

FIGHTING FARMER SUICIDES IN INDIA THROUGH A HELPLINE

By Jency Samuel



The wife and parents of a farmer who committed suicide in India.

Photo: Jörg Böhling

With erratic monsoons leading to crop loss and financial problems, farm distress continues in India. A telephone helpline counsels farmers on the brink and addresses the root causes to alleviate problems and prevent farmer suicides.

Sreeharsha Thanneru remembers the day when farmer Mallappa Tandra called the *Kisan Mitra* helpline. Mallappa was sobbing inconsolably. The rains had failed, there was only little water in his bore well, and he could not get the drip irrigation system that would save his standing crop. When Sreeharsha tried to counsel him, Mallappa repeatedly mentioned suicide as his only recourse.

Mallappa had gone to the administrative block office to apply for the government's subsidy for a drip irrigation system. When he learnt that he was not eligible, he was too dazed to decide what to do. Someone who observed his distress suggested that he calls the *Kisan Mitra* helpline. That is how he got to speak to Sreeharsha, the programme coordinator at *Kisan Mitra*.

Distress among farmers is high in central and parts of southern India. Erratic monsoons, repeated crop losses, difficulty in getting institutional loans due to a lack of land documents, and hence falling in debt traps with private creditors are the main drivers. Factors such as

illnesses in the family and a lack of educational support for children add to the stress. When overwhelmed by difficulties, the farmers resort to ending their life. *Kisan Mitra*, which translates as farmers' friend, counsels the farmers, and coordinates with the respective government departments to address the issues that cause distress.

Farmer suicides

Agriculture is the primary livelihood for more than 55 per cent of India's population, and farm distress has been a continuing problem. The National Crime Records Bureau, which collects data on suicides in general, started gathering statistics specifically on farm suicides in 2014. As per the latest data available, farm suicides, which had accounted for 8.7 per cent of the total suicides in the country in 2013, increased to 9.4 per cent in 2015.

The state of Telangana, particularly the southern part where the *Kisan Mitra* helpline op-

erates, reported the third highest number of suicides among all states of India, with 1,400 in 2015 suicides. The data pertains to cultivators farming their own land or leased land, and to agricultural labourers working for wages. Telangana reported 1,358 suicides of cultivators and 42 suicides of labourers. The data indicate the number of families left without their breadwinner.

Towards prevention of suicides

The Centre for Sustainable Agriculture (CSA) is a non-profit organisation working among farmers since 2004. While trying to understand the root causes of farmers' suicides, the CSA contemplated the idea of a helpline to support farmers in distress. The team met Divya Devarajan, the collector, about ex gratia payments that the government pays to families of farmers who had committed suicide (generally referred to as suicide families). Both parties decided to work together on preventing suicides. "Farm distress is not a new phenomenon," says Divya

Devarajan, presently the collector at the Adilabad district of Telangana and in charge of the district's administration. She remembers the distress her grandfather went through when she was young. She has memories of him losing most of his lands, when he was unable to repay loans taken from private money lenders who charged exorbitant interest rates.

She recalls her earlier stint as sub-collector, when one of her duties was to head a three-person committee, visit families of farmers who had committed suicide, verify the cause of suicide and sanction relief. "It was painful visiting the families. What is the use of helping them after the suicide? Why not prevent it in the first place? We thought the farmer might not have been driven to taking his life just because of loan sharks. But then we realised that his inability to repay loans might concern a bank that sanctions loans, the revenue department handling land documents, the agriculture department that provides seeds and so on. So we thought of creating a multi-stakeholder helpline," she says.

In the districts of Telangana, the collector and administrative officials hold a weekly meeting called *Prajavani* (meaning people's voice), with the citizens, to alleviate their problems. "This helps farmers bring their issues to the administration's notice. But some places are remote and thus they lack access. Moreover, the officials are bogged down by various responsibilities. There was a need for a dedicated centre to help farmers in distress, and coordinate with government departments to resolve their issues," says Sreeharsha.

