2011) in his research on 'Egoism, Anomie and Masculinity: Suicide in Rural South India (Andhra Pradesh)' looks at cultural perceptions of masculinities and the failure to fulfil the duties that accompany those perceptions as one of the reasons why men commit suicides. This brings out the issue of patriarchy in Indian society and its social reproduction across generations, a system which promotes a particular form of hegemonic masculinities that not only affects women but also men.

Another aspect Nilotpal highlights is the inaccuracy of government data on farming related suicides and the need to carefully analyze if the reason for the suicide is farm or nonfarm related. Through his research he found that, sometimes nonfarm related suicides (committed as a result of other social reasons for example, non possession of certain "high class" goods like TVs, cell phones, bikes and the loss of pride and dignity that entails) can be passed off as farming related suicides (Nilotpal 2011: 24). Therefore, he states the need to verify if suicides in rural areas are really farming related or not. But this raises if such a clear distinction between "farm" and nonfarm" can actually be made. Because the inability to purchase certain goods reflects on the inability of the profession to provide the financial resources necessary to be of a "higher class" and its impact on notions of masculinities. Therefore, I see the need to go further back and challenge the structure that prevents individuals from living their desired lifestyles and not just looking at it as a single layered problem of not acquiring certain desired commodities.

Looking at the case from an ethnographic perspective, when viewing how overall vulnerabilities of households are affected in the aftermath of farmer suicides, Ranjana Padhi (2009) in her article "On women surviving farmer suicides in Punjab" brings in issues of the gendered nature of the impact and its implications at the household level. She talks about the "deepening stranglehold of patriarchy on women's lives" and the inequality in burden sharing (Padhi 2009: 53). Her research found that in the aftermath of suicides, women are forced to provide not only for themselves, their children and other family members but are furthermore forced to deal with the consistent harassment by loan sharks (Padhi 2009: 54). Along with this, they are left to deal with the psychological impact of losing a loved one and a provider of the family (Padhi 2009). The effects it has on the overall health of the women and children and its implications for the future of the family clearly illustrates that while one life ends in this process, several are left behind in worse circumstances, left to fend for themselves.

Since farming is such a volatile profession that depends so highly on nature, any unexpected natural occurrences can lead to destruction of crops and low yields, thereby affecting the farmers income. According to Durkheim in his theory of suicide, Anomic suicide occurs as a result of sudden changes in society and the failure of society to regulate individuals based on these changes (as cited by Jones 1986). Agriculture is a very precarious occupation, especially in India where it is still heavily dependent on rainfall. Any unexpected rainfall has the potential to ruin harvests (as witnessed recently in Maharashtra). Add to that the economic crisis being faced by the country, the failure of the Government to adapt its agricultural policies in line with these economic changes and the uncertain investment climate and these reasons can be used to explain the increase in farmer suicides. An example of this was the unexpected rain and hail in the state of Maharashtra that occurred in the month of February this year that completely destroyed crops, leading to approximately 38 farmers committing suicide (Kakodkar 2014).

Farmer suicides are a form of an epidemic in India, where 47.2% of the total employed population still relies on agriculture for their employment (World Bank 2012). Globalization, neo-liberalism, an increasing population and an increasing need for the agricultural sector to perform in this market dependent system leaves a lot of farmers vulnerable and unprotected.

While there is a lot of literature on the reasons for farmers suicides, I encountered a huge gap in the literature relating to the impact of farmer suicides on the surviving members of households in terms of vulnerability and precariousness.

Even in terms of its relevance to social policy, basic rights like citizenship and the need for the government to recognize farmers come into question. How can farmers and their households be successfully integrated into the economy when they only get recognition after death ('posthumous citizenship')? Only through research on the lived realities of the persons affected by this can the government help make effective policies.

Therefore, I find it very important to address the issue of subjective experiences post the trauma of farmer suicides in households. Keeping the above

mentioned points in mind, this research will aim to address this gap in literature and provide a platform for the surviving members of households to voice their grievances. Through their experiences, it will furthermore aim to highlight the shortfalls in existing policies, thus providing a starting point for more research on the issue and policy recommendations.

## 1.2 Research question

What are the subjective experiences and vulnerabilities experienced by the women of the household in the aftermath of farmer suicides?

Sub-research questions

- What are the emotional, physical and financial struggles these women have to go through?
- What role do other actors, primarily NSWPs, play in reducing such vulnerabilities and what are the consequences of their involvement?
- How effective are government policies in reducing household vulnerabilities in terms of compensation or supplementary schemes to provide employment, housing, food etc?

## 1.3 Methodology<sup>1</sup>

Brewer (2000: 2) describes methodology as the "broad theoretical and philosophical framework" that guides the procedures and rules of acquiring knowledge. The methodology adopted in this research paper will be qualitative in nature, mainly ethnographic in its orientation.

Ethnography as a term was first used in the field of anthropology in the 19th century to describe cultural practices outside of "the west" (Atkinson and Hammersley 2007: 1). Though there has been a lot of debate over the years about if ethnography can be considered the "science of social life" as findings from ethnographic research can be very subjective (Atkinson and Hammersley 2007: 7), it can be very helpful for studying individuals in their natural environments or 'fields', a form of investigation into their lives, by collecting data in a way that captures their daily life and social contexts, where the interviewer is actively involved in the usual atmosphere of the interviewees, so that data is generated in an organic manner without tampering with their natural environments (Brewer 2000: 6). It is a very useful tool to study "social phenomena" using a small sample which adopts a detailed method of interviewing that produces unstructured data where statistics and quantitative information is not at the forefront of the research (Denzin and Lincoln 1994: 248).

"Pure" ethnography requires field emersion for a lengthy amount of time as ethnographers usually engage in the day to day lives of the persons being interviewed (Atkinson and Hammersley 2007: 3) but as a result of the time constraint of my research period, I was only be able to adopt an ethnographic

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<sup>1</sup> A large portion of this section has been taken from my previously written work as part of the coursework for ISS-3303-1314

orientation. An ethnographic orientation consists of using similar tools as one would use in pure ethnography but without going in depth into the lives of the interviewees because of the lack of time. Sometimes, an ethnographic orientation would additionally involve semi structured interviews to try and only get information that is useful for the researcher, so as not to waste time in the short period the researcher has. This would not be used in pure ethnography as it would result in tampering of the interviewee's flow of narration of their life histories. In this research, the stress is on subjective experiences at the household level for which Oral Histories was used as an interview technique.

Used initially by feminist researchers to try and understand women's subjugated knowledges, it is a technique of data collection that brings together narratives of individuals, to understand the participants perspectives (Leavy 2011: 4). As put forth by Patel (2005), "oral history therefore provides insight into the thought processes behind behaviour" (Leavy 2011: 8). It is not only useful in giving a voice to members of disenfranchised groups, but can also be used by Sociologists to form a connection between individual experiences and the macro societal and cultural contexts, which can help deepen research (Leavy 2011: 4).

It puts forth two main philosophical assumptions for the researcher about an individual's ontological and epistemological positions (Leavy 2011: 6). Very simply put, while my ontological position would constitute how I understand the truth, my epistemological position would constitute how I arrived at my understanding of the truth. Therefore, it challenges how I, as a researcher, understand the reality and the reason I understand it in a particular way. From an ontological view point, oral histories is a process and not an event. Meaning is given to this process only once we start the research process collaboratively and then analyze the data collected during the research. Researchers actively participate in this "knowledge-building process" (Leavy 2011: 8). From an epistemological standpoint, using oral histories means that I, as a researcher will not have any upper hand in terms of knowledge. It puts me and the participants in the same level and relies on the reciprocal interactive relationship between the two (Leavy 2011: 8). "Shared authority" was the term coined by Frisch (1990) to highlight the distinctive feature of the produced results when approaching it from the perspective of oral histories (Leavy 2011: 8). Therefore, oral histories is a useful tool to understand subjective experiences of people with respect to past or current events (Leavy 2011: 23). Thus, for my research which aims to examine the change in vulnerabilities at a household level in the aftermath of suicides, using this technique to observe this change seemed like the most effective way of generating data while at the same time maintaining the organic and rich nature of the data generated, because my research can be viewed as trying to trace a timeline of processes and histories brought on by the specific event of a suicide.

In ethnography, it is imperative for the researcher to show his/her presence as a method of situating oneself in the context you're placed in, this was first highlighted by feminist geographers (Rose 1997). It is important to acknowledge that the way I, as a researcher will interpret the knowledge generated during my field work will depend on how I interpret the research and how the context that I come from shapes the interpretation of the research (Rose 1997). As argued by Rose (1997), knowledge is not universal and making any such declarations of universality tends to reduce the authenticity of the infor-

mation produced. Therefore, the findings will in no way be neutral and claiming neutrality will only lead to subordination of those other, context specific knowledges (Rose 1997). Therefore, I highlight my positionality as a researcher, i.e., me being a 'foreign' educated Indian student from a 'higher class', and how this might affect my interaction with the families. My position can be seen as being privileged and the way I interpret what is being told to me will be subjective (what I might find surprising, might be "normal" for them). To add to that, my mother's presence throughout my field work played an important role in getting the women to open up. She initially came with me from a safety perspective even though I told her that I wouldn't be taken seriously as a researcher. But I felt that her presence actually worked to my advantage and humanized me by shifting my role from researcher to daughter, which resulted in the widows opening up to us a little more. My mother also actively participated in asking questions and interacting with the women.

