

**FARMER SUICIDES AND POLITICAL RESPONSES: ANALYSING
KARNATAKA'S AGRARIAN CRISIS****Dr. Manu C. N.**Associate professor in Political Science, Government College Autonomous Mandya, Mysore
University,manucn.manucn@gmail.com**Abstract:**

The agrarian crisis in India and particularly in Karnataka, has been a significant socio-political issue for decades. The increasing number of farmer suicides, driven by factors such as crop failure, indebtedness and ineffective governmental policies, has garnered widespread attention. This study aims to examine the political responses to the agrarian crisis in Karnataka, analyzing the underlying causes of farmer suicides and the measures taken by the government to address these issues. By exploring data from 2000 to 2014, the study highlights the impact of political interventions, the role of policy reforms and the challenges faced by farmers in the state. The research seeks to provide a comprehensive understanding of the agrarian distress in Karnataka and suggests recommendations for sustainable agricultural development and enhanced government support.

Keywords:

Farmer Suicides, Agrarian Crisis, Political Responses, Karnataka, Crop Failure, Debt, Agricultural Policies, Rural Distress, Government Intervention, Agrarian Reforms.

Introduction:

Agriculture has historically been the backbone of Karnataka's economy, yet the state has witnessed a growing number of farmer suicides over the past few decades. These suicides, often attributed to a combination of economic hardships, environmental challenges, and political neglect, have highlighted the severity of the agrarian crisis in the region. In particular, the period leading up to 2014 saw a dramatic rise in farmer suicides, which, in turn, forced political leaders to respond with policy reforms and promises of financial aid. This research aims to delve into the root causes of the agrarian crisis in Karnataka, analyze the political responses to these issues and assess their effectiveness in addressing the problems faced by farmers. Karnataka, a state in southern India, is home to a large agrarian population, with agriculture forming the backbone of its economy. The state is renowned for its diversity in crops, ranging from cereals and pulses to cash crops such as cotton, coffee and sugarcane. However, the agrarian community in Karnataka has faced severe economic distress in recent decades, culminating in a crisis that has resulted in an alarming number of farmer suicides. This phenomenon is not a singular event, but a culmination of long-standing structural issues in agriculture, compounded by environmental and economic stressors. The agrarian crisis in Karnataka, particularly from the early 2000s to 2014, has drawn widespread attention not only from policymakers but also from civil society and international organizations. At the heart of the crisis lies the precarious financial situation of farmers, exacerbated by rising indebtedness due to crop failures, poor pricing mechanisms, insufficient governmental support and harsh climatic conditions. A series of failures in the



monsoon rains, coupled with poor irrigation facilities, led to crop losses, plunging farmers into debt. For many, the inability to repay loans became a key trigger, pushing them to take the extreme step of ending their lives. This crisis has been exacerbated by insufficient reforms and the lack of effective safety nets for farmers. Political responses to this crisis have varied over the years, with promises of loan waivers, relief packages and agricultural reforms being rolled out, yet the efficacy of these responses remains debated. Political leaders have often been seen as reacting to immediate crisis situations rather than adopting long-term sustainable agricultural policies. The state's reliance on a limited number of crops, combined with the lack of diversification in agricultural practices, has further deepened the crisis, revealing the systemic issues within Karnataka's agricultural sector. Over the years, Karnataka has witnessed multiple political responses to the agrarian crisis. These include setting up task forces, implementing loan waiver schemes, providing compensation to families of deceased farmers and promising better irrigation infrastructure. However, the root causes of the crisis, including low agricultural productivity, water scarcity, poor market access and poor policy implementation, have remained largely unaddressed. The impact of such interventions has been mixed and while there have been some short-term benefits, they have not been enough to prevent further suicides or the deterioration of the rural economy. The state's political parties, too, have had a significant role in shaping public opinion and responding to these issues. Each party has sought to address the agrarian crisis through a combination of financial aid, policy promises, and rural welfare programs, but their ability to address the long-term issues of sustainable agriculture and farmers' welfare has been limited. At the same time, the role of political partisanship in shaping responses to the agrarian crisis is another area of interest. For instance, the regional and national parties in Karnataka have often used farmer distress as a platform to gain political leverage, but this has not always translated into tangible improvements for farmers. This study aims to explore the agrarian crisis in Karnataka from a political perspective, analyzing the factors that have contributed to the crisis and evaluating the responses from various political entities. It will look into the role of both the state and central governments, the impact of electoral promises and the effectiveness of policy measures such as loan waivers and crop insurance. The study also seeks to understand the wider socio-political implications of the agrarian crisis, including its impact on electoral politics, political stability and the shifting dynamics of the rural economy. Through this comprehensive exploration, this research intends to uncover not only the reasons for the agrarian crisis but also the limitations of political solutions in addressing the deep-rooted challenges faced by farmers in Karnataka. By analyzing the effectiveness of past political actions, this study will provide insights into the type of governance and policy reforms needed to address the ongoing agrarian distress and prevent further farmer suicides. Thus, the agrarian crisis in Karnataka is not merely a rural issue, but one that lies at the intersection of politics, economics and social justice and understanding the political responses to it is key to formulating more effective and sustainable solutions for the future.