"Often, the distressed farmer just wants to talk. When he talks to someone and that moment of anguish passes, he realises the possible consequences if he had carried on with his plan," says Divya Devarajan. To counsel farmers in their moment of anguish, *Kisan Mitra* was launched in April 2017 in the district of Vikarabad, situated in Telangana. Pamphlets, advertisements on local cable television and paintings on the walls of block offices helped create awareness about the helpline. Divya Devarajan tells villagers about the helpline and talks about it at every meeting.

When the call comes

The *Kisan Mitra* team comprises programme coordinator Sreeharsha, five counsellors, besides three district coordinators (one for each district), 14 field coordinators (five field coordinators each in two districts and four in one

district) and a psychologist. The helpline is in service from their office in Secunderabad from 8 a.m. to 8 p.m. throughout the year.

Farmers contacting the helpline often break down during the call, mentioning their crop loss and debts, and contemplating suicide. The counsellor calms them down. "Initially I talk to the farmer like a friend. Slowly, I tell him that suicide will not solve any of his problems and how best to use available resources. We make him understand that we will help him through his problem," says Vandana, a coordinator of one of the districts. When the farmer feels better, the counsellor collects all pertinent information that helps sort out his problems.

Immediately after an incoming call, the counsellor informs the responsible field coordinator. The field coordinators comprise men and women and cover three administrative blocks enabling the helpline team to take care of the entire district. "We visit the distressed farmer as soon as possible, within a maximum of four hours," says field coordinator Sangameswar J.

Collaborative work

Kisan Mitra goes beyond counselling distressed farmers and tries to mitigate their problems. The field coordinators' visits help the team in further counselling and gathering additional information. The team shares a summary of the information with the government officials. In turn, the officials regularly update the team on the action they take in each case. The team continues to coordinate between the government officials and farmers until the problem is resolved. "The collector reviews the cases in the *Prajavani* meetings. So it is a combination of a top-down and a bottom-up approach," says Sreeharsha.

According to Divya Devarajan, the follow-up of the cases conducted by *Kisan Mitra* helps her keep tabs on the issues on the ground. "The team and the officials bring important issues to my notice. For example, when we hear a lot of farmers complain about a pink bollworm (*Pectinophora gossypiella*) attack on their cotton crop, we know there's a problem that we need to attend to," she says. "We are able to identify problems at the right time and solve them immediately." Some farmers call the helpline saying that they did not receive their crop loan or crop insurance or any of the other government entitlements, not knowing the procedural formalities. The team help them navigate the documentation involved so that the farmers get their entitlements.

Support for distress and suicide families

The team bring the distress calls to a logical end. As for Mallappa, he did not have the land document, as the land was in his late father's name. He had inherited his father's debts. The land was hypothecated for a loan, and hence the land documents were in the bank. Added to these were his personal woes – one daughter is physically and the other mentally challenged. *Kisan Mitra* coordinated with the bank regarding the overdue loan, with the revenue department about the land, and with the horticulture department about the irrigation. As a result, his land succession documentation was completed within a day. His drip irrigation system was sanctioned, and he was able to save his sugarcane crop. He has nearly repaid his loan. One of his daughters is now getting educated.

At times the team seek the help of private donors for financial support. Worried about the situation of Boppu Padma's family, a neighbour called the helpline. Thirty-eight-year-old Padma had spent Rs 1,000,000 over seven years for treatment of her throat cancer. Her husband losing cotton and paddy crops to pest attacks, taking care of a late relative's children, looking after her mentally ill mother and her son after he had met with an accident wore Padma out. She requested *Kisan Mitra* to get her pension. Since she was not eligible under any government scheme, the team arranged for a monthly support of Rs 3,000 through a philanthropic individual.

Via the helpline, children of suicide families get enrolled in a government day or residential school. "A few are enrolled in private schools. When our field coordinators appraised the school administration of the children's situation, they waived off the fee," explains Vandana C., coordinator for the Mancherial district.