I additionally acknowledge the language barrier and the problems that brought out while conducting the research. The native language spoken in Maharashtra is Marathi and while it is a language I understand, my replies were mostly in Hindi, which affected the way the interviewees interpreted my questions. This brings up the need to consider Members' Meanings (Emerson et al. 1995: 108). It emphasizes the importance of field notes and how texts produced from ethnographic research in specific areas need to take into consideration issues which members in that area consider important and reproduce them in such a way that people unfamiliar with that area and its issues understand its meaning equally (Emerson et al. 1995: 108). This includes use of gestures, words etc that might have different interpretations for different regions (Emerson et al. 1995: 108). Therefore, I tried to keep that in mind and avoid "importing exogenous meanings" into my interpretation and reproduction of my field notes (Emerson et al. 1995: 109).

Open ended questions were used in an informal interview format. Semi structured interviews were conducted, so as to make the best use of the limited time available to get the maximum amount of relevant information. It must be taken into consideration that I had no other choice in selecting my research site. I tried contacting various individuals, NGOs and organizations for help to no avail. Mr Kishor Tiwari, head of a CSO, was the only one who agreed to give me access to his district.

Area of study: 5 villages in the district of Yavatmal in state of Maharashtra. The primary crops grown in these villages are Cotton, Soyabean, Pigeon Pea (Toor Dal) and Sorghum (Jowar). The women interviewed either owned land, rented out land, worked as labourers on other people's land or did something completely non-farm related.

Sample: 5 households. I chose 5 households keeping in mind the limited amount of time available. It was taken into account that since my research was ethnographic in nature, the number of interviews didn't matter as much as the depth of the interviews conducted. While I could have conducted more interviews, my main aim was not to get a large sample. My intension has always been to primarily bring forth the voices of those who are otherwise deliberately ignored and highlight the main problems they face, thereby providing a basis for further investigation. The content of the interviews revolved around their lives pre suicide, the circumstances that lead to the suicide and their lives since

then. Some women were more forthcoming with their life histories while some seemed reluctant or shy to divulge their stories.

Initially, I went into it with the hope of finding some households who have and some who haven't received government compensation so as to be able to do a comparative study on if there was a difference in the vulnerabilities between these households and if there was, to be able to explore the extent of the difference. But none of the women that I spoke to received any compensation as a result of the suicide, because of which I had to mend my focus.

### 1.3.1 Brief background of the women interviewed

Name	Year of Suicide	Age of woman now (in years)	Amount of Debt (in Rupees)	Family Structure at the Time of Suicide	Things received (in general and as a result of the death)	Assets (agricultural and other)
Purnima	2010	37	3,00,000	Woman - 33 Daughter - 10 Son - 13	PDS, Sewing machine(Pico and Fall), Rs.30,000 from an American girl, Rs.3000 worth clothes, Tiffin service, help for payment of education and tuition fees, computer for son (daughter also uses), cycle from relatives, Rs.600/month from the government	Land - Previously owned - 3 acres (not anymore) House - Own
Vandana	2011	30	1,00,000	Woman - 27 Daughter - 10 Son - 7	PDS, hand cart for selling Garlic and Cumin	Land - Own House - Own
Geeta	2011	27	80,000	Woman - 24 Daughter - 0.9 Son - 4	PDS (partially), 1 sewing machine, 1 pico/fall machine given by father, Rs.600/month from the government	Land - Not own (brothers own 6 acres gifted by grandmother) House - Father's
Chandrakala	2004	35	>60,000	Woman - 25 Daughter - 6 Daughter - 9	PDS, Indira Awaas Yojana, Adivasi school free education	Land - Own - 4 acres House - Own
Kamal	2011	-	1,50,000	Woman - - Daughter - 19 Son - 12 Son - 17	PDS	Land - Own - 3 acres House - Own



### 1.3.2 Ethical dilemmas

The topic being discussed in my research paper is an extremely sensitive one which I tried to handle with utmost care and compassion. Keeping this in mind, Davis's (1998) method of approaching Ethics based on 'informed consent, confidentiality and protection', was used in the course of my fieldwork. I tried to be forthright about my reasons for doing this research and give them a choice to participate or refuse participation. I asked permission for any material I recorded/photographed and tried to frame questions, keeping in mind the sensitivity of the topic (Rao 2014).

This brings me to the biggest ethical dilemma I faced, the question if asking persons about such personal experiences could be seen as 'voyeurism'? This question stemmed from multiple interactions with my supervisor. She made me aware of the ethical dilemmas I might encounter while conducting my research in the villages. Can it be seen as a selfish, perverted act of asking people to reveal their personal lives and relive traumatic experiences simply because I'm interested? Is doing research just for my personal knowledge generation okay, however sensitive the issue might be? Or do I need to justify digging into people's lives with greater policy implications? I feel that as long as I was honest about our intentions, genuine and empathetic towards them, they would not mind narrating their stories. But it was also important to consider that if dealing with gatekeepers like NGOs who have the power to grant/deny access to your interviewees, it is important to use buzz words and fancier language to try and convince them to let you in. I recognized that a lot of the times, it was such gatekeepers who tended to object, not the interviewees themselves. When talking to the interviewees, maybe making up a story about an imaginary person who has gone through similar experiences as the person being interviewed and then asking the interviewee for advice on the issue might be a better way of approaching a sensitive issue without directly asking the respondent about it, by using a proxy to reduce the trauma of reliving the experience (Huijsmans 2014). It boiled down to the question of ethics. How much could I embellish the truth to make my work easier? Should I make (sometimes) empty promises about greater policy implications of the research, when in reality it might not lead to any change at all? Do I give my respondents false hope just so that I can conduct my research? I acknowledge this along the lines of Stacey (1988: 23) who argued that "fieldwork represents an intrusion and intervention into a system of relationships, a system of relationships that the researcher is far freer than the researched to leave. The inequality and potential treacherousness of this relationship seems inescapable". And while I agree that I will obviously have more power in this interaction, I feel that the relationships ultimately formed were entirely subjective, depending on the responsiveness of the interviewees. For me, since I interviewed women who have been marginalized in some form or the other, I felt that being dishonest about my intentions would only lead to greater disillusionment and disappointment for the interviewees. Therefore, my intention was to be as honest and empathetic during the entire process and give my respondents the opportunity to stop me if they felt uncomfortable at any point.

Keeping all the above points in mind, I dove into my first experience in fieldwork prepared, with an open mind, acknowledging my limitations as a re-

searcher and the limitations of my findings. In the next part, I will be outlining my research process.

## **1.4 Experiences from the field: The research process**

### **1.4.1 "I would have died without him": Kishor Tiwari, a Godfather to these women**

I contacted Kishor Tiwari for help when I was still searching for a village and he told me to come meet him in a different city before he could say yes, as a test to see if I was serious about my research. The first phone conversation was quite unnerving because he came across as unfriendly and arrogant. My mother decided to accompany me to meet him because she wasn't comfortable with me going alone. The next day, when we reached the place he told us to meet him, we realized that he was giving a talk at a gathering of high profile members of a political party. He made us wait 4 hours before he finally asked us to come see him. Even then, he spoke to us for just 5 minutes during which he told me to come to a village called Pandharkawada in the district of Yavatmal the following week as there was going to be a meeting of 100 widows then to discuss their plight and hand out seeds. After meeting the widows, he told us that we could stay back for a few days and one of his "people" would take us around.

The head of the Vidarbha Jan Andolan Samiti, a farmer's advocacy group, Kishor Tiwari has been working in the field of farmer suicides and agricultural inclusion for the past 25 years. He initially worked in a Japanese multinational company but after realizing the plight of farmers in his hometown and in the country and because his family has a heritage of being agricultural workers, he gave up his corporate job and decided to try and help out where it mattered. He was earlier affiliated to a political party before realizing how dirty the game of politics was and quit. He then founded the Vidarbha Jan Andolan Samiti to help "his people". Since then, he has been fighting for farmer's rights.

I soon realized that he plays a very important role for these women and acts as a "benevolent patriarch" and a NSWP, helping them navigate their lives. He has been working tirelessly in the area of agricultural rights and inclusion and provides help to not just the farmers but also their widows. In the course of my stay in the village during which I had many conversations with him, I realized that he was extremely critical of NGOs and refused to call his organization one, had no faith in the government and only spoke about how useless they were and was very sceptical about the role of fellow activists like Vandana Shiva, who according to him spoke about the subject without having any real grassroots knowledge on it. He repeatedly admitted that he was "mad" to have pursued this issue so religiously for so long, in the process sacrificing certain aspects of his personal life. His consolation for sticking to this issue for so long was "*at least I sleep like a baby at night, knowing that I'm trying to make a difference*".

He is knowledgeable on a variety of subjects and makes an effort to help whenever possible, be it medical, financial or psychological assistance. Some of the widows depended on him to apply for their compensation benefits and some for emotional support for themselves and their children. He doesn't al-

ways encourage the women to rely on the government as he doesn't trust the individuals in power.