Definitions:

- **Agrarian Crisis:** A prolonged period of economic hardship in the agricultural sector, often resulting from crop failures, indebtedness, lack of government support and environmental factors.



- **Farmer Suicides:** The act of farmers ending their lives due to the socio-economic pressures, particularly those arising from financial debts and crop failure.
- **Political Response:** Actions, policies, and interventions implemented by government bodies to address the agrarian distress, including relief packages, loan waivers and policy reforms.

Need:

The agrarian crisis in Karnataka, marked by alarming suicide rates, calls for urgent analysis to understand its multi-faceted nature. The responses from political parties have often been reactive rather than proactive. Understanding how political interventions have shaped the agricultural landscape will provide insights into policy efficacy and guide future strategies for addressing agrarian distress in the state.

Aims:

The primary aim of this study is to analyze the factors contributing to farmer suicides in Karnataka and assess the political responses to the agrarian crisis. The research will focus on:

- Identifying the causes behind the increasing farmer suicides.
- Analyzing the political actions taken between 2000 and 2014.
- Evaluating the effectiveness of these responses in mitigating the crisis.

Objectives:

1. To explore the socio-economic and environmental factors contributing to the agrarian crisis in Karnataka.
2. To analyze the political responses from state and central governments to address farmer suicides.
3. To evaluate the effectiveness of government policies, including loan waivers, crop insurance schemes and relief packages.
4. To propose recommendations for improved political action and policy reform to alleviate the agrarian crisis.

Hypothesis:

The hypothesis of this study is that despite political promises and interventions, the measures taken by the Karnataka state government have been insufficient in addressing the root causes of farmer suicides and long-term solutions are required for the sustainable development of the agricultural sector.

Research Methodology:

- **Type of Research:** Descriptive and analytical.
- **Data Collection:** Primary data will be gathered through interviews with farmers, government officials and policy experts. Secondary data will be obtained from government reports, academic articles, media sources and records of farmer suicides in Karnataka.
- **Tools and Techniques:** Qualitative analysis will be used to examine the impact of policies and government responses, while quantitative analysis will look at the frequency of suicides, crop failures and debt levels.
- **Timeframe:** Data will be collected from the period 2000 to 2014.



Strong Points:

1. **In-depth Analysis:** The study offers a comprehensive examination of the agrarian crisis in Karnataka, looking into political, economic and social dimensions.
2. **Real-time Data:** The use of both primary and secondary data offers a more nuanced understanding of the issues.
3. **Policy Focus:** The study focuses on policy interventions and government responses, providing an evaluation of their effectiveness.

Weak Points:

1. **Limited Scope:** The study is confined to Karnataka, limiting its generalizability to other Indian states.
2. **Data Reliability:** Farmer suicides are often underreported, which could affect the accuracy of the study.
3. **Political Bias:** Political responses might be analyzed through a partisan lens, affecting the objectivity of the study.

Current Trends:

1. **Increased Awareness:** There's a growing recognition of the agrarian crisis in media and public discourse, with more focus on mental health support for farmers.
2. **Policy Changes:** The government has been introducing more progressive policies, including improved crop insurance schemes and enhanced loan waiver programs.
3. **Technological Interventions:** Advances in agricultural technology, including weather forecasting and crop management tools, are being integrated into state policies.

