

Not everybody loves a good drought

By Nandita Raman



Radha, daughter of Siddapa turned hostile towards people after her father's death.

Sitting outside her small house in front of a huge pile of peas, Radha was whacking them with a meter-long stick. Radha, one of late G. C. Siddapa's daughters, does not talk much. A cheerful and a happy girl once, Radha sits in a corner of

the house alone the entire day.

Life after Siddapa was dull. When someone new comes to talk to her, she uses the stick to chase them away.

Siddapa lived in Basapura, a small, quiet village some 10 km outside the main town of Holalkere in Chitradurga. He committed suicide in April 2009 after the continuous failure of his crops. Almost three years after this tragic incident, his family has still not recovered and life has not improved for them.

Their family received a compensation of Rs.100,000 in October 2010, more than a year after Siddapa's death. Radha did not appreciate the compensation that she received nor was she

amused with people talking to her. “Go away! Why do you want to talk to me,” she screamed when people tried to converse with her. For her neighbors, this was not surprising. “Her father’s death really affected her. She does not talk to people much. We think she has a mental problem,” said her neighbor.

To Natrajan, Siddapa’s friend for the last 20 years, his death came as a shock. He had lived close to Siddapa’s house and was used to seeing him everyday. One fine morning he was gone. “It was the same old reason, his debts were increasing and profits were decreasing and this forced him to commit suicide,” he said.

The compensation that came in did not make much of a difference to the family because it was paid out so late and money lenders were still knocking on their doors. Despite all his financial crises, Siddapa managed to raise his children well. A family of four girls, they were a thick unit. His first three daughters are married while Radha, the youngest one is still unmarried.

“When Siddapa died, Radha was left alone,” said Natrajan. He also said that people suspect this could be the reason why she is so unfriendly to others. Now his lands are managed by one of her sisters’ husband and the family is struggling to make ends meet.

Holalkere taluk, located in Chitradurga district, is like most other small towns in the country, where the main occupation is agriculture. The chief crops grown in the area are maize, cotton, *areca* nut, *jowar*, and *ragi*.

Most of these crops need a lot of water to survive and water is easily the biggest problem facing agriculture in this *taluk*. It is not only hindering the growth but also other sectors. Mounting

debts along with water problems has led to farmer suicides. In the last six years, 49 farmers have committed suicide.

This is not a new trend in Karnataka. Along with farmers from Maharashtra, Andhra Pradesh, Madhya Pradesh and Chhattisgarh, Karnataka is one of the biggest contributors to farm suicides. The National Crime Records Bureau's latest report on Accidental Deaths & Suicides in India for 2010 reveals that Karnataka stood second with 2,585 farmer suicides. At least 17,368 Indian farmers killed themselves in 2009, the worst figure for farm suicides in six years, according to data of the National Crime Records Bureau (NCRB). It brings the total farm suicides since 2000 to 186,745.

Farmer suicides in India

Year	Suicides
2000	16,603
2001	16,415
2002	17,971
2003	17,164
2004	18,241
2005	17,131
2006	17,060

2007	16,632
2008	16,196
2009	17,368
2010	15,964
Total	186,745

Source: NCRB

When Siddapa was alive, he struggled and finally decided that death was the solution. Chandrashekar, a farmer from ChikkaYemmiganur is now living a life of failed crops and debts. It has echoes of Siddapa's life when he was alive. On a sunny afternoon, Chandrashekar cycles to his farm barefoot to see his crops drying up. He looks at his six acres of dried up land and wonders how he will get through the year. This is an everyday routine for Chandrashekar.

His profits have reduced drastically over the years and going through everyday is now a challenge. The main crop he grows is *ragi* and makes just Rs.700-800 per quintal this year while he was making around Rs.1,500 last year.

Walking into his small cramped house close to his field, he said the main reason for this dismal performance of his crops is lack of water. The rains this year have let the farmers in the *taluk* down, leaving the fields parched.

Chandrashekar's land is the only source of income for his family. He has three children, two of them girls. "The rains this year have been poor and left me indebted," he said. "All my crops are dying and the yields are less than half compared to the previous years."

Chandrashekar is dependent solely on the monsoon for water. He has no bore wells or other irrigation to bank on. According to him, the main reason he doesn't have alternatives is the lack of money.



Lack of irrigation has left Chandrashekar with barren land

"I have no money but only the seeds now, so there is no question of digging a bore well or getting irrigation water."

The farmers in the area are totally dependent on rain, and it has been a particularly bad year. In September, which is the harvest season, the normal rainfall is about 93.60 mm but what they received was 32.42 mm. While the average rainfall in the area is 6,028 mm, this year it received only 485.31 mm.