He had a profound impact on my study, one I did not initially anticipate.

#### **1.4.2 Situating myself: my interpretations of the scenes I witnessed**

While I intend to go into the details of what I witnessed in the later chapters, I thought it was important to give an overview of what I felt as I went through the motions of my field work. Despite my mother being there with me, I was very aware of the fact that we were two women travelling to the interiors of India. We got stared at, right from the beginning because of the clothes we wore (even though we both wore Indian clothes), the way we looked and the way we spoke. We looked and felt out of place.

It is not often that we use public transport in India but we had to push and force our way into an overcrowded state transport bus to reach our destination. When we reached the village, we soon recognized the lack of women on the streets. I couldn't understand why. Why were we the only two women walking on the streets? Were the others working in the fields? Or at home? How could I try to blend in more, so that men on the streets stopped staring? Two of Kishor Tiwari's men came in a car to pick us up from the bus stop. It became evident that ours was the only car on the streets. They took us to his office, a fancy building, which turned out to be his home/office. It became immediately clear that he was extremely respected and feared by everyone around him. He spent some time with me in his office, quizzing me on my general knowledge and testing my intelligence. It felt like I was being evaluated by him to see if I was worth his time and effort. I got the impression that he didn't take me very seriously as a researcher because my mother was with me. He joked about it once, saying *"so you can't do anything without your mother"*. But I realized that there was nothing I could really say to make him take me more seriously except prove my merit as a researcher. He also spent some time telling us about everything he has sacrificed and the time and effort he has put into this cause, emphasizing all his achievements in the process. He asked one of his men to accompany us for the next few days while I interviewed the women. Every night, he would call us to his office for some more chatting and quizzing. And every night I got a little more insight into the man that is Kishor Tiwari. It was obvious that he had collected a lot of good will over the years, because of which people were ever ready to help him and donate to his organization. All it took was a call and some rich individual or company would send in some donations. But it became clear that he had the power to force people to do things his way, whether they liked it or not.

Most of the women worshipped the ground he walked on. It was astounding to see that he knew every woman's name and the name of every member of their family. His attention was extremely personalized, which I found commendable. Women stood in line waiting for their turn to talk to him and voice their grievances. It started feeling a bit scary, like a scene out of a mafia movie. Was it okay for one man to have so much power over other's lives and livelihoods? That's the question that echoed in my head.

On meeting and spending time with the women, I felt this sense of helplessness. They had this look in their eyes while talking to me. Like maybe my

interviews will be the one to change their lives. I repeatedly stressed that I could not promise making any sort of difference in their lives, but what I could do was make their stories heard a little more. Some of them were in better positions than the others in terms of housing and finances. Some of them seemed happier than the others. And some of them seemed completely desolate, in homes that shouldn't actually be called "houses". I got a little more pessimistic about their situation with every passing day. Was there really a way out of this vicious cycle of poverty? Would their lives worsen in the future? Did their identities, hopes and dreams not matter at all? Was it good enough that they were just "existing" without actually "living"? Shouldn't the state be held accountable for some of the injustices befalling these women? On the last day of my stay there, I was tired, mentally and physically and was waiting to go back home to start processing the information. But even after going back home, I couldn't muster the courage to touch the topic again for two weeks. It was too personal. I was too emotional. And even though research is subjective, I felt that in my volatile state of mind, anything I would try to write would be too affected by the fresh memories. After two weeks, I managed to become a little more clear headed on everything I saw and resumed sorting out the data I collected. After coming back to The Hague, I tried contacting Kishor Tiwari with some questions I thought of while sorting through the data but got no response. So I worked with what I had.

## Chapter 2

### Setting a Framework

This chapter explores the lens used for analyzing the findings from my research. Since the focus is on subjectivities, I found it important to use a framework that could capture the depths of it successfully. It is essential to look at not just external circumstances that help shape these subjectivities but also internal thought processes and how they are shaped/shape the conditions around them. With this in mind, the concepts and theories used aim to deepen the level of my analysis.

#### 2.1 The Capabilities Approach and Justice

The Capabilities approach which was developed by Amartya Sen, was formulated as a method of measuring individual welfare and social justice. In it, he presented an alternative notion to well being, other than the mainstream utilitarian view, concentrating on "individual freedoms" and people's quality of life (Deneulin 2010: 503). Individual welfare (both materialistic and non materialistic) is looked at using two variables: realized welfare or *functionings* and potential welfare or *capabilities* (Kuklys 2005). While functionings reflect the choices the individual makes and lives with, capabilities reflect the variety of possible functionings the individual can achieve, depending on how free the person is to choose amongst the functionings and the environment around them that either obstructs or facilitates its use (Kuklys 2005). Agency, then is the freedom to follow aspirations valued by individuals (Deneulin 2010: 504). Therefore, poverty is termed as "capability deprivation". An example of measuring welfare using this approach is when considering the fact that a person isn't eating. This can be seen as either fasting or starving. Characterizing it would depend on if not eating is a choice or if it is because the individual doesn't have the means to eat. If the person has the capability to obtain food but still refuses to eat, that would be interpreted differently than if a person isn't capable of obtaining food (Deneulin 2010: 507). .

Similarly, Sen looks at the gendered aspect of it by considering women's preferences to sometimes be adaptive in nature, forced over the years to settle for less based on their status of being "second class". He speaks about intra household power dynamics where needs need not be satisfied to the same level for everyone in the house, which can sometimes lead to women being worse off than men (Deneulin 2010: 505). An example of this is the practice of women consuming lesser food than men as a result of women eating whatever is left over after the man satisfies his appetite (Welch 2002: 3).

*"Neglect is like ashes, ashes that keep the fire hidden within but do not let the warmth die out. When self-respect ebbs, a lack of attention does not seem unjust. So it causes no pain. And that's why women are ashamed to experience grief. So I say: if this be your arrangement, that women will suffer, then it is best to keep them in neglect, as far as possible. With attention and love, suffering only grows worse (Tagore as translated by Gupta)."*

A continuation of this theory came from Nussbaum (2003) who listed a concrete set of basic capabilities for universal analysis and spoke about the potential of this approach to highlight gender issues further. She disagrees with Sen, who she feels keeps this approach too vague, thus making it impossible to concretize a solution (Nussbaum 2003: 35). She speaks about the flaw in society where women are conditioned over time to accept their situation and therefore may not find issues such as sexual abuse, unequal wages and other such situations a thing of much importance because they are resigned to the fact that they do not have individual identities and rights, the same as others in society. Therefore, they see no point in wasting energy thinking about the injustice when changing it is a dream unachievable. This environment makes them more susceptible to poverty. I witnessed this when speaking to the widows in that area. All of them had this sense of resignation, a belief that things are the way they are and will not change in their lifetime. Years of being ignored by the government has led them to believe that their lives are not as important as everyone else's. This sense of resignation led to all of them being completely accepting of the fact that men made twice as much as them in daily wages even though the men I spoke to admitted that the women did equal or more work than them in the fields.

As a consequence of this inequality in multiple aspects, we witness a complete failure of capabilities. According to Sen and Nussbaum, to get such disadvantaged people out of poverty would require extra support from various actors, because, for example, in a country like India where girls are conditioned to not go to school, it would require more input of resources to change that conditioning (Nussbaum 2003: 35). Hence, for Sen, justice becomes "equality of capabilities" while Nussbaum feels the need to go beyond it to look at "political values" (Nussbaum 2003: 36). She illustrates this with the help of the example of how in some countries women are normatively allowed to vote but they might be threatened with violence if they leave the house (Nussbaum 2003: 37). Thus, justice can only be served based on the recognition of such circumstances. Lack of negative policies is not enough to combat these injustices. What is required is proactive specialized policies to overcome these adverse circumstances. Dworkin defines justice in similar terms, as the need to compensate people for portions of their circumstances for which they are not in charge of or have no control over and which might prove to be a barrier to their accomplishments (Roemer 1996). For example, the women that I interviewed spoke about their geographical isolation as one of the reasons for their inaccessibility. Justice would then be providing them with the infrastructure to be self sufficient in their isolation, like irrigation facilities, or creating better infrastructure, like roads, to reduce their isolation. Kabeer (2012) takes it a step further to state that the term justice should only be used in situations where the institutions that allow those who have been oppressed, the liberty to refuse or accept roles given to them. Elaborating on that, she talks about how existing institutions sometimes fail to give women their agency to choose by imposing roles on them that society considers relevant (Kabeer 2012: 219). Thus, according to her, identifying injustices must be the first step in fighting for justice (Kabeer 2012: 223). But then the question arises of recognizing injustices when defined so subjectively.

The Capabilities Approach has received a lot of criticism over the years. Deneulin (2010: 503) talks about the need to look beyond individual welfare and take into account human relationships and interactions within larger spaces like communities. According to him, there is a complex interplay between individuals and communities because of which, looking at individual freedoms might not be the most effective way of analyzing well being (Deneulin 2010: 503). We, as individuals, navigate through and give meaning to life based on interactions with others, thus making the distinction redundant (Deneulin 2010: 503). "Socially constructed meanings are essential for all human life, and are what enables people to translate their 'doings' into states of 'being'", consequently making individual well being a product of living well together (Deneulin 2010: 503).