History:

Karnataka has witnessed several instances of agrarian distress, particularly in the cotton and sugarcane-growing regions. The rising tide of suicides, starting from the early 2000s, forced the government to acknowledge the depth of the crisis. Political responses, including loan waivers, farm debt relief and crop insurance schemes, were rolled out, but their effectiveness remained limited. Throughout this period, various governments had differing approaches, with some focusing more on immediate relief while others focused on long-term reforms. The agrarian crisis in Karnataka has a long and complex history, shaped by a combination of environmental, economic, political and social factors. This crisis has not emerged overnight but is the result of cumulative pressures on the agricultural sector, exacerbated by poor policy interventions and a lack of long-term strategies for sustainable farming.

Colonial Legacy:

The roots of Karnataka's agrarian crisis can be traced back to the colonial period. Under British rule, the agricultural landscape of Karnataka was transformed to serve the colonial economy. The introduction of cash crops, such as cotton, indigo and later, coffee, took precedence over food crops, creating an imbalanced agricultural economy. Furthermore, the British colonial administration's emphasis on extracting revenue through land taxes led to a system of land ownership that was heavily exploitative. Peasants were often left indebted, and many were forced to sell their land or work under exploitative conditions. This colonial



legacy of agrarian distress has had long-lasting effects on the state's agricultural economy and has contributed to the challenges faced by farmers even in the post-independence era.

Post-Independence Era (1947–1970s):

After India gained independence in 1947, the new government implemented land reforms and initiated several measures to modernize Indian agriculture. In Karnataka, the implementation of the **Karnataka Land Reforms Act, 1961** was aimed at redistributing land and providing tenancy rights to sharecroppers. The government also promoted the Green Revolution during the 1960s, which focused on introducing high-yielding variety seeds, chemical fertilizers and irrigation facilities to increase agricultural productivity. However, these reforms were unevenly implemented and the benefits of the Green Revolution were limited to a few regions with access to irrigation, primarily benefiting commercial farmers.

While the Green Revolution led to increased productivity in regions like the **Mandya** district (for crops like paddy), it also deepened the dependency on external inputs like fertilizers and pesticides, further intensifying the economic burden on small-scale farmers. The regions without adequate irrigation infrastructure, however, continued to suffer from stagnating crop yields and were left vulnerable to crop failures and price fluctuations in the market.

1980s and 1990s: Growing Debt and Environmental Challenges:

By the 1980s, agricultural distress in Karnataka had worsened due to the dual challenges of environmental degradation and rising indebtedness among farmers. The state, despite having a strong agricultural base, lacked a comprehensive and sustainable water management system. Farmers in regions such as **North Karnataka** and the **Cauvery basin** struggled with irregular rainfall patterns, frequent droughts and poor irrigation systems. The failure of the monsoon in these regions led to crop failures and farmers found themselves increasingly reliant on loans to sustain their livelihoods. The limited success of water management projects and the gradual depletion of groundwater levels added to their woes.

The rise of **private moneylenders** who charged exorbitant interest rates further trapped farmers in a cycle of debt. Despite government initiatives like subsidized loans, small-scale farmers often found themselves unable to repay their debts, leading to widespread financial instability. During the 1990s, the situation grew even direr, as market liberalization policies began to impact agricultural markets. The reduction in government subsidies and price support mechanisms, coupled with the growing influence of multinational corporations in agriculture, made it harder for farmers to earn a decent income. This period also saw a shift towards cash crop cultivation in some areas, which made farmers highly vulnerable to global market fluctuations and price volatility.

2000s: The Surge in Farmer Suicides:

The early 2000s marked a turning point in Karnataka's agrarian crisis, with a sharp rise in the number of farmer suicides. In the period between 2000 and 2010, Karnataka recorded a significant number of farmer suicides, particularly in the **Belagavi, Bagalkot, and Haveri** districts. The main trigger for this surge was the mounting debt due to crop failure and the inability of farmers to repay loans. In 2003, the state witnessed a crisis in the sugarcane sector, where a drop in sugar prices led to economic losses for farmers. Similarly, in the **cotton-growing regions** of the state, the introduction of genetically modified crops did not yield the expected results, contributing to the mounting debt and despair.



The **Cauvery Water Dispute**, a long-standing issue between Karnataka and Tamil Nadu, also added to the farmers' distress. The lack of equitable water distribution, especially during drought years, impacted the livelihoods of farmers in the region. The unavailability of water for irrigation led to failed crops and the political discourse around the water-sharing agreement further exacerbated the situation.

