

Study blames improper state funding units, weather Social stigma drove farmers to death, says Nias report

BY JAIDEEP V.G.

Bangalore, Feb. 10: A three-fold combination of economic, social and ecological factors led to the farmers' suicides in Bidar. According to a study by a social anthropologist at the National Institute of Advanced Studies, the absence of a substantial state funding agency, the social stigma attached to indebtedness and fluctuations in rain led to a crop-fail-

ure, driving the farmers to suicide.

The social anthropologist, Dr A.R. Vasavi, termed as an "insult to the farmers at Bidar," the Legislature joint house committee's suggestion that a team of psychiatrists be sent to Bidar to probe the suicides. Dr Vasavi said the recommendation would mean the state disowned responsibility for its absence in the financial lending sector at Bidar.

Dr Vasavi, who spent eight days

FARMERS' SUICIDES

in 1998 at Bidar probing the 13 suicides which occurred between December 1997 and May 1998, said far from psychiatric help, the farmers need a strong government funding agency to lend money, instead of the unbridled growth of private moneylenders who charge lending rates of upto 50 per cent per annum.

"From 1987 to 1992, the Reserve Bank of India reduced credit availability to agricultural sectors from 19.1 per cent to 11.7 per cent. Moreover, only large land owners are considered credit worthy," she said.

As a result, many private "financial corporations" have sprung up at Bidar. "These are run mainly on caste lines and are very prolific. For example, at Maurambi village, which has 240 households, there

are nine financial corporations, charging lending rates between 40 and 50 per cent per annum," she said. Most farmers who are unable to obtain agricultural loans from co-operatives or banks approach these corporations.

"In 1997, the farmers were under severe pressure — trying to avoid the social stigma of being indebted, private financiers pressing for loan recovery and crop failure.

■ Turn to Page 10

Social stigma led to deaths

■ Continued from Page 9

These factors were too much for some farmers to handle and they committed suicide," she said.

Also in the lending business at Bidar are agricultural agencies which offer farm equipment, fertilisers, seeds and pesticides on credit to the farmers. "Manufacturers permit high interest rates by printing high maximum retail prices on the items to be sold. This gives the retailer a large range of prices to sell items," she said. "In fact, the presence of agri-agencies is so strong in Bidar that I noticed advertisements for the pesticide Endosulphan painted on the sides of temples," she said.

Dr Vasavi also said many farmers claimed spurious pesticides caused the crop failure. "Many farmers spoke of their dogs consuming rotis contaminated with pesticides, and walking away unaffected. They also claimed that

there was a lack of guarantee of many commercial seed varieties," she said.

The social stigma attached to indebtedness was among the factors which led to the suicides, she said. "Because farmers and the financiers live together in small communities, indebtedness can lead to public shame. In fact, one farmer allegedly committed suicide because his creditor publicly asked him for money," she said.

In another more extreme case, Bijabai of Maurambi village, who cultivated 14 acres, committed suicide because of a double credit she owed. "Her husband was mentally retarded and she managed the farm on her own.

In 1997, she not only borrowed money to buy agricultural products, but for her daughters wedding too," Dr Vasavi said. Bijabai's debts amounted to Rs 60,000 at the time of her death. She is among the

two women who committed suicide because of crop failure at Bidar.

Finally, the ecological damage caused by an attack of the heliothis pest, resulting in crop failure compounded a problem waiting in the wings, she said. "The agriculture at Bidar is poorly managed.

Firstly, only eight per cent of the land is irrigated. Secondly, the two irrigation projects there are in a state of disrepair. Thirdly, the farmers cultivate only tur dal. Monoculture destroys nutrients in the soil. Lastly, an increased dependence on pesticides and fertilisers makes the crop susceptible to pests and diseases," Dr Vasavi said.

According to her, the introduction of modern agricultural practices — without applying proper logistics — has led to a gap between the region's ecology and commercial agricultural practices.