Literature suggests that this approach has failed to recognize the importance of subjective experiences and happiness, restricting its definition to mostly objective social parameters like health, age, employment, environment etc (Deneulin 2010: 506). But there is a need to look at well-being as both subjective and objective in nature, not just restricted to a concrete list of "doing well", as put forth by many mainstream economists (Taylor 2011: 779). It should give importance to the individual's quality of experiences and perceptions of "feeling and being well", while at the same time acknowledging some basic social parameters that use welfare to improve well being (Taylor 2011: 779). It can be argued that welfare and well being are two concepts that are relational in nature with individual agency and actions being shaped by social provisions. As put forth by Taylor (2011: 780) "welfare may provide the conditions in which genuine agency can take place and agency itself may be found within social relationships as much as in autonomous individual action". He talks about well-being as self-efficacy, where one's perceptions of their lives are dependent on the opportunities provided by their macro surroundings to belong (Taylor 2011: 784). To prove the above mentioned statement, "happiness" economist Richard Layard gave the example of increasing government investment in mental health. According to him, by advising the government to invest in the community's wellness and therapy, more people will start becoming fit to work, thereby reducing the amount of money spent by the government for "incapacity benefits" and increasing savings, thus relating the micro (well-being) to the macro (welfare). It can be seen as an institutionalized approach to individualizing happiness. To counter this, Sen and Nussbaum talk about how looking at subjectivities can be dangerous because sometimes people, consciously or unconsciously, adapt their emotions and preferences to try and be happier even under dire circumstances (Deneulin 2010: 506). This again can be correlated to the "false consciousness" argument which is complex territory to enter because while this concept does explain the problem with subjectivities, many argue that it can be used as a tool by policymakers to simplify policy by negating preferences of the poor, by terming them to be "false", leading to the reproduction of dominant, mainstream policy making techniques (Deneulin 2010: 506). Agricultural policy can be looked at along the same lines. In the course of my field work, as I discovered the importance of Kishor Tiwari, the stand in patriarchy, I started thinking about its repercussions on the community; how the capabilities of the women were so restricted in multiple ways and how he provided an outlet to expand their set of capabilities but at the same time restricting it by limiting their potential for justice.

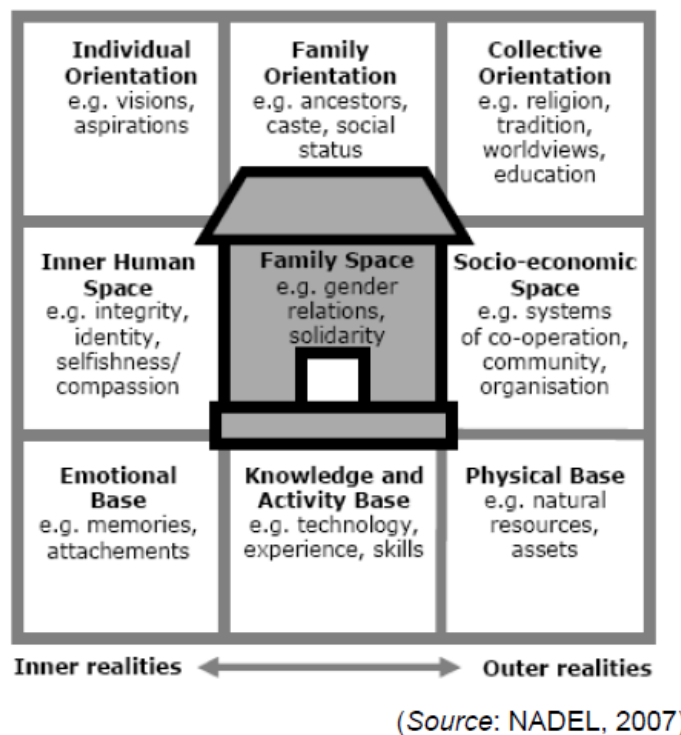
## 2.2 The Sustainable Livelihoods Approach

A livelihood as described by Chambers and Conway (1992: 7) is "the capabilities, assets (stores, resources, claims and access) and activities required for a means of living; a livelihood is sustainable which can cope with and recover from stresses and shocks, maintain and enhance its capabilities and assets, and provides sustainable livelihood opportunities for the next generation; and which contributes net benefits to other livelihoods at the local and global levels and in the short and long term". Scoones as part of the team at the Institute of Development Studies (IDS) defines livelihoods similarly but does not believe that it needs to "contribute net benefits to other livelihoods". It looks at various "portfolio assets" ranging from financial, physical, natural to human, political and social (not just at an individual and household level but taking into consideration the greater structures in place) and the risks, vulnerabilities and opportunities conducive to the micro and macro level environments of people which is dependent on their gender, castes, age etc (Scoones 1998). There are multiple definitions of this approach depending on which organization is defining it. As stated by Krantz (2001) as part of his research for SIDA, the Sustainable Livelihoods Approach looks beyond the usual ways to reduce poverty by taking into consideration concepts of social exclusion and vulnerability and how they might dampen or improve a person's ability to deal with poverty. A variation of this approach comes from DFID which doesn't specify a definition of what constitutes "poverty" but requires active involvement of the private and public sector (Krantz 2001: 23). While it looks at the larger structures that determine these livelihoods, it ignores a very important unit of analysis, the household, looking at it from the perspective of every individual's aspirations and values.

Even though definitions might be different, an overarching theme of this approach is that it doesn't predetermine the sector that requires intervention (Krantz 2001: 15). It looks at already existing livelihood systems and then finalizes its entry point in terms of sectoral intervention based on that, actively involving people throughout the process (Krantz 2001: 15).

Traditional approaches to Sustainable Livelihoods failed to take into consideration the gendered aspect of resource allocation and oppression but approaches developed through years of research on this framework such as the Rural Livelihoods Approach brought in the aspects of gender dynamics intra and inter households (Ludi 2008: 3). The figure (2.2) below describes the Rural Livelihoods Approach:





This approach can be used to study the gendered nature of burden sharing (livelihood activities) and intra household power dynamics. A plus point of this approach is that it takes into consideration not just capabilities, skills, identities and relationships but equally looks at all this with the lens of emotions, an aspect that is imperative when researching the lived realities of the families. It analyzes inner and outer "orientations" to document people's desires and world views (Ludi 2008: 2). It looks at "space" as something that affects people's sense of integrity and community solidarity and uses "bases" to look at physical constraints and emotional experiences (Ludi 2008: 2). Bebbington (1999: 2022) argues along these lines, stressing the importance of acknowledging "the social, economic and political relationships that create poverty and wealth" and the ability of these relationships to change over time. He talks about how access to resources is determined by the absence or presence of various actors and the interactions of rural people with them (Bebbington 1999:2022). Looking at various forms of capital assets (including natural, produced, social, cultural and human), he argues that livelihood options are determined by the resources that we get access to based on the combinations of the various forms of capital, thus determining individual's capabilities and simultaneous practicality of livelihood options (Bebbington 1999: 2029). This can be used to explain why farmers make the choices they make (for example, committing suicide as a strategy to get access to government compensation) and how this choice of committing suicide results in a transformation of livelihood options of the surviving household, thereby reducing or exacerbating poverty.

The notion of 'gendered vulnerability' can be looked at to explore the unequal effects of farmer suicides. Poverty affects men and women differently and the ability to deal with any unexpected disaster and the post disaster recovery depends on one's positioning in the context of the household (Bamberger et al as cited by Chhachhi and Truong 2009). Indian society is extremely patri-

archal in nature and most households are controlled by men. The profession of farming is no different. Most farmers are men and household expenditure is usually in the hands of the men. In many poor households, the male breadwinner (who throughout the day does manual labour) is first given food, followed by the working/school going sons, followed by the daughters and finally the woman, who ends up getting a very small portion of the meal (whatever is left over after everyone else eats). Along these lines, Sumi Krishna talks about gender based discrimination in natural resource activities, ranging from "resource control to conflicts" (Krishna 2012: 15). According to her, early literature on this overlooked close complex connections between women, the spaces they occupied and how their access to those spaces depended on relationships with others in the community (Krishna 2012: 16). She highlights its invisibility and its tendency to ignore hierarchical structures of power within the community, which, if ignored, can systemically reproduce inequality. These sorts of intra household power dynamics can be captured using this approach and can highlight how livelihood options are distributed. Thus, as a result of farmer suicides, power dynamics change radically and the entire burden is shifted into the hands of the woman of the household, who is left to deal not just with the debts incurred by the farmers and the hassle of dealing with moneylenders but also left to navigate through government bureaucratic procedures to get access to compensation. One moreover needs to consider the social stigma attached to farmer suicides and widowed women caring for children without a male household head and the impact it will have on the surviving family's livelihood decisions.

This approach is equally useful for understanding policy gaps and livelihood improving strategies that can be adopted by the household. Since this approach highlights people's agency and assets along with taking into consideration development interventions and its impact on livelihoods, this can be used to chart out livelihood strategies available for households pre and post suicides and can therefore highlight the most beneficial way to choose amongst those options, thereby reducing vulnerability. It can provide a clear picture of where policies are lacking and give an outline for interventions from the government.