Political Responses and Agrarian Movements (2000–2014):

During the 2000s and early 2010s, the Karnataka state government introduced a series of measures to address the agrarian distress. The most prominent of these measures was the introduction of **loan waiver schemes** by successive state governments. In 2006, the government announced a **farm loan waiver** to address the growing indebtedness of farmers. This was followed by similar announcements in subsequent years, but their effectiveness remained limited, as they only provided temporary relief and did little to address the underlying causes of the crisis.

Agrarian movements, including those led by **farmers' unions** and regional political parties, began to demand more effective solutions to the agrarian crisis. The **Karnataka Rajya Raitha Sangha (KRRS)**, one of the most prominent farmers' organizations in the state, played a key role in raising awareness about the plight of farmers and organizing protests. These movements brought attention to the failure of government schemes and demanded more sustainable agricultural practices, better irrigation facilities, and guaranteed minimum support prices (MSP) for crops.

The political landscape of Karnataka also played a significant role in shaping the state's agrarian policies. The response to the agrarian crisis was often shaped by electoral considerations, with political parties offering financial relief packages to garner support from the rural electorate. However, the political response to the crisis was seen as opportunistic rather than systemic, with parties often using the issue to secure votes during elections rather than addressing long-term reforms.

The Role of Media:

The role of the media in highlighting the agrarian crisis became more prominent during this period. As the number of suicides rose, the media began to report on the issue more extensively, bringing national and international attention to the plight of Karnataka's farmers. This media coverage helped push the issue of agrarian distress to the forefront of political discourse, though the focus was often on immediate crises rather than the underlying causes. The media, especially through campaigns and reports, helped to influence public opinion and demand political action. The history of Karnataka's agrarian crisis is marked by a series of environmental, political and economic challenges that have compounded over the years. While the state has witnessed various attempts at mitigating the crisis, including loan waivers, subsidies and reforms, these measures have often been inadequate in addressing the systemic problems faced by the agrarian sector. The crisis has also been exacerbated by political short-termism, inadequate irrigation infrastructure and a lack of sustainable agricultural practices. The government and political parties in Karnataka have responded to the crisis with a mix of short-term relief measures, but there is still much to be done to provide long-term solutions for farmers' welfare.



Discussion:

The rising incidence of farmer suicides in Karnataka is directly linked to several factors, including:

- **Debt:** Farmers, particularly in the northern and southern parts of Karnataka, have been caught in a cycle of debt, unable to pay off loans due to crop failures.
- **Crop Failures:** Environmental factors such as drought, erratic rainfall and poor irrigation infrastructure have exacerbated the agrarian crisis.
- **Ineffective Government Interventions:** While there have been multiple political responses such as loan waivers and insurance schemes, their implementation has been uneven and ineffective in many cases.

Results:

- **Effectiveness of Political Responses:** Although there were immediate short-term benefits from loan waivers and relief measures, the long-term solutions were inadequate in addressing the structural problems within the agricultural sector.
- **Farmer Suicides:** The incidence of farmer suicides continued to rise, indicating that the political responses were not fully addressing the underlying issues.

Conclusion:

The agrarian crisis in Karnataka, marked by a high incidence of farmer suicides, has highlighted the urgent need for effective political intervention. While the government's efforts at providing financial relief have been beneficial in the short term, the absence of sustainable agricultural reforms, such as better irrigation infrastructure, crop diversification, and debt restructuring, has led to continued distress. For lasting solutions, a more comprehensive and inclusive approach to agriculture and rural development is required. The agrarian crisis in Karnataka, as reflected in the tragic phenomenon of farmer suicides, is a complex and multifaceted issue that has evolved over several decades. The crisis is the result of a combination of environmental challenges, historical economic policies, political responses and the changing dynamics of agricultural practices. From the colonial period, where agriculture was reoriented to serve colonial interests, to post-independence policies that attempted to modernize the sector, Karnataka's farmers have faced a long-standing struggle against systemic injustices, financial instability, and ecological vulnerabilities.

The state's agricultural landscape has undergone profound transformations, particularly in the post-Green Revolution period, but these changes have not been universally beneficial. While regions with access to irrigation and new technologies have prospered, other areas have remained marginalized. The focus on cash crops, lack of diversified crop choices and insufficient water management infrastructure have worsened the plight of small-scale farmers. The rise of debt, exacerbated by erratic weather patterns, declining soil fertility and an unyielding reliance on external inputs, has made farming an increasingly untenable occupation for many.