The droughts this year and the financial crunch have forced Chandrashekar to think about working for other people to make money. "I have to earn money, and if agriculture is not giving it to me, I have to find something else," he said.

On the contrary, his neighbor Sidesh, who has about the same acreage of land as he does, is making profits despite the poor rains. His secret is that he got drip irrigation installed a few years

ago and he is not dependent on rains at all. “An initial investment of about Rs.50,000 on drip irrigation has brought me here and the rains don’t affect me anymore,” said Sidesh.

Sidesh lives in a fairly large house with and does not seem to be facing significant difficulties.

He grows *areca* nut and cotton and makes a profit of Rs.1,80,000 per year. Drip irrigation is a luxury for most farmers. As Chandrashekar points out most of them do not have money for basic needs leave



While a lot of farmers are relying only on rains, some farmers like use drip irrigation and sprinklers to water their crops.

alone irrigation. The drought has caused farmers to consider suicide

as an option. For example, Chandrashekar also said he was too poor to be eligible for bank loans.

Bank loans, a far fetched dream

Bank loans are complicated to most of these farmers and for smaller amounts they go to local money lenders. The local money lenders take advantage of their desperation and charge high rates of interest.

“For immediate needs like buying seeds or fertilizers, a lot of farmers come to us,” said B. Prakash, supervisor of Venkatesh Pawn Brokers. Most of the pawn brokers in Holalkere charge an interest of 14 percent. The farmers pledge gold in return of money. “Most of them pledge only a few grams of gold,” he said. For one gram of gold, they get around Rs.800 and the time period is 11 months. Prakash said that, in most cases, they extend the time period taking the plight of

the farmers into consideration. He also said that even after that if the farmers haven't paid, the pawn brokers send a notice and pledge the land.

In the case of banks, they lend at a much lower interest but farmers cannot borrow at will. Farmers who already have taken loans from these banks and have not cleared the loans are also not entitled to borrow again. "Most of the farmers who borrow money don't end up paying back. There are many pending loans with us," said Kantha Raju H.Y, senior manager of Pragathi Grahmin Bank.

Banks have longer schemes in loans with interest varying from 7.5 percent to 15 percent depending on the amount and duration. For short term loans up to Rs.50,000 the banks do not ask for security or mortgage but for anything above that, they ask for land as security.

Harder for women

Boramma lives in a small village near Holalkere named Arehalli. Her problems are similar to Chandrashekar's. She has around four acres of land and grows cotton and corn. Her production has decreased due to lack of rain and she has no idea how she would get through the year.



Being a woman, Boramma finds it very difficult to get help from the government

To make things worse, she lives with her daughter and finds it very difficult to survive. "I used to earn around Rs. 50,000 a year. Now I hardly get around three quintals of cotton after harvest," she said.

According to her, being a woman has made things only harder for her. "We don't get any help from the government," Boramma said. "If it

continues to go this way, my daughter and I will just commit suicide.”

Even with these difficulties, she managed to raise her daughter Tippama well. Tippama has finished schooling but could not pursue higher education due to lack of financial assistance. “I applied for a job with KSRTC [Karnataka State Transport Corporation] but I still have not heard from them,” she said. Although her mother is scared to send her away to Bangalore for the job, Tipamma said she wants to work to save her family from the ongoing crisis.

Organic farming – the way forward

While a lot of farmers are struggling to survive, there are a few exceptions. Sitting in a palatial house in Kudneerkatte a small village in Holalkere, K. G Basawarajappais is a master of organic farming. In a region where there are so many farmer suicides, he manages to make huge profits and is one of the richest people in the taluk. A simple, old man, Basawarajappa owns 20 acres of land in his backyard. He grows a variety of crops such as paddy, *areca* nut, coconut, mangoes, almonds and coco. He believes only in organic farming and famous for his vermicompost which he makes himself and sells to the agriculture and horticulture department. He is the largest vermicompost producer in the district. While explaining the process of making vermicompost, he said that organic farming is less expensive than inorganic farming and it is a misconception to think the opposite. He uses cow dung or *gobar* as he calls it. He uses earthworms, wet waste and water in a huge pit in his backyard to produce vermicompost



Basawarajappa, is one of the most successful farmers in the entire taluk. The secret of his success, he claims, is organic farming.

Looking the picture of prosperity and contentment in a crisp white dhoti, he spoke of his disappointment with the fact that almost 90 percent of the farmers in the area use chemicals and spoil their land. “Organic farming is not only good for the crops but also helps land maintain its fertility,” he said “Vermicompost adds minerals and makes the soil rich.” He also said that most farmers are not aware about the benefits of organic farming which is why they use chemicals.