### **2.3 Gender and Hegemonic Masculinities**

Feminist scholars first aimed to make gender a category of analysis to bring out women's contributions and experiences in historical narratives as a method of not only showing how women go through daily life differently but also how history can be reshaped if we take into account their roles, power dynamics and challenge dominant notions regarding their impact on history (Scott 1986: 1055). "Gender", as argued by some scholars, was used as a substitute to the term "women" as a method of depoliticizing women's issues because using "women's rights" legitimized the issue by saying that women, as political subjects, had real historical rights, contrary to popular discourse (Scott 1986: 1056). The term rejected all biological markers that distinguished between sexes and instead used social relations and roles assigned to men and women, thus making sex an aspect of the broader umbrella term of gender (Scott 1986: 1057).

Over the years, a lot of research has been done on patriarchy, as a way of understanding the historical origins of gender dynamics. While some argue that patriarchy is a result of man's "need" to control women, some say that looking at it from the lens of sexuality gives insight into sexual objectification of wom-

en (Scott 1986: 1058). Either way, historians argued that this "biological essentialism lens" confined gender to differences in physical attributes, which then rendered the human body unchanging across history. They additionally failed to take in account how these differences affect other aspects of our life, aspects that were initially considered unaffected by gender differences (Scott 1986: 1059). Joan Kelly, was one of the first researchers to talk about the complementarity of economics and systems of oppression but most Marxist Feminists have been criticized for viewing gender as a consequence of economic structures and not independently as a field of study (Scott 1986: 1061). The politics of this needs to be considered when we think about how house work and domestic work are not included when computing GDP and the implications that has on the value placed on women's involvement. Post Structuralist researchers have spent time analyzing how childhood as a life stage is important in determining "gender identities" based on what children hear, see and read (Scott 1986: 1062). Social Constructivists argue that economic, social and cultural institutions reproduce identities, for example, girls playing with dolls and boys with cars; pink symbolizing girls and blue, boys (Scott 1986: 1071). The dynamics play a profound role on how women and men view themselves internally and in their social and cultural context.

All of the above furthermore solidifies the need to go into literature on patriarchy and masculinities to see the historical meanings attached to being a "man". This brings in the concept of Hegemonic Masculinities. It was initially used to study the "social nature of masculinity and the possibilities of change in men's conduct" (Connell 2005: 831). The Gay Rights Movement was born out of the need for gay men to protect themselves from abuse by straight men as a result of being "different", challenging conventional roles of masculinities (Connell 2005: 831). Over the years, the term began being used to understand the reasons for perpetuation of authority of men over women. However, this concept is not applicable to masculinities in general. It applies to the percentage of the male population that feels the need to act in a certain way to be a "man" (Connell 2005: 832). The concept has been used to understand classroom interactions, crime patterns, projections of men in media and emotional determinants in men (Connell 2005: 834). However, the concept has been widely criticized for failing to recognize differences with the category of "men", by universalizing characteristics of men (Connell 2005: 836). Researchers point out the tendency to exclude women from studies of masculinities, thus separating issues that are actually extremely intertwined (Connell 2005: 837). The definition of masculinities is moreover said to be too vague. Is it a concrete set of behaviours and characteristics in society or is it fluidic, changing depending on time and context (Connell 2005: 838)?

In terms of this paper, it becomes important to understand these concepts to get deeper insight into why women view themselves the way they do and why men act in a specific way.

## **2.4 Citizenship**

The concept of full citizenship is important to this study in terms of its repercussions for justice in general and gender justice. Traditionally, citizenship was described in terms of geography, where belonging to a certain "bounded"

region offered one the rights and duties that came along with it (Yarwood 2014). Kabeer offered an alternative way of looking at it as a means of connecting individuals to structures and further connecting gender justice to social justice. She brings in the gender angle of it to suggest how citizenship is affected by relationships of kinship, which have been internalized for years and affects the way women interact in their environments. According to her, household dynamics rely on the interdependence of women and men and therefore some women might resist exercising their citizenship and agency as they view it as going against their identities as wives and mothers, therefore restricting their identities to that of "self denial and service to others" (Kabeer 2012: 221). This self sacrificing attitude leads to women replicating this role in not just their homes but also other aspects in society. Therefore she poses the question if women will be able to overcome the oppression they face without offending the nature of relationships they already have. What I found through my field-work was that farmers and the families from this region were deprived of their citizenship not just because of their geographical placement but also because of internal conditionings and societal indifference or exclusion thus showing the fluidity of this concept, making us rethink notions of citizenship.

Thus, citizenship, as a concept, transitions from a single to a multi layered construct. Yuval-Davis emphasizes the importance of "intimate citizenship", the need to consider the private sphere of the household because of its importance in setting up access to "rights and obligations" (Yuval-Davis 2010: 122). She brings in the body and its "multisitedness", distinguishing the regulations imposed on it at different sites " (Yuval-Davis 2010: 123). This relates to complete citizenship being dependent on gender, class, caste, race. It is a term that differs at the household "private" level, the community level and the state level (Yuval-Davis 2010). Women's positioning in these levels relies greatly on their "social citizenship" or relationships and interactions, the way labour is divided in each layer and the importance given to it. For the farmers, citizenship unfortunately is achieved posthumously and for the women, they struggle everyday to recognize/be recognized in each layer.

## **2.5 Non State Welfare Provision**

Welfare can be acquired from various types of institutions. As Gough (2004: 30) describes, the household, community, market and state come together to chart the institutional framework of welfare provisioning domestically. If we take into account international actors, this chart expands even more. As summarized by Wood (2004:31), "markets are imperfect, communities clientelist, households patriarchal and states marketised, patrimonial and clientelist". This is a fitting description of how internal dynamics and hierarchical relationships at various levels determines efficacy of welfare access. Hence, insecurity increases more for the poor who don't have the power to control the bodies that distribute their welfare (Wood: 51). This becomes the main difference when contrasting it to relatively "well off" people, who have some level of self-sufficiency in their security. NSWPs is one such actor which helps determine security.

NSWPs, in this paper, are defined as any organization or person, apart from the state that does "direct delivery or indirect facilitation of services, programs, and infrastructure, which are aimed at promoting the well-being and

security of the population" which usually includes health, education and sometimes provisions for the "vulnerable" groups in the population, including the poor (Cammett 2011: 4). Even though some researchers might argue that making a clear distinction between state and non state is not easy because sometimes NSWPs get some financing from the state, for the purposes of this research, NSWPs will be categorized as non public sector funders. The debate between state and non state provisioning has been ongoing for years. While a lot of research has been done on the importance of state provisioning, there seems to be a gap in the literature when talking about the consequences of non state provision on the overall welfare and long term well being of people (Cammett 2011: 2). Especially in the "global south" where welfare provisioning for its citizens was hampered by neo liberal state agenda, the importance of other actors, apart from the state, becomes important to consider (Cammett 2011: 3). In India, welfare over the years has been distributed to the population through an array of different schemes and intermediaries, ranging from the MGNREGA to the use of rural banks (Cammett 2011:3). While some argue that the extent of the existence of NSWPs depends on state capacity<sup>2</sup> and it is important for the state to take responsibility to ensure proper services, others say that it is important in countries like India to look at NSWPs because of the weak nature of state and the fact that people would receive much less if it wasn't for NSWPs (Cammett 2011: 6). MacLean similarly argues that relying too much on other actors has the ability to take away from the state to do its job and maintain strong internal mechanisms for providing welfare and makes the state complacent, thereby reinforcing a weak state (Cammett 2011: 6).

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<sup>2</sup> It is the ability of the state to enforce control over its borders and collect revenue for redistribution of goods and services for social welfare (Cammett 2011: 6)

## Chapter 3

### Exploring Vulnerabilities: My Findings

During the course of my interactions with the women and others in the community, I came across a lot of interesting statements made by them, which helped me understand their overall situation in terms of their financial positions, livelihood options, emotional spaces and gendered dynamics. This section aims to explore and analyze my findings using the concepts and theories mentioned in chapter 2.

#### 3.1 Gender, Space and Incomplete Citizenship

*"I rented a shop near the temple but since the property belonged to the temple people, they started demanding a sum of 2-3 lakhs to buy the space and so when I couldn't give them that, they took it back. Initially the rent was 2000 per month but then they started insisting on buying it and I didn't have that kind of money. So now I sell stuff from home itself (Geeta 2014).*

These words were spoken by Geeta, a widow who was trying to earn a living by selling jewellery (which she referred to as "stationery"), a different livelihood option she adopted after her husband committed suicide. She had to move out of her rented space and move in with her parents after the suicide because she was unable to support herself and her children. Throughout the conversation, she kept referring to the house she was living in, in very impersonal terms. When I asked her what she meant, she said *"..... when can they support me till? When my brother gets married and the sister in law will come home, I'll have to leave the house. My older brother will definitely get married this year. My brother and parents are mine but my sister in law isn't"*. It was the assumption that this "space" wasn't her own, she was on borrowed time, living in the house until she was asked to move out, thereby reflecting the transitory nature of her 'family space'<sup>3</sup>. She has no belief in herself, in her ability to independently provide for herself. This was reflected in the fact that she kept saying that she didn't know what she was going to do in the future when she didn't have the support of her parents. Her sense of identity and integrity, her 'inner human space'<sup>4</sup>, was close to non-existent.

