

COVER STORY**Marathwada's turn**

ANUPAMA KATAKAM
in Osmanabad District

The Marathwada region has seen farmers' suicides and it could be another Vidarbha in the making.

PAUL NORONHA



Venubai Kolge with daughter-in-law Jeesubai (left) at Palaswadi in Osmanabad district. Venubai's husband committed suicide unable to pay back his debt of Rs.1,30,000.

SIX months ago, 65-year-old Kashinath Ravan Kolge killed himself by drinking pesticide. His wife Venubai Kolge says mounting debt drove him to suicide. "He had taken a loan to dig a borewell. But we did not get any water. We had no money left. The crops were yielding very little. It was a hopeless situation."

This is now a familiar story in the Vidarbha region, where thousands of debt-ridden farmers have committed suicide. But Kolge is from the neighbouring Marathwada region. From 2003 till date, 131 suicides have been recorded officially in the eight districts of south-central Maharashtra that form the Marathwada region.

The Kolge family owns four acres (1.6 hectares) of land in Palasvadi village in Osmanabad

district. Of this 2.5 acres (1 ha) is uncultivated. The remaining has been leased to daughter-in-law Jeesubai's father for a loan of Rs.40,000. He has grown sugarcane on it and will return the land only after he makes the money from the sale of sugarcane. The Kolge family's only income now every month is the Rs.300 that Jeesubai earns for cooking midday meal at the Zilla Parishad primary school. Her husband died of cancer five years ago. Venubai's second son lives in another village and her grandson is learning tailoring in Osmanabad from a relative. Kashinath Kolge's loan stands at approximately Rs.1,30,000. Venubai and Jeesubai do not know how to repay the debt.

Marathwada has suffered from successive years of drought. Water scarcity has reduced the area under sugarcane and this has had its impact on the sugar factories, many of which have shut down. Pulses and other traditional crops do not help recoup even the cost of production, and this has pushed thousands of farmers into the debt trap.

Marathwada is one of the most backward and neglected parts of the State. Natural resources are limited and irrigation is practically non-existent. According to government figures, only about 50,000 acres (20,000 ha) are irrigated. Marathwada, like the other regions in the State except western Maharashtra, has no irrigation projects in spite of sending heavyweights such as Shivraj Patil and Gopinath Munde to power over and over again.

Most of the region falls in the rain shadow area and is dependent on the monsoon for its water needs. This year the monsoon began well but incessant rain and poor water management led to major flooding. Almost the entire kharif crop has been destroyed and farmers in some areas of Parbhani district say so much soil has been washed away from agricultural land that restoring its fertility would take years.

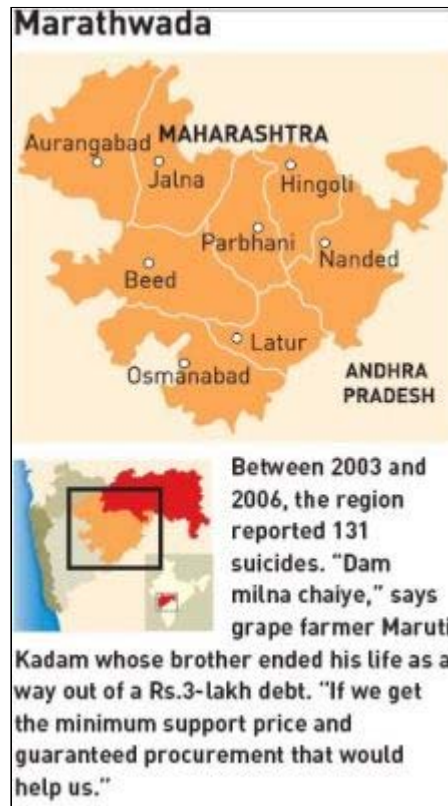
Cotton was once the main crop, besides groundnut, greengram, blackgram, pigeon pea and sesame. However, cotton's vulnerability to pests and lack of timely rain led to a change in the cropping pattern and the introduction of jowar, tur and soyabean, besides sugarcane. Sugarcane soon became the most popular choice with its minimum yield of 40 tonnes an acre (0.4 ha) and the lure of Rs.800 a tonne of cane that the sugar factories offered. Farmers, even small farmers, realised that they could make around Rs.30,000 an acre.