As for suicide families, the government gives an ex gratia payment of Rs 600,000. The team coordinates with the families on livelihood support, as often the ex gratia amount is used to clear debts. "Between 2014 and 2018, we helped more than 100 widowed women, providing them with milch animals, tailoring units, small provision stores and the like, for financial sustenance," says Divya Devarajan.

According to Sreeharsha, many try to commit suicide but are saved in time. "In Adilabad, we observed that for every five people who attempt, one dies. They may not have called us. But we try to address their issues as well," he says.



A district collector assisted by government officials of various departments reviews the cases of distressed farmers and suicide families.

Photo: Kisan Mitra

Ripple effect

When Adilabad was flooded in 2018, farmers lost their crops, and their houses got damaged. The agriculture department officials visited the fields, assessed the damages and collected data of about 30,000 affected farmers. With the relief payment slow in coming, despite efforts by the district collectorate, a group of farmers filed a Public Interest Litigation. “This move helped the affected farmers get a total relief of Rs 120 million,” says Sreeharsha. The move also helped other flood-affected districts to get compensation immediately. Of the 33 districts of Telangana, *Kisan Mitra* works in three at present. Nalgonda district is in the pipeline. Often farmers from other districts also call the helpline. “Though we can’t follow up on their cases, we counsel the farmers or give them information regarding government schemes, and wherever possible, connect them with local non-profit organisations working in the sector,” says Vandana.

Bringing the helpline to more districts

The helpline for the Mancherial district was started in March 2018. Karnan R.V., the collector in the district at the time of the launch, says that a couple of suicides among farmers spurred him towards establishing a helpline. “Often it’s not farm distress alone. Other personal issues add to their agricultural woes,

pushing them to take the extreme step. At that moment of despair, if he is able to vent out his feelings, the farmer will feel better. So we thought of a helpline for distress calls,” he says. Besides, he saw the success of the helpline in his neighbouring district administered by Divya Devarajan, who often encourages fellow bureaucrats to adopt the approach, and decided to launch the scheme in Mancherial.

According to Vandana, the death of a farming couple was one of the reasons that prompted the start of the helpline in the Mancherial district. Having been duped with spurious seeds, 35-year-old Kondakarla Tirupati suffered loss of successive drumstick crops. There was hardly any yield from his tomato, ridge gourd and other vegetable crops. With continuous crop failures over many seasons, he had accumulated a debt of Rs 1,500,000. He sold teak crops in an acre and cleared Rs 600,000. Despite taking a loan of Rs 400,000 from his parents, he was unable to clear his debts. When he met the district collector for help, he was sanctioned loan through the Telangana Scheduled Castes Co-op Development Corporation, as he belonged to the scheduled caste category. The government has separate corporations working for the welfare of most backward castes, scheduled tribes, etc. But tail-end impediments in the release of the loan proved to be the final straw for Tirupati. Having given poison to his family, he then hanged himself. While he and his wife died, the children aged twelve and fourteen survived.

Moving forward

Agricultural expert Devinder Sharma finds *Kisan Mitra*’s providing the farmer with mental support at the appropriate time very crucial. “Often bureaucrats know what industries want but are unaware of grassroots’ needs. So, *Kisan Mitra* having a dialogue with the collectors once a month would help them understand the constraints and make the system more effective,” he says. Sreeharsha sees the collaborative work involving the government as a good model. “Once, during a field visit, a government agricultural officer caught sight of a farmer sitting with a bottle of pesticide in his hands and alerted us. We were able to intervene and sort out the farmer’s problem within five days. So we find working with the government better than working as a parallel entity,” he maintains.

“I can’t say we have stopped suicides altogether. But I can safely say that we have been able to stop many farmers from taking the extreme step and more importantly we reach out to survivors,” Divya Devarajan states. She facilitates the interventions through a collector’s discretionary fund and opines that they could reach out to farmers in more places if the government institutionalised the programme.

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