These kind of ideals of spaces being temporary for daughters was solidified when I spoke to Chandrakala, another widow who casually said that *"One daughter is done with her education so I gave her away. Now the second one is left"*. I was left feeling uneasy. Was this notion of daughters being temporary commodities so ingrained in Indian society that people could casually bring up giving them away, with no thought to the kind of effect such statements might have on the daughters mindset and their perceptions of self? Why are women always the ones made to feel like second class citizens whose identities are intertwined with the identities of other men? Can't we create an environment that fosters independence and self worth? Don't we realize that statements like *"Now I have two children (boys). My daughter is married"*, made by Kamal, another widow, solidi-

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<sup>3</sup> With reference to the RLA

<sup>4</sup> With reference to the RLA

fies sex based discrimination at a very fundamental level? How can we casually negate the existence of a daughter just because she gets married? These kind of questions gave rise to more questions about how integrated the women actually feel in their community and with the rest of their country, looking at it from the citizenship lens.

*"What other work is there here. There's only farming. No other profession. This is a farming district. So you have to do labour in farms. ....there's just no other way to earn money. People have to sow 2-3 times and they don't have any money. This year because there are no harvests there are going to be a lot of suicides (Geeta 2014)".*

This sentence is a perfect reflection of the injustices faced by the farming community within their 'socio economic space'<sup>5</sup>, firstly because of their geographical isolation. Secondly, because of their choice of profession and the repeated neglect they are subjected to not just from the government but also the rest of the "citizens" of India. What I found surprising was that even though the population in this district was actually quite large, the only way for them to reach a nearby city was by travelling in almost crumbling public buses after bearing a bumpy bone crushing drive through incomplete roads. And even that city seemed limited in its livelihood possibilities. The primary possibilities I saw were restaurant owners, vegetable and fruit vendors, private rickshaw drivers, convenience store owners, medical shop owners and barber shop/beauty parlor proprietors. Again, most of them are male dominated professions, reflecting what jobs are considered "appropriate" for women and men. The fact that the farming community in general is ignored by various actors in society adds to the physical as well as psychological isolation. One can imagine what being a woman in such isolation must feel like. Such gender based discrimination has a profound impact on women's access to citizenship rights. The patriarchal nature of Indian society is further reflected in the way women get access to land. As stated by Bina Agarwal (1994: 1455) in her research on gender and property rights, she highlights how by making women's ownership of property difficult, men maintain their command over women and in the process prevent empowerment. This was proven by the fact the most of the women I interviewed didn't have land in their names until the husband committed suicide. Some of them said that they didn't get access to government compensation easily because of land being in the name of the father in law, which prevented the government from recognizing their husbands as farmers. Such intricate dynamics have severe implications on citizenship.

Within the household, their identities have a fluidic nature, depending on their living situation and their level of (in)dependence. It becomes defined by the death of their husbands, their identities as widows, single mothers and sole providers. At a community level, they define themselves with the help of Kishor Tiwari, the man who acts as a stand in patriarch in the absence of their husbands, guiding them through their daily lives. As he says, so they do. *"Tiwari bhai (brother) didn't tell us to apply for government compensation. So I didn't try"*. It is important to acknowledge the role he plays in determining the extent of their state recognized citizenship. He decides when and in what form the women should apply for help from the government. Apart from him, the community

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<sup>5</sup> With reference to the RLA

level government, called the *Gram Panchayat*, plays a very important role as an intermediary. This can be seen in the following statement made by Kamal, a widow living in a makeshift house with no flooring and dilapidated roofing: *"...we need money to build a house. Whatever I earn from labour goes in daily consumption so our urgent need is money for a house. Sometime back I sold 2 of my animals for which I bought mud and kept it aside for building a house. Now I'm waiting for the approval to come from the Gram Panchayat. Then maybe I can build a house"*. This shows that state level approval is not enough; local governments play an important role in determining the way citizenship is accessed between the state and the people. At the state level, the widows' identities simply remain invisible resulting from government negligence.

### 3.2 Limited aspirations and Capabilities

*"I fell while working in the farm. I needed twenty stitches. They had to put a rod in my leg. I can't walk or cycle a lot anymore. Because of that, I can't travel to different cities to make more money doing other things (Purnima 2014)"*.

With this statement, she made me think of how adverse circumstances can impair one's capabilities even more, thereby making you even more disadvantaged. In Purnima's case, her physical impairment restricted her ability to explore various livelihood options. She spoke about how a lady approached her with the opportunity of selling *sarees* (Indian clothing) in her community. But that would require her to go to a far off place to pick up the sarees which she couldn't do because of her leg. This added unexpected injury ended up restricting her choices even more. She used to earn additional income stitching clothes for others but after her injury, she couldn't operate the foot pedal on the sewing machine, further restricting her livelihood possibilities. As a result of this, her "capabilities" decreased, her livelihood options were additionally dampened and she viewed herself as more "disadvantaged".

Similar sentiments were echoed by Geeta who said that she had many desires but she didn't think that realistically she would have the ability or means to ever fulfil them. After her husband committed suicide, her 'emotional base'<sup>6</sup> shattered, leaving her in the hospital for six months in a coma like state. Even after she got back home, she remained in shock for six more months. The only reason she was able to manage with no income was because of her parents. She was well educated and had completed certificate courses in beautician's training and crèche management. But she spoke about there being no opportunities for opening a beauty parlour in her village because not only was buying equipment and renting a place too expensive but people in the area had no money to spend on beauty parlours, which meant that she wouldn't have enough customers to keep the business going. She spoke about competition being very tough as there was only one crèche and many women applying for that position. She failed to get it this year and she intends to apply for it again in two years. Therefore, put in context of the RLA, she failed to realize her 'individual orientation' because of multiple circumstances around her. Her social status as a "widow" and a member of a "lower class" further hampered her 'family orientation'. The way her family is perceived in society and her 'collective orienta-

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<sup>6</sup> With reference to the RLA



tion' and life chances were affected by her community and its inability to satisfy her individual aspirations, either as a result of its geographical placement, restricted livelihood options or others' financial inability to support her dreams of starting a beauty parlour, thereby reflecting not just her situation but also the collective struggle being faced by the community. The government in no way contributes to help reduce these vulnerabilities. Instead, their role can actually be seen as debilitating.

*"The seeds that the government provides are very expensive. Even a small bag costs 1000 rupees and if you take a bank loan you have to pay that back. The government doesn't give us any concessions or help with repayment (Vandana 2014)".*

She said this while she was shedding light on how even though market prices for agricultural commodities are increasing, the money they get for their produce hardly ever increases because of which farmers don't make nearly enough money to cover their costs. Simultaneously, the state keeps pressurizing them to produce more while not subsidizing access to seeds, forcing them to take loans to increase productivity and supply more while still earning negligible increases. This cycle prevents them from ever moving out of the trap of poverty and debt. This gives insight into the role structures in place play in determining a person's capabilities. It is important to recognize that capabilities need not be defined individually but are greatly affected by the (un)supportive environment around, including government apathy, that may or may not exacerbate an already existing crisis. Many of the women spoke about how they're in the process of sowing seeds for the third time this year because of freak weather conditions that are destroying the crops but they're receiving absolutely no financial assistance from the government.

Being a woman further adds to this crisis. This can be illustrated when taking into consideration wages in the agricultural sector in India. Women like Geeta are paid lesser (Rs.100/day) than men (Rs.200/day). Patriarchy is so innate in Indian society that even though the constitution advocates equality for all, such explicit naturalised wage discrimination isn't considered noteworthy and the women don't feel the need to complain. The systemic reproduction of wage discrimination based on sex can have severe consequences on women's sense of self. Benhabib (as quoted by Kabeer 2012: 224) emphasizes the fluidity of women's perceptions of themselves and how it depends on everyday interactions. She believes that women's identities keep changing depending on the nature of relationships forged everyday and these changing identities may either reinforce old traditions of oppression or help give them the strength to vocalize the injustices being forced on them. Therefore, gender discrimination becomes a term used in different scenarios based on context specific identities and experiences that determines how one perceives themselves and others around them. Summarizing their situation, we can say that they are left with unfulfilled aspirations, an absent state, adverse neo liberal policies, unpredictable climate conditions, debt, low self esteems, gender based inequity and absolutely no way out. Adding to this, as pointed out by Chandrakala, is that even if they want to do something other than agriculture to try and escape from poverty, they can't because, in her words, *"....apart from house work and farming I don't understand anything else"*

What is even more unfair is that they are resigned to the fact that their children will end up in this cycle. This was witnessed when Vandana said *".....especially my daughter. She has so many dreams. She has very big dreams but I don't*

*think that we have the ability or means to fulfil them"*. Her daughter wants to teach Math at a school in a city about an hour away from their home. But she didn't seem hopeful of that dream ever materializing. Kamal spoke about needing to take her sons out of school after her husband committed suicide because she couldn't afford paying the fees. This in turn lead to her sons being incapable of acquiring any other knowledge or skills other than farming, thereby decreasing their long term livelihood options.