"Sugarcane does well even if rainfall is scanty, which is why it became so popular in these parts," says Nandakumar Surve of Latur. "But that does not mean it does not require water. We had to dig borewells to irrigate the crop. Unfortunately, this depletes groundwater fast. After years of draining groundwater, there is not much water left now and crops are suffering. Not to mention livelihoods and basic living," he says. "Our village gets drinking water about twice a week."

Sugarcane cultivation had grown to such proportions in Marathwada that at one time in Latur there were 15 factories in a 50-kilometre radius. However, almost half of them have had to close down. Neighbouring Osmanabad district has only one factory now.

"Until two years ago we reaped about 35 tonnes an acre. Today I cultivate only four out of my eight acres and I get about 15 tonnes an acre if it is a good season," says Surve. He has a loan of Rs.2 lakhs to repay - Rs.1 lakh from the District Cooperative Bank at 14 per cent annual interest and the other from the local moneylender at an interest of 12 per cent a month. "It's impossible to pay back at these rates but we have no other option. We take loans to pay off previous loans. Now the banks do not give us money. It is very difficult."

Borewells are perhaps singularly responsible for the water problem. In the 1980s the borewell became a solution to the water scarcity in the region. When in 1980 they had to dig 45 metres (around 150 feet) to strike water, in the 1990s they had to dig up to 90 metres (around 300 ft). Now water is available only at around 460 metres (around 1,500 ft), sometimes not even at that depth. "We must understand that the region's groundwater levels are as it is low, so until efforts are made to replenish that, water will always be scarce," says Ajay Dandekar, a Professor of Agriculture working in Vidarbha and Marathwada.



Many farmers soon switched to grape, as a result of encouragement from the government and the promise of higher income. "We cultivated grape because the land is rocky and uncultivable," says Maruti Kadam of Maanmodi village in Osmanabad district. "Nothing would grow here earlier. Then we were told by the government to try grape. Over the past 20 years, we have cleared nearly 15 acres of boulders and stones to put up vineyards."

About two years ago, says Kadam, they were getting a good price for grape. A kilogram fetched around Rs.10. However, it has stayed at that level since and with input costs increasing rapidly, profits are falling. "We just about break even," he says.

Shahaji Narwade, a Professor at the Tata Institute of Social Sciences in Osmanabad, says that of the Rs.100 a farmer gets for every 10 kg of grapes Rs.30 to Rs.35 goes towards marketing cost (Rs.8 to the middleman, Rs.10 for transportation, Rs.8-10 for packaging and Rs.5-8 as incidental costs).

Furthermore, production costs include expensive new pesticides such as Redomil, which costs Rs.1,200 a kg. Earlier, farmers used chemicals such as M45, which costs around Rs.100 a kg. But pests have developed resistance to them over the years. Crop insurance is another recurring

expense. But it does not cover failure of the crop in the market place, says Narwade.

In October 2005, Maruti Kadam's brother Babu Kadam committed suicide because he could not repay his loan of Rs.3 lakhs, a portion of which he had taken to conduct his daughter's marriage. Maruti Kadam says the entire burden of the family is on him now. Almost 90 per cent of the farmers in Maanmodi are in debt. "Going to the cities to work is not an option because there is no work available there either or it is too expensive to live there and send money home," says Kadam.

What would farmers need to pull themselves out of this desperate situation? "*Dam milna chaiye*" (give us a good price), says Kadam. "If we get the minimum support price and guaranteed procurement that would help us." "A better long-term solution is a remunerative price that matches the cost of production," says Dandekar.

These steps could well check the spread of the crisis. "Unfortunately, the State and Central governments fail to see that the crisis is spreading," says Vijay Jawandhia, who leads the Shetkari Sangatana in Vidarbha. "Definitely cotton farmers are in acute distress, but as the numbers of suicides rise in other districts it is clear the phenomenon is not exclusive to Vidarbha. The writing on the wall is clear. We cannot afford to ignore it," he says.

Marathwada is clearly suffering from an agriculture slump. The local people believe the number of suicides is grossly under-reported. This is how, they say, it began in Vidarbha.