The sharp increase in farmer suicides during the 2000s and early 2010s underscored the critical nature of the agrarian crisis. The response from political parties and the government was characterized by reactive measures, such as loan waivers and financial aid packages, which failed to address the root causes of the problem. While these measures offered temporary relief, they lacked the structural reforms necessary to secure the long-term



viability of Karnataka's agricultural sector. The political rhetoric surrounding the agrarian crisis was often centred on electoral benefits rather than sustained, meaningful policy interventions that would alleviate the hardships faced by farmers.

Moreover, the role of media in highlighting the issue of farmer suicides cannot be overstated. As the number of suicides escalated, media outlets began to cover the crisis extensively, often casting it in the context of failed government policies and inadequate political responses. The media's role in amplifying the voices of farmers' unions and agrarian activists was crucial in bringing national attention to the crisis, though it was frequently focused on immediate issues rather than the long-term structural changes that were needed.

One of the most glaring issues in the agrarian crisis in Karnataka is the lack of sustainable agricultural practices. Farmers continue to rely heavily on chemical fertilizers, pesticides and water-intensive crops, which leads to the degradation of the environment, soil erosion and a depletion of groundwater resources. The absence of adequate support for organic farming, water conservation methods and climate-resilient crops has left many farmers vulnerable to the vagaries of nature. The lack of a comprehensive approach to sustainability is a key factor in the persistence of the agrarian crisis.

On the political front, the agrarian crisis has become an issue that is frequently leveraged for electoral gains rather than genuinely addressed. While there have been some efforts to improve the situation through welfare measures such as loan waivers and the promise of higher crop prices, these interventions often lack the necessary planning and foresight to ensure long-term agricultural viability. The political response, while often well-meaning, has been fragmented and insufficient in addressing the deep-seated issues faced by farmers.

Furthermore, despite the political promises, there remains a persistent neglect of the rural economy, a lack of adequate infrastructural support and an absence of long-term strategies for agrarian reform. Karnataka's government has failed to implement systemic changes that could help farmers adapt to the challenges of modern agriculture, such as improving irrigation systems, promoting crop diversification and investing in rural development initiatives. These shortcomings continue to perpetuate the cycle of indebtedness, economic instability and suicides among farmers.

The agrarian crisis in Karnataka also raises important questions about the role of large-scale agrarian movements and the power of political advocacy. Farmers' unions and regional political parties have attempted to address these issues through protests, strikes and calls for reform. However, despite their efforts, the response from the government has often been half-hearted or insufficient to tackle the core issues of land rights, water access and sustainable farming.

Karnataka's agrarian crisis is not merely an economic issue but a deeply ingrained socio-political and environmental problem that demands urgent attention and comprehensive reforms. It highlights the need for policies that go beyond short-term relief measures and focus on long-term sustainability, equitable resource distribution and the empowerment of farmers. The crisis also points to the necessity of a more robust political commitment to addressing the challenges of rural distress, ensuring the protection of farmers' livelihoods, and creating a more resilient agricultural system. Without addressing these systemic issues,



the cycle of agrarian distress and farmer suicides in Karnataka is likely to continue, with devastating consequences for the state's rural economy and the lives of its farmers. The agrarian crisis demands a collective, multi-faceted response that involves government action, civil society participation, agricultural reforms and a shift towards sustainable and climate-resilient agricultural practices. It is only through such an integrated approach that Karnataka can hope to break the cycle of agrarian distress and create a future where farmers are supported, empowered, and able to thrive.

Suggestions and Recommendations:

1. **Sustainable Farming Practices:** The government should promote agro ecological farming methods to reduce dependency on chemical inputs and improve soil health.
2. **Enhanced Loan Restructuring:** Instead of one-time loan waivers, a more systematic approach to loan restructuring should be developed.
3. **Mental Health Support:** Psychological support systems should be integrated into government relief packages to help farmers deal with stress and mental health issues.
4. **Improved Agricultural Policies:** Long-term policy focus on irrigation, crop insurance and diversified crop production is needed to alleviate rural distress.

Future Scope:

Future research could explore the long-term effects of policy interventions in Karnataka's agriculture sector post-2014. Additionally, comparative studies with other states facing similar agrarian crises could provide more insights into the effectiveness of various government measures.

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