Purnima spoke about her son wanting to pursue engineering or a career in the Indian Police Service. She however, seemed a little more hopeful because Kishor Tiwari was guiding him throughout the process. I started noticing a pattern. The girls were encouraged to study up to grade 12 and then get married. The boys were encouraged to pursue a career even after grade 12. Why was there a difference in the way Kishor Tiwari mapped out their life paths? Didn't the girls deserve an equal chance to continue pursuing their interests after grade 12? What was the point of educating girls till grade 12 if she was eventually going to be forced to get married and do home based work or farm work? There is a whole new unexplored world outside for the girls to explore, were they not worthy of doing that?

Hence, we realize that this connection between desires and capabilities, which starts with agriculture failing to provide for the household, then looks at the consequences of that on the individual, household and community and then explores how these consequences are shaped by a number of 'inner' and 'outer realities' such as egos, dreams, societal pressure and cultural practices, shape the way people operate in their daily lives and in the long run.

### 4.3 Hegemonic Masculinities

*"The father committed suicide because of our daughter's wedding. We have a pair of bullocks which we thought we could sell to fund the wedding but we didn't get a good price for it in the market. Who will give us a loan then? And because no one would give us a loan such thoughts started coming into his mind. Everything had been finalized. The muburat (wedding time) had been fixed but he was unable to gather the money till then and because he didn't get a good price for his bullocks, he committed suicide on the road itself. So then the villagers contributed and got her married. We first completed the wedding and then conducted his funeral (Kamal 2014)".*

Another aspect of capabilities that needs to be considered is the issue of ego and masculinities and its effect on well being. According to Emile Durkheim, in his book 'Le Suicide' (1896), suicides might be an individual act but it is an act shaped by society. He speaks of four primary reasons why people commit suicide: Altruistic, Anomic, Egoistic and Fatalistic (Durkheim as cited by Jones 1986). Durkheim postulated that Egoistic suicide occurs when the individual feels isolated from their community (as cited by Jones 1986). He stated that the more integrated and close knit communities felt, the fewer were the chances of individuals committing suicide in that community. Therefore, he said that as society disintegrated towards individualism, an individual's tendency to commit suicide would be higher. Arguing along similar lines, Nilotpāl (2011) speaks about perceptions of masculinities and its implications on the failure to "perform" accordingly. When aspirations and capabilities are hampered by certain constraints and men take that as personal failure, not succeeding in completing their "manly" duties, this can lead to extreme consequences.

This was seen when I interviewed Kamal, who spoke about her husband being unable to face people after failing to provide for the daughter's wedding, as society dictates, because of which he drank poison on the day of the wedding and killed himself. While she attributed the cause of his suicide to the daughter's wedding, what needs to be understood is the deeper reasons for it. We need to ask why he wasn't capable of financing the wedding? Why was his income generation so inadequate? What does it say about society in general that he had to pay for the wedding individually, just because he is the father of a bride and not a groom? Was the inability to finance the wedding such a blow to his ego and sense of masculinity, that he felt the need to end his life? An act like this speaks a lot about patriarchy and how it doesn't just have adverse effects on women but also men. These generationally imposed gender roles have a huge impact on people's livelihood decisions and we cannot ignore its significance when studying societies and cultures.

I understand this concept is more relevant when studying the reasons for farmer suicides, something that is not the primary objective of this paper. However, I couldn't leave out this aspect of gender identities. If we, as a society, fail to help get rid of these roles, what makes us think that sons in the coming generations won't feel the same pressures to act and provide in keeping with their responsibilities? What are the chances that failure to do so won't make them resort to similar drastic steps?

## Chapter 4

### Providing Support

One thing that became clear as I went through each day in the field was that these women were surviving on support from various actors, be it the government, Kishor Tiwari and his contacts or their own communities and families. This chapter aims to explore and analyze the forms of support they obtain.

#### 4.1 Non State Welfare Provision

*"Because of brother's generosity, we are where we are. I pray to God everyday to give him a long life and that his children and family prosper"*

During my field work, I experienced the extent to which NSWPs can affect the environment around them. When women like Purnima said *"Kishor bhau (brother) is helping and we are surviving"*, it left me uneasy. In no way did I want to negate his efforts in helping his community. But at the same time, I couldn't ignore the red warning sign that came on every time such sentences were spoken. By relying excessively on him, could it be seen as shifting from one form of dependency to another, perpetuating the woman's need for "help from a man"; patriarchal systems of dependence? Even though he genuinely cares about the widows and knows all of them at a very personal level, he does a lot of their work for them, therefore acting as an intermediary between the women and the government because of which most women had no idea about how to get access to various government schemes themselves. There's additionally the issue that since his support is individualized and personal, he maybe preventing the state from being held accountable. He also confessed to sometimes keeping the widows in the dark about the severity of their situation because he didn't want to *"scare them unnecessarily"*. While this can be seen as an honourable effort to reduce their stress, it can be said that by not educating the widows about their situation and their rights, he is preventing them from developing their consciousness to fight for their rights and move out of this generational reproduction of poverty. It would have been different if he was complementing state welfare provision instead of substituting it; if he was encouraging the women to apply for compensation or other government schemes. But from all my interactions with him, I got the impression that he discouraged reliance on the government. While his stance might not be completely unwarranted, by doing so, was he really helping the women out in the long run, or was his solution just short term?

*"Only people like you can help us. When the suicide happened in 2011, Kishor brother played a very important role to help in my mental state. I didn't move or anything. I didn't even pay attention to my children. I was admitted to a hospital in Yavatmal for 6 months. Even now I feel weak sometimes and my hands give way if I work too much"*.

Geeta, one of the younger widows said this in the course of our conversation. After her husband committed suicide, the psychological trauma rendered her completely immobile for almost a year. Her nine month old daughter and four year old son were left with her parents. She told me the only reason she got out of this shock was because Kishor Tiwari went to the hospital where

she was admitted and told her to snap out of it and move on, if not for herself, at least for her children. He acted as her 'emotional base'<sup>7</sup>, her second father, forcing her to come to terms with the death of her husband and continue living life with the family she still had. She moreover repeatedly stressed the uselessness of the government, which I started recognizing was the exact opinion Kishor Tiwari had. Although I'm not trying to defend the government, I was left wondering if this was her individual opinion from experience trying to fight for her rights or if it was Kishor Tiwari's "indoctrination", which she reproduced blindly? As a result of that, I became uncomfortable when she repeatedly said that people like me, and not the government, could help her. Did she want me to give her something financially then or did she mean that people like me could help them get visibility and bring their struggles to the common man? Shouldn't the state instead be made to fulfil its responsibilities?

I recognized that Kishor Tiwari wasn't the only NSWP in that community. As a result of the goodwill and fame he acquired over the years, researchers from all over the world approached him when looking for a place to conduct their field work because of which some women spoke about receiving sewing machines from "American researchers". A few of the people who spent time with them taught them additional skills like how to stitch different types of embroidery patterns on clothes which they in turn taught to their daughters. So not only did they rely on one man and his reach for their survival, they additionally waited for the occasional donation as a result of visits from outsiders. Thus, their 'knowledge base'<sup>8</sup> was primarily determined by these NSWPs.

While speaking to one of the widows, she told me how her daughter's school had increased the fees for the next year. When she told Kishor Tiwari about it, he went to the school and forced them to accept lower fees for her daughter. Could this be considered justice served because of having the right "contacts" or injustice for the others in school who had to pay a larger sum of money just because they didn't have someone like him to use his power to help them? Or do we need to look even deeper at the problems that cause such financial crunches in the first place? When women like Vandana say things like: *"We have a lot of troubles which we have to bear with which is why when we speak to you'll our eyes get filled with tears. We don't understand what to tell you and what not to because we feel so terrible about our lives. Just a lot of worry about how our children will survive. If my son calls sick even 1 night I can't afford to buy him medicines. How many things can I also do? Should I work in the field, work outside or look after my children?"*, how do we conceptualize notions of justice? Should the state step up and reduce their grievances or should non state actors come in and fill in the gaps in state provisioning? Or should non state actors pressurize the state to provide for its citizens? The extent to which private money lenders were taking advantage of the invisible government can be seen when Vandana told me.

*"If you borrow one rupee for a year your interest on that one rupee will be 50 paise (half of a rupee). So, they basically charge us 50% interest"*

These private money lenders take advantage of their desperation and charge them exorbitant interests rates for the money they borrow. Such exam-

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<sup>7</sup> With reference to the RLA

<sup>8</sup> With reference to the RLA

ples solidified my belief that the government needs to be held accountable and NSWPs need to work alongside the government, so that access to welfare can be more widespread.

## 4.2 State provision: exploring possibilities

### 4.2.1 The Mahatma Gandhi National Rural Employment Guarantee Act

The Mahatma Gandhi National Rural Employee Guarantee Act (MGNREGA)<sup>9</sup> came into existence in 2005, guaranteeing employment for not less than hundred days per year, to un-skilled adult workers in rural India, who volunteered to do manual work (GoI 2008: 1). Under this act, people could express their willingness to work either orally or in writing to the local government (Gram Panchayat) (GoI 2008: 2). If employment was not given within fifteen days of the job application, daily unemployment allowances had to be given by the state (GoI 2008: 4). The MGNREGA was specifically targeted for farmers as a way of them getting income during off seasons of agriculture. I went into the field hopeful about the impact of MGNREGA because of its perception as being a "success story" but what I found was completely different.