Lovith Nayak, a farmer from Ayanehalli grows peanuts and corn in his five acres. He uses endosulphan as the crops he grows attract pests. He said that it is the only way to deal with them. Nayak also said that chemical fertilizers are easily available in local markets and cheap as well. He spends Rs. 300 per liter of endosulphan whereas he would have to shell out Rs. 2,600 for a quintal for *gobar*. If he uses *gobar*, Basawarajappa points out that the soil is bound to become healthier. “People don’t think in terms of future, they use chemicals temporarily and later complain about the quality of the soil deteriorating,” said Basawarajappa.

Basawarajappahaswon multiple awards for his organic farming, talks with evident pride about his achievements and his methods. He makes about Rs.200,000 per year and his expenses are also very limited. His major profits come from coco, which he sells it at Rs. 8,000 per quintal.

His fame is not restricted to Holalkere, but has spread to other parts of the world as well. People from the United States, Dubai and Canada visit him to learn about his work. While Ravi, Joint Director, Agriculture, said that they are helping farmers by providing subsidies, most of the farmers say it is not enough. “We buy seeds only from Chitradurgabecause when we need the seeds they are never available with the department here,” said Nayak.

Ravi also said that the department is taking initiatives to educate farmers to use high-tech implements like cultivators but not many farmers are taking it up.

Another alternative

A few farmers are moving away from traditional crops and venturing into horticulture. The income for most farmers growing traditional crops has been stagnant at Rs.10,000 per annum. Papaya and pomegranate are the most common fruits that are grown while some farmers are also growing tuberoses, a flower used for making bouquets.

“These horticulture crops are seasonal and give farmers higher profits, so some of them have started experimenting with them,” said Devaraju, Senior Assistant Director of Horticulture.

Improving productivity is not rocket science

While farmers across Holalkere are suffering with huge land holdings and failed crops, one man believes that land holdings are the biggest advantage that the farmers have. S. Viswanathan, founder of Agriculture Consultancy Management Foundation, a non-profit organization said that unlike USA or Israel, India has huge arable land and with proper management it is possible to



Although most of India is still dependent on agriculture, farmers across the country are struggling to survive and suicides are still continuing.

make agriculture a profitable venture.

Sadly, agriculture which is the largest sector in the country has stunted growth. With 70 percent of the country still dependent on it, it contributes just 21 percent to the country's GDP every

year according to World Bank data. Production has only been decreasing or stagnant. In villages, India is not shining. Viswanathan feels that farmers are committing suicides while there is an easy and quick solution to this problem. "To achieve higher productivity, all we have to do is combine science, technology and some good management," said Viswanathan.

But Kavitha Kuruganti of Alliance for Sustainable & Holistic Agriculture does not fully agree with him. "The entire tragedy of farmers' suicides is closely correlated to science & technology options put in front of them and to say that productivity improvements will address suicides is a wrong prescription," she said.

Viswanathan also said that in countries like USA, production is much higher, while the average production of corn is around 800 kg/acre in India, the average yields in the US Midwest is around 10,000 kg/acre. Similarly, the average yield of tomato in India is 5 tons/acre, while Israel which is a much smaller country harvests around 200 tons/acre. “Even if India achieves half of what the US is producing, we can still be food bowl of India”, he said. This is just six simple steps away.

- Select crops suited to the agro climatic conditions and market needs
- Test and correct soil
- Go for quality, tested and certified seeds
- Optimize use of water and farm inputs
- Go for appropriate mechanization
- Have holistic management

Using these simple methods, Viswanathan and his foundation say that that proved production improvements are possible at a demo farm in Tamil Nadu. “In fact, with black gram, we got a five-fold increase in production,” Viswanathan said.

By doing this, farmers can make around Rs.12,000 per month which would make them self-sufficient. He also said that this would not only help India produce more, but also make agriculture profitable. If agriculture is profitable, the problem of urban migration will also be solved.

Meanwhile, back in Holalkere, Chandrashekar is still waiting for rains to save him. He does not want to resort to suicide make money and save his family. His aim is ensure his children get good education and comfortable lifestyle, something that he missed out on. On the contrary, Sidappa who committed suicide thinking the money would help his family also did not succeed. In fact life got tougher for Radha after her father died. A cheerful girl once is now struggling to live a happy life. Her neighbor looked and her and said, “It is difficult to watch her this way now.”

Production in the last two years in Holalkere

Crop	2009- 2010 (in tons)	2010-2011 (in tons)
Corn	8,000	2,725.50
Ragi	2,5300	1,1121.25
cotton	1800 (Bale)	4248

Source: Agriculture department, Holalkere