*"MGNREGA is bogus. You get a job card. All the officials and the people who get the tenders use GCB machines and don't use labour at all to do the forest or road work. Then they collect the money that is supposed to be given to all the people who have the job cards and they give each of the job card holders Rs.500 and keep the rest Rs.10000-15000 for themselves".*

Kishor Tiwari's right hand man told me this. As a result of its failure, the scheme that was supposed to initially help give more livelihood options to the rural populace ends up helping only the contractors and sub contractors (already rich and corrupt people) earn more at the expense of others.

Another fascinating aspect I discovered was the psychological reasons behind not opting for the MGNREGA. While talking to Kishor Tiwari's right hand man, I asked him why opting for this scheme wasn't a popular option in the district. He told me it was because most of the families in the community had illustrious backgrounds and histories of being from rich, respected farming families. Although they were no longer valued by the broader Indian community, for them, taking part in this scheme and doing manual labour was considered "beneath them". Thus, their self esteems sometimes prevented them from participating in the MGNREGA. MGNREGA, moreover has a very strong linkage to the caste system in India. It was meant to give livelihood options to the lower castes, who otherwise tend to be ignored in government policies (Kumar). While statistics have shown an increase in participation of lower castes, the question I started asking myself was if by providing an alternative livelihood opportunity in this particular form of work, are we simultaneously reproducing their caste status and limiting their options to venture outside manual work? It looked to me like a form of exclusion within this inclusion, making them work within one particular field for the sake of giving them jobs,

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<sup>9</sup> Previously known as National Rural Employment Guarantee Act (NREGA)

without actually looking at the level of integration and welfare as a result of these jobs.

#### 4.2.2 Other government schemes

A government scheme that everyone I spoke to was successfully availing of was the PDS, a food security programme introduced to help India's "poor" get access to rice, wheat, sugar and kerosene at extremely subsidized prices (GoI 2002: 290). All it requires is for people to show their BPL card<sup>10</sup> and then they are entitled to a certain amount of ration every month (GoI 2002: 290). While this scheme is not particularly meant for widows of farmer suicides, it helps in reducing the amount spent on food. Not all of them were getting the quantity they are entitled to because of corruption at the shops that distribute this food because of which sometimes their food supplies run out before the month's end. It moreover needs to be taken into consideration that what they're getting is very basic. If given a diet of only rice or wheat, would we be able to survive? Just because they are poor, are they not entitled to choices? Is this basic diet enough to maintain their health after they work on the fields and at home? Can the government help subsidize fruits and vegetables to help reduce the amount of money spent on food and increase the richness of their diet?

Indira Awaas Yojana is a government scheme that is meant to provide housing for "disadvantaged" people, by providing them a sum of Rs.70,000 to build a house (IAY). The budget for the scheme is supposed to be shared by the centre and the state in the ratio 75:25 (GoI 2013: 8). Chandrakala was lucky enough to get access to this scheme because of which she no longer has any loan on the house. The government was supposed to moreover build a latrine as part of a complementary scheme but corruption prevented her from getting access to that. However, the fact that she had her own house gave her a sense of security about always having a roof over her head. Kamal wasn't as lucky. The shanty she calls her house is almost falling apart. She has sent in her paperwork to avail of this scheme but hasn't heard from them yet. Kishor Tiwari's right hand man said that it takes at least three years for paperwork to get processed and sanction to be given. Access to such programmes depend largely on timing and luck. Kamal's main priority was getting a "proper" house. Such schemes, if implemented properly, have great potential in reducing the vulnerabilities faced by these women.

Sanjay Gandhi Niradhar Yojana is a scheme where Indian widows are entitled to a sum of Rs.600/month (7.4 euros) to help them survive after their husband's death (GoI). Two of the five women said that this scheme was convenient for them because the money was delivered to their doorstep each month but the amount was too negligible to make any sort of real difference.

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<sup>10</sup> The BPL card is issued by state governments to people who, according to surveys conducted by the government, are classified as "poor" depending on criteria put forth by the state governments. Over the years there has been a lot of debate on this classification of the "poor" depending on certain criteria which can lead to inclusion or exclusion of people, if identified incorrectly in the survey

They suggested increasing the amount to make it more helpful since the standard of living was rising at such a fast pace.

Apart from all these schemes, one main area where the government is lacking is in giving the women the post suicide compensation they are entitled to. In the state of Maharashtra, that amount is Rs.1,00,000 (approximately 1235 euros). It was surprising to see that not one of these women had got access to even a small portion of the amount. Corruption, cumbersome bureaucratic procedures and lack of accountability are some of the main reasons I found. While there might be many other schemes these women avail of, it is their right to get access to this one scheme that they are entitled to, as a result of them being widows brought on by farmer suicides.



## Chapter 5

### Conclusion

#### 5.1 Policy recommendations

From my research, a number of different holes in policy were revealed at different stages of intervention. Kishor Tiwari suggested the need for district level grievance redressal councils that will be able to ensure swifter and more direct help to the people in need. Since a lot of time is spent trying to navigate government procedures, which are sometimes made more complicated so people give up mid way, he suggested trying to reduce the number of channels so that people don't spend half their lives trying to get help in terms of justice or access to something which they're supposed to have in the first place.

The Indian Government's lack of response in dealing with farming related insecurity has always been a huge debate but literature suggests that community policing might be a way of actively involving the farming community in helping each other out (Sangalad 2012). It is a method of making each one responsible for the other's well being by encouraging camaraderie within the community. The whole viewpoint on policing revolves around providing the farmers the knowledge so that they can use their skills and capabilities to survive on their own, irrespective of the hardships they might face. The fundamental flaw I find in this method is the individualization of responsibility, forcing people to navigate state manufactured hardships by developing individual coping mechanisms, thereby taking away from the state to fulfil its duty.

While these solutions might be useful, it is important to acknowledge the perspectives of the women I interviewed. During the course of the interviews, I requested all of them to highlight certain additions in government policies that they would appreciate. They recommended some of the following:

- Providing free education for their children, even if it is in a private school, which would substantially reduce the amount of money spent on education and therefore increase savings
- Providing free housing so that they could save more money every month, instead of spending it on repaying loans for the house
- Forgiving the debt after the suicide so that they don't have to worry about harassment from various actors
- Giving them the Rs.1 lakh compensation they are entitled to
- Subsidizing access to healthcare

What I realized was that most of their recommendations didn't require implementing new policies. There are existing policies (on paper) that should provide them with most of what they asked for. The real change needs to come in the implementation of existing policies. The above points highlight how much the government is lacking in its reach to the poor. What is required is state intervention at multiple levels to ensure that benefits reach those who need it the most, the poorest and marginalized in India. It furthermore needs to be taken into consideration that while forgiving loans after a suicide can help reduce the burden for the women, farmers in debt might start killing

themselves as a mechanism to move out of debt and absolve their family of the growing burdens.

It is imperative that we realize the gravity of the situation where people from a community so essential to the economy are killing themselves because they aren't able to survive in the environment around them. This isn't even just about the fact that the people who give us food are unable to access food themselves. There is a need to look at it as a very fundamental problem of ending one's life because it doesn't seem worth living anymore and trying to address issues that arise with it accordingly by either providing farmers with enough support to continue surviving on agriculture in the long run or

- Immediately providing the women with the financial support to deal with the loss of their partners and an earning member
- Helping them acquire the skills and knowledge to start pursuing alternative livelihood options and the means to extend the reach of their livelihoods so that they can make more money out of it by creating a strong networking base, thereby reducing the impact of their geographical isolation
- Providing grief counseling keeping in mind that suicide is a psychological act that has a profound impact on the persons left behind

## 5.2 Concluding remarks

What I realized through the course of my field work was that while the suicide had an intense effect on the women and the burden was completely shifted onto them, the presence of Kishor Tiwari might have reduced the impact of the suicide. I was left wondering if these women were actually fortunate to have had some form of support. Widows in other parts of India might be worse off because of the absence of someone like him. Then the question arises that unless we manage to replicate him and put him in every village in India, shouldn't we pressurize the state to take his place and do their job? This community of widows seemed lucky to have someone like him tirelessly fight for them.

For some of the women, considering the timeline of events, they were equally worse off before and after the suicide, which says a lot about the profession of farming in general. What hits them more is the psychological impact of losing a partner, a provider. It isn't fair that some lives have less meaning than others. In the long run, the ideal solution would be restructuring the system to ensure that farmers don't feel the need to end their lives out of desperation but in the short run, to make the lives of the women and children left behind more "livable", the government and the citizens of India need to address these issues with as much urgency as possible. The government currently isn't doing anything to help reduce their grievances and NSWPs are left to fill that void, which, while being a blessing need not necessarily be the best solution to help the women move out of this systemic reproduction of inequality and poverty. What we need is a proactive, collaborative approach where multiple actors come together to address an issue that is plaguing such a vital community of our population. Turning a blind eye towards this will only result in more deaths and increased vulnerability for the families. We need civil society to equally en-

gage with such issues. Only when individuals recognize and come together to act on the seriousness of this problem can we hope to help improve the conditions of the women and children. But for that, we first need to recognize them as equal citizens of society, whose lives as just as valuable as everyone else